

## FLIP THE SKY

Guest: Bob Leonard

Dates: February 19, 2019 and March 6, 2019

Interviewer: Joshua Doležal

Place: Pella, Iowa

JD: Why don't we start with where you grew up.

BL: I grew up between Des Moines and Johnston in an unincorporated area that we called Dog Patch, after the Al Capp cartoon of many years ago – it was still running when I was a kid – they called it Dog Patch. It was a bunch of ramshackle houses and no plumbing. Phone service had just got in when I was a kid, but we didn't have plumbing until I was 8 years old. We thought my aunt next door was rich because they had a hand pump in the kitchen, and we had to go outside.

JD: So, for somebody who doesn't know Dog Patch or Al Capp, this is Lil Abner.

BL: It's a bunch of hillbillies. So, they called us that. And there were houses that were weird. Cobbled together things. It wasn't on a grid, it was on a cow path. The street meandered, only three or four of them. It wasn't in the city of Des Moines, it wasn't in the city of Johnston, it was just an unincorporated area. The people that work there, just blue-collar people. My dad was a carpenter. Mechanics lived there. Some people worked in Johnston. Some people didn't have cars. I remember one guy that would walk back and forth from Johnston every day, 260 days of the year. It's probably a ten-mile commute on foot every day. There was a lot of poor people. We weren't farmers, but blue-collar people, mainly.

JD: And you told me once that you lived near the Meredith Mansion.

BL: On the south end of Dog Patch was the Meredith Mansion, where the Meredith publishing corporation – the people, the Merediths – lived there. Old Des Moines money. There were too big, beautiful, giant barns that were there, too. They had their horses, they had their estate. It was, you know, millionaires that lived there. We'd walk by it all the time. A couple times during my life we went trick or treating there. But it was a mansion, and I think I'm an anthropologist in part, because I wanted to know why some people had nothing, like us, and we could live next to people who had everything. And that we're born into everything. That difference just really befuddled me, as young as five years old. I just didn't get it. It also made me feel – we weren't poor like everybody else, but it made me feel like we weren't as good as them. I came to resent that. I came to resent as much my feeling – because we have nothing, they have everything – and so that makes you feel lesser. Or made me feel lesser. And I came to resent that, and I still resent it. I just think it's wrong that our society – I don't mind rewarding people that earn what they get; inherited amounts of vast wealth bother me. Inherited wealth doesn't bother me if somebody

leaves their kids well-off, that doesn't bother me. But for generation after generation after generation of vast wealth, the Trumps, the Waltons, that just – I don't like that.

JD: Is this contrast that you felt living in a place called Dog Patch, was that name given by the people who live there?

BL: Yeah. It still is. People still call it Dog Patch.

JD: Were you aware then of that being a kind of stereotype, that people outside of Iowa would have of Iowans? That you would be sort of conforming to? Did you see yourself as a hillbilly in the way that someone outside of Iowa would have?

BL: No, for the simple fact that my mom used to always say, "Don't act like poor white trash. You're better than that." That's an interesting term, and I know academics are supposed to condemn it, but there were plenty of people around that didn't work, didn't do anything, didn't keep up their property, didn't take care of things as they should, and we called them poor white trash. And it was a marker. In academics, in anthropology you can't like that, because you're acting like somebody is better than somebody else – everybody has to be the same. But that kept us in a position where we were more socially mobile than some of the other kids who didn't have moms scolding them for acting like poor white trash. If academics want to criticize me for that, I don't care. It's a lever of social inequality and you can say it keeps people down, and it keeps the generations of kids down, but it's their parents that are doing that. It's not my mom. That level of social inequality was to elevate me and my sisters, not to keep anybody else down.

JD: Can you say a little more about the kinds of values your parents raised you with?

BL: You had to work hard. You had to have a craft, if you were a man. It was a very traditional, sexist, patriarchal family. My sisters, I don't think they were given limitations. If they wanted to go do something, they could, but there was more pressure on me to go do something. My dad hoped that I would go into business with him. I didn't. I didn't want to do that. He's a carpenter; he taught me a lot. My sister eventually wanted to go into the business but because she didn't pound nails and didn't know that side of it, he didn't invite her, and to this day he regrets it. The farm crisis pretty much killed his business, and she might have been able to help him through it. But I was supposed to be there to do that. Then there were also aspirations that if I could go to college and be something else, that was fine too. It was a value of hard work and always being the most valuable person at whatever job you took. You embraced it. You did it, and you did it right. My father is a craftsman, and everything we built had to adhere to a very fine standard of craftsmanship, and that has transferred to everything I do. If I write something, I want to make it as good as I can possibly make it. But then you also recognize that at a certain point you have to

stop. No poem is ever perfect, no article is ever perfect, but you can't keep tugging at it forever. We knew what point that was.

JD: Did your parents encourage you to think about college? The way you say that, it sounds like they were okay with it but maybe equally okay with a future in a trade.

BL: That would have been fine. No one had ever been to college in my family, and so they didn't really know what it was about. They didn't know how to prepare me, and they didn't know anything about it. Any grades I got, as long as I passed, were good enough. My mom had a sister and a brother that lived until adulthood, and she's the only one to finish high school. My dad's side – he had 11 brothers and sisters. He was the only one to finish high school. My grandma went to third grade. My grandpa went to sixth. So, if I would go to college, it was something special that they didn't think would necessarily happen.

JD: It sounds like they weren't prejudiced against that. They didn't think you'd turn into a pencil pusher or something pejorative. They took just great pride in our craft, we would sort of look down at people with soft, easy jobs. People without calluses on their hands. We would elevate ourselves in terms of our craftsmanship because we could actually look at something and say we built it. We could show people that. We built a house a week, frame it in. No one would ever want to be a banker. That was the culture I grew up in. A banker would be the worst job. You're just sitting there, and you're not outside. Real mind-numbing stuff. It's a different kind of factory. But now I realize banking is much more complex than that, but back then we didn't know it was like that. We didn't know anything.

JD: And your mom taught you about race? You grew up with a sense of racial justice, would you say?

BL: I think so, and it was pretty interesting. A bunch of different things were going on. I was born in '54. I was 15 in 1969 when all this stuff was happening. There were a few black kids in school, but I'll talk about that more in a minute if you want me to. Mainly we just saw black people on the streets in downtown Des Moines, and we really never talked about anything about it. I think one time we heard the n-word in my mom's presence. None of us uttered it, because it wasn't a part of our vocabulary. We would have never said it. We never heard my dad say, and we never heard my mom say it. Well, I heard my mom say it once. It was in this story. She was at the Drake relays with some friends, and one of the girls with her said, "Look at that n-word person run." An older black woman was sitting behind them, and she said, "Honey, you can call us colored, you can call us black, but don't use that word, please." And the girl just nodded, and said, "We won't." That was mom's story about race. My grandpa's story about race was, he says he doesn't care about the color of anybody's skin as long as they're on the road crew together and "he moves his shovel as fast as I move mine. It doesn't matter." And grandpa was a road

worker, and he built ships in Seattle. He was a carpenter, a nurseryman, any odd job he could get. There were simple lessons about race, and that was all. That was the end of it, when grandpa or mom or dad would say something. Okay, that's it. So, I grew up without that. And of course there's gotta be some kinds of societal things that permeate oneself, but there's that. There's also the Edna Griffin story that my mom drove home to me. Edna Griffin, if people don't know this, first thing you do if you're listening to this: stop, pause, go Google Edna Griffin. Edna Griffin walked into a Katz drugstore in Des Moines in like '48 and she sat down at a lunch counter with a friend and asked for an ice cream sundae. She's a black lady, and the girl at the counter and her other friends went to go buy some batteries and the girl starts to serve her an ice cream sundae. A boy who's the manager, I guess he's early twenties, came in and whispered to the waitress, and the girl went to Edna Griffin and said, "I'm sorry, I can't serve you at the lunch counter." Edna Griffin, she was a sergeant – look her up, she's just incredible, with her WAC uniform, she's beautiful. She's like a movie star.

JD: WAC stands for?

BL: Women's Army Corp. She's like a movie star. Her husband's a physician, one of the first black physicians. So, she's not having any of this. They started a protest, and it went before the Iowa Supreme Court. Within a year, it was overturned, that you can't discriminate against people based on the color of their skin in Iowa. Iowa is progressive on a number of other issues too, and maybe there was something like that before, but I don't know. So, the Supreme Court ruled really quickly in Edna Griffin's favor, and it was wonderful. It was six or seven years before Rosa Parks. People say Edna Griffin is the Rosa Parks of Iowa. No, she's not. Rosa Parks was the Edna Griffin of Alabama, Mississippi, I forget.

JD: Mississippi.

BL: So, go read this, and preach the story of Edna Griffin. I just love that story. Every time I drove by, we had to drive by it to get to my grandma's house, I thought of Edna Griffin. I thought of racial inequality. I thought of fairness and social justice from when I was five.

JD: So, you had this powerful moral compass from your parents, I know they were also avid readers.

BL: Read, read, read. We didn't have a lot of books. We had one 4-foot-wide bookshelf. We had some World Book Encyclopedia, and once a month for twenty-six months – well, probably 28; C had two volumes – but one would be delivered. You'd get A, you'd get B. They'd slowly come, for much of my elementary, probably third or fourth grade on we had an encyclopedia.

JD: What else did you read besides that?

BL: Everything in the library. I really liked biographies. They're these little blue biographies. The school didn't have a library, but we had a Bookmobile, where a long, tall, white-haired man would come every Thursday I think, and we'd trot out to the Bookmobile, which was wonderful. We could check out seven books. I remember this man in a suit and tie, really tall, and he would come down in the blue Bookmobile. I don't know where he came from, the Des Moines Public Library, probably. And after a while, he would hand a pile of books to me, and he'd say, "I thought you might want to look through these." And I did. Any biography, there were these little blue biographies for kids to read, fourth, fifth graders. I'd read about famous people, and interesting people, and I'd wanna know how you go from some place obscure and poor to being a great person. I didn't see a path. I just didn't see a path. And school didn't see that path either, because they divided us up. In Johnston at that time, there was Pioneer seed corn, so there were a lot of scientists and business people. So, if your parents worked for Highline or Pioneer, you were in the A grade. If your parents, like mine, were carpenter or mechanics or farmers, you were B class. And the A class got the college prep. You got all the field trips and college class. B class didn't get field trips or extras. We were ready for trade school. I think we're starting to do this again in society. Only now they call them STEM careers, and they act like they're gonna teach your kid to be an astronaut or an engineer, when what they're probably gonna be is welders. And nothing wrong with welding, but don't tell your kids that they're all gonna be scientists if they go into these STEM careers. But it's the same kind of thing, I think, when we start funneling kids into these different trajectories of high school. In kindergarten, how many bright kids did we not give all the opportunities they deserved, to put them down this pipe to these kinds of jobs? That I think are valuable.

JD: Did you think you were unusual in the grade B class because you loved to read?

BL: There were other kids in there – there's all kinds of kids. What really upset the apple cart was like in fifth or sixth grade, I got the sixth highest score in the state on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills. I was a C student. So, then I was lazy. And, maybe I was. But I didn't know how to focus. I also have ADD, and it's like we're in this beautiful room looking outside and it's still – it's really cold out now – but when I was a kid, when I was chained to a desk in a school room, I'd just weep. I'd have tears on my paper. They had to figure out why I scored so high on the test, probably because I read all the time. I loved school when it was reading. I loved reading, I loved art. I wanted to be outside. Anything else I really didn't care about. My grandma taught me math, and so I was good at math because it was fun and interesting, but then the teachers changed the math curriculum and they did something different and then it was harder for me.

JD: Since I know you were an athlete, is it fair to say you were pushed in that direction because of your working-class background or position in the grade B class? Was that sort of an

accompanying expectation of that population? Or were all students in school equally pushed towards wrestling?

BL: I think people were pushed, it was just something you did. You dreamed of being in the NFL, or an Olympic wrestling team, or something. But you weren't taught to dream of being an author or a poet or a businessperson. There're only certain role models that you have. My role models were teachers, carpenters, and mechanics. So, I sort of went to the direction of teaching, and thought I would be a teacher and a wrestling coach, maybe a football coach, or whatever. You didn't know – we didn't know. The root to being a banker or an accountant, to us, was the same as the root to being a movie star. You had no idea how to get there. No one ever taught you, or told you, or said you had the tools that you can be. Instead, it was, "You're lazy. Sit in your chair the right way. Don't slouch over. Don't do whatever." This very grueling classroom existence, that right now, I just want to rip the chains off of me, to the people that are listening. I couldn't be pigeonholed, and I didn't do very well. I still scored so highly, and they had to find an excuse. It's not the system's fault, it's the student's fault. Now, or ten years ago, they'd be drugging me. I'd be drugged. So, no, the school's not the problem, the kid's the problem, so let's drug the hell out of him. We do whatever we can to keep the kids in their chairs.

JD: Did you feel that sense of tearing the chains off when you went to wrestling practice and got to vent some steam, was that an outlet for some of your frustration?

BL: It was an outlet for me, but at first, I didn't enjoy it, because it was too structured and boring. Long spells of being bored. Football practice was just stand there and wait and do something violent, then stand there and wait, then do something violent. The violent part was okay, and wrestling was okay when you were wrestling. You have to drill to the left side and the right side, even though I know I'm never gonna shoot this move to the left. You waste a lot of time shooting to the left just because you're supposed to. It wasn't a lot of fun, but then all of a sudden, my sophomore year I was bigger and stronger than everyone else. There's nothing like the feeling of getting the quarterback in the back field and the fear on his face, and bringing him to the ground. It's primitive, and it sounds cruel, but it's just primal brain stem stuff that we learn how to control in society.

JD: It's outdoors.

BL: One side was that good. We had a really good football team, a really good wrestling team. We had the best football and wrestling team Johnston has ever had. No one's ever beat our record since I graduated in '72. No one's done better than we did.

JD: When you made it into high school, did you have the same attitude towards school as elementary? Were there things you enjoyed about high school?

BL: There were some things I enjoyed about high school. The social aspects of it were fun. Sociology was fun. Literature was terrible. I don't like Charles Dickens, never liked Charles Dickens. You can shove *A Tale of Two Cities* down my throat and I won't like it. I sat down in my twenties and read what I thought was all the great books, because I figured I've got to do it. So, I did it, and I read a lot of great books. But because they shoved Dickens down my throat in tenth grade, I never picked him up again, probably to my loss. I think we should be reading a lot of contemporary people, and we need to be doing contemporary music along with old music. I like reading contemporary authors because I want to give them a shot. I think our kids should be reading about stuff that's directly relevant to them, in addition to the classics. I think we need to mix it up more. It's like the same old stage plays that we see. There're some things that we keep see coming back and coming back and they're great. But think of how many great contemporary artists that we aren't feeding.

JD: *Death of a Salesman*, over and over.

BL: Exactly. There's other great contemporary work. Not that we should cast it all aside, but I think some of it we should look at again. For example, some of the things are incredible. The movie *Grease*, I remember when it came out, I thought it was wonderful. Now, I look at it, I happened to watch it about a year ago, it's this horrible, sexist, misogynistic piece of crap. It's a horrible, horrible movie in contemporary times. But they're still producing it, they're still doing it. I'm unnerved by it now. To think that I and we and as culture existed and, in some ways, still exists, is abhorrent. So, I think we need to make progress.

JD: So, you were kind of getting some of your interests kindled in sociology in high school?

BL: I loved history, too, I thought I was gonna be a history teacher. History was really, really interesting to me. Anything about history and how far we've come still interests me. I think history's really interesting. I liked earth science. I love biology – I still love biology. You would think that I would like literature, but I don't like assignments. I don't like writing assignments. If you tell me I have to write something about X, that's just real hard. I don't care about X. I'll write, and I'll pour my soul into something I care about, but you make me write about something I don't care about? English teachers have done it forever, you're probably still doing it, you're probably sitting there, thinking, "There's a reason that we make you do that, Bob." To me, that's hard. I got good grades in writing, but I don't like it when you say, "Write your soul, Bob." Say, "Write about the integration of technology in the work place." Eh, I don't care.

JD: An aside there, is if I were to ask you three questions you care about answering and answer them with research, that would be a different assignment.

BL: Yes. That is a challenge.

JD: Maybe some curriculum has changed. So, you read about the world. You learned some about history and sociology and psychology in high school. Backing up a little bit, I know you learned about the world also from a radio your grandpa gave you. Can you tell me a bit about that?

BL: Yeah, it was actually my uncle. He was stationed in the Ellucian Islands right after the Korean War and brought back home Hallicrafter short wave radio, an old tube radio. I still have it. It sits at home. It still works. It's sort of tragic, it's been destroyed by the internet. Part of the time back then was the discovery of the different things. You turn the dial slowly on the different bands, then you'd start to hear something, then you'd realize what you were hearing was a foreign language, which was cool, but you can't understand them, so you'd find radio Japan, radio Moscow – I'd find all the different places where the different countries were teaching the world about themselves. I'm sure a lot of it was propaganda, but I don't care. They're still teaching me about their world. And a lot of it's really innocent stuff. It's the news from their perspective, which is really interesting. Anybody that doesn't listen to BBC and only listens to American media or only reads American media, you don't know half of what's going on in the world. I look at BBC every day, and this whole Arab spring that surprised America, they've been writing about it on BBC for a year and a half.

JD: What was one BBC story you remember from that radio?

BL: On the radio, my favorite show on the shortwave radio was a naturalist in Japan who climbed Mt. Fuji. It was a climb up Mt. Fuji. It was every Friday night and I could get it at 11 or something and I stayed up and listened, fading in and out from Japan. He would walk up Mt. Fuji and he'd say, "Here's this plant," and you'd hear his footsteps. You'd hear the birds. You'd hear the squirrels in the trees. He'd say, "This plant is X, Y, and Z, and it does this, and we've been using them for medicinal purposes for whatever." And it's similar to weaving in with the cultures of Japan and Japanese history, and he all did it on a walk. I'm sure he probably just walked for a week or two, but he was prepared, and I've been all over the internet trying to find this again, but it's gone. I learned so much about another culture. Learning about another culture makes you realize more about your own. It was apolitical; it was all about biology and nature and culture. I thought I wanted to know more, and I always wanted to know more, and I still want to know more. I want to know more about people that are different from us. That's part of what got me into anthropology, too. But social inequality that I saw, all around me, and then our ignorance of other cultures. Lack of appreciation. It turns your world upside down. That's why I like teaching anthropology. If you just take a globe or a map of the world, and we think that this is the way a map should look, but you turn it upside down, and it's this eye-opening experience. We know there's no up and down in space, why is there an up and down on our maps? Why do we have North America center stage and big? Well, because that perpetuates what North American

society wants you to think – we're at the center of things. We're bigger than everybody else. That enhances our importance. And really, think what the world would look like if the center of the world was Japan. And we're marginalized, out at the edges. But that's not what we want.

JD: You ended up going to the University of Northern Iowa on a wrestling scholarship, thinking you were going to be a history teacher. How did that happen?

BL: I was an All-State football player and I was undefeated my senior season in wrestling, and then I blew out a knee and the guy that took second in my districts took state. I was a good athlete and I got a lot of scholarship offers. I got offered a football scholarship to Michigan State, to LSU, a bunch of other places, and wrestling scholarships. Then I hurt my knee and the Michigan State football scholarship was withdrawn. LSU still wanted me, and they had an offer on the table. They said they've got a job for me working at an oil rig in the summers. I said that sounds interesting, and it sounds a little dangerous, too. They said they've had a few guys come back without some fingers, but you can still play football. I'm a lineman, right. I'm not a wide receiver. So, that was always interesting to me, that they thought it was no big deal that guys lose their fingers on the oil rigs. I went there, and I wrestled, and got tired of that. You had to run every morning, lift every lunch, and practice from 3 to 5:30. If you're trying to learn, and you're exhausted, and you're spending four and a half or five hours a day working out, that impacts the educational experience. So, I grew tired of that. But I needed the money, so I still did it,

JD: That's how you put yourself through college?

BL: That's the only way.

JD: Tell me about how you then started to want to leave Iowa. What were the turning points that made you want to go to graduate school somewhere else or live somewhere else for a while?

BL: I was tired of the sameness, the predictability. I was tired of being around all kinds of people like me, and I wanted to explore different – the same what I thought was boring landscape that I see isn't now, it's so much richer to me now. All of society says something is happening everywhere but here. If you look at all the popular media, you see a lot of popular media about Iowa during the caucuses, but otherwise you don't read about Iowa, really ever in any of the popular media, you don't see it on TV, the big music scenes are elsewhere, the literature scenes are elsewhere, the movies aren't made here. The whole exciting world is out here and I'm stuck in a very dull place. I think a lot of kids in a lot of places think that. There's probably kids in the middle of LA, the middle of Chicago, that think that, too. But I just had to go explore, and going to grad school is a good excuse for that.

JD: Is it true that when you were on the wrestling team, you traveled? Is that part of what made you aware of these other opportunities or ways of life?

BL: Yes. Absolutely. We did a lot of traveling. Traveling is of great interest to me. I don't do very much, but it's of great interest. Probably the most significant trip we used to take is the Orange Bowl, New Year's Day I guess it is. There used to be an Orange Bowl wrestling tournament, so every year I was in college, we went down to that. While you're doing it, you're working out but you're also doing fun things. Fishing on the Everglades, and getting out on boats, and going interesting places, and doing interesting things. I thought I have to get out of here. If I could go to a place that has something beautiful like the Everglades, or something like mountains, or the ocean, I'm gonna do that. I'm 22, 23 years old. I needed my walk about. So, graduate school was my excuse to do that. I guess I could have packed up and moved, but I needed to move with a purpose, and graduate school was a good purpose.

JD: You told me once about hearing Walter Mondale speak at UNI and the kind of encounter you had that also kind of repelled you from Iowa.

BL: Yeah, that was probably the tipping point. It was Walter Mondale speaking. It was '76 or something, and it was very good. We were democrats in my family. My grandpa believed to his dying day that the New Deal saved him and his family from starvation, so that's why we were democrats. Plus, if you're a poor person, and you aren't a democrat, you're an idiot. You're just dumb. To this day, you've drank some Kool Aid. The Republican party is going to do nothing for you if you're poor. If you need help, they're gonna try to take it away from you, and not only are they gonna try and take it away from you, they're going to say that you that your lot in life is holy duty and your lack of initiative and your poor nature and soul. Not that bad circumstances or lack of opportunity or whatever. Yeah, so. You see, Grandpa really influenced me with that. Having an outhouse at the foot of the Meredith Mansion will tend to do that to you, too. So, I'm there, at the top of the student union building, watching Walter Mondale, this guy a couple years older than me – handsome, nice, young guy came to me and said, what'd you think? So, I went on and said what I liked and he said, "The democratic party is the party of the n-word people," and it came in this nice, handsome man package, this gentle, handsome guy like off a magazine cover, and he says something so vile and preposterous to me, and I was just stunned. He was more mature, knew more, so I'm sitting there wondering. And I just didn't say anything, which is regrettable. But I didn't know what else to do. Inside I'm thinking, "F- this place. I'm out of here." That was it. How could you hate somebody that you probably never met? Another thing that happened which was very interesting and related to this, at our school in Johnston there was something called the Y home. There were a few black kids that came there. The Y home was for kids that were neglected, and they were boys, and some of them were car thieves. There were Y boys and they were good kids. There were a couple older ones that I remember being a little scary, but thinking back there was no reason we were scared. They didn't do anything, but there

were rumors that they did something really bad, wherever they came from, Keokuk or whatever. There was one black kid, his name was Dennis Shields. Dennis was a real good kid, he was a year younger than me, and he ended up getting adopted by one of the white families. Dennis was Dennis, and just like everybody else, was really neat. We knew that he came from troubled circumstances, and I sort of followed Dennis' career, and he was a good basketball player, and he went to Graceland, and ended up going to the University of Iowa law school. He ended up working for different schools, and now he's chancellor at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville. I started writing for *The New York Times*, he found me, and we'd been talking. He told me some things he never told me before. Maybe I remember, it's been a long time. This was all in the last year, this talking. He said that he was raised in a Catholic orphanage until he was 5, and then he was adopted by a series of abusive foster homes, so when he came into the Y home, it was his first real permanent place. So, that kid came from the worst of circumstances, from an orphanage, through his hard work and effort, got through college, got through law school, different administrations, and now is Chancellor of UW-Platteville. And he's still living in a situation where he likes to travel with the football team for one game a year. One night when he was gone with the football team, a bunch of guys came up in a pickup truck, Confederate flag on the back, and blared Dixie on the Chancellor's lawn to the Chancellor's wife while the Chancellor was gone.

JD: In 2018?

BL: A couple years ago. I was horrified. It's in the post-Trump world. This is horrifying. In his yard. Anybody that acts like this stuff is over, is wrong.

JD: I want to come back to that later when we get to your return to Iowa and how you've confronted some of these things that've pushed you away, but maybe we'll turn to those years away for a bit. So, you got your PhD at the University of Washington. Tell me how you got there from the University of Northern Iowa.

BL: I had to get out of there, so I wrote letters to probably 20 graduate schools all across the country, and I had no anthropology degree, I had good college grades, but I had no anthropology degree. I had a history degree, but I learned to love anthropology, and I knew I wanted to do anthropology. UNI didn't really have a program at the time. I applied everywhere and I got accepted all kinds of places where I knew I wanted to live. In Florida, California, wherever. I was accepted to Idaho State. That was the only place I was accepted, so I thought I'd go there. There was one place I had applied to, but I hadn't heard back from. This was like July, maybe August; it was time to go to school. So I called them to find out whether I was accepted or rejected because I don't want to go to Idaho and then realize – I'd rather go to Seattle. I called, I was working construction in the summer for my dad. At lunchtime I drove up to a phone booth in Colfax, Iowa from the jobsite and called University of Washington and talked to secretary and

said I was wondering if I'd been accepted. She starts rifling through files, and said, "I'm sorry, I have no record, are you sure you applied?" I was sure I applied, and she said, "Let me call you back, do some digging." And I said I've got to go back to work because I'm in a phone booth in Colfax, Iowa. She said I should call her back at the same time tomorrow. So, I did, I called her back and she said, "I'm very sorry, but I misfiled your application." And I said, "Oh, okay, I understand. Thank you." And she said, "No, wait, the chair of the department decided since it was our mistake, you can come." So I went to the University of Washington. Can you believe that?

JD: What's the path from Dog Patch to an anthropology PhD?

BL: There it is. Unbelievable. I'd be a completely different person, because grad school was wonderful. It was tough, and it was a real wonderful group of people. Great mentors, living in a great city. I arrived in '78, and in 1978 it was wonderful to be young and in Seattle. I'm sure it's still wonderful to be young and in Seattle.

JD: How did you deal with expectations, because this was a very rigorous program, and you described earlier certain chaffing against structure and obligatory assignments in school. What was different about grad school that resonated with you?

BL: Grad school was a different kind of challenge. I wasn't chained to a desk, I was more mature. I wasn't a boy. But also, you're not chained to a desk. You can walk around, you can put yourself in a carol in the library and wander the stacks, then come back and focus, wander the stacks, come back and focus. I still do that on my computer, only now, it's the internet, it's not the stacks. But so that was good, but I didn't know really the hard work it would require. One of the anthropologists we had to work with, Dr. Robert Dunnel, he's deceased now, but he was really a major leader in the field. Typical to grad school, much of his class was based on classroom participation and upon your final paper. Mainly just the final paper, and some of the labs and stuff had their own tests and quizzes and stuff, but this was a theory class. He said always come in and talk to him before your final program. So, I went in and talked to him, and I didn't know anything. I didn't know anything about anthropology. They gave me a test when I arrived to see if I had to take make-up classes, and I remember Dunnel administrated it, and he said, "Mr. Leonard, you're going to have to take this test." And I said, "I'm not going to pass it. I've never had an anthropology course." He said, "You have to take it anyway." So, I took it. It was multiple choice, and I know I only knew the answer to one question, and that was about who wrote *On the Origin of Species*. I go back to him, he looks at it, he grades it, he comes back in, and he said, "Mr. Leonard, you've done something impossible." I said, "What's that?" "You've scored worse than probability would indicate that you should have. Much, much worse." I said, "I told you I didn't know anything." He says, "We like a clean slate." Then he through my test into the wastebasket. It was interesting to me. That was a challenge. He was very inspirational.

So, I went in and talked to him on theory, and he laid out a good path for me to pursue my paper. There were 11 people in my entering class. I had the first paper. He gave me the first paper, and I was the first to make the presentation. I'd worked with him enough, I thought it was an okay presentation, I didn't think it was great. But I really worked hard on it, and really got into literature, and really worked and thought. That was a challenge, that's just a challenge. You've got to pick them out and you've gotta climb it. It's not gonna be easy, you just do it.

JD: More autonomy, doing it?

BL: Yes, absolutely. But then one graduate student, who was slightly older, maybe five years older, he said to me, "How much did Dr. Dannel help you with your presentation?" And I said, "He was really helpful, he was very great. I couldn't have done well at all without his guidance." I said, "When you go talk with him," because I presumed the guy would, "I think you'll really enjoy your conversation with him and really find it helpful." And he patted me, and said, "Bob, some of us know more about anthropology than you." I didn't say anything. But I was furious. Then in another class, this time I did my own presentation, and it was fine. Not great, I'm sure, but fine. He was just so patronizing. This will show you a lot about my competitiveness, good or bad, and also about the program and how tough it was. He had a topic, and part of the deal was you answer students' questions – it's a grad school seminar. So, he had his topic, and I dug into his topic. I dug into his topic so hard that when it came time for his presentation and the student questions, Mr. Connor, how about X? Have you thought about Y? What do you think about Z? And he's just – doesn't know. He can't answer anything. The next day, the professor in that class said to me – Don Graceland, he ended up being my mentor – he's walking down the stairs, and I'm walking up, and he says, "Leonard, you're a bastard. You're one hell of a bastard." Or something like that. I just remember "bastard."

JD: Was that a compliment?

BL: I said to him, "I'm sorry, did I do something wrong? Was I not supposed to do that?" And he said, "No. That was perfect. You've set the stage for the rest of the course, and you may well have ruined Mr. Connor's career." I didn't want to do that. And I didn't, but his career was over.

JD: You were the only one of that class to pass competence of exams? Is that right?

BL: That's right.

JD: How did you go from being admitted by luck to the program to being the only surviving member of that class? Was it that challenge from Mr. Connor?

BL: Yeah, in part. Whatever I do, I try to be the best that I can be at it. If I'm gonna do it, I'm gonna do it right, or I'm not gonna do it at all. I'm gonna say I can't do that, that's not my skill set, that's not something that interests me, I'm not gonna be able to do that. If you ask me right now, would you teach a course on the anthropology of the Middle East, I'd say no. I have to have been there, I have to live it, and I'm gonna do it. I could barely handle the students and the deserve more than that. So, I'm not gonna do it. But he challenged me, and if something challenges me, I'm going to take it on. I realized then by how hard it was, I can work harder than anybody else. I know I can. I learned that on construction sites. I learned that on the football field, on the wrestling mat. I might not win, but I will be one of the hardest working people there. That's what I was taught. That's what I will do. I will be competitive and I will be a good sport when I lose, but I will not sell myself short.

JD: Is that your dad's sense of craftsmanship, sort of?

BL: Yeah. It's the journey, it's not the end result. I like games, I play cribbage. I'm gonna play cribbage to win, I'm gonna play fair. If you beat me all the time at cribbage, that's the way it is. But I'm still gonna be the best cribbage player that I can be. I was asked once to contribute to a book, and it was a volume on the history of Iowa, and I thought, what can I do? And my wife said, "Write about radio, write about nature, write about one of those topics." And I just thought, there's a lot of good nature writers out there. I can't write as good as the best nature writers can. I can't write about working in radio, that doesn't really drive me right now. It was a book about Iowa and Iowans, so I wrote about Iowans that I've known. I broke all kinds of rules, I've got sentences that are 400 words long, but it's more of a mix of prose and poetry, but it fulfilled me, and I did it my way, and it's something nobody else can do. That's why I think you encourage in your riders to have them present the best part of them. They're not going to be the writer you are. Maybe they'll be better, maybe they'll be worse, but they certainly are going to be different, and find their own voice. That's what I've shot to do, find my voice. If I submit to Milkweed Press for their annual awards and I don't win, still I submitted the best thing I can do. You do the same thing. Somewhere, we learn that craftsmanship. Somewhere all of us succeed. I don't think I'm so different than anybody else. You're asking me how I was built the way I am. It wasn't anything special.

JD: How did graduate school change the way you saw the world?

BL: Anthropology does that. It looks at what we think is normal and the natural order of things, and teaches us that it's different. And it doesn't have to be anthropology, it could be chemistry, too. You do it with literature all of the time. Through great literature, if you read something that explores different planes – I went through a phase where I was reading female African novelists – and that was very interesting to see the different worlds that they present. Anything can do that if the person pursuing that academic interest decides to do that. That's the goal of anthropology,

to turn your world upside down, to break down power structures. And see who's powerful and why. We find out why that social order exists, what it perpetuates, who profits from it, and who's hurt by it. Anthropology tries to take those things down. When I write political things, that's what I'm trying to do – turn those things upside down. But then also you do it with a certain level of dignity and respect for the people that you're working with. When I'm writing about the Republican mind, I do it with curiosity and respect, even though I think Donald Trump is the worst president we've ever had and a failure of a human being. He's probably the only person I won't treat with respect because of the damage that he's done. But in general, just because somebody has a different world view, I'm gonna try to understand it. I won't dismiss or diminish it. Trump's just a different thing.

JD: We were just talking about graduate school, and how it changed the way you saw the world. After you got your PhD, you had a few jobs before you got into faculty work, is that right?

BL: Well, as a part of graduate school, in the summers I'd be in the field. I did archeology, I did it in California and Oregon. I worked for, technically, the Peabody Coal company in Arizona. That was a project out of Southern Illinois University, and I was hired to direct excavations down there on the Navajo reservation. That was wonderful. It was absolutely wonderful.

JD: Is there a moment that really sticks out to you from that time?

BL: Oh my. You can't ask it like that.

JD: Paint a picture. Theater of the mind.

BL: Traditional Navajo woman on a horse, racing across an archeological site, pointing a shotgun at me, saying something in Navajo, and pulling away and running off. What exactly did you say, was there something that strikes me, or that I remember? So there, that's the first thing that I remember. And it's a real interesting, but probably too long story, I turned to a young man, a young Navajo man. I thought I was just gonna get killed, and I said, "What'd she say?" and he said, "Nothing important." I had a dozen, fifteen people working with me. Couple of Anglo grad students from Michigan. I'm still in grad school, but I'm working for the Navajo nation, for Peabody Coal company in coal mining country. They're destroying archeological sites with coal mining operation. We had the full structure of society replicated, which is always good. We had older people, we had men, we had women, we had kids. Young kids. Teenage boys, and some girls. Society is replicated. That's how you make a good crew. If you just have all young guys, it's gonna be a mess, just because guys are guys and they don't always do what you want them to do. If you have grandpas and dads and boys and grandmas, it's just better, and I don't have to enforce a bunch of 16 year old kids. Some of the work is heavy, some of it's not. The Navajo would structure themselves into gender roles and the society would be replicated how they saw.

The work would be structured how the Navajos wanted it to be structured. Then I would talk with the older Navajo men and figure out things. The women didn't speak English because the women weren't allowed – that was the most distant part of the reservation, and the women never had a chance to learn English. The men would be the communicators. I talked to one man who's one of the most interesting men I've ever met in my life. His name – I guess I'm not gonna say his name. I don't know what he would think about that, if it's being recorded. In some traditions, if you say the name of deceased, you draw their attention. I don't wanna draw his attention. I don't want him being bothered by me, 30 years later. Naming a person's name when they're deceased is not a good thing. It's like looking at the stars isn't a good thing. You're supposed to say, "What's not good about looking at the stars?"

JD: What's not good about looking at the stars?

BL: What if you catch the eye of someone? What if they look back? Okay, so then I turn to this man. He was a code talker in WWII. People who know code talkers, they're people who would use Navajo and some other Native American languages to communicate, and then in code, so they could speak over the radio regarding the operations of the fleet or troop operations or whatever. The Japanese couldn't decipher what they were saying. There were some code talkers in Europe, also in WWII, but mainly I know about the ones in the Pacific, largely because of this friend, who will remain nameless. And I said to him, "What was that?" And he explained it to me. This project had been going on for ten years before I joined it, and every year, they would come and they would have a job fair, who wants to come work for us over the summer. Turns out that they would always try to get people who had some tie to that piece of land. So, they'd have families. They wanted a good mix of men and women, society replicated. Then they picked this one woman, this one man who was just this really interesting old man. I'm not gonna say his name either, but he was dying of brain cancer. They picked his wife to give a kid to work here. It was a young woman who ended up working with us. This old guy was dying of brain cancer, and all he'd do is stand in the back dirt pile. He couldn't stop working. He'd work, and then when we'd have lunch, and he would go back over to the back dirt pile where he couldn't hurt anything and keep turning the shovel. He'd always work. He had to do something. Anyway, he died shortly after from brain cancer. But he was married to two women. The woman that came up on the horse and pointed the shotgun at me was the wife who didn't have somebody on the crew. His other wife had somebody on the crew. He explained to me that there'd been a human resources error that got a shotgun in my face. She had red ochre on her face, traditional velveteen dress, hairpin blouse, hair in braids, with a shotgun on a white horse in my face because of personnel error.

JD: At an archeology site.

BL: Yeah. That woman, I knew the moment she died, which was about 15 years ago. I knew, through the fabric of the universe, the moment that she died. Because she came into my head, and I could say her name. I could say her name now, but I don't want to draw her attention, but I couldn't say her name. Then, what happened, are you sure you wanna hear this? This is long. Okay. So then we left. I said, "Okay everybody. Let's leave." Then this code talker fellow said, "I don't think we wanna leave." I said, "Why not?" "If we leave, they won't get paid." I said, "Okay. Alright, we'll stay. I'm not comfortable, but we will stay." They need their pay. The next day I come back to the site by myself to do some book work. There, across the road – it wasn't a road, but just a dirt through the sage brush path – there was a barrier of the flagging tape we use on the site with the different colors, strung across the road with symbolic stones placed underneath, and from the center, a plant called rosebush. A symbolic barrier, blocking us from using the site. I thought, if everybody comes out to work the next day, they're not gonna get to work because they'll see this message to go away. I thought, what should I do? So, I took it down. I put it all arranged to the side. The next day we get back to work, and my code talker friend, I asked him to come with me and I went and I showed him that, and I asked if I did something wrong. He said no, everybody wants their pay. They don't know it's there, so it's okay. He said, "I've got to do something with this." So, we worked all day and went home. The next morning, I couldn't walk. I couldn't get up. I had incredible, incredible pain in what I presumed were my kidneys. I couldn't work. I couldn't do anything. I yelled for somebody to come to the tent, so somebody came and brought my assistants. And I said, "You know what to do, just go on out. Tell me at the end of the day what happens." So, people brought me water and some food over the course of the day from people that stayed in the camp. I was there and I was just horrible, horrible pain. That night, my assistant came in, and she said, "Sorry you're not any better. Just so you know, Mr. Code Talker Friend wasn't at work today." Another day, nothing changed. Mr. Code Talker Friend, he wasn't there today. That night, I heard a rustling at my tent. A Navajo woman I had never seen before and some kids, and a young man that spoke English. They said, "We're seeing how you're doing." I said, "I'm not doing well at all." I didn't have insurance, so I'm not going to the doctor. They said, "Okay." Turns out, it was his wife and grandchildren that were there. They went and left, and the next morning I woke up, and I was fine. You know how you're sick, and you're better, but you know you're not quite better, but you're just happy you're better? I felt so great, it was like I'd never been sick. It was like the sickness was gone. And I learned that the wife had come and they'd taken in Mr. Code Talker Friend and he had the same symptoms, and they didn't know what it was, so they opened him up. He had surgery. And when the surgery revealed nothing, they figured out that we'd been witched. They went to talk to the woman in the pleated dress, shotgun, velveteen blouse on a white horse, and she said that she had witched us, and that we would have to pay money, sheep whatever, and there had to be a sing. The night after they left, they held a sing for our code talker friend. She said, "What about the white guy?" "His family has to pay, too." "He doesn't have any family. His family isn't here. They've got no clue." She says, "Well, then he dies." They

said, “No, you can’t do that.” She said, “Okay.” So they had the sing for me too. I woke up the next morning, and I was fine.

JD: Write a story.

BL: I didn’t learn about all of this until our code talker friend came back and told me what had happened.

JD: So many things happening with the Navajo nation and also with the Zuni tribe, which you worked with before you got your position at University of New Mexico.

BL: Yeah.

JD: Before we make that shift, do you feel like working with either of those indigenous communities connected with the values you’d been raised with? Or your feelings about race in Iowa that had pushed you away, was there something here that went back to your roots or satisfied what you felt was missing from Iowa when you left?

BL: It fit in well. I fit in well. Everything was fine. I enjoyed it. I learned so much about culture and traditions. Imagine if you went to the grocery store, and every time, it was different. There were new things to learn. What’s this? What’s that? What does this mean? How about this? Just something as simple as going to the grocery store. It’s like this all the time. If you engage and wanna learn, they’ll teach you. But you have to ask. You have to find someone that’s willing to tell you. This is all pre-internet. It wasn’t pervasive. We were just social. We talked, we told stories. The story I just told you, I know you think it’s an interesting story, but half the people that will listen will probably just walk away. That’s too long for their attention span. And I gave you the short version. It was a different time. You’re sitting at lunch, in the shade of a juniper, and you’re talking about this, that, the other. About the culture, their traditions, what they do, and what they’re willing to share. They have questions for you, too. It’s like when I worked for the Zuni, one of the first people I talked to and ended up being a really good friend said to me, “Okay, what are you doing here?” And I said, “I’m here to work.” She goes, “Do you have family back home?” “Yeah, I got two sisters.” She said, “Who’s doing for them what you’re supposed to be doing?” She was baffled that I was so far away from my sisters. I said, “They do just fine on their own.” She said, “I’ll never understand you people,” and walked away. Really, I abandoned my sisters. I moved a thousand miles away from my sisters. How could that possibly be?

JD: That never occurred to you?

BL: Not until that moment. That's what we do. We go and do whatever we want and women will do the same thing. My sisters, back then, could have too. But for me to go and do something was like, it was encouraged. People want you to go and do things, travel, see the world, whatever. I just totally abandoned all of my familial responsibility. She was having none of that. She would not think that's a good thing. Right now, I'm thinking maybe my world view is totally screwed up. I left my sisters. So that's what anthropology does. That's what looking at other cultures does. That's what talking to people does. It takes your world and puts it upside down, even though it seems natural. Then you realize that's a pretty crummy thing for me to do, to leave my sisters alone. Or, would it have been sexist and patriarchal to not leave my sisters alone? Who's right? Was I right or wrong in leaving my sisters alone? Do you know the answer?

JD: I don't know the answer. What strikes me about your story is you have this powerful sense of where you came from, you have this powerful sense of deep roots with your family, with the ethics you were raised with about justice, about hard work, about craftsmanship, and yet for so many other Americans, it was somewhat easy for you to give that up, or at least translate that or transfer it to some other arena of competition, like in Seattle, without thinking of yourself in Seattle representing Iowa. Did you think of yourself as an Iowan when you were out doing your thing in Seattle or with the Navajo or with the Zuni? Or were you just a free agent? Not belonging anywhere, really?

BL: My resentment of Iowa then was just pretty profound. It took me a while to begin to appreciate it again. I'm thinking like a lot of guys and gals when you start to raise a family, you realize it's a pretty safe place to raise them.

JD: When you're in Washington or Arizona or New Mexico, were you thinking, "I'm glad not to be in Iowa"?

BL: I'm always glad to be doing the next thing. I don't resent the past. I don't think about it that way. I just move through whatever stage. I never resented Iowa. For a long time, I resented the racism, the bigotry, the homogeneity, but then I came back to it and it's changed. In some ways it's a lot better. In some ways it's worse. The racism that I thought was retreating in 1969 and through the early '70s has somehow since 2015 and a half has come back and has emboldened people. It's very disappointing. But it's not everybody, just the few. They're frightened, pathetic beings.

JD: When you were working with the Navajo and the Zuni, did you feel like you were compensating for some of that racism in Iowa?

BL: Not consciously.

JD: You weren't trying to do penance for anything?

BL: No. No, I don't do that. I don't feel like that. I was on another dig in northern New Mexico. Deep Hispanic community. Mocho bean field country. Incredible. It's just this country. High mountains were on this, and there were some guys there that were logging. Cutting down trees for vegas for fancy Santa Fe homes. They were Hispanics, New Mexicans. One of the guys was coming on too hard on one of the girls, and she asked me to do something about it. We're camping in the middle of nowhere, not our country. The guys were camping there too, they had a different campsite. It's too much hard work to drive in and out. So, I got a six pack of beer and took it down and sat by their campfire. No, I took a 12 pack. We're sitting there, drinking, and it's just fine. There are two guys and me, getting drunk. One of the guys that I saw said, "You gotta lay off something somewhere. She's not appreciating it." And then he went off on a rant about Anglos coming in and taking everything and disrespecting everybody and their heritage and our privilege and all that, this and the other by the campfire. Going on and on, saying things about me. I said, "F- you. You don't know anything about me." And the guy next to him looked back and forth between us and then the guy that said that, he said, "Alright. Good for you, man. Let's drink." It was a challenge. He had to do it to see what I was made of. He tried to pull all this racial get that typical liberals will feel, and you apologize and feel like a terrible person, but no. He doesn't know anything about me. I'm not gonna let him say those things about me or about her or anything, and all it took was me saying f- you. Then we're fine. It's just this guy stuff happening. You'd say it, there's no fight or anything. There's no interest in that. But I had to – I felt obligated to say what I felt. Not to say what I didn't feel. I think I also said something about Spanish coming too, but I don't remember exactly what I said. I don't feel that guilt. I am me. I try to be the best me I can be and not have those cultural – I'm not comfortable with that cultural baggage. I can recognize that it exists and there's differential opportunities for whatever. Having come from not much, and not knowing a lot of people that come from not much, I don't think of it in a sense of white privilege. And when you're in a place everybody's white and some people have stuff and some people don't have stuff and people are working paycheck to paycheck and you have no chance in hell of sending your kid to college, it doesn't feel like a very privileged position.

JD: In some ways, not to project on your story, but growing up in the circumstances you did without indoor plumbing might have been good preparation for camping out in the desert and being resilient in the ways you needed to be to be successful in anthropology, archeology.

BL: I think so. I think it gives me a position in power in the sense I've been there. I've done that. I'm proud that I've done it, and you and I can drive around and if we spend a day, I can show you a hundred houses my dad, uncle and cousins and friends built, and I'm proud of that. Donald Trump Jr. doesn't have that. Neither do the kids from Meredith Mansion. My son says I've got a problem about rich people and I need to be kinder, and he's probably right. But it's this inherited

vast wealth that I'm uncomfortable with in a system that gives an opportunity and all the money in the world that other people don't have.

JD: Maybe one more question before we wrap up for today. You were working with the Zuni people when you got an invitation to give a job talk at the University of New Mexico. Why did you decide to make that transition to being a full time faculty member?

BL: It was a dream to work at a major research institution and teach anthropology. That's sort of the academic dream, isn't it? You go to graduate school in anthropology pretty much to be a professor. Or researcher. You don't go to be a business consultant. Maybe they do now. Maybe they should now.

JD: Maybe I should pose the question a bit differently. What were you doing with the Zuni people and how did that contrast with what you wanted to be doing as a faculty member?

BL: I was working for the tribe. We were doing a story about preservation. I was a tribal employee. It was just really, really interesting. They didn't have the Zuni people with the training they needed to do the programs that they did, so they hired other people. We did that, and it was a lot of fun. I really enjoyed it. Plus, I could continue to work at Zuni, and I did for years. I lived in Albuquerque and would come out in my old trailer. For a while we had a field station, and I'd come and work in the summers.

JD: So, you could do more as a faculty member than you could as a tribal employee?

BL: Yeah. It was rare for people that weren't Zuni to be there for very long. It didn't happen, really. I mean, people might come for five years or something and then you'd move on. It's something every white person should experience, just being the only white person that you might see all day. I'm sure there were other tribal employees, but you're a minority. That's something everybody should experience. And if we were only as graceful to all the minorities that are in our midst as the Zunis were to me, the world would be a better place.

JD: Well, should we pick up where we left off last time? I think we were in New Mexico. You had just gotten your faculty position there at the University. I think you told me you continued your field research in Arizona, was it?

BL: It was in New Mexico, on the Arizona border. For the Zuni tribe. Still worked out there. I was pretty much tied to it. I liked it. I liked living out there. It was very different from what I was used to. It felt like I was making a difference, and every day was interesting. On the edge, it's interesting being the minority, and then hearing different tales that they had to tell about society

and culture and landscape and looking at the land, and religion. All of it was something I was totally unused to. It was fascinating.

JD: How did you feel you were making a difference?

BL: I felt like I was helping tell an important story about society and culture and history. I saw the crazy things that the government had done to the tribe and just working as an advocate for them. I did a little bit of expert witness testimony, and stuff like that in lawsuits. That was a lot of fun. The story of what the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the U.S. government and all the things they did to the tribes is just not the standard view of American history that we're all taught. I liked to see other sides. It was just as far as another side as I could get to on the continent.

JD: Was there was one of those cases where, as an expert witness, you felt like you moved the needle for some?

BL: We did some work modeling exactly how much damage the federal government did to the economy, because they were extracting everything they wanted to without any compensation. They were extracting coal, they were taking all kinds of things – anything they could get out of the reservation, uncompensated, they did. That was pretty interesting. I was part of that. Estimated yields – I don't know if I told you, but land practices that the federal government imposed to try to bring in the people from the 7 different villages they went to in the summer, they federal government tried to make the central valley more productive to get them out of the villages because they didn't want them practicing their influences – pagan practices. It was a Christian BIA guy that tried to get this to happen, so they built a dam so they could do irrigation more easily, and they did what all dams do eventually. It either silted in or breached, and it did both and scoured the landscape for 22 miles and essentially took the tribe out of being overproducers into having no water they could move to their land. If the water's 10 feet below the land surface, if it's scoured, you can't divert the water into fields for irrigation. So, how do you estimate that? And based upon rainfall practices and good years and bad years and trying to figure out the parameters and the damage that was done, it was incredible. Essentially took farming out of the equation, all because a Christian BIA agent wanted to stop them from practicing their religion. To me, that's an important narrative in the sense that we don't see this. This has repercussions for today, for Pella. Everybody's on this mission to spread the word of God, and everybody likes to think they're doing the right thing, and this guy 110 years ago thought he was doing the right thing, and he destroyed the economy. I don't know. This is not a story anybody in Pella likes to hear about the negative consequences of their mission work.

JD: Were you able to put that in a perspective for a judge or jury then? Was it a lawsuit?

BL: It was a lawsuit with the tribe, and I was just one of the team that helped produce documents to do that. So that was very interesting. I don't know, that kind of public affairs kinds of research is very interesting to me. That advocacy. I felt very lucky to be able to do it, but I was really pretty peripheral, because of the people there that had been doing it for generations. I was just lucky to be a part of it as a young, sort of pre-PhD and then post-PhD person.

JD: How old were you then when you joined the faculty?

BL: I was about 30, but I worked for the tribe before that.

JD: So, you were pretty young for a full-time professor?

BL: Yeah, there were graduate students older. That was sort of interesting, once you get a faculty position. You're the same person one day before, but the next day, you're important. It's like *The New York Times*, I was the same guy before *The New York Times* pieces starting hitting, but now they want me on CNN and MSNBC and FOX News. It's fascinating to me that there's these little benchmarks of recognition that have nothing to do with what we are as individuals. It's always bothered me.

JD: Like a switch gets flipped.

BL: Yeah. It still bothers me. When I write about Trump's tariffs and agriculture for *The New York Times*, I just think there's so many better people than me to write about this. Agricultural economists, farmers, but I don't turn down the opportunity. I run all my stuff by farmers and bankers and people that I know to make sure that I'm not missing anything or I'm not missing anything that isn't there, and my good research. But it's like the people that should have their voices, don't. In part, because they don't have time to do it, and then there are political implications for them. If I work with a person who does farm loans, and she gives me all kinds of insights about what's happening. In the academic world, I'd put her on as a co-author. But she doesn't want to be named because she doesn't want the repercussions for the – she wants to be part of the voice, because they're my pieces, but I look to them for insights, and I'd make her junior author, but she can't do that. She can't be on TV. She can't editorialize. It's the same thing across all of academia. There are all kinds of academic experts that if they speak out, they'll lose their funding. If there's university presidents that aren't careful about how they tread, they'll lose endowments. The big public television does a good job of giving farmers and bankers and all kinds of real people that know an issue, but commercial TV is terrible. When's the last time on any of the big Sunday talk shows that – you never see anybody that's actually right there on the ground that knows something, their whole life is this issue. Their whole life is impacted by the trade issues. Are you ever gonna see a farmer whose life has been impacted by these trade issues pontificating on Sunday morning?

JD: So, the people who are people talking most are the ones who are least at stake in an issue.

BL: Right, right. They probably have the least knowledge. It's just like when I see nothing but reporters on a Sunday morning, or everyday evening show, I just think, what a missed opportunity. I mean, where are the academics? My god. The role economists can play. Political scientists, anthropologists, sociologists. I mean, all of the different social sciences. There's not a policy issue that doesn't have some social science study behind it. But they don't speak to the issues in public forums. The academic world has taken a backseat out of fear. And then the whole academic reward system doesn't reward anyone for their public outreach.

JD: I know you feel like there should be more public intellectuals.

BL: There should be. That's why I like working with people at Central College, because whenever you reach out and do things, it's just wonderful. How many people have I interviewed from Central on my show? I don't know, lots, right? So, then they're public intellectuals.

JD: Is that how you thought of yourself when you were at New Mexico, 30 years old.

BL: No, because if you did anything like that back then, you were a popularizer. You were taking the easy road out. That didn't help you get tenure.

JD: It wasn't rigorous enough.

BL: No, it's not. You have to do teaching, research, and service to the institution. So, you have to sit on stupid committees that didn't get anything done, or you had to teach, which a wonderful, favorite thing. And then you had to do research to fit into the narrative that they want it to fit into. If you want to write a book and get tenure, you're putting all your eggs in that basket. It has to be a good enough press, and if you want to do something that's a longer-term research study, you can. A major peer-reviewed article every year like slackers, and that's really hard to do.

JD: And this was a competitive anthropology program?

BL: One of the top 10 in the nation. The structures would never allow you to do that. I never would have thought of doing that. I finally decided that anthropologists did a crummy job of sharing what they did, so I did a public radio show for a couple of years with some colleagues, and it was wonderful fun. We'd take the research of people – I'd see something interesting in *American Anthropologist* and we'd interview the author and produce a one-minute segment for public radio. That was great fun, but nobody was getting anything. No one looked at it. You're just wasting your time. It's still not any different than that in academics. The tenure system at

major institutions doesn't allow them to do it. I remember when Carl Sagan was famous. He's not a very good astronomer; he's just a popularizer. The astronomers were looking down at Carl Sagan. I mean, what's wrong with that? They're still looking down at Carl Sagan probably.

JD: So, you felt a lot of pressure to do research, and some of that was with the Zuni tribe, but you also worked in Mexico?

BL: I wanted to do research. Mexico was a lot of fun. I loved working in Mexico. We worked with the National Institute of Anthropology and History. We brought in over I don't know how many years, we brought it – I want to make sure I get these numbers right – over a hundred kids from 13 different countries, and that was fun. Mostly from Central and South America, but we had some from Europe. One girl from Africa. Somebody from the Philippines. A bunch of Dutch students. That was a lot of fun. A group of people from Cuba.

JD: You weren't doing field research in Mexico?

BL: Northern Mexico, we did archeology. That was a lot of fun. Working in other cultures, that was fun too, and talking to people about different perspectives and where they came from, and different political views they had. We had a lot more in common than not. It was a different kind of environment. There were Federalies with machine guns and rapid fire shotguns, so it was a little intimidating, too.

JD: Were you harassed on the site?

BL: One time, a girl from Argentina and a girl from Mexico went to this town, we were on site, to this town Galeana. We lived in another town, but that was the closest town. They went to get watermelon or something in the afternoon, and they came back in tears. While they were there, the Federalies went through town and took everything. They started at one end of town, went through the houses and took jewelry, money, anything they wanted. The girls saw it coming, and got stopped. I don't know what happened, but they came back in tears. They said we had to get out of there. We had several pickups, we had about twenty kids, and it wasn't really a road we were on. We were out in the middle of nowhere. It was just a road we'd created, and so we're coming out, and the other guy that was my equivalent from Mexico wasn't there that day, so it was me. I was the only principal investigator there, and up comes a troop truck with a bunch of young men on the back, like 20. They pulled right up in front of us, and I see them coming, so I stop. By the time we have our papers, I'd stepped way away from the vehicle, holding our papers and making sure they could see my hands. I went probably 20 yards away from our vehicles. They jumped off the truck, they got all around me, and then a young officer in his twenties – it's interesting that they take the kids from the north and take them to the south, where they work for the government. They take the kids from the south and bring them to the north. So these were a

bunch of Mayan kids, and kids that weren't northern Chihuahua kids that were around us then. You don't wanna be policing people you don't know. The different cultures police the different cultures. Anyway, they're all around me with shotguns, automatic rifles and stuff. Just standing there. And I said, "Hola. Como se llama Bob. Soy un profesor." I just start talking, being real friendly. Some older guy in his thirties came in and started talking with me, and I said, "Come on back, let me show you around. I'll show you what we've got going on." I was just as friendly as I could be. I acted like nothing was wrong. Handed him my papers. He looked at me, and sort of shook his head. He said, "Are you telling me the truth?" I said, "Yes, I am telling you the truth." He sort of shook his head again, and he said, "Okay, get out of here." But I didn't know what was gonna happen. So, yeah, we were harassed. It came out okay. But it was very fearful. The thing is, they went through that village and took everything they wanted. That's just horrifying. The classic person, NRA person, would say that wouldn't happen if they had to worry about there being a gun in every other household, and they're absolutely right.

JD: Interesting. So you think if the local people had been armed –

BL: Yeah. So liberals like to say that conservatives and gun owners are so stupid. They're fearful of the government. The government's gonna come with tanks. And they're gonna take away your guns if they want to. The government's not gonna do it. But first, if they want to, your gun isn't gonna protect you. Well, I think it would have protected those people in Galeana. So I understand that Conservative argument in a way I never did before.

JD: So, that was part of your research during that time. What was your favorite aspect of teaching at the University?

BL: Getting the kids to think different ways and trying to help them do that. Undermining everything they had thought they ever knew. Because then you can shake it up. If our worldviews that we come with, if we don't have any way to assess them or think about them from a different way, then we harden into that. I don't think that we want to do that. Some people harden into that. The more you're exposed to other cultures, other perspectives, the more you can figure out who you are and what you believe. But if you're never exposed to anything else, I don't expect them to believe or necessarily understand you, but if you share perspectives, then they can evaluate if they want and build upon. It's not an indoctrination, it's an exposure, and people can do what they want with it. If they aren't exposed, how sad is that?

JD: Did you tell stories to your students?

BL: Oh, yeah. That's the best way to teach, through stories. We have oral traditions. It's a relatively recent phenomenon in terms of human communication. It's stories, it's the narratives that make sense, and it's the only way we learn. In the American Southwest, the Hopi and Zuni

and everybody that was all oral traditions. Nothing was written. Kevas, which were the subterranean religious structures that, it's very complex to explain kevas, but they were underground, and it was primarily male kind of thing. All winter long, if you're in your keva, you would whitewash it, and then there were stories you would tell. The elders would draw and tell a story. Until you had the whole whitewashed walls of the keva covered in narratives, the mythology. Then you're looking at it and hearing stories. The next season, they'd whitewash it and do it again. Then you'd do it again, for generation and generation you'd be telling the same stories and drawing the same images. That's how you understood your place in the world. You're hearing your stories, where you are, who you are, and where you're coming from, over and over from somebody else that's older. The women would do the same kinds of things and tell these stories. Stories are so important. Anything that isn't a story doesn't pack the lesson it could because it's just dull. Weaving anything into a story is the way you learn. I don't care whether we're looking at over some dorms and trees and plants and people walking and stuff. There can be some aesthetic things that add interest to it, but you add a story to the campus or the biology of the tree and evolution of ashes and how they fit the ecosystem, telling those narratives, that's where you learn, I think. Books are important, but it's the oral tradition that means the most to us still.

JD: You told me a story once about a biologist who was lost in South America, and couldn't understand the stories he was being told when he was found. Can you tell me that story?

BL: I was on top of Mt. Evans with an archeologist, a soil scientist, and a biologist, and we were 10,000 feet or something, it was cold, some good Cognac, and we were telling each other stories all the time. He told a story of he was in the Amazon, he did work in the Amazon, and spoke several languages down there, he was a plant researcher, and he got lost. And he wandered into the night, very frightened. Couldn't find his camp, heard sounds of another camp. He walked toward it. It was a group of people that lived in the Amazon, and they welcomed him, they fed him, and drank the local brew. As the night progressed, they knew he wanted to learn about their culture, talking about battles fought in the past, great men, and monsters. They used the constellations as mnemonic devices, and they'd point at this part of the sky and they would say, "This monster was here. Here's this battle. Here's that great man." For all he could do, he couldn't understand what they were pointing at. He understood what they were saying, but he didn't understand the mnemonic devices in the constellation. One by one, all the men of the village showed up and tried to explain to him – all the elders – what he was seeing in the sky, and he could see nothing. Then long toward dawn, a child stood up and pointed at the sky, and he said, and I don't know the language he used, but the child said, "You're looking at the sky the wrong way. The constellations aren't seen by connecting the dots. The constellations are the black spaces in the sky." And immediately into the biologist's head, looking at the sky, he spotted monsters, great battles, the deeds of great men just written out ahead of him and all he had to do was look at the sky differently. To me, that's a powerful story. Something that's so engrained in

us, that there's one way to look at the constellations, but if you start looking at the black spaces, you see completely different things. It's engrained for us to look at the white spaces. That's what life is, too. That's what culture does. It tells us how to look at the world and when I teach, I want to shake that up. Don't you?

JD: Absolutely. So that's what you were trying to do for your students, to flip the sky?

BL: Right. We should all try to flip the sky, all the time. That's why a lot of my writing, to flip my sky, a lot of my writing is about my conservative friends. I have to flip my sky to understand where they are. It's very interesting. Most of us aren't interested in flipping the sky. And they're not interested in flipping their sky. I didn't try to get them to flip their sky. They're conservatives. They're not gonna flip their sky.

JD: I used to be a conservative.

BL: You flipped your sky. And you flipped it by seeing different things and having mentors that showed you to see different things, I suspect.

JD: In the case of this biologist, it took getting lost, an involuntary circumstance that he didn't go looking for, but then he couldn't forget. For me, I didn't go looking to become a progressive, as I think of myself now, I'm part progressive, part moderate, but a lot of those transformations, I think, were reluctant on my part. Once you see something, you can't un-see it. Once you see monsters in the sky, you can't see only constellations.

BL: So, that's what we do,

JD: It was during this time in your teaching, researching, and that's where you met your wife, Annie?

BL: She was a neighbor, and I really got to know her through her kids, because I let them play video games on my computer and she didn't. It was really through the kids.

JD: How many kids does she have?

BL: Four. And then two with me. And they're everywhere now. Denver and Seattle and Santa Fe and Albuquerque. And ours are still here.

JD: How did you know this is more than a neighborly relationship?

BL: Because she was beautiful and brilliant, and she flips my world a little bit, too, in the sense that she grew up in Europe. She was born in New Mexico, and her went on a post dock and so she lived in Spain and Copenhagen and France and different places until she was about 11. She doesn't know much about US history, but she knows all the Danish queens. I don't know, it's been fun.

JD: Your two children were born there in Albuquerque?

BL: Yes.

JD: What are their names?

BL: Asa and Johanna. They're here, and Asa's just graduating, and he's ready to go on his walkabout.

JD: And by walkabout you mean life journey?

BL: He's like I was when I was his age. I wanted to get out of Iowa. He wants to go to Boston and study art. We have family in Boston. I understand and appreciate, he's always been adventurous. We'll see how that works out.

JD: Good luck to him. Trying to capture this period in your life – you met Annie, got married, you all lived together, and then Asa was born.

BL: Yes, he was born and Annie was teaching computer science in continuing ed, and while she was pregnant with him, she started fainting and couldn't teach anymore, because you can't teach and faint. We needed her salary, so I tried to figure out what I could do to supplement it, and I thought I could do some things by writing, but that's a long-term thing. You have to get established. You might write for years and not make a nickel. I was wandering the streets one night trying to think of what I could do, and a yellow cab drove by at a high rate of speed. It was late at night, and it looked like the person was having fun, and I thought I could do that. So, I enquired, and you had to say that you would do 3 nights a week, and you were on your own. You have to pay a lease and gas and anything you make is yours, and it ended up being pretty good. I fit in well, and I loved it. That turned my world upside down again.

JD: And you wrote a book about that called *Yellow Cab*. Why was that an important book for you to write?

BL: Because it freed me from the writing of academia. Maybe that's why the people in the Academy are in part hidden because their work is impenetrable to the public. Maybe they don't

know how to write for anything but other academics. It's sort of sad, because the world I saw didn't lend itself to any academic writing. It led me to short stories and poetry, because in one cab ride there's about 15 or 20 poems if you're paying attention. Or one good short story. You just have to pay attention and think about what's happening and your interactions. Is this a story worth telling? Most of the time they are. But you have to think about the story. You have to think, where's the story here? You have to be honest to the story. You have to be honest to the people. If you're not paying attention, there's no story there. But if you're paying attention, there's a story in everything. You just have to think how to frame it and what emotion do you get out of this story. Every story should yield some kind of emotion or you haven't done enough work. There's emotion to every human endeavor. If you don't tug at that, you're wasting your time. There cannot be any human interaction where there isn't some kind of give and take, some tension, or kind of emotion that comes from it. Most of the time, you either don't recognize it or you've been enculturated to oppress it. What you have to do it start to unravel that taxi ride to see who is this person, what's their story, what's going on, what's adventurous. Not everything is. That's the challenge. This is just a guy in the backseat. What do I find out that's interesting about them? Some of the things just happen in pure wackiness, and the story comes in a nice little package with a bow. But the rest of the time, you work to figure out what they are.

JD: A friend of mine wrote an essay that I still teach at the very beginning of a semester of The Personal Essay, and it's called "Learning to See." In any genre, you have to learn how to see. You see your experience or you see other people and you have to be able to imagine them as characters or imagine the shape of the narrative within your own memory. You locate stories that way. Do you have a favorite from *Yellow Cab*?

BL: I've got a lot. If they weren't good, I wouldn't have put them in there. I don't know. You could just pick one and I could tell you why I liked it. Some of them that I like are sad. Right before Christmas, you knew you'd see college girls out on the street, maybe working the streets so they could buy Christmas presents for their family, boyfriends or whatever, or to pay for their trips home. That's something nobody sees, and that's a story nobody wants to tell, but some girls did take to the streets of Albuquerque to make some money.

JD: And you saw that in the cab?

BL: Yeah. Between Thanksgiving and Christmas, there'd be fresh faced girls on the street. Then when you saw some of them in school. That is a tragic story. I sort of equivocate on it because a lot of the women that I talked to that worked in sex trades had really different perspectives on it than a lot of the classic narrative. There was a teacher that was a stripper. She was a middle school teacher and stripped on the weekends because she could make more money on Saturdays than in a week. That was what she did, and don't dare judge her. She liked me because I wouldn't hit on her on the way home. I had a lot of hookers and strippers that would call me and

had my cell phone number because I wasn't gonna bug them on the way home. She would read Russian poetry to me on the way home and that was very interesting. All of this turned my world upside down.

JD: I was gonna say, these are things you see and can't un-see either.

BL: I saw some amazing things. I saw some horrifying things.

JD: You told me about a time you had been at the University for 17 years and you'd been driving cab for how many years?

BL: Four or five.

JD: And making it with two kids? But just barely?

BL: Once I was driving the cab, it was better. It was just fine. They didn't pay a lot at the University. They called everybody on the faculty, unless you're a medical doctor, so many people joked it's the land of entrapment. You love being there, but the compensation for the English professors, I was an anthropology professor, and the compensation for English professors was like half. English professors were like the lowest of the low in salary. Isn't that sad?

JD: Some things haven't changed.

BL: I don't know, the cab thing was interesting, and it let me break through from my writing. I'd come home and tell Annie a story, and she'd tell me to write it down. And I said some of them come to me like poems. So, she said to write poems. I hadn't written poems since freshman year in college. Well, so? I know I don't follow the forms or rules or whatever, and I'm sure there's academics that would turn their nose up at my stuff, but I don't care. It doesn't matter. I don't like hardly any of the poems I read in *The New Yorker*. They're all "I can follow the rules of poetry more. I'm a better poem because *The New Yorker* published me. I'm the kind of the poetry world for today." And I don't understand that. I don't wanna get into that. I'm sure there's rules that if I learned them, I would learn to appreciate them, but I don't like to write for. I wrote for a long time for a specific audience of academics that would understand what I write. But my mother wouldn't understand what I'm talking about, and I'm tired of writing for academics. I want to write for my mom and people like her and everyday people. Academics don't do that, so as a consequence, since they can't reach into the world and share the wonderful things that they see and create, the rest of the world doesn't know what they do and they tend to resent them. In that environment where you have all of this research and bright minds being able to work together to solve society's problems, instead we have people that don't know anything, not all of

them, but many of them following ideological biases that are centuries deep. That's in part the problem of the structure of academia.

JD: As I'm listening to you and I'm thinking that writing this book was a kind of liberation from that for you, and it seems like it was something you enjoyed. Hard work, but you're driving a cab, you're seeing the world in a different way. You're seeing stories and writing them down. It seems like that maybe could have gone on if you're making ends meet that way. Why did you decide to come back to Iowa? Why did you decide to give all of that up?

BL: Annie sort of wanted to. She wanted a new adventure. Then we started worrying about the younger kids. Albuquerque was turning into a rough place, and I mean, it was always sort of rough. It's not anything inherent to Albuquerque, it's any time you get a bunch of people in a close environment, just like rats in a cage. If you let the rats out on the lawn, everybody's fine, but if you put them in a cage, everyone starts bickering. Humans are the same way. A boy was shot and killed behind our house. That wasn't good, but the final straw was when I was driving my cab one night, bars were closed, I was downtown. A couple of things happened that were just too much for me. There's a big parking lot by all the bars. The people that were going to the bars would go there, and then it would thin out between 2 and 3, they'd be gone, and I'd be down there. Some homeless guy that sat at the corner started yelling at me. He says, "Call 911! Call 911!" So, I parked my cab, I got out, I called 911 on my old flip phone. In the middle of the lot, I looked out there and I could see what I thought was like a huge raccoon. It was in the dark. There weren't a lot of lights, just some ambient lights sort of in the middle of the parking lot. It was sort of this odd thing, and I heard this odd singing. It sounded like singing. Is that a human? I thought, no. It can't be human. Humans can't move like that. I got closer, and it was a boy in his twenties. He was broken everywhere. His head was back, and his mouth was open, and he was singing. It was his life leaving him. His voice was parts moaning, but it sounded like singing to me. I'm just horrified. I told the police to come. They all came, I don't know, they all came. Ambulances, long line of cars, you could see them coming forever, like they knew something horrible had happened. This boy was broken, just broken to bits. There was this odd, you want to help him, but there's this odd, 3-foot radius that I'd run up to, and I couldn't go any closer. And other people would run up, too, and couldn't get any closer. One of his buddies ran up and broke that barrier. It took him a little bit and the buddy held his hand, and the ambulance came, and even they hit that 3-foot barrier. It was really weird to watch. Then they went it, and he died. What had happened was there'd been an argument at the parking lot and the homeless guy told me this. One of the guys hit this kid. One punch, knocked him out. Then these 5 guys got into their Toyota, drove around, and ran over him. They got out, they came and looked at his body, and then they backed over him. Then they all got out, all five of them, and they looked at him again, and drove over him one more time, and then they drove off into the distance. I arrived when I saw them leaving the parking lot. That's when I got there. And the homeless guy started screaming. And eventually, they figured out who the guys were, and it ended up being on like

page 17 of the paper. It was this horrifying event. When you're a cab driver, you've got to pay your \$95 lease that was there. You've got to tip out the dispatch, the mechanic, the person that takes your money. You tip out everybody, and you've got a \$95 lease, and you've got to pay for your gas, and so you go home at 3 in the morning otherwise you're not making as much money. So I went over to the Hyatt because I knew this one guy would come out about now. I thought, I'm just gonna sit at the Hyatt. And he was a gay guy that used to go to a gay bar. He was a real nice guy, like his job, just really nice. It wasn't a gay bar, it was a gay magazine place. I don't know if it was all gay inside, I don't know. I've never went inside. There're mainly men in there. I don't know what happens. I don't care what happens, but he's a real nice guy. And we chat a little bit, very professional young man. And then he comes out, and he's just in the backseat of my cab just balling. I thought, I probably picked him up 10 or 20 times, he's always happy, always nice, and now he's in my backseat in tears. I've just seen a boy die. I thought, I can't do this anymore. I'm thinking I've got little kids. I can't do this anymore. Annie wanted to go, so we left.

JD: Why did you feel like your kids were unsafe? This story you've told me about the bar is horrific. But your kids wouldn't have been at that bar.

BL: Or hanging out in parking lots or anything, but there is just lots of violence around. We learned one of the little boys who grew up across the street grew up and went off and served his time in Afghanistan and was back not very long and was killed in an ATM. Just the random violence that would happen around was just – we felt like Iowa would be a safer place to raise our kids.

JD: So, what did it feel like to resign?

BL: It was hard.

JD: I mean, you told me this was your dream.

BL: Yeah. It was hard, but I knew that was what was best to do. And I naively thought it would be easy to get another job once I got up here, which was pretty naïve. You have a PhD, you teach anthropology, and I had this applied work that I did. With statistics, I figured I'd find a place somewhere. And I did, and I'm very glad that I did. But I went for a year with nobody even contacting me when I applied for things. I never applied for an academic position, because I knew that would be hard. We'd have 220 applicants for a job. I didn't even try for that. It was time to move on. Plus, I was tired of writing for the same 6 or 7 people that would read my stuff. That just didn't feel like that was – you work too hard for not to get a more public audience. Not that I deserved one, because I wasn't writing for a public audience, I was writing as I was taught, for my peers, so that was part of the problem. I was brought up in it and it took the cab to drag

me out of it. The thing about a poem, and you know this, is in one poem you can convey as much information, as much feeling, as much education, as much understanding, as much enlightenment as you can from a really good book. I could do more in a poem than I could in a scientific article.

JD: So, in some ways, the *Yellow Cab* experience, driving the cab, writing that book, was sort of coincidental in that it paralleled these other experiences that were alarming to you, and that made you feel like your family was unsafe. But you were sort of being changed by those experiences that would have made it difficult for you to keep on doing academic work, even if your family was safe.

BL: Yeah, absolutely. I don't know whether this is horrifying or normal, but I liked being unsafe. I liked the riskiness of driving the cab. That was part of it. And being on the edges of society, I'm the only guy that could come home and tell his wife that, as an anthropologist and as a cab driver, I'm the only guy that could say, "I was talking to this hooker last night, she said this that and the other." I like that. I like going into those different worlds. I liked talking to the hookers. I like talking to the strippers. I liked talking to the drug dealers. I liked talking to people of different cultures, of people in the gangs. And negotiating that space was fascinating. I'd still drive the cab today. I'd still accept the risks to see if you can negotiate it. And if you can't negotiate it, like I did with the Federalies in Mexico. If you can't, then I don't know what to say. But to me, that's a challenge, and I like doing it. What do you do when somebody steals from you? That's a space not very many people are in. How do you negotiate somebody angry in the backseat? How do you negotiate somebody with a gun? How do you do that?

JD: Do you know Jack London's story, "South of the Slot"?

BL: I've read much of him, but it was a long time ago.

JD: You should go look at it. It's exactly like your – Freddie Drummond is a sociologist I believe, all buttoned up at the University. He's engaged to this sort of icy woman from high society, but his research takes him south of the slot, which is the railroad track in San Francisco. And he studies the labor unions; it was around the time of the riots in San Francisco. But he adopts this other persona, Big Bill Totts. And he's a brawler, and he's this earthy character, south of the slot. To do this research, he has to pass in that environment. But then it becomes a Jekyll and Hyde thing. Which life is he going to choose? I'm hearing a lot of echoes of that.

BL: It is. If somebody says that they want to find a hooker, what do you do? I don't find hookers. What do you decide to do? Well, I'd drive around as much as I could, away from areas I knew they were, and make as much money off of them as I could. That's what I did. Is that ethical? I don't care what it is. They can look all they want. When they get tired, they're gonna go home. Occasionally, they'd find one. So, what do you do? It's a horrible, terrible, sad situation, I mean,

one time I was stuck babysitting an infant in a car seat while a girl went into a hotel room for a guy. I didn't know what we were doing. I was driving somewhere with a girl and her baby. Going to a hotel room. It became pretty clear afterwards what had transpired. It's terribly sad, but it's life, and it's life on the streets, and you have to accept it. I just tried to record it so people could understand some things. I didn't put that in there. And I'd encounter kids that'd say – they'd leave their kids in the car. “Oh, what grade are you in?” A guy about eight years old. “I don't know. I've never been to school.” So.

JD: Wow. So, you came back to Iowa. Should we take a quick break? Keep flying ahead?

BL: I'm fine.

JD: So, you came back for your kids, and –

BL: My parents.

JD: Also, your parents.

BL: I wanted to be with my family.

JD: Yeah. How did you decide where you were gonna settle?

BL: For a few years, whenever we'd come back, we'd drive around and look for places that we wanted to be. I didn't wanna live in a city but we needed to be close enough to my family, so she wanted something in the country, and we like the rolling hills of south central Iowa. We found a place, just by chance, and that's where we were. It could have been Winterset. It could have been Oskaloosa. It could have been anywhere.

JD: It was close to your family. You liked the landscape there in Knoxville.

BL: I like all of the southern Iowa landscape.

JD: You said it took you a year to find your job now at the radio station?

BL: About that. I go back and forth and I go for 3 weeks and work the cab every night and go back and work my job at the radio station.

JD: So, how did that opportunity come about? You tried consulting and other things, and you had a background in radio because you did the show in Albuquerque.

BL: Yeah, but I didn't really think about it. I met the owner of the radio station, and he asked and I started asking questions and he liked the way I asked questions. He said, "Would you come work for me? We'll let you do an interview program." I said, "Yeah, sure."

JD: So, you didn't start out doing news, you just did –

BL: My program.

JD: Which was called "In-Depth Fridays"?

BL: In depths every day. And then I ended up supervising news people, and they have radio stations in Washington, Iowa; Pella, Knoxville, Indianola, Perry, Jefferson, Stewart, and so all those young people in all those news positions, I work with them and try to guide them. That's really interesting.

JD: That's what you're doing now?

BL: Yeah.

JD: When you started with the In-Depth show, or what did you call it? A series? A show?

BL: Yeah, it's every day. It's pretty much whatever I want to, every day. People reach out, and I want to help them tell their stories. Or I'll find something of interest that I'll wanna do. Or I'll just see something that appears on the surface not to be interesting, and I'll try to figure out how I can make that interesting. My best example was when I got a press release from the Iowa State Extension office on mold. Corn mold. And this woman that did research on corn mold. The corn mold inherently doesn't sound that interesting, does it? It turns out, just coincidentally, that this woman was very exuberant, very knowledgeable. And she was from Pella. She works for the Iowa State Extension office in Ames. Anyway, we started on corn mold, and by the time the interview was over, this young woman from Pella is protecting the world's food supply. That's what's cool. When you try to take something that isn't interesting on the surface, for whatever reasons. We might not think corn mold is interesting, but if we don't understand corn mold and how to control it, then we've got an unsafe food supply.

JD: Do you do that with people also that you feel are overlooked?

BL: Absolutely. I love to do that, in the sense that I grew up as a carpenter in a working class environment, and I don't think that people that do those kinds of jobs are appreciated enough, and I think I've told you this before, there's a certain class tension there when you have your craft and you're good at it, at least back in those days, you sort of look down your nose at people

who are stuck in offices and people like bankers and stuff. I like to do that. I can get on a road grater or maintainer, and they can teach me how to do it. Or I can ride with one on a snow plow. I remember one time, there was like a 12 inch snow, maybe 8 or 10 years ago, and I went out on a snow plow, and what they went through to clear our roads and knowing that those things don't cut through snow like a knife. There's lots of pressure. There's this really interesting tension on the blade of a snow plow. They really aren't as steady on the roadway as you think. There're little movements, there's loss of traction. You're in this huge, giant beast that can get stuck pretty easily. That the snow is not like a knife through butter. They have different textures and sometimes you'll hit a spot, and even a few inches will drive them to a stop, and then you have to work it. Here's how you work it this way, that way, so it's this incredible thing in a big snow storm. Then to recognize that when someone needs dialysis or when there's a fire – that's what people don't understand in these tough snow years that we have – every time an ambulance goes out into the countryside, there's probably a snow plow in front of it. So, you've got a fire truck behind you and you're trying to get there. Somebody's dying, and you've got to drive your snow plow through 12 inches of snow and cut the path for the ambulance. That's heroic. I want to tell their stories, and to me, that's really interesting. Everybody's all grumpy about the snow plow guys. "Oh, the snow plows, they're out there, they filled the end of my driveway." They are real first responders, and they're making our area safe for commerce and industry and for us to get to work, but nobody appreciates that. A friend of mind works at Walmart. We became Facebook friends. Did I tell you this last time?

JD: Is this the Vietnam veteran?

BL: He's an Iraq War veteran, but if I can tell his story, then wonderful. I want to do that. I am so enriched.

JD: Tell us about this artist. He was an artist.

BL: He still is an artist, and he's this very creative man. We became Facebook friends, and I don't know why. I normally don't friend people. I hardly ever friend anybody. I respond to friend requests. To me, I feel presumptuous if you wanna be my friend. I'm old school enough to think that. He befriended me, and I saw him doing all this, he was getting recognized for his work as an artist. Then I realized that he was only one of like – 30 out of 800 might be accepted, and he was accepted year after year. It's this small guy, he works at Walmart, and nobody knows anything about him. So, I want to make him king of the world for a day. Let's celebrate him. Let's celebrate his creativity. Let's celebrate him as a person. His friends do, but most of the time I just walk by and maybe nod at the people at Walmart. It's what most of us do. Or anybody. We don't engage with them.

JD: No one knows that side of him at Walmart.

BL: No. His friends might, but at Walmart, or people, but if he starts talking too much to people at Walmart walking by, he's probably gonna get a reprimand or something. But I like to dig in and find out what everybody's story is, what it is about them. To me, I interview presidential candidates all of the time. But it's a constructed kind of person. I'm less interested in talking with people that are constructed to present themselves to me. I'd rather talk with people that aren't constructed, that aren't asked the questions, that aren't engaged. Those are my more interesting stories. I let them do that.

JD: Do I understand correctly that you've also done some oral history work for families with loved ones in hospice?

BL: Yes.

JD: How did you start doing that?

BL: I started doing that because my world got turned upside down again. It was a woman from HCI Hospice of Iowa. She called me and said, "Can I be on your radio program? It's advance directives. I wanna talk about hospice." I thought, oh my God. She wants to talk about people dying. How can I make that interesting, about death? Everybody's gonna be depressed. No, I don't wanna do it. I don't wanna talk about hospice, no. So, of course I said, "Of course, yes. I'll talk with you." Because I was ignorant, and I had all these perceptions about it, and it ended up being very uplifting, because hospice is about celebrating life, and it's about comforting people as they pass. I didn't know that. Some of it never really entered into my realm of experience. So, she brought me in. They ended up asking me to be on the board, which is a pretty smart thing that you should do in any non-profit. You want the radio person or the newspaper person on your board because then you can help manipulate the media. So, they did that, and I agreed. I ended up being chair for a year. Fortunately, when it came time to help my mom, I knew what to do. I also knew there were non-profit hospices, which this one is – if you don't have a nickel, they'll take you. Or there's for-profit hospices that don't have to take you. I knew what hospice was. I knew it wasn't giving up. I knew it was helping. I was able to help my mom, and then my aunt became ill. She fell and broke her hip. My cousins start calling, "Mom's gonna need help. I don't know anything about hospice. And they're telling us she needs hospice care." And I said, "Who are they sending you too?" And it was a for-profit hospice. I said, "Well, tell me how the meeting goes." My cousins call me back, they said, "We don't understand a word they said. We don't know anything about it. We don't understand." I said, "Okay, let me get somebody there from the hospice I know, and I'll come up and interpret if you need me to interpret, but I'll send you somewhere." I established they didn't have any money. Everyone was broke. The HCI people went up. My cousin called me back, and I said, "Did you understand?" And she said, "Yes, thank you. Thank you so much." And it was like, so I got involved, sort of I needed to

learn the lesson of how to help my own family in this time. It was really wonderful that they came to me, and they taught me. Over the years, I try to teach people. All our hospices do well. But anyway, they asked me, “Would you mind interviewing people that want to be interviewed?” Or maybe I volunteered it. I don’t remember. It was part of what they do at HCI. They do a life history, like do you want someone to come and they’ll tell stories or whatever. And some people want it. It’s just this remarkable thing. I’ve met some remarkable people, and some remarkable stories. Then I just burn it on a CD or a thumb drive and I hand it to the family. Once I know it’s in the family’s hands and I know they can read it, I delete it. I never use it for anything. It’s just amazing. There are interesting patterns to it. Men want to talk about accomplishments, women want to talk about relationships. You do this too, don’t you, some of this?

JD: I’ve never done hospice. Well, have any of these interviews that you’ve done for hospice changed you or changed your sense of what’s important?

BL: They all change me, in the sense that these people are willing to share. Some of them are just wonderful. Some of them frustrate me, in the sense that you have to ask real open-ended questions. One time I asked a guy, “Tell me about your brothers and sisters.” I knew, because they give me a sheet, X brothers, X sisters or whatever. And he said, “Don’t ask me about them. I haven’t talked to them in fifty years and I never wanna think about them.” It seems like sort of an easy question, but it was a bad question. So, what I do is say, “Where were you born? What was it like growing up?” I get all kinds of things. And if I know they’ve got kids or grandkids, I want to get some emotion. I want them to leave a gift, some words of wisdom. “I love you.” Stuff like that. Sometimes, people don’t wanna do that. They don’t wanna give that. One guy who had kids, young kids, all he wanted to talk about was his college buddies and all the things they did drinking and stupid in college. Like, get a clue, man. I didn’t say that, but I wanted to. But I couldn’t get anything out of him. I would say, “Do you have a message for your children?” “Yeah, be good. But then there was this time that Joe and I did this that –”

JD: So, those weren’t all world changers.

BL: No. There’s some that are. Just so wonderful, people that have had interesting lives, even if they’re troubled lives or whatever. I interviewed a young woman in her thirties that ended up dying of cancer, and it was this most beautiful, beautiful interview where she talked so lovingly about her family, so lovingly about her husband. It was just maybe the most wonderful thing I’ve had a part of.

JD: As I’m thinking, so many parts of your life experience that at the time you had no idea would be useful, and the kind of work that you do now really have been, so your cultural depth as an anthropologist, your navigation of different worldviews, your *Yellow Cab* experience, your ability to straddle different what we call discourse communities in academia, just different

groups of people in the ways they talk and the ways they make sense of the world, all of that's really vital to the work you're doing now. In radio, in non-profits, and also in your written work. Is that fair to say?

BL: Yeah. I keep thinking back to that woman. Can I return to her for just a moment? Finish that. She passed away. My recognition, what I learned from that too was I knew her. I didn't really engage with her when I'd see her around, so I was sad for that. Then I learned I need to engage more with people. But then, one day, at Peace Tree after work –

JD: Peace Tree Brewing?

BL: Yeah. This man came up to me. I'd never seen him before. Never remembered seeing him before. Big guy. Came to me, and he said, "You don't know me, but I'm so and so's husband." And I just starting tearing up, and I said, "Man, she loved you so much." Then there's these two big guys who had never seen each other, hugging at Peace Tree. Tears in their eyes, hugging and patting themselves on the back. It was like, what a gift she left him. What a gift she gave me. They're life changing. From an interview that I didn't wanna do, to that. All of this stuff, encountering all this stuff I don't know anything about, being open-minded and wanting to learn, that's what anthropology's about. These different discourse spaces or whatever, it's trying to get across them. I hope that was okay to divert back.

JD: Absolutely. Maybe I'll back up even a little bit further. You had been away from Iowa for 20 years at least?

BL: Thirty.

JD: Thirty years. Left as a young man, sort of fed up with what you thought of as a boring environment, and ignorant attitudes about race and other things. What did you see when you came back? How had Iowa changed?

BL: Iowa had changed quite a bit. It was more conservative. It had this crazy, bizarre, tribal division based around Iowa and Iowa State athletics, which is just ridiculous to me. People worship at the cult of Iowa State or the Iowa Hawkeyes, I know they don't see it that way – it's just sort of a fun thing to do, but in many ways it's an opioid. You don't have to think about the trials and tribulations of the real world when you immerse yourself in something like that. It's something our intellects want us to do. They want us to engage and think and process the world around us, but it's so focused into sports now, and it's pretty easy, and people work hard and they wanna play and they don't wanna think about the stuff in the world around them. They find comfort in the Hawkeyes and Cyclones and –

JD: Nobody flew flags off their porch when you were growing up in Dog Patch?

BL: No, no. Nobody flew flags. We couldn't afford to get into a game. We wouldn't go to a game. We might like to know that we won or not, but it wasn't any big deal. It wasn't like it is now. Now it's just this cult. And they're building monuments to millions and millions and millions of dollars. I don't know, I read something about Iowa State was investing \$30 million in one end of the football field. \$30 million dollars for one end of the football field. How many Nobel Laureates would that endowment bring? How many Pulitzer Prize winners would that bring? And not just bring for a year, endow chairs. National Book Award winners. Cancer researchers. All in a football stadium. And I know they're gonna say it pays for itself, which it doesn't. It helps attract students, which is may or may not. To me, how Iowa has changed is how our nation has changed, all caught up in the sports stuff. It's a lot of wasted potential to me.

JD: It's not where you find meaning in the world.

BL: No. I used to enjoy reading the sports page. I used to enjoy watching games. But it's gotten so bad, I just don't.

JD: Well, you were an athlete, yourself.

BL: Yeah.

JD: If you were a young person now, do you think you'd be going into college athletics? I mean I guess you wouldn't know what you know now about the world and where you find meaning.

BL: No, but right now I'd think that Division III Athletics are a good model. That's what I think. Let me play football, let me throw guys around, let me wrestle. Now I think I'd be better focused spending that time on my studies, but I understand why people wanna do that and I think Division III level is the way to do it.

JD: Without the scholarships and millions of dollars.

BL: Yeah. Absolutely. I think so. But, it's not gonna be that way. That's sort of the perfect world. Or give scholarships to the kids that are gonna be in the musical, too. That's how Iowa has changed. It's also more racist. But that I really started seeing more of that after Trump.

JD: It's more racist than when you left in the '70s?

BL: Yeah. Absolutely.

JD: How do you know?

BL: Because it's more apparent to me. People are more racist now than they used to be. I have a buddy who, we grew up together. He was an orphan. He was a black kid. He went to our high school. There was a YMCA home for troubled youths and juvenile delinquents and abandoned kids or whatever. They just were sort of in our classes with us. It wasn't any big deal. He was a Y boy. He grew up in a Catholic orphanage. He grew up and then came to live with a black doctor for a while until he was maybe 10 or 12 or something, I forget. Then he came and went to us, and we were on the same football team together. Just another guy. There were a couple other black kids. Very minority.

JD: What was his name?

BL: Dennis Shields. And Dennis went on, he was a good basketball player too, and he went on and played at Graceland University and then went to the University of Iowa and got his law degree. Went to various academic institutions, and now he's chancellor of the University of Wisconsin - Platteville. After I started *The New York Times* pieces, we caught up with each other. It was really interesting. He emailed me that he'd be calling the next day or so. We had email correspondence. Then I get a call. "Do you have a moment for the Chancellor?" I said, "Sure." She said, "He's pulling up the driveway now, but let me just tell you now, he says you were a terror on the football field." So, I get on, and it's like, we haven't seen each other since 1972. But it was like it was yesterday. I was yakking on the phone. Then Dennis sent me a piece that he's working on. He sent it to me yesterday, I responded today. It's about race, and him growing up. And it's about the tale of two kings, Steve King and Martin Luther King. Dennis essentially shared the narrative that I shared with you, that he thinks the world is more racist now than when he was growing up.

JD: There was one night in particular that made him think that.

BL: Yeah, I hope he's okay with me sharing this, but yeah he likes to go and travel with the basketball and football team one time a year, and one time when he was gone with the football team, some people came up, some men came up in a pickup truck, flying the Confederate flag into his driveway, the driveway of the Chancellor, and played "Dixie" at the top of the volume of the speakers, and his wife was home alone.

JD: And they knew that.

BL: I don't know. He and I talk a lot about race. He's talked to me about – not that we ever did when we were kids – but he's talked to me about coming up and talking with him and doing something, and he wanted to do something sort of, he didn't know what he wanted me to talk

about. He said, “How about two old friends talk about race.” He’s thinking about it. Because we have this deep history of it. We can talk frankly and honestly about it. I think it would be pretty good. Anyway, Dennis and I share the same thoughts. That’s how I know. I would have asserted yes, I just know, it’s empirical experience, but I think it’s better to put down a second voice here.

JD: Dennis discovered you because of your columns in *The New York Times*, and I know you’ve written for other major outlets, like *Salon*, so how did you make that leap from a radio program in Knoxville, Iowa to the biggest stage for journalism, *The New York Times*?

BL: Just try to see things from a different angle. I’m not gonna be the best reporter in the room. I’m not gonna be the best writer in the room, but if I sit and think and watch, I’m gonna see things, just like in my cab, I’m gonna see things nobody else does. I’m gonna construct a story about it. If I construct a good story, they’re gonna take it. That’s the nature of stories. We create the story. Some come gift wrapped, but most of them are just pretty hard work. You have to see them. I can’t make them up. Whatever my abilities and limitations are, my limitations are making stuff up. I can’t just make it up. I couldn’t be a sci-fi novelist. It’d be stupid. It’d be a like a fifth grader’s sci-fi novel. But I can observe, and I can write, and I can construct a narrative around something I see. What it is, is I have to make sure that I see what other people don’t see. If I put out what other people don’t see, or at least part of this narrative is about something you don’t see, and if you sit here, and you and I are looking at each other, and you know what we’re seeing? What we’re seeing is nothing the same. You’re not seeing anything I’m seeing. Right?

JD: There’s some overlap. Lots of differences.

BL: Right. We have to think about it. What I have to do is think of what is the most interesting story that has a message? I’m not interested in a story for a story’s sake for *The New York Times*, I want a story with a message. I try to find that, and I try to write it in an interesting way, in a different way. I like to mix emotions. I like to be a little bit serious and funny. There’s nothing like serious and funny in the same piece, I think. I like to do that.

JD: Are there one or two of those you’re most proud of? Those columns?

BL: I’m proud of all of them. But the one I did about Diedre DeJear, who ran for secretary of state and lost, I wrote about her as being a model of how to engage. How Barack Obama and Diedre DeJear engaged rural Iowans in Steve King country, and how effective it was. For me, it felt like just a small piece in our march toward equality. The actions that we do are probably more important, but if you get something in words that move other people, the words themselves, if you can move somebody else and not just yourself, maybe that’s more important, I don’t know. So, I felt that piece for Diedre DeJear was a piece for me to play a small roll in our march

toward racial equality and justice. I guess I'm most proud of that. I'm very sorry that she didn't win. She's a remarkable woman, she'd been a remarkable candidate. She has a great vision, and if I can help her along, then I will do that. It's not my most influential piece, but I told you last time we spoke how proud we should all be of Edna Griffin. My little piece in *The New York Times* made me feel like I was sitting at the booth, being denied ice cream with Edna Griffin, and I was on the right side of history. That's where you wanna be. Equality and justice is the right side of history.

JD: When you're writing for that kind of outlet, you must be aware of stereotypes about Iowa and Iowans as racist, and I assume you're trying to challenge some of those assumptions. What are you trying to say about Iowa and the Midwest with that national audience?

BL: That most of us are good people. That Iowa is a purple state, and Democrats shouldn't give up in Iowa. And I'm also trying to say some other things. In a lot of my piece whenever I have an opportunity, and I'm a lapsed Lutheran, but I'm thinking that there's nothing in the Republican part of Ted Cruz or Mike Huckabee or any of those people that use Christianity to divide us. That is remotely related to the Sunday school lessons that I learned, and that people of faith, if they examined the more liberal lefty pastor message versus the hard Old Testament rhetoric of the Christian right, and examine it against what they truly believe and what their faith actually says, they'd find that what the Christian right has created is repulsive and destructive of the religion and is abhorrent.

JD: Like separating children from families?

BL: Yeah. And not doing anything about Syrian refugees, and not recognizing that the crisis in South America and Central America is in part because of our interventions in those governments, and we're as much of the problem. We stand as holier than thou, that we're better than everybody else, we wrap our flag around us and through up our border and to hell with the rest of the world. That's not my Sunday school lesson. I try to put that into it too whenever I can. I've got a lot of friends on the Christian left that are too nice. They don't want to offend their congregation and I understand that, but there's got to be something done. Part of it is too, that America doesn't like to look at our history. We don't like to embrace it. We want to sugarcoat it. We remember the parts we like. But as a colonial power, we ran around the world, extracted resources, did whatever we wanted to the rest of the world, colonized it, and now it's karma. We're being colonized. Get used to it. We have immigrants that are displaced, in part because of things we've done and haven't done. Maybe there's some atonement. We get a lot of this, "My ancestors didn't do this, my ancestors didn't do that." It's irrelevant. What do we do today?

JD: I have two more questions because we're running short on time and your good graces, taking a lot of time to talk with me. I really appreciate it. You're writing a book right now about Iowa, is that right?

BL: Yup.

JD: So, it's your *Yellow Cab* for Iowa life. How's that going? Any highlights so far?

BL: It's going well. I'm supposed to be done with it this month. But all the other writing about politics has – once you get the attention of the national press, it's like you can't blink. You have to keep plugging, you have to keep plugging. So I need to step aside and go back to this other book and finish it because it's on deadline, but once I've got the eye of an editor or the ear of an editor, my mind is to keep producing, producing, producing. Plus, the world is in such a, this is gonna sound arrogant, but the world needs – this is really arrogant, but I'm gonna – the world needs to say what we have to say, and I'm one voice that has – you and I don't think, I don't know if there's a nickel's worth of difference in our opinions about most political things, but once I have a voice, once I have an outlet, maybe I'm clever at writing for it, maybe my writing style fits, but I don't think that I know more or that I'm a better writer. Whatever I have, I have to go with it now, or I've missed an opportunity to do good and to change the world. The non-political writing has been pushed on the back burner, but it can't, because otherwise my publishers get mad at me.

JD: What are you trying to say in that book?

BL: It's about nature and love and family and seeing the world around you. It's called *Deep Midwest*. It's about thinking. It's about mindfulness, and it's about the wonders in our mundane life if we stop and pay attention to it. There's absolute wonder all around us, wherever we are. If we don't see it, get off our intellectual asses and look for it. That's sort of what it's about.

JD: Are you speaking at all to that young man who couldn't see that and left?

BL: Yeah. I'm speaking to that. There's something that comes with age that's wonderful. It's absolutely wonderful. Some of it's the emotion. The testosterone levels start dropping, and you become teary eyed at a sappy commercial or something, and that's a wonderful thing, actually. But then having the experience. I was working out at the gym the other day, and there's a young man there. He's just graduating from high school. I said, "What are you gonna do?" And he told me what he's gonna do, and he says, "Yeah, I'm sort of picking myself up." I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "I made mistakes." I said, "What mistakes could you possibly have made?" He said, "Well, I made them. But I'm trying to recover from them, and to move on." And I'm just sitting there, and here's this kid. He's a good kid. I'm sure his mistakes are pretty minor. But I

said, “You’re in the right direction. You’re pointed the right direction. Good for you. Keep on that path, and let me know if I can help.” It was a beautiful thing, but it was kinda sad at the same time that he had these burdens already, at 17. So yeah, I’m talking to him, I’m talking to me, I’m talking to whoever will listen. There’s richness and joy and beauty and even in the worst of things, somehow, we can recover and be better and try to find joy.

JD: I look forward to reading it.

BL: Just don’t bring your scholarly, poetic eye to it.

JD: I have more than one eye, as you know. So, one last question, and I know I’ve asked so many already, but when you look in your crystal ball, how do you see Iowa or the Midwest changing or not changing in the future?

BL: Wow. Iowa has a choice. We can choose darkness and fear and anger and hate and division, or we can choose the light. And inclusion and appreciation and love and hope and I know that we may be through a lot, I can’t imagine us not choosing light.

JD: That’s a hopeful end.

BL: There has to be hope. There’s no hope in darkness. There’s no future in darkness. There’s no future in hate. Hate has to be a temporary thing that we go through. Maybe it’s this thing that we do that we have to cleanse ourselves with things that make us feel so bad before we can feel good again. I don’t know. We’re sort of in a liminal state. We’re in a transitional state to what we are going to be. Did I tell you the story of the monster, the Katniss? I don’t think I did. Quickly.

JD: You told me the monster in the sky, and that’s the only monster you told me about.

BL: Alright. Margaret Sullivan with *The Washington Post* called me up after one of *The New York Times* pieces. How can we restore journalism? How can we get back our credibility? This is sort of a metaphor for how do we get America back. How do we get journalism back? We went on and on, we talked about all this stuff. Didn’t really come to a conclusion. But then it all came to me. We’re in a disaster movie now. This is called the Trump disaster movie. And think back to *Independence Day*, and what happens, is the peoples of the world come together. There’s a giant monster, and how do you defeat the giant monster? You have everybody in the world coming together. Somewhere in the middle steps the protagonist. Joseph Campbell-like. The protagonist is sort of a structural inversion of the evil monster. With Trump, the protagonist has to be – the bar is pretty low. Somebody with honor and dignity has to start. If you’re casting it from central casting, it’s probably gonna be a minority. It’s probably gonna be a young woman, so it’s like the movies. If you have a big bad guy, you have a young woman. You have Katniss in

*The Hunger Games*. Or you have the people bringing down the monster in *Independence Day*. The center is we all come together and there's a protagonist, and they pull back their bow, and the tip of the bow, they fire the bow, they slay the monster, and at the tip of the bow, that arrowhead is called truth. That's what's going to destroy the monster. It's also called hope, and will yield us with a future where we at least get along, appreciate, and understand, and hopefully respect each other.

JD: Well, it's a future I'd like to live in.