

FLIP THE SKY

Guest: Bob Leonard

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Interviewer: Joshua Doležal

Place: Pella, Iowa

BL: 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. 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. What do you do when somebody steals from you? How do you negotiate somebody angry in the backseat? How do you negotiate somebody with a gun? How do you do that?

JD: Bob Leonard is News Director for KNIA/KRLS, a major radio station in Iowa. He also writes for *The New York Times*, *Salon*, and many other national newspapers and magazines, whose editors have nicknamed him the Trumpland Translator. Bob's world now would have mystified him as a child, when he lived in a house without indoor plumbing and read all the biographies he could find, wondering what the path was to a better life. His search led him to graduate school in anthropology at the University of Washington and later to his dream, a faculty position at the University of New Mexico. He did archeological research with the Navajo and Zuni and also led students on digs in northern Mexico, where he survived a standoff with the federal police. It was exhilarating, all of it, but after the birth of his first child Bob had to reckon with his thirst for danger and he and his wife Annie chose to raise their family in Iowa. When I first met Bob – as a young professor myself – I couldn't understand the choice he made. How could he give up his dream and resign from a tenured position at a research university? And why would he want to raise his children in Iowa, a place he found stifling as a young man? Bob likes to say that he's still on his walkabout. His work doesn't take him to Arizona or Mexico these days, or the night life of Albuquerque. But he is still searching, still asking questions, still turning over all the rocks everyone else overlooked. I'm Joshua Doležal, and this is *Mid-Americana: Stories from a Changing Midwest*, hosted by me and Brian Campbell.

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. 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. 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.

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. 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.

JD: Growing up poor gave Bob a social conscience, but he learned about race from his mother, and her stories shape his thinking to this day. One of those is the story of 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. 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: So, you had this powerful moral compass from your parents, I know they were also avid readers.

BL: 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, which was a wonderful thing. 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.

JD: 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 Aleutian 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. 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 learned so much about another culture. 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.

JD: During Bob's primary school years, students were divided into two classes. The A class was for kids whose parents worked for big companies like Pioneer and Highline. The B class was for kids like Bob, whose parents were carpenters or mechanics or farmers. The A class got the college prep and the field trips and the B class followed the path to trade school. It wasn't the path that Bob wanted. He wasn't even sure what he wanted. All he knew then was that he was miserable.

BL: 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 and I could look outside, when I was chained to a desk in a school room, I'd just weep. I'd have tears on my papers. 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: 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. 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. 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. 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.

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. 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.

JD: 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, 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 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. 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.

JD: Bob worked on archeology sites with the Navajo and Zuni nations through graduate school and after he accepted a faculty position at the University of New Mexico. His humble roots helped him adapt to other impoverished communities, and he sometimes served as an expert witness for First Nations who sued the U.S. government over coal extraction, water rights, and other struggles for sovereignty over tribal lands. Bob enjoyed being the only white person for miles around. He told me if we were only as graceful to all the minorities in our midst as the Zuni and Navajo were to him, the world would be a better place.

BL: 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. And one of the women who 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? 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 abrogated 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: Bob's research also took him to northern Mexico, where he partnered with the National Institute of Anthropology and History on archeology sites that drew students from thirteen countries – South America, Europe, and Africa. Mostly it was a lot of fun, he said. But there were other times when he feared for his life.

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 Federales 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.

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 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. 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: Bob doesn't give anthropology lectures anymore, but most of his stories are parables. He told me that stories are the best way to learn. One of many ways to turn your world upside down. Sometimes a story is how you see the history of a people written across the night sky.

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.

JD: Bob met his wife Annie in Albuquerque, next door, where she lived with her four children. Bob let Annie's kids play video games on his computer and got to know Annie and soon they married and added two more children to the family, Asa and Johanna. Annie's pregnancy with Asa was hard. She had fainting spells and couldn't teach anymore, and soon Bob's faculty salary wasn't enough for the growing household.

BL: 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.

JD: Do you have a favorite from *Yellow Cab*?

BL: 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. 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: Bob liked the danger of driving the cab. He liked the anonymity, the lack of pretense, the challenge of matching wits with the street. But he saw some things that he couldn't unsee. And he began to wonder if it was just a matter of time before bad luck caught up to him or to Annie or to their family.

BL: 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. 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. 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: Bob didn't have a job or a plan, really, other than coming home, when he resigned his position and settled near Knoxville, Iowa. He says he was naïve - he thought maybe he could do something with statistics. It was more than a year before he found work in radio, with KNIA/KRLS, where he still covers politics, culture, and profiles of Iowans from all walks of life. I asked Bob to explain what his show, In Depth, was all about.

BL: A friend of mine works at Walmart. 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. 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: Bob's show has also changed his personal life in ways he didn't see coming. He interviewed a volunteer with Hospice of Iowa who convinced him to join the board, and when Bob's mother and aunt needed care, he knew where to turn. And now he gathers life histories for other families, so they can celebrate their loved ones and keep their stories close after they pass. When he is recording life histories for hospice, he draws on a lifetime of navigating different languages

and worldviews, resolving conflict in the cab, and listening for the story potential in every person he comes across.

BL: 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 aren’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. 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.

JD: After he left for graduate school back in 1978, it took thirty years for Bob’s walkabout to lead him home. I wanted to know what had changed about Iowa in all those years he’d been away, what seemed different or strange when he came back to stay.

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 stupid. 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 its 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, endowed 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 it 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.

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. It's about race, and him growing up. And it's about the tale of two kings, Steve King and Martin Luther King. 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. This is horrifying. In his yard. Anybody that acts like this stuff is over, is wrong.

JD: Dennis discovered you because of your columns in *The New York Times*. 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. Whatever my abilities and limitations are, my limitations are making stuff up. I can't just make it up. But I can observe, and I can write, and I can construct a narrative around something I see.

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 throw up our border and to hell with the rest of the world. That's not my Sunday school lesson.