

You Might Be Right - Navigating Disagreements - Transcript

Arthur Brooks: To say, "you might be right" is not to say I don't believe anything. It simply means that I have enough respect for somebody else to listen to what they have to say. Because the truth is, every single one of us is wrong, we just don't know on what. I'm in a mixed household. All three of my adult kids voted differently than me and my wife, all three of them. Esther, my wife, she's like, "Where did we go wrong? When will they learn?" But you know what? To quote a great podcast, "they might be right."

Marianne Wannamaker: Welcome to "You Might Be Right," a place for civil conversations about tough topics brought to you by the Howard H. Baker Jr. Center for Public Policy at the University of Tennessee. In this special bonus episode, our hosts, former Tennessee Governors, Bill Haslam and Phil Bredesen, discuss practical strategies for navigating disagreements in everyday life with renowned author, social scientist, and happiness expert Arthur Brooks.

How can we solve problems when we don't agree on the facts? How can you help someone who loves conspiracy theories? In our increasingly polarized world, is civility really the right goal or do we need to be aiming for something greater? This episode was recorded live at the Baker Center in Knoxville, Tennessee, in December, 2022.

Phil Bredesen: Well, Bill, it's good to be back together with you again here. A little bit unexpected. We have a bonus to podcast this time around.

Bill Haslam: Yeah. I would say it was a free one, but they're all free so.

Phil Bredesen: Yeah. Good. Well, I hope you had a great holiday and I'm looking forward to it. We have a very interesting guest.

Bill Haslam: We do. We described certain people or situations as being a unicorn, and I think this guest, you could describe as a unicorn. He's on the faculty at Harvard. He's got a PhD in social science, writes the column for the Atlantic. But he also, his past background is included being in a symphony orchestra in Barcelona playing a French horn. He's led a think tank, one of the most influential think tanks in Washington. But he's now majoring in happiness, if you will.

Let me just start there. Our guest is Arthur Brooks and a lot of you know Arthur. It's really a privilege to have him here at the Baker Center on the University of Tennessee campus.

Arthur Brooks: Love being here. I've got a great relationship now with the University of Tennessee. I'm going to be coming every semester for three years. And boy, there's never a bad excuse to come to Tennessee. I can see why the two of you wanted to lead this great state.

Bill Haslam: Well, thanks. We mean it. It's personally fun to have you here and we're really thrilled to have you associated with the Baker Center as well. Let me start here. Why happiness

and why not significance or joy or meaning? Why are you majoring in happiness these days?

Arthur Brooks: I'm thinking about happiness because it's the one thing that I know that everybody wants. I'm a social scientist, I'm an academic by background. I've done that most of my life. I mean, I spent the first 12 years of my career as a French horn player, but after that I was an academic. And along the way, as I was getting into my 40s and 50s, I thought to myself, "What should I be talking about that's actually going to have an impact on my fellow humans? What's the thing that they actually care about? How can I bring my toolkit to bear? And by the way, what do I most want to understand?"

And the answer is, comes from everybody I ask, "What do you want?" They say, "I just want to be happier." That's what people say. Now, they don't know what they mean, necessarily, but they know it when they feel it. And I thought to myself, "Well, for Pete's sake, I was trained in statistical methods and on human behavior. And why don't I bring that to bear on the thing that people care about the most? I don't have to study widgets, I don't have to..." I mean, there's nothing wrong with widgets. Let's be honest, I want to be the life of the party. I want more friends and more dinner invitations. So, I'm going to study what people want to hear about.

Bill Haslam: But happiness seems a little bit like a selfish goal rather than significance or meaning or impact. I'm just kind of curious how you ended up at happiness.

Arthur Brooks: Well, it depends on how you define it and that's where the investigation actually starts. I have a class that I teach at the Harvard Business School called Leadership and Happiness. It's a hugely oversubscribed class. And so on the first day of class, my students are 28 years old. I get two sections of 90. And I say, "Look, you bid all of your elective points to get into this class." We have a bidding system as you'd expect in the good capitalist Harvard Business School. And I say, "So obviously, you must know what happiness is." And they say, "Yeah, yeah."

Then I could call them. I make them tell me. And they always say, "It's the feeling I get when I'm with the people that I love." Or, "The feeling that I get when I'm doing the things that I enjoy." It's all about feelings. And if that were the case, then it is a kind of selfish and maybe even a trivial thing to look at.

But the first thing to understand is that that's wrong. Happiness is not feelings anymore than your Thanksgiving dinner was the smell of your turkey. You walk into mom's house and you say, "Oh boy, it's going to be a good Thanksgiving." because of the smell. But if she said, "Well, that's it. Smell away." You'd say, "This is the worst Thanksgiving ever." And similarly, happiness is not feelings. Feelings are evidence of happiness.

The scientific study of happiness actually starts there and defines it. And then talks about what causes it, and then what are the habits of the happiest people, and what impedes it? And that's a real scientific discipline.

Phil Bredeesen: So, what is the scientific description?

Arthur Brooks: Happiness is a combination of three phenomenon in life: enjoyment, satisfaction, and purpose. And if you have those three things in balance and abundance, you will classify yourself as a happy person, according to all of the best data. They now have data on millions of people, how happy they say they are. And they have in abundance and balance, those three things.

Now the next question is, what are those things? You think you know what enjoyment, satisfaction, and purpose are until you start to think. And that's what the people who do work in the philosophy, the social science, and the neuroscience of happiness, they're all digging into one of those wells. And they're talking about enjoyment, how to get enjoyment from life. How do people get that feeling of being fully alive, moment to moment? How do they get satisfaction, which is the reward for a job well done, of a goal met? And most importantly and the trickiest of all is, how do they find meaning and purpose in their lives? And those are the three things to really talk about.

That's what happiness is. It's like the macronutrients of your Thanksgiving dinner: protein, carbohydrates, and fat. What is food? Protein, carbohydrates and fat. And once you understand that, you can start to build a balanced, nutritionally sustainable diet that you can consume and be healthy on for the rest of your life.

Bill Haslam: Well, one of the things that's not making us happy in the country today is the way that we discuss the things that are most important to us. Whether it be matters of the heart and matters of belief or issues around the political decisions of the day. Well, what's happened? Why are we so much at each other's throats?

Arthur Brooks: To begin with, we've always been at each other's throats. I mean, it's like we always tend to think that in the past there was more harmony than there was. And you look back at past times, you find all kinds of polarization that's occurred.

When you and I came of age politically, when we were deciding what we think, this was in the 70s for example. It was a hugely polarized time politically. You had... Jimmy Carter was a very controversial president. Most of the Republican candidates that were challenging him, guys like Phil Crane, if you remember that blast from the past kind of name. I mean, he was every bit as hammer and tong's Republican style as any of the Republicans we would find today.

You go back a little bit before that and you find the election between Nixon and McGovern. I mean for Pete's sake, these were very pretty strong views and pretty big differences. And parents of kids were saying that if the wrong person wins, that's the end of America. And if you go back to 1968, 1969, my friend Ken Burns, the filmmaker, he reminded me that in those two years, there were 700 domestic political bombings in America. That my friends, is polarization.

We tend to look at the halcyon days of times past and it wasn't that great, quite frankly. So, is it bad right now? On certain measures, it's worse. And other measures in terms of political violence, it's not as bad. And we just have to take it as it comes and try to make political progress no matter where we are.

Phil Bredesen: To take that as just a step further, when you talk to these business school students who are the cream of the crop ...

Arthur Brooks: They're great.

Phil Bredesen: ... of young people.

Arthur Brooks: They're great. I couldn't get in by the way, so... I was rejected from Harvard, so they apparently have different standards for faculty than for students.

Bill Haslam: Yeah.

Phil Bredesen: That's good.

Bill Haslam: Phil actually got into Harvard, I didn't.

Phil Bredesen: Yeah.

Bill Haslam: You and I are in the same.

Phil Bredesen: That was in an earlier time when it wasn't nearly so...

Arthur Brooks: People always say that, but it was something getting into Harvard, when you did.

Phil Bredesen: These people, they're going to go out and they're going to have successful careers. And one thinks they know a lot about in that point of relationships and so on. What are the biggest dangers that they face in terms of not really having the kind of happy, as you've defined it, life? Where's the pitfalls?

Arthur Brooks: There's a lot of things that you can do wrong. Now, the first big pitfall that young people are falling into right now is trying to avoid their unhappiness. It sort of seems plausible that the best way to have a happy life is to not be unhappy. But the truth is that unhappiness and happiness are not opposites. They're actually largely processed in different hemispheres of the neocortex of the brain. And the people who go all of their effort to avoid unhappiness, they're going to avoid their happiness.

And here's how it works. The third macronutrient, obviously the trickiest and arguably the most important component of happiness, is meaning, finding meaning in your life. Nobody finds meaning except through suffering. This is just a truism. You don't say, "You know how I found the meaning in my life, was that week at Disneyland." I could ask either of you or any of the people listening to us, "When did you really figure out what you were made of? Tell me of a pivotal experience." They're going to tell me about somebody dying or about getting sick or about losing something or having their heart broken and getting through it and learning what it was all about. That's the post-traumatic growth that is part of being fully alive.

The current generation, one of the biggest pitfalls that I see that's quite different than people in the past, is that they're desperately trying to avoid unhappiness and pain. If you're feeling sad, if you're feeling blue, if you're feeling anxious, that's a diagnosable problem. You got to take care of it. Look, there are medical problems with depression and anxiety, don't get me wrong. But suffering is a very sacred part of life. And the result is when you're trying to avoid unpleasantness in your life, you'll avoid, I don't know, relationships that might be tricky. You might avoid being rejected by a university or job that you're looking for.

You find, for example, that people in their 20s today are 50% less likely to be married than when I was that age. They're also 50% less likely to cohabitate. They're a third less likely to say they're in love. And a big part of that has to do with fear. Fear of what? Fear of pain, fear of rejection. And that comes from trying to wipe out unhappiness. Mistake number one is trying to avoid suffering.

Phil Bredezen: These are people who have also a lot of options in life, when it comes to finding purpose.

Arthur Brooks: Everybody does. Everybody has endless options, when it comes to defining purpose. But the only way you're going to find it is by being alive.

Bill Haslam: The idea of this podcast is, you might be right, taking difficult subjects, hearing different thoughts. You've also spent a good deal of time writing and talking about, that we're not doing that well, we're not disagreeing well, we're not fighting well, however you want to say it.

What could we do better? Everybody's come out of Thanksgivings. Christmases or holidays of different types are ahead. Give us some advice on when we sit down with those folks who don't see the world the way we do, but we may or may not love them anyway, how do we have a better discussion?

Arthur Brooks: Well, to begin with, and I've done this in experiments where I bring together Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump supporters. I don't want to see whether or not I can get them to kill each other. That's easy. What I want to see is if they can have a productive conversation. And it turns out that there is a formula for doing that. It depends where you start the conversation.

If you ask people to start by talking about abortion, you're doomed. If you start by talking about immigration, you're in trouble. It's not going to work. But if you start by asking people who dramatically disagree with each other politically to start by telling each other about their kids, you win. Why? Because you're literally employing a part of the brain dedicated to the feelings of love. And when you start there, you almost can't make it to other parts of your brain that are dedicated to combat.

It's a really important thing for all of us to keep in mind, that we have an opportunity to start conversations and conduct ourselves around our shared loves that are fundamental and deep and important. Or we can start the conversation with trivialities in which we differ. I'm sorry, politics is largely a bunch of trivialities, when it comes to the relationships that sustain us. The difference between a 20 and 30% business income tax rate compared to how are your kids doing, it's just pales in comparison.

And we get wrapped around the axle about these things that we think are fundamental to our identities, which is another problem. We have public officials that are governing with fear, trying to conscript all of us into their culture war. They want us to fear each other, they want us to hate each other. They want to tell us about those people, and to make it feel like that we're victims and that we have to fight. When we fight, they profit, is the important thing to keep in mind. And what do they do?

To get back to your earlier question about what are the barriers to happiness, it's the fact that faith is in decline, family is in decline, friendship is in decline, work is in decline. And those are the four fundamental institutions of meaning. And so, meaning is in decline. And when that happens, predators step into the vacuum. And they offer us a sense of meaning with respect to the zombie religion of victimization and the counterfeit family of grievance. That's what we're getting and that's the big problem. So, I think we all need to fight back. Number one is, talk about the things that actually matter, the things that in which we share our matters of the heart.

Bill Haslam: I could listen to you when you said, "Well, the political issues of 20 versus 30% tax rate are fairly irrelevant compared to the bigger issues of faith, family, friends, and work."

Arthur Brooks: Yeah.

Bill Haslam: And I'm sure a lot of listeners here say, "Well, he obviously doesn't get it. He doesn't get how important some of the things, whether it be gun control or abortion or climate change, it's how big the stakes are." And yet also, no, you come with a point of view. You led a think tank that was a right-leaning leading think tank. You've written books on the conservative heart, et cetera. How can you be both? How can you say, "These things in the end don't matter as much." and still have a point of view?

Arthur Brooks: Well, we're going to have a point of view. I mean to say you might be right, is

not to say, "I don't believe anything." It simply means that I have enough respect for somebody else to listen to what they have to say. Because the truth is, every single one of us is wrong, we just don't know on what. We don't know. And each one of us should want to get the truth earlier than later. And the only way that you're going to be exposed to the truth is by listening to things that you haven't heard before, and perhaps ideas with which you disagree. It's a favor to you, do a favor to yourself by talking to people and listening to people that have a different point of view. You don't have to accept their particular point of view. All you have to do is not hate them and fight them and be rhetorically violent toward them, is what it comes down to.

The truth is, it's basic self-preservation, is to listen to people who differ from you. And life is a lot better. That's number one. Number two is this. You think you're right, so your goal should be to persuade other people. Nobody has ever been insulted into agreement in human history. And if you want to persuade other people, the only way that you can do it is by being a decent human being. And the best way to get people to listen to you is to listen to them. It's just common sense.

Martin Luther King preached about this when he preached on Love Your Enemies, Matthew 5:44. He said, "Jesus didn't say to your enemies, he said to love your enemies, because only then can I redeem my enemies." And that's a decision, is what it comes down to.

Phil Bredeesen: Let me ask, change the subject a little bit here. Both Bill and I have, in our careers, given innumerable speeches to high school graduating classes and that kind of a thing.

Bill Haslam: None of them can remember anything we said. I should go ahead and say that.

Phil Bredeesen: You try really hard to think of something and the speeches always are kind of the form of: here's a big transition in your life and here's my thoughts that I think you ought to be carrying on with you. If you were to be invited to speak to a high school graduating class in an ordinary, not some super special high school, you wanted to tell somebody who was 17 or 18 years old how to approach from the standpoint of happiness, this next decade or two in their lives, what's the essence of what you'd say to them?

Arthur Brooks: If I were to give a graduation speech today, given what I see and what I think about in terms of happiness, I would say, "Be an entrepreneur with your heart." It's pretty easy to convince college students today and even a lot of high school students that they want to start a business, be an entrepreneur. It's actually kind of easy to take risks with money and especially other people's money, but it's increasingly hard to take a risk with what you value the most.

One of the things that really, as we talked about a minute ago, that inhibits people, that holds people back from their happiness is their unwillingness to give their hearts away. And so what I would say is, I would admonish them, challenge them, within a week to tell somebody that they loved them. That's what I would do. And if it's not scary, it's not entrepreneurial enough.

Maybe it's your dad. Maybe it's your dad. And that's kind of hard in a lot of families. I was speaking in Minnesota two weeks ago and somebody said that there was a man – this is where they're known for being reticent about their feelings – and they say there was a man in Minnesota who loved his wife so much that he almost told her.

Phil Bredeesen: I've heard that one.

Arthur Brooks: Yeah. And so, with whom are you separated and who needs to know what's really written on your heart that there's love? With whom are you secretly in love? Be an entrepreneur and watch it set you free. Watch it set you on a trajectory toward the kind of radical courage and the love that's in your life that you actually need to be happy and other people need to hear from you.

Phil Bredeesen: When you spoke a little bit earlier about focusing in terms of building relationships with people who may see the world very differently from you, focusing on children and using that part of your brain rather than trying to engage directly those issues about what's the corporate income tax or what do you think about abortion or something. But both Bill and I have lived part of our lives here in the world where actually, you did have to think about those things. I mean, they're real issues and there's people who care passionately about them.

I don't, certainly, personally, think you can begin to underestimate the degree of tribal loyalty that we human beings have. I think we've been wired to be that way for a very long time. You have any suggestions for, "Oh, okay." But when you finish talking about the children, at some point, you got to talk about the corporate income tax or about what you're going to do about some of these other kinds of issues. Any thoughts about how to have a more productive conversation there?

Arthur Brooks: Yeah, for sure. The one big principle is this, if you want to persuade your interlocutor, if you have a different point of view and you want to persuade the other person what you have to say is, at very worst worth listening to, at very best worth adopting. You have to remember that the values that you're about to share can be either shared as a weapon or as a gift. If you use, ever, your values as a weapon, you've eviscerated their content and you've made it impossible to be persuasive to another person. Nobody ever... It's like ringing somebody's doorbell and they answer to the door and you hit them in the face with a bouquet of flowers. Those are flowers, they're beautiful, they're a gift from you. But you used them as a weapon.

Number one is, am I using my opinions? Am I using my values? Am I using my morals as a weapon or as a gift? Look, we all know the answer to that, when we're doing this. I mean, we could come to some sort of logic chopping subtleties about it, but when we're listening to a conversation between two people, we know perfectly. If you're doing the kind of violent activism, the power plays that people are doing in American politics, right and left, all the time, it's all basically, "I'm going to threaten you, I'm going to insult you, and I'm going to get you to do what I

want by sheer force." Or "I'm just virtue signaling to the people who already agree with me." That's absolutely the wrong way to do it. To say, "I know you're going to disagree with this, but I really think it's important and I want to share it with you because I care what you think." I've advised Republican politicians for a long time. I would advise Democrats more, but they don't call as much. And one time I was talking to the-

Phil Bredezen: Well, just give me your phone number.

Arthur Brooks: Hey, you got my phone number, I'd love it. But I was talking to all the assembled Democrats and Republicans, all the assembled Republicans in the house and Senate at their retreat. It's at the Greenbrier. It's where they would do this retreat. I was talking about this very interesting neuroscience that shows that you get seven seconds for people to figure out what you're all about. You get in front of a group that doesn't know you, you get seven seconds. People frame you up in seven seconds. Your first seven seconds is super critical, that what you say, the first thing that comes out of your mouth, what you look like, what you're wearing. The first impression really is everything. And it takes hours for you to reestablish that, if you don't get it right in the first place.

So I say to these politicians, I said, "Okay, you're going to be in situations that are tricky. Go places where you're not invited and say things people don't expect. For Republicans, go to an NAACP meeting. Not that many Republicans at NAACP meetings. There's some but not that many. The first seven seconds should be something like this. I'm going to say a bunch of things and maybe some of you are going to go home tonight saying, 'That guy's crazy.' But none of you, if I do my job, are going to go home and say, 'that he doesn't love me and my family.' That frames it up and that's basically, 'I'm going to tell you a bunch of things and it's my gift to you. And you can take it or you can reject it, but I want you to know that I'm doing it in a spirit of love.'"

Bill Haslam: I'm going to go to the reverse of that. I've heard you talk and write a lot about the damage that contempt does. And every now and then I realize when I'm talking to somebody live that, "Oh, yeah. I've stolen a lot of their stuff." And one of the things is, you talk about marriage counselors will say, "It's not hopeless when they're arguing with each other, but it is hopeless when they're both rolling their eyes at each other, and it's just contempt for what the other says."

Arthur Brooks: Yeah.

Bill Haslam: It feels like to me, you say, "Well, our politics has always been polarized and characterized by vehement disagreement." But I do think what feels different to me is this sense of contempt for the other side. They're not just wrong, they're wrong for bad reasons, they're bad motives. And I'd love to hear you talk about again, what does contempt look like in politics and how do we get away from that, even with people that we think have gone down a rabbit hole in a really bad direction.

Arthur Brooks: Yeah. So contempt is a complex emotion that's actually a combination of two primary negative emotions. Now, the primary emotions, negative and positive, are processed by the limbic system of the brain, which is a very ancient part of the brain that has evolved over a 40 million year period. And it's basic job is this, and the human brain is so amazing. Its job is to take signals that are processed by the brain stem and turn them from kind of the machine language into language that our prefrontal cortex can read. Emotions are simply signals to our prefrontal cortex to make a decision, to make a decision on how to act. You need your basic emotions. The basic negative emotions are anger, sadness, disgust, and fear. Those are the big four, and you need all of them to stay alive.

People are always so regretful. "I feel angry so much. I feel sad. I feel afraid so much. I hate that." No. No, no, no. You're alive because of that. When a car is speeding toward you in an intersection and your visual cortex processes that at the very back of your brain, it sends a signal to your amygdala, which is part of your limbic system, it lights up like a Christmas tree. This sends a signal through the hypothalamus of the brain to the pituitary glands, which then sends a signal to your adrenal glands, which sit over your kidneys.

Bill Haslam: I'm feeling like we need visuals here.

Arthur Brooks: I know. And that spits out stress hormones in 74 milliseconds. That makes you jump out of the way and your heart's pounding and you're sweating and your life is saved before you even knew what was going on. So, that's the important thing. That's a basic negative emotion of fear that saves your life.

Disgust is the negative emotion that you have in response to a pathogen, something that smells terrible, something you should stay away from. Don't put that in your mouth. Whatever it happens to be. That food looks like it's rotten. When you mix them together, disgust plus anger or disgust plus fear, you get contempt. Contempt is a very complex emotion that says that something is worthless, something has no worth. It's not worth paying any attention to. When you direct contempt toward another person, you have a permanent enemy. And you express it, it's the deepest form of hatred to say, "You're worthless."

Now, this is the reason that couples get divorced, is because they treat each other with contempt. Interestingly, they don't actually feel contempt. You don't think that your wife is worthless, but you acted as if you did through certain physical gestures and turns of phrase. So dismissal, derision, sarcasm, eye rolling. These are all ways that the brain of our interlocutor is processing your sense of contempt.

Now, here's the interesting thing. You probably don't feel contempt, but you're expressing contempt. And that's what we're doing in politics. So to answer your question, we've gotten into a national rhetorical habit of expressing contempt when we hear something with which we disagree. And by the way, I do it too, I do it too. I have to be very careful about it. I'm a social

scientist, I'm doing the research on this. And I know perfectly, do not roll your eyes when your wife says something you think is misguided because she will interpret, her brain will interpret that – It's real fun to be married to me. It's your brain interprets that as, "What you think what I just said is worthless, so you think that I am worthless." I don't want that because I don't need trouble in my marriage.

But I also don't need that when I'm teaching at my university. I have center right policy views and my colleagues don't. And if they say something about the carried interest provision of the Internal Revenue Code or something that's even more hotter, like abortion, and I'm like, "That's really misguided," and I roll my eyes, they just heard that their view is worthless and they're worthless. That's our problem.

Phil Bredesen: You spoke earlier about brain process and the limbic system and so on. And I've always thought that one of the things that's underappreciated in the way we think about these things is just this fact that we're wandering around in 2022 with brains that are a hundred thousand years old. People talk about it a lot in terms of diets, why we eat too much fats and sugars, because they were really valuable then.

I think it also goes in and affects other areas. I mean, our tribalism is an important evolutionary defense mechanism that we still have with us at a time when it's not really useful. By talking about that, are there other things that you can think of where there's this – that affect happiness, where there's this disjointedness between the way we're wired and the world that we live in today?

Arthur Brooks: Oh, yeah. I mean it's, again, the basic negative and positive emotions are all designed to keep us alive in the Pleistocene. And so, you hear a twig snap behind you and you're off running and thinking about a tree that you might be able to climb. You don't even know what it was because you have a negativity bias because that's what's going to keep you alive. The stress hormones that we actually get – the epinephrine, norepinephrine, the cortisol that are produced by our adrenal glands – all of that is supposed to be highly episodic.

To use that example, to answer your question directly, we are adapted as a species to have tremendous amounts of stress, very occasionally, very. Most of the time we should be hanging around the fire, telling stories about our ancestors, eating berries off a bush, having a good old time. And occasionally, a tiger comes up and we have to run crazy to stay alive.

The problem is, in modern life, that the stress hormones are giving us like a constant drip. You open up your Twitter, you get a drip of cortisol. You come into work, you read the newspaper, you turn on Fox News or MSNBC, they're designed to increase your cortisol levels because they know with that little bit of fear, the little bit of stress hormones in your system, you're more likely to act. Fear is a stimulant for you to act in particular ways. They're profiting, you're not. But the truth is that that's one of the ways that our life is degraded by the maladaptation of these ancient ideas. And we see this in countless ways over the course of our day, and we have to take

appropriate corrective action to defend ourselves.

Bill Haslam: So is today's world of social media an accelerant, or just a symptom of all that?

Arthur Brooks: It's an absolute accelerant. What it does is, it actually plays on the behavioral consequences of that, and people can make a ton of money from it. Or people can get followers or just their jollies. But social media is a very, very efficacious way to use the maladaptation of our ancient proclivities to turn it into profit for them, and to ruin the quality of life for us, is what it comes down to.

Bill Haslam: So, help us be better citizens. We all know that, whether we admit it or not, we have confirmation bias. We like people that tell us that what we already believe to be true. We also know that we get to choose our news and how we get intake of what's happening in the world. Given all that, how can we broaden, listen, hear the other side of the argument more and end up a better citizen?

Arthur Brooks: So, let me suggest three things. Number one is, watch less news. Get zero political news from social media. Turn off all the cable channels completely. They scratch a little itch that you have. They give you a little bit of dopamine, they give you this little – and dopamine is this neurotransmitter of desire, of craving, of anticipation of a reward. And you get it when you're hearing something that's slightly forbidden.

But what those cable channels are and what you're getting from Facebook about politics, it's just political pornography. And it literally is working in the human brain the same way. It's just doing something naughty and forbidden and titillating, et cetera. It's really, really bad for you. It's really bad for your brain, it's bad for your motivation, and it's going to lower your happiness, is the bottom line. It's leading to addictive behavior. So, turn all that off.

Get all of your news of all types in a total of 30 minutes a day. And make sure that you limit all political news to 15 minutes a day, not any more. And on only one dose, and never go back to it until tomorrow. That's number one. You need to go on a diet, is the bottom line.

The second thing to do is to spend a lot more time looking at local and a lot less at the infotainment of the federal. People ask me all the time, "Aren't you discouraged?" And I was like, "No man. I'm on the road 48 weeks a year. We're recording this from beautiful Knoxville, Tennessee. It's a rainy day, but it's still a beautiful place. You want to know why? 'Cause I'm sitting with two guys who disagree with each other on policy and love each other as people.'"

Why? Because this is an intensely local experience. We're not in Washington DC. You guys don't have to beat each other up and score points. You don't have to do that, so you don't. And I'm in states and counties and cities every single week. And I see all kinds of progress and all kinds of harmony and not that much political unity despite that. So, get local. And don't pretend, don't fool yourself into thinking you're a good citizen because you're well-informed on what you

see on MSNBC. "I'll watch five hours a day of MSNBC." That just makes you a bad citizen, not good citizen. That's substituting for you doing something for the school board. That substitutes for you actually cleaning up the park or doing volunteer work, instead, you're just a schlub in front of the television, angry about Trump or some stupid thing.

Number three is, get out of the house more and hang out more with people with whom you disagree. Actually expose yourself to differing viewpoints. You don't have to do it 24 hours a day. I'm not suggesting you should marry somebody from the other party, although I wouldn't say that's a bad idea either. I'm in a mixed household. All three of my adult kids voted differently than me and my wife. Esther, my wife, she's like, "Where did we go wrong? When will they learn?" But you know what, to quote a great podcast, "they might be right."

Bill Haslam: All right, so we're wrapping down. You gave us a great lead in. Can you give us an example of a time when you realized the other side might be right?

Arthur Brooks: Yeah. A lot of what we're talking about here, about be actually being less political, this is something that I came to because I got a lot of really, really good advice. I realized that people might be right about not trying to be right so much. I got some very good advice early on in my career in Washington DC. So I was a college professor and then I became president of AEI. AEI, the American Enterprise Institute, is the big thing tank in Washington. And I went there and I gotta say, I was pretty hammer and tongs, man, early on.

It's not like I wasn't insulting. I wasn't trying to hurt people, but I was very sure about things where people can have legitimate disagreement. I'm not exactly sure that 20% corporate income tax rate is better than 22%. I mean, for Pete's sake, is a lot that's going into that. And so people that I really respect, they help me to understand where they might be – and I'm increasingly persuaded that they were right – is that I didn't have to be right and I was probably frequently gonna to be wrong.

You lose friends that way, by the way, because what you do is you give inadequate support to the true believers. People in the culture war, they don't like it when you don't look sure anymore, when you're like, "Ah, I don't know. I've talked to some Democrats, they're making a lot of sense. I'm not going to kid you." Boy, oh boy, will you lose friends fast doing that, I got to say. But that's the key thing. That's been a real game changer for me, I have to say.

Bill Haslam: Yeah. My experience is, in politics, people want Doc Holliday, not Mr. Rogers.

Arthur Brooks: Mr. Rogers had probably a bigger audience and certainly had a better end than Doc Holliday.

Bill Haslam: There we go. Good.

Phil Bredezen: I think, Bill, you and I have talked various times about how one of the other

benefits for keeping access to what other people are thinking, is that most of the real problems that we've come across actually require taking a bit out of each of the possible solutions. It's not one or the other, that you craft something that way. And I always think of ideology as just sort of a way of not having to think about these things. You just got a ready-made answer for yourself. This has been very enlightening. I have to think about what you said today, but I may come up with some of those "maybe he was right" kinds of answers.

Arthur Brooks: Thank you, Governor.

Phil Bredeesen: Arthur, thanks so much for joining us. Like I said, we're thrilled to have you associated with the Baker Center at the University of Tennessee. I think we're even more excited about the way you're choosing to spend your time now, trying to redirect America and some of the ways that we've ended up at each other's throats instead of just looking for solutions that can lead to better lives.

Arthur Brooks: Well, as my father used to say, "It beats working for a living."

Bill Haslam: Thanks again.

Phil Bredeesen: Thanks again. Appreciate it.

Marianne Wannamaker: Thanks for listening to "You Might Be Right." Be sure to follow on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you listen to your favorite shows and please help spread the word by sharing, rating, and reviewing the show.

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