

KEITH MEACHAM
THE SOUL OF AMERICA
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

Keith Meacham
Jon Meacham's Wife
September 4, 2019
Interviewed by Katie Davison
Total Running Time: 54 minutes

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Meeting Jon Meacham

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KEITH MEACHAM:

I met Jon when I was 18 and he was 19 and he was essentially my tour guide at a college visit and we really hit it off. He was very much an old soul, even at 19. And I remember coming home from that college visit and telling my mother, I said, "I met the most amazing," and I think I almost used the word man. And then I said, "Boy." And my mother was saying, "Well what was amazing about him?" And I said, "I don't know, he was just very wise." And I said, "I think that's the kind of man I'd like to marry." And I was 18 and then we ended up really coming back together at 22 or something. But all the while, from the time I met Jon until the time we really got together as a pair, we wrote letters to each other. And so we really got to know each other through writing. And I think I fell in love with Jon through his letters. He was just really thoughtful and interesting. And he listened and I felt as though he just had more gravitas than any boy I'd ever met up to that

moment. And yeah, I mean I guess he was definitely quoting people that he was reading, and we had, in our letters and our correspondence, we would talk about the books we were reading. I mean, I'm sure they were, when we go back and look at these letters, they are kind of ridiculous. But there's definitely just this love of books and reading. And you could tell that this was someone who, at a very young age, was really engaged in the life of the mind. And that was very apparent and very attractive.

Keith saw Jon as a writer early on

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KEITH MEACHAM:

I think always he knew. His grandfather was a writer and a judge, and I'm sure he's told you a little bit about his grandfather. But I think that that was always in the background of his world. And I remember Jon describing his house to me where he grew up with his grandparents in Chattanooga and he wrote this long letter to me about the house that he'd grown up in and the house that he imagined living in as a man and a father. And it was the first thing he mentioned was books. It was lined with books. And so I think it was always really clear to me that that was a big part of his growing up and that he really wanted that to be a part of his future. And he wrote for the college newspaper. Even in those early letters, he would work in the summers at the Chattanooga Times and he would send me the clippings of his articles and he was a great writer. He was a great reporter. So I think really early on, even at 18, I think he was very interested in journalism and reporting on politics. And at age 10 I think, he campaigned for Reagan. I

mean literally at age 10, he was out there putting up signs for Reagan and he was fascinated by Reagan as a man. And that came through even early, early on in our correspondence, because we really only met briefly that one weekend when I visited the college that Jon attended and I ended up not attending. So really a lot of what I learned about Jon was through letters, which is a different way of learning about someone, especially when you're 18 and 19 and 20. But yeah, I would say that I was pretty sure he was going to be a writer of some sort.

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Well Jon always make fun of me and says that it was probably good that we didn't go to college together because Jon would have been maybe not as enamored of my journal writing and novel reading. So I mean we loved to write about books we were reading, and Jon would write about the things that he was writing for the paper, but I was always just a voracious reader of novels and he would laugh at my lack of interest in any kind of history, at the time.

Meacham's start in journalism

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KEITH MEACHAM:

So he graduated in 1991, and then immediately he went to the Chattanooga Times, which was such a storied newspaper and had this direct connection with the New York Times because of the [inaudible] family, and these were the clippings that I would get. But he interned for them in the summers and then got a full-time job with them in the summer after he graduated. So by

the time I think we started seeing each other a little bit more, he was fully on board at the Times. And I guess though, that the training of Jon started really when he was a little boy, at the knee of his grandfather. He was a city judge and he had this, I can't remember what Jon calls it, maybe this coffee club or this group of guys that were city leaders in Chattanooga, and pretty forward-thinking leaders. And Jon would go to the coffee club with his grandfather and sit at the table with them and listen to the things they had to say about politics and the law. And I think he really, really learned a lot just listening. And he was an only child so he was always around older people. And I think that that really shaped both his interest in things that were a little bit more mature than maybe your average 12-year-old boy would have been interested in.

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But also, I think really sealed his interest in the life of a city life of a nation. The life of political figures who had to run for reelection and had to really think about what were the compromises you have to make to get elected to do what you really want to do for the good. So that was really early on that, as Jon tells the story and as his grandfather told this story to me and as parents told this story to me of his youth, that was really a big part of it. But by the time I met Jon, he was already writing for the school newspaper, then interning in the summer, he interned at the Washington Post Company as a reporter after winning, I'm not sure what kind of fellowship or something for college students. But by the time we really got together fully, not just letter writing, he was at the Washington Monthly and that was really a training ground for young writers and journalists who, instead of going to Columbia

Journalism School, they trained for two years under Charlie Peters, which was like bootcamp for journalism.

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And it was a really a really powerful experience of learning, not only to write and to defend your thesis and to write in a compelling way and to report, but also to actually print the magazine, put it to bed, really how to run a magazine. I can remember kind of early days, because by the time he was at the Monthly, we were dating and both living in Washington D.C. and we would have Friday night dates that got canceled because we had to drive up to the printer and take the magazine to the printer because somebody was late filing their story. So... And Jon loved that. He loved being a cub reporter and an editor and getting the magazine printed in time and deadlines. He was really into all that.

Meacham's understanding of how to telling a story

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KEITH MEACHAM:

Yeah, I mean, I think one of the things that I love about Jon's work as a reader, not as his wife, is that he both has a very strong point of view and a strong thesis, but he also is able to tell a story. And so, I mean, if I had to guess, we've never talked about this. I think that his training, both as a journalist from a very young age, but also a lover of novels, because he loves a good story and he knows how to tell a good story. And so he has a thesis in mind when he's writing, but he's also always thinking about, well, what's the human story? And I think that's really, to me, as he's grown older, and I think

when you have children and start to really understand human behavior from birth, as they grow, I think that Jon's understanding of the motivations and the foibles of the men and women who shaped the country and shape history has become much more complex. So, yeah. So I think that he's always had a

strong thesis, but he's also always had a strong interest in and fascination with what motivates people to do what they do.

How Meacham's work is connected to his personal life

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KEITH MEACHAM:

Well it's always been funny to me and I'm sure Dr. Freud would have something to say about this, but Jon published his first book right after our first child was born. So I always think of it as these two births happening in the same period of time. And I really think that while I was giving birth to a baby, Jon was giving birth to a book. And I think it was really important to him that this book that he was writing say something important, that he would want his son to grow up and respect and that it would be timeless and that the arguments that he was making would be both defensible but also attuned to the human beings he was writing about.

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And I think that's one of his great strengths as a writer is that he's always asking the question, what was happening right at that moment when Winston Churchill made that decision? And he's very good historically, but not always personally, about not casting quick judgment on people for really

difficult decisions because they're all rooted in something human, right? It's not as though there's this clinical test tube that these guys are working in and making decisions about history. They're really struggling with a multitude of factors on the ground. And I think that that was really important to him in his writing about Churchill and Roosevelt, about Jackson, about Bush, really thinking about, "What were those moments and what would I have done as a man in those moments? What would my son do in those moments as a human being?" And I think he wants his work to be something that our children can look back on and say, "Yeah, he was fair. He was thoughtful."

Meacham writing "Franklin and Winston"

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KEITH MEACHAM:

He was researching that book for many years. And then I feel like my awareness of it as this big huge event in our life really came right around the time that my son was born. So Sam is born in May and I think we're organizing and alphabetizing the research materials while our son's crawling around on the floor and chewing on the Churchill papers. And he was probably a year old when the book was published, but it took several years to research. And then the writing was probably about a year and a half. I mean, Jon will correct me if that's not right, but it was interesting to have this book and this baby all happening at the same time. And then the book is dedicated to Sam.

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And Churchill and Roosevelt really are these characters that Jon's always

been interested in. This Anglo-American Alliance and what does that mean? And they were these white privileged men. And I think that that's also been something Jon's always been interested in is, how do we write the story of these people who are very privileged and how they shape history? And how do we also make sure that we're not leaving out the other people who were part of making that history? But the fact of the matter was, they were making history, and they were very flawed people and men of their time.

Jon and Keith collaborating

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KEITH MEACHAM:

I would not take credit for being a creative partner, but I definitely read everything before it gets to galley. And because I'm a voracious novel reader and not so much a reader of American history or biography, I mean obviously I read Jon's biographies, but that's not the first thing I go to on the bookshelf. I mean I would spend all of my days reading Victorian novels if you let me. But I think I'm a good reader for him because I'm thinking about the story. Like what I want to know is what motivates these people. Why did they do the things they do? And what were the compromises they had to face? And I think Jon's really interested in that too, which is one of the reasons I really like his work, but I definitely read everything and I put lots of marginal notes that he I think gets a little tired of. But always takes them very seriously.

Meacham's approach to his projects

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KEITH MEACHAM:

Yeah, I mean usually there are three or four ideas brewing at all times and we talk through what the merits of one over the other are. But Jon's usually pretty... It's not even that he's private about what he's deciding to do, it's just he's a thinker and he's always... Like the wheels are always turning, and sometimes I'll find out something, he's thinking about doing when he's really, really pretty far along in the process of thinking about what the next project is.

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And I also always know what he's thinking about doing as loads of books arrive. I can remember thinking, "Okay, I guess he's doing Madison now," because we started getting all these books in the mail about Dolly Madison. He buys from these third hand booksellers that they mold inside the books and... But yeah, but then the books start coming in and he starts toying around with the idea of this character. But it's really, I don't know, in some ways I think his process is like writing a novel and that he really wants to think about, "Is this an interesting character before I really commit to writing about him?" And like what was he like as a person? What was his childhood like? He doesn't start just with the policy. Obviously, he wants to write about people who did things that really shaped the country, hence writing presidential biography. But I also think he picks presidents who he thinks were really complicated people. Interesting people.

Meacham's evolution as a writer

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KEITH MEACHAM:

Well, I mean I think that when you're writing historical biography at night and on the weekends and on holidays and then you're reporting in real time at Newsweek during the week, you're seeing both the immediate decisions that people in powerful places are making. And your initial instinct as a journalist is to sort of, well at least I think in this climate, is to fire, to lash out for the decision not being hard enough or not taking a stand on something. And you don't really have the luxury of time to look at what are all the human factors behind that decision.

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And so I think that Jon's working on those two planes for all those years really did inform his both measured look at historical figures. And when I say measured, I don't mean that he doesn't come down hard on them, but he's definitely not clinical in his writing about the human beings who've shaped American history. He really, I think, writes with a very human touch and I think his journalistic training allowed him to see how easy it was to just say, "Well, why did he do this?" And fire away critically at why someone did something.

Meacham working at The Washington Monthly

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KEITH MEACHAM:

It was really like an emergency room. I mean, I felt like I was dating a doctor in his residency or something. I mean it was really all hours of the night, and

again, truly driving the magazine up to the Pennsylvania publisher so that it wouldn't be late and that it would actually come out in physical form. So yeah, lots of hours. And also really close relationship with the editor, who's this amazing man named Charlie Peters, who has trained some of the best journalists in American journalism. And Jon felt so lucky to get to work for him and with him, but he was a real task master and someone who wanted the best work. And I think that training ground of, "Why are you saying that? What's your evidence for that? That doesn't sound right. I don't believe you." I mean he just had this really, really strong intellectual training with Charlie that I don't think you really could get anywhere else, because it was not... It was on the ground, real reporting. And he also met all of these amazing people that he'd interview. Economists from Yale. He'd be talking to senators and even presidential interviews, even people that were actually making the decisions on the ground at that moment. So he really got a great training there, but it was brutal hours.

Meacham becoming managing editor at Newsweek

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KEITH MEACHAM:

So that job is a two-year stint, and then it really ends up landing people in great places. Many of the people that worked at the Monthly went on to the Times or the Post or Newsweek or Time, and Jon ended up getting an offer from Newsweek to come and be the nation editor. So, editing all of the domestic reporting. And then, due to a series of various events, he ended up

kind of rising in the ranks at Newsweek pretty quickly. I mean, some of them just normal turnover and people moving to different magazines and jobs, but also his very beloved editor, whom he was very, very close to, we were very close to, died of leukemia. And that ended up really kind of shaking up the magazine and shifting a lot of the main roles at the magazine, or at least opening up fairly big roles at the magazine in ways that I don't think would have happened had Maynard lived. And Jon ended up becoming managing editor at that moment, which was really hard because at the same time that it was this great promotion for him, at a time when he was a very young man, and so what a great honor. But it was also he was mourning the loss of this man who was very much like a father to him. Maynard Parker was a really important figure in his life, and his wife Susan and their boys were really an important part of our life. We were young and kind of newly in New York. We'd just moved there, we'd just gotten married. And they were just a really big part of our personal surround. And so those years were... kind of talk about the human story of everything. So meteoric rise, yes, but also really at a moment when some very sad things were happening at the magazine.

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Well, it's so funny for me, because I met Jon when he was 19 and he seemed to me like he was 30 when I met him. So much was always made of Jon's age, but if you really had ever known Jon before that time, you knew he was just very much an old soul, and he was very, I mean I used the word wise earlier, but he was. He was sort of someone who got on really well with older people, and when I say older I mean really older. He'd grown up with his grandfather. He kind of really... He actually lived with his grandparents, growing up, from

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the time he was about 12 forward. And I think that he was just really someone who was very comfortable in the presence of older people and understood them, liked them. So for me it didn't feel like the stories about his age made that much sense, because I knew him so well. But I could understand how the age on paper, 29, seems really early to be the managing editor of a national magazine, when national magazines were really a big deal.

Meacham working long hours

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KEITH MEACHAM:

I'd say that from the time that we started dating until really just recently, it's always been kind of all-consuming for Jon. He's never really off. He's always got something rolling around upstairs. And as he's gotten older and I think more accustomed to juggling a lot of things, and is more able at that, it's gotten easier. But he's definitely always been someone who's completely in flow. Always.

Meacham's relationship with his grandfather

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KEITH MEACHAM:

Yeah, I mean, I think Jon's grandfather was a really huge part of his life and he really admired his grandfather, and I think he admired his career. Both of his grandparents were kind of people before their time in Chattanooga, Tennessee. His grandmother was the dean of students at the University of

Tennessee at Chattanooga. So, in the 1940s and '50s, she's this woman who is leading a major department at a state university. His grandfather is a judge by day, and at night he's writing sea novels. So, these are really people who are doing really interesting things in this pretty small town in the South. Small but big enough, and Jon really looked up to them. And I think that conversations around their table were very interesting. And his parents were in the mix, too, obviously, but he really revered his grandparents, and as an only child, I think he spent a lot of time there.

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And there was always the watching the news with his grandfather, and they got Newsweek and Time, and he always talks about how important those magazines were to his childhood and his understanding of politics and what was going on in the world, because there was really nothing else. There was no... You're reading Time and Newsweek, and then the local paper. There was the morning paper and an afternoon paper, and he ended up working for one of them later, but I think now there's only one. His grandmother's death was part of the reason that he ended up living with his grandfather in sort of his high school years. It was as much to care for his grandfather as it was for him to be a little bit closer to the school he was attending. But his grandfather definitely lived to see some of the early Newsweek years. And he wasn't very well, but he would get the clippings and he would see Jon's byline in Newsweek, and that was a big deal to him.

Meacham's years at Newsweek

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KEITH MEACHAM:

Well it's funny because the early days at Newsweek, I mean Jon was the nation editor and then the managing editor, and then became editor. And if you held a gun to my head and asked me to give you the dates of all that, I don't think I could really give you the chronology except insofar as it overlapped with the birth of our children. But it was... In those early days, before he became editor, I think we all had the sense that the magazine was here to stay. It felt very much like, wow, this is a really important publication, and this is how people are getting their news. And the closes of the magazine were these intense kind of political campaign-like moments.

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I mean, I remember every Saturday night was... I knew Jon would never be home on a Saturday night. Our weekend was Monday. I think he had Monday off. And I was teaching school, so my week began really heavy, heavy-duty on Monday morning. So there was very little time for being a normal 20-something in New York, because every weekend was just crashing the magazine. But those relationships that were built during that time for him were pretty intense and pretty great. And it was really a fun time, I think, to be in that business. I don't think he started, or we started, to feel that things were changing until really he became editor, and that was a time when ad revenues were starting to go to the... people were starting to really have a much greater sense of where their dollars should be spent because of internet advertising and the algorithms that could track behavior. It wasn't like you took out a big full-page ad in Newsweek for selling cars, you would

go to the internet. So I think that those were the years when we were starting to see magazines being a little bit doomed.

Living in New York City and moving to the South

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KEITH MEACHAM:

Oh, we loved New York. I mean it was really fun. And there are so many displaced southerners in New York, so we had this great group of friends that... some we reconnected with from college and childhood, a lot of people we met there. Great friends that we made through Newsweek. I had a great set of friends that I met through the education ed-reform world. And we had a great time there, and all three of our kids were born there, and didn't want to leave. In fact, yesterday I came across this essay that my son wrote about the trauma of leaving New York when he was in the third grade. So yeah, it was a great time. It was fun being young in New York. But by the time the third child came along, and you're in this tiny apartment. You're kind of longing to be nearer to your family and have a little support on the babysitting front. So we were really glad to be able to move back to the south when we were able to.

Being from the South and living in New York City

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KEITH MEACHAM:

Well, I think that there's always, and especially when you're young in New York and you say you're from Mississippi—Mississippi even more than Chattanooga. I think that there's a sense that maybe you're conservative or maybe you're particularly as a woman, maybe you're not as bright or maybe you're not as liberal as someone who is fully forged in the northeast. So I think that there's a little bit of tension that happens there, and you feel maybe like because you're not coming out of this northeastern Ivy League school for Jon, or for me, because I went to the University of Virginia, that you have maybe something more to prove, but also maybe a different perspective, right? Like, the people back home are not seeing it the way you're seeing it. My parents aren't really talking about things in the way you're talking about things up here.

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And so Jon I think early on had this very strong attention to the fact that things beyond the beltway... Remember when that was a term? Like outside the beltway. I think it may still be, but seems like it really was when Jon was at Newsweek. And he really was very interested in thinking about what people in Grundy County, Tennessee, were saying about politics. Or what somebody in Mississippi felt about this particular way of reporting something. So, there was, yeah, I think that played into the way he thought about politics and about the way he covered stories.

Meacham's interest for politics outside the major cities

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KEITH MEACHAM:

Jon's definitely very interested in what's going on outside the major city centers. And I think that writing about people like George H.W. Bush give you a sense of well gosh, there's a lot going on in Washington and New York and California, but this guy's campaigning in Texas. What's happening on the ground in Texas? What's the reality there? And what's he going to have to do to get elected in this state? I mean, our system is set up in such a way that you really do have to pay attention to things that are happening between the coasts, like the great flyover zone.

Idea driven vs. personality driven books

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KEITH MEACHAM:

The first time I saw this kind of passion around a point of view... Because Jon's written all these books about presidents and each one is different, right? Each president is his own person, and so the books are really informed by the personality in the moment that that president was making decisions. But, the first time I really saw Jon write a book and get really excited about writing a book that was more ideal driven and less personality driven was when he wrote *American Gospel*. And that book really kind of, it kind of came about with this great passion. He just was so annoyed... I mean, annoyed is not the right word. He really felt strongly about debunking this myth. Remember this moment in cable news where everybody was talking about it's a Christian nation, we're a Christian nation. And Jon really wanted to say something about how we're not a Christian nation. And as someone

who's, all of his education took place in church schools, I mean even college, I think he really felt strongly about debunking that myth. But debunking it with evidence and really looking back at what the founders said about religion and about drawing that wall between church and state. So that's the first time I really feel as though Jon went on a mission to say something important. I mean, not that the biographies aren't also saying something important, but they're less idea driven and more personality driven. And *American Gospel* and *The Soul of America* are certainly more idea driven. There's a sermon in there a little bit.

Meacham's vision of the country and himself

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KEITH MEACHAM:

I think that he really does feel as though there are certain things that need preaching about. And one of the things I think he feels really strongly about is that the founders really intended for this country to be a place where many voices, many colors, many creeds... I mean, they didn't get there quickly, right? It took them a long, long time to open the arms wide enough to accept women, African Americans, people of different sexual preference. But they got there, and I think he really feels strongly about giving the country credit for the fact that we are on our way there, still on our way there, and also that it's important to really look at what the people that actually helped get us there were up against in real time. It's so easy to say well they didn't do enough in 1919. But I think Jon really likes looking at well what were they really, really up against, and what were the compromises they had to make as

human beings? So he takes his journalistic and biographic training and kind of turns it to look at these periods in history to make a larger point.

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I think that there's a real pride in America and a belief in America. I think Jon really, really believes that the American experiment is flawed but ultimately better than anything else we've seen anywhere else. So he really believes in the experiment, and I guess he's sort of maybe impatient for people to slow down and say you know it's not perfect, and nothing good happens without compromise, but look at all the compromises we have been able to make to give greater voice to people who don't have a voice. And I tend to be, when talking to Jon or when I'm reading his manuscripts, saying what a lot of, I think, of his critics say, which is but they didn't do it fast enough, or but look it took this long for women to get the vote. But we were still separate but equal in Mississippi in the 1970s. Shouldn't we hold those people accountable for not working fast enough?

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And then Jon has these invariably really complex answers about, well this was happening on the ground, and his voracious reading of history and his incredible memory. He has such an incredible memory for dates and facts, and he's able to bring all that to bear on this was happening on this particular day in history in Johnson's presidency, and his decisions were affected by this particular day and this particular set of circumstances. And it's often easy to kind of look at history like, well let's look at Johnson's civil rights, well let's look at Johnson in the war. But Jon's really good, I think, about looking at what happened on a day, any given day all these things are coming at these

presidents, and I think Jon wants to help people understand that really good things can happen because of the work of really flawed people.

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I think that he feels incredibly fortunate in the education he's been given. He was born a white man in the south in the 1960s. He's grown up and continued to be privileged, and I think he really, really genuinely feels that that gives him a responsibility. So, if there is a drive, it's primarily that. To whom much is given, much is expected. But also, I think that he really believes... Actually, I think he's truly a patriot, without having gone to war or done anything... I mean, I think his writing is patriotic. But I think that he really, really believes in the power of the American experiment and that it's better than anything else out there. And that, though it's flawed and still has a long way to go, that he wouldn't want his children to feel any differently about it than he does. He would want them to criticize it and call it out on the things that are not great about it, but I think that ultimately, he also is really interested in writing for posterity and giving his kids and our kids and their generation something to look at and think about.

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I don't think any thinking privileged white straight American working in the public forum is not highly aware of the position in which they stand, so I think Jon's very, very aware of where he, the podium from which he's speaking. And I think that he's pretty solid and straight on that himself. But sometimes when I'm reading and he's talking about a particular period... For example, the civil rights movement, and he's not been there, or he's not really

ever experienced that. Those are sometimes harder edits and harder for him to write about, and so he'll say, "Do you think I'm giving it its due? Do you think I'm quoting people that were there enough?" So, he's very conscientious about really pulling in voices that have to speak for their own history because he can't speak for it. Yeah, but there's always lots of conversation about that in those early drafts, because you want to make sure that you're not trying to speak for someone else, but that you're trying to tell the story of America, which obviously has lots and lots of voices in it. And he's always searching for the right people to help tell that story.

Meacham writing "The Soul of America" after writing about the Charlottesville riots

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KEITH MEACHAM:

I think that it was very much on his mind, like how have we gotten to this place where the president of the United States is not taking a hard stand on white supremacists rampaging in the streets of Charlottesville as saying, I can't remember the exact line, but there's a lot about behavior on all sides, or whatever the thing is that the president said. I think Jon was just completely dismayed, and that ends up being a moment in which he kind of banged out... I say banged out meaning he was on fire. He really had a lot of things to say about it and wrote the article. And then as he got to thinking about it, it really kind of grew in the same way that the *American Gospel* grew out of a smaller piece, I think, for Newsweek. That he just felt really passionately about it, and it just kind of grew and grew and grew. And he really only discovered that it was a book after kind of writing the book. He just kept writing, he kept

writing, kept writing, kept looking at other periods in history when we've been in moments when people were thinking we were in the worst moment we could be in. And I think as he started to look back at that, he started to feel oddly, kind of counterintuitively, feel hope that, okay well if this feels like the worst moment we've been in, this feels like we've never been here before. And then as he started to really use his historian's craft, and also his reporting craft, he realized, you know we have been in some pretty crappy situations before, and there is a way out, and one way out is to look at where we've been.

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And a lot of people, I think, have said, "Well, you're way too hopeful and you're way too optimistic." But nobody's ever really accused him of being simplistic. So, I think that's a really interesting point. I think he is optimistic. I mean he's optimistic, but his optimism is very grounded, in fact. He has a very strong argument for his optimism.

How Meacham's work influences his role as a father

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KEITH MEACHAM:

I think that we have a good division of labor in our family in the sense that Jon's writing about these really big ideas that he taps into history to help people kind of see a way forward in the present. And it's very national, if not global. And yet on the ground, when you're raising kids, you're always seeing injustices or you're seeing in their schools things that you wish were moving more quickly in terms of diversity and inclusion. All of the things that we

think about at a national level, when you have kids, you're always seeing them on a local level. And so I think that the conversations at our dinner table are really informed by both what we're all experiencing on the ground. We're living in the south, and the south is an amazing place, but it's also a place that still has a lot of demons from its past. And I think that what is really lively at our dinner table with all of our kids, and with Jon and me, is that we're always talking about the intersection of the big ideas, which is where we are right now, and what is our responsibility as citizens of where we are and the communities that we're in right now.

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Our son is really into policy debate. He's on the policy debate team at his school, and he debates nationally, and he's really being trained in thinking about both sides of an argument. And last year's topic, they have one topic each year, was immigration, and so lots of conversation around immigration, and it was a great topic for the year because obviously it was very much in the news. And it was really great to see my 16-year-old son and my 10-year-old daughter and 14-year-old daughter getting in these very, very complicated discussions about immigration and what's right and what's wrong, and Jon kind of bringing this perspective of history into the mix and talking about well we were here at the turn of the century in the '20s with immigrant communities. This is not the first time we've really struggled through this. And Jon tends to be much more driven by the personality of... Or not the personality, but the human drama on the ground for the leaders at the moment. And my son, who's being training in policy thinking, is really more

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clinical, like well that's bad and that's good. And Jon's really, and I think people as they grow older are by definition more complex, but Jon's very good at looking at the complexity of a historical situation and trying to understand it in kind of a 360 view. And that's been interesting to watch with our kids. Trying to help them understand that you've got to really put yourself in the shoes of the person that's leading in order to understand why they make the decisions they make.

Meacham's education

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KEITH MEACHAM:

It was just a tiny liberal arts college on top of a mountain in the middle of nowhere in Tennessee. And I think the benefit of that place is that it's so small, and the professors there are not really forced to publish or perish, and so there's a real focus on teaching and a real focus on relationships with the student. And so Jon got to be really close to a number of his professors who really kind of took him under their wing and really kind of recognized early on the talent in Jon. I mean, talk about "in loco parentis," that school really kind of lives up to that particular part of their mission. They really do shepherd their students in a way that helps define who they are and what they are. And then it is a school that was founded by the Episcopal church, and so it has a lot of history. I mean, it's the University of the South. It has a lot of complicated history in that it was, you know, the first cornerstone was blown up before the Civil War, and then it was re-founded after the war. So, lots of that sort of history. And they're really doing a great job of looking at

that history and doing a lot of writing about the hands of the enslaved people that built the university. So, it's an ongoing project, too, but it's a school rooted in the Episcopal tradition, and I think that that is a very big part of Jon's own educational background and something that has really shaped the way he thinks about things. Because the Episcopal church is very much about compromise and acceptance and tolerance and inclusion, and I think that that's been a really, really big part of his own educational training, and his religious training.

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He went to an Episcopal Montessori school as a little boy, and then he went to a school that was loosely affiliated with the Presbyterian church, I guess, in his high school years. And then he went to Sewanee, which is an Episcopal school attached to an Episcopal school of theology. And he was also an accolade and brought up in the church, and has a very strong faith. And I think that the Episcopal church is a church of great reason, and I think that's been a real part of his training, is that you can still have belief and it can be tempered by reason, and that there's a way for those two things to coexist.

Meacham speaking about “The Soul of America”

01:46:25:08

KEITH MEACHAM:

This book, *Soul of America*, has really been the first book that I think he's felt was more of a message that he wanted to get out. And so speaking about it in the particular climate we found ourselves in, I think has been really fun for

him, but also something he feels like he should do. In the past when the speeches have been about Jefferson or Jackson or even George H.W. Bush, I think it's been more focused on these characters and these presidents and what we can learn from them. But *Soul of America* has been a very different kind of book, and it's really resonated with a lot of people who want to feel hope in the American experiment, and what the prognosis is for that experiment. And Jon's very hopeful, and I think that a lot of people really appreciate that. There are definitely people who are saying, "Oh, you're too hopeful. I'm not hopeful, you're too hopeful." But again, I go back to this. I think he's hopeful with a lot of reason behind that, and a lot of proof and evidence behind that. So it's not just said in this kind of pollyanna way.

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He's come to see that the platform that he has and that has been open to him because of a lot of hard work but also a lot of good luck, it gives him I think a sense of duty to go out and preach what it is he believes in. So, there is a little bit of preaching, I guess. And there's also a sense of duty. I do feel that that's true. But I think that he would say to you, he's got it a lot easier than somebody who's running for president or running for senate, or someone who's actually having to be scrutinized in every way in order to serve their country. So, I think again, too whom is given, much is expected, and Jon feels that this is something he has to say that he really, really believes in, and that could possibly be a unifying message in a time of real division. I think I would say the same thing Jon would say, though, is that there are people that are really on the front lines, getting shot at. There are people that are making laws that are making life better for millions and millions of people. So, I

would say that Jon probably is modest about his own role, and rightly so, because it's an important role. But he's got the privilege of being able to go in and have thousands of people listen to what he has to say and walk out and not have any kind of smear campaign against him on television. So, I think he would definitely give great credit to the military, a political candidate, a priest. People that really day in and day out are having to make that their full-time job. I think he would say that there are people that are doing things that are a lot harder and a lot braver.

Meacham's relationship with Christianity

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KEITH MEACHAM:

I think he's a very private Christian, and that he writes about it and he writes about it in a very intellectual way while always acknowledging that faith is something that transcends the intellectual. But I definitely think that his Christianity and his belief play a role in his journalism and in his understanding of great leaders and of people. And I think essentially, he believes that the world is a fallen and complicated place, and that the best hope we all have this side of Eden is that we give each other the benefit of the doubt, and that we try to look at the complex decisions that people have to make. And so, we talk a lot about, in our family and also with each other, about this idea of radical forgiveness, and that's for me really the power of Christianity. And I definitely think Jon brings a sense of forgiveness to the historical figures that he's looking at. Not that he says, "Oh, everybody gets a

pass because everybody makes mistakes and so we forgive them for the things they do." But I do think that he looks at historical figures as human beings first, and as presidents second. And so, while he holds them to account, he also recognizes the humanity in them. So yeah, I think that he definitely is, his work is certainly impacted by his belief and by his being a practicing Christian. I think Jon's contribution and the message that he is out there kind of delivering is that none of us has exactly the right answer to how this should be done, and it's way easier to stand on the sidelines and roll your eyes and shake your fists and be angry, and not try to see where the other person is coming from. And as a Christian, you're called to really try to put yourself in the other person's shoes and understand them, and to give them the benefit of the doubt.

Change in America

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KEITH MEACHAM:

Jon says all the time, which I think he's now developed as his kind of shorthand for why he wrote the book, which is that we've been here before, when you think things are worse than they've ever been before, you have only to look at McCarthyism or the Civil Rights Movement. But I think that there's even a deeper message, which is that good things really happen in the country and change really happens when people put aside this polarizing anger and try to work together and to try to understand the people that they're fighting against. I mean, Martin Luther King didn't get where he got with the Civil Rights Movement by just hating everyone, and by

screaming about how unreasonable they all were. I mean, there was that, but there was also a sense of trying to understand the other person and understand where they were coming from and what they were afraid of. And I do think that that's a lesson for how we can move forward. And that to me is kind of the bigger message to the book, because all of the periods in history that Jon picks are times when it would have been really easy for you just to say, "Let's all retreat to our polls and have these really strong opinions and just hate each other and fight." And not much gets done when that's the approach you take. And so I think that he looks at the people in those moments who compromised and listened to each other, and realized that everybody's not going to get their way 100%. And that moving forward often is messy and complex, but that you move forward through those complexities by accepting complexity.

Being proud of Meacham

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KEITH MEACHAM:

I am proud of Jon. I'm proud of Jon, more than anything, I'm proud of Jon for being such an amazing father, because he's a busy, busy guy, and he has a lot going on and he could spend 365 days of the year on the road, and he doesn't. He's really, really involved as a father. And he really just likes being a father and likes being part of our family. And I think our kids teach him a lot about what is important to say, what people need to hear.

