ANAND GIRIDHARADAS INTERVIEW
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

**Anand Giridharadas**
**Journalist**
**Interviewed by Noah Remnick**
**Date of Interview: June 22, 2022**
**Total Running Time: 1 hour, 35 minutes and 29 seconds**

START TC: 00:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Life Story Features

Kunhardt Film Foundation

ANAND GIRIDHARADAS:

And I'm supposed to look at the camera?

NOAH REMNICK:

If you could look to Noah, actually.

ANAND GIRIDHARADAS:

Okay.

NOAH REMNICK:

Speeding, Chris?

ON SCREEN TEXT:
Anand Giridharadas
Journalist

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NOAH REMNICK:
So much of your work is about the accumulation of unfathomable amounts of money and power in the hands of a few at the expense of the many, and how this corrupts our social and political life. Just explain what's going on here and how we got to this point.

ANAND GIRIDHARADAS:
When I started to observe in the run up to what became this book, *Winners Take All*, was that we lived in a time with these kind of two somewhat contradictory, seemingly contradictory phenomena. On the one hand, we were living in this time in which very wealthy and powerful people, such as Bill Gates and many others were talking about… Saying they were going to save democracy, saying they were going to save Africa, on and on. And the other phenomenon at the same time was at the same group of people, in many cases, the same actual dudes were hoarding more and more wealth and power year by year, even when you netted out what was being given away or what was being donated or what was being done. And so I became curious about the kind of simultaneity of these two

observable realities. It is true that we live in a time by any measure of extraordinarily generosity. That is also a time of extraordinarily hoarding and predation. And I became interested in the relationship between those two things. And I think maybe the conventional wisdom about the relationship between those two things that I had kind of encountered was that yes, we have all these challenges.

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ANAND GIRIDHARADAS:

Yes, we live in an unequal time. Yes, we are hearing from Occupy Wall Street and Pope Francis and Piqueti and any number of things that there's something not right. But at least these people are doing something. At least they're helping, at least they're... At least Goldman Sachs is helping those 10,000 women with its 10,000 women program. I'm not sure anybody ever counted. At least Wells Fargo is helping with financial literacy, even though it also had a big fraud problem. At least Mark Zuckerberg is spending $300 million securing the 2020 election, even though he, as much as anybody in public life, created conditions in which the 2020 election was imperiled. At least, at least, at least. And I think the kind of investigation that led to *Winners Take All* was an investigation into the question of whether the "at least" thesis is correct. What I actually concluded from my reporting was that these elite acts of serious, but in a cosmic sense, scanty do-gooding are not just drops in the bucket that are failing to address the big challenges. They are the lubricant in the engine that is causing these problems. In other words, it's not just that Mark Zuckerberg isn't giving enough, it's that the kind of giving Mark Zuckerberg does allows him, over here behind the curtain, to

continue being Mark Zuckerberg, which is to say someone who is urinating on democracy as his business model. The kind of change the world vibe that Elon Musk is able to create around himself lubricates an engine of tax avoidance and capturing government subsidies, and then telling everybody that government is terrible, all that kind of run around.

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ANAND GIRIDHARADAS:

The kind of moral glow that the Google people may acquire by going into some communities and doing local news and saying, it's such a tragedy there's no local news in these small communities, even as they sit on this advertising duopoly with Facebook that is the cause of there being no local media in these places. That kind of do-gooding thing over here could be in the millions, is enough lubricant to distract people from what is going on and to cast them in the light of solution to the very problem that they are. And so the kind of thesis that I came away with through the reporting and spending time, I want to be very clear, I am a reporter. I spent time in this world. I didn't throw these rocks from outside. I spent time in the world. I went to CGI, Bill Clinton's Clinton Global Initiative, and spent time in that world talking to people, talking to him about it. Spent time with the head of the Ford Foundation who has very conflicted feelings of his own about it, Darren Walker. Spent time with young people who are kind of drafted into that world and are working in that complex. Spent time in George Soros's foundation, one of his foundations. And what I concluded is this elite do-gooding is kind of the wing man of the elite harm doing that is happening on a grand scale in our time.

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ANAND GIRIDHARADAS:
And that you can't actually understand why we live in an age of such tremendous plutocratic capture, why the American dream has become something that only exists in Europe and not in the United States. Why someone like Donald Trump can become president. You can't understand any of these phenomena, if you don't understand, not only the way the wealthy and powerful rig the political system to their benefit, but further rigged the kind of reputational ecosystem of the society. So that, and this is brilliant, the people most likely to be resented for sabotaging the American dream have ended up being the most lionized by many regular people as the only people who can save them from the nightmare those very people have caused.

NOAH REMNICK:
You mentioned how all of this works to corrode democracy. Do you think it's fair to still call the United States a democracy?

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ANAND GIRIDHARADAS:
You know, I think the United States… There's two levels in which to answer that question. And I don't think either can be overstated. On the level of founding ideals, but also constitutional language and commitments, the original commitments and certainly the amended commitments of this country on paper are actually remarkable. You know? And I think when you hear the second part of what I'm going to say, it's important to say the first part first, because a lot of countries don't actually have those commitments, right? Free speech is not to be

taken for granted everywhere. Not only in really tyrannical regimes, there's a lot of kind of middle ground places in the world where just that is not something that is an entitlement. We have a glorious system in ideals, a pretty great system in terms of constitutional construction. And from the beginning of this country, a total failure to have the courage to live up to any of it, or much of it. All men are created equal just didn't apply from the beginning. So the country starts with an asterisk, and the asterisk says we don't actually mean the above.

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ANAND GIRIDHARADAS:

Didn't mean the above is not good. It's excellent. And it's really different from a lot of other places. It suggests certain normative commitments that I think are radical ideas in the history of the world. But this country also starts with the parallel reality of that lack of courage to live those values, to be the thing they said and my way of understanding American history, one of my ways of understanding American history is as I very long protracted, mostly upwards sloping, but often downward sloping in the short run or medium run process of trying to make us what we said we were going to be. And to that extent, we are a liberal democracy in name. We are more of a liberal democracy in many ways than we were when a whole bunch of us couldn't vote. When you had to own land to be a voter, when you had to be a man to be a voter, when you should be white to be a voter. Let's not discount the very real progress that has been made in opening up that democracy to more people. The liberal part of liberal democracy, we've added a whole bunch of rights, protections that did not exist before. There's a whole bunch of people who have immunities that are really essential to a

flourishing free society that maybe people in the 18th century couldn't have conceived of such as abortion. And other kinds of rights against surveillance by electronic means that obviously the founders couldn't have conceived of.

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ANAND GIRIDHARADAS:

But in this moment, the kind of two track story I'm telling is very much a two track story because we have these ideals we've been getting better on them. And then we have the reality that as we've been getting better on them, as we've been extending that promise to more people, as we've been granting rights to more people, that very act of extension has caused such a forceful, renewed threat of illiberal and anti-democratic backlash, that there's a really real prospect of backsliding to the kinds of moments we've had in our past where we had these things on paper and we weren't living them at all. I think something that maybe gets underplayed among those of us, like me, who want this progress to happen, who don't like the, kind of, "Make America Great Again" backlash, that I don't think we celebrate the fact that this backlash is only happening… It's called backlash. It's only happening because we've actually achieved a lot. Right? And I think sometimes people on the left don't like talking about what they've achieved. And I think if people on the right had achieved what people on the left have achieved over the last generation it would be heavily advertised.

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ANAND GIRIDHARADAS:

We've dramatically changed the status of women. And not on a century scale, on a millennia scale, right? Women are living a variety of roles in this society and

many others in a way that's just unprecedented in the history of the world. We are creating a multiracial, multiethnic democracy as a superpower that is really unprecedented, no shade to India or China or Germany or France. But actually if you look at demographics around the world, no one is trying to do what we're trying to do. We are on track to be this kind of superpower of color by the middle of this century. A superpower without an ethnic majority, racial majority. It's really, actually, cool stuff. It's a great ambition. It's an ambition that's actually worthy of struggle. And we are up against an extraordinary backlash because of the cool, powerful, awesome in the literal sense of awesome thing that we are trying to do. And that backlash is now potent enough that we may not end up doing that thing.

NOAH REMNICK:
As a journalist you've reported from all over the world and studied how wealth and power function across different societies. Do you see this charade of elite change making as distinctly American or is there something universal about it?

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ANAND GIRIDHARADAS:
It was interesting. I always, with my books, try to bound it, what I'm writing about, to a time and place to be specific and to not over claim, which is always risky. And then what always happens, and this has happened with all four of my books, is that people on their own in other societies will find certain connections. And I kind of prefer that and let them see what they see that happens to be the same. When I wrote my first book about India called *India Calling*, I had friends

from Lebanon and Egypt and other places who had their own conflicting relationships with other societies and this one. And although my book was completely about India, my Egyptian friend, or my Lebanese friend, or my Nigerian friend was like, "Oh my God, that is so true of our family." And I love that. In that same vein, I think *Winners Take All* was very much about an American phenomenon as I conceived of it and reported it. And I think in certain ways, the things I wrote about are very specific to America or hyper developed in America. The philanthropy in America is 410 billion dollars a year, even adjusting for population or economy size, I don't think any other country is remotely as dependent on and hawk to philanthropy. I mean, it's kind of off the charts. I don't think… I'm not sure billionaires decide school policy in any European country.

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ANAND GIRIDHARADAS:

I remember asking a German friend of mine, "So how do billionaires influence public education in Germany?" And she didn't answer the question. She started laughing because she didn't understand what the connection would be between a billionaire and school policy. Whereas in America, that feels like those are the only people who sort of decide school policy. So I think there's a way in which… And obviously like our thread bear safety net, not having healthcare, not having pensions, not having free college, not having daycare… The way in which we starve the commons, have people pay less taxes and then have them kind of give money to solve some of the problems that have been caused by their starving of the society. That loop is a little bit specifically American in a sense, right? But

that said, when I started to travel for the book, Britain, Europe, even India, I've heard this from people in China. I think there are echoes of some parts of this that are happening elsewhere. And in many ways, I think people see this maybe the way they saw Coca-Cola at a certain moment in the 20th century, which is like this big liquid tsunami coming their way that hasn't fully landed yet, but they see is coming. And the elements that I see most... In India, for example, I think the model of government not solving large problems that people share and kind of using rich people as an alibi for their public failure, rich people who are kind of thieving from the commons and then turning around to be like nation building figures. That's very much what I wrote about here.

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ANAND GIRIDHARADAS:

I think India is in many ways going in that direction. So a lot of people in India connect on that particular point. I think in Europe, something I heard a lot about is that this culture of just like thinking of entrepreneurs as the smart people in society who know about everything and whose insights should be kind of man spreaded everywhere through the education system and health policy, whatever, that feels like that's coming to Europe. Even if the whole *Winners Take All* phenomenon is not in that form. And you see it in things like President Macron, France, in some ways comes out of the business world, has a little bit of that vibe. He's created all these kind of like entrepreneurship councils and his vibe is a lot of that kind of… The society that has startups is a good society. So I think that is something that I do see everywhere. And certainly this kind of broader notion that we should focus on asking the richest, most powerful people to do more good, but

never ever tell them to do less harm. I think that's becoming a quite universal—has become a quite universal ethical code for the 1% of the 1%, the Davos class. And I think it's breaking the world and I think people are waking up to it.

NOAH REMNICK:
You've made a point of discussing how your life and education and career have informed a lot of your work. I'd love to hear how you would describe your childhood. What was your family and community like growing up?

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ANAND GIRIDHARADAS:
I grew up in an immigrant family in Shaker Heights, Ohio. My parents are both immigrants from India. They met in the 1970s in Bombay, India in French class. My mother was studying to be a French English translator, and she had already studied a lot of French in school and was just kind of taking a refresher class to practice more conversation. India's one of those countries where languages are not taught with active conversation. It's more taught in theory. So she was taking this class to chat, get a little more chatting skills. My dad had like, I think, basically never studied French, but had a lot of confidence and was selling trucks in Africa as his job. Indian trucks, Tata trucks in Africa, needed a little bit of some bomo to sell those trucks. So he enrolled in this class, and they met in this class. And shortly after that, he went to graduate school in America and they kind of got together after he went to graduate school. And he had this decision about whether to stay in America or go back to India after grad school. And the seventies in India were, I think, a very sclerotic, depressing time where my dad said to me

very simply, I looked at my boss 20 years ahead of me in the company and realized I didn't want to spend the next 20 years becoming him. Wasn't a lot of opportunity. It was a time of suffocating government policy. India was completely shut off from the world. And then my mother had her own gripes with India, although she didn't want to leave. My mother was... I think India is a— quick, larger point to make. I think India because it's a democracy gets a… We just like democracies and it gets a little bit of a free pass for being a totally grim place to be a woman for 95% of women.

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ANAND GIRIDHARADAS:

And I think if it wasn't an electoral democracy, we would see it more in the way we see in Afghanistan or other places that are bad to be a woman in. But somehow because India has constitutional rights and it's a good democracy, actually a third of parliamentary seats set aside for it. It has a bunch of things that are on the surface look like what we in the west kind of think of as like good country category. India's a grim place to be a woman. It still is a grim place to be a woman. And my mom experienced that. It was just, you're not allowed to do things. She and her family... Every family is different, but her family's particularly— she not allowed... Can't go to the movie theater with your cousin, male cousin, because someone may not know it's your male cousin. And this is in her twenties. Can't go to parties. And you know, her family might have been a little extreme, but frankly, as I later learned as a reporter in India, not especially extreme. So she had her reasons when he tried to convince her to move with him to America, she was skeptical. She did it. They moved to Shaker Heights, Ohio

after his grad school. I grew up there for the first seven years. And it's probably the opposite of the world they left in Bombay, now a city of 20 million people with a few square inches per person. Shaker Heights is this… Very lovely. It's one of the most racially integrated suburbs in America, famously, and it's the lawns and it's the suburban houses, 2.5 cars and 2.5 kids and block parties.

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ANAND GIRIDHARADAS:
And a kind of— I think it's very important for their story and to some extent, mine. They experienced a kind of American tolerance that is different from the tolerance they would've found in New York, or San Francisco, or Washington D.C. The people— Many of the people they kind of found themselves, and this is mostly white people in the late 70s and early 80s in Shaker Heights, Ohio, were not especially knowledgeable about the world they came from. I think most Americans that I know in New York today in 2022, would be able to tell you about a couple of newspaper articles they've read about it. It's just a dif– We live in a much less insular America than America, the late '70s or '80s. They didn't know a lot about India. They didn't know much about where my parents were coming from. They occasionally asked really dumb questions, like was that red thing on my mother's forehead a hole in her head, and that was the blood and so on and so forth.

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ANAND GIRIDHARADAS:
But this was an America Shaker Heights, Ohio that was fundamentally loving, welcoming, embracing. For every ignorant question, there was a generous

invitation. There was a promise to, "I got to teach you my Jewish grandmother's cheesecake recipe. Don't share it with anybody, but you got to have a cheesecake recipe if you've moved to this country. Have you ever shopped in a mall?" Someone asked my mom. "No, I haven't." "Well, I got to take you shopping in a mall." And my mom almost got arrested for shoplifting because she didn't know that you have to pay in each store as its own payment system. She thought the whole building was one big store. Someone went and showed her. Someone taught her how to drive while my dad was working at the office, not well enough that she didn't one day end up on the ice in the middle of our neighbor's yard in a huge Oldsmobile that she could barely see over the steering wheel of. But I think about it so much now in terms of the direction the country has gone in. This was a suburban battleground state, like mostly white American social world where people didn't have to know a ton about the world people had come from, to just have a basic instinct of, "We're glad you're here. You're part of this. You can become American too. And let us help you become American as much as we can." I think that's still in us. I think people still have that experience of America in certain places. But I think so much about that.

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ANAND GIRIDHARADAS:

I think if our family had started in New York, actually the first place any of my family members were in New York, was actually the neighborhood I live in now, Clinton Hill, my dad's brother, that was our first beachhead in this country for any member of our family. I think we'd have had a very different story. My guess is we would've melded into an Indian community if they'd moved to New York. So

in some ways, it was great that we moved to this smaller place, where they had friends from all kinds of different backgrounds, and friends who were not from their background. It tested them and grew them and grew all of us. It was a very, in many ways, idyllic childhood. My father traveled a ton. He was a consultant from McKinsey, an institution I have since written quite hostilely about, which he doesn't disagree with a lot of the critique today. He was traveling routinely, Sunday night to Thursday night, kind of permanently for a lot of my childhood. It was really my mother doing a lot of the day to day lifting. It was a lot on her, but just a really glorious American, suburban childhood of running in the yard, and sprinklers, and baseball bats, and gloves, and kiddie pools, and all of that kind of stuff. Block parties, stuff that I sometimes— New York, like I realize I'm not giving my children because there's no block parties or not enough. And not a great place to swing a baseball bat.

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ANAND GIRIDHARADAS:

And then when we were seven, a really interesting— When I was seven, we were not all seven. When I was seven, an interesting thing happened, which is the adrenaline rush of being immigrants wore off. In other words, I think there was something really difficult and challenging about coming from India, coming to this other place. As I said, learning to drive, learning to shop in a mall, learning to cook new food, learning to put your kids in school. And it was hard and it was demanding and it was a rush. And then they figured it out as one does. They had the house, they had the two cars, they had the two kids. They figured out their American life in this placid place. And I think a kind of boredom set in. Like, "Is

this all there is? We've done this hugely exciting thing. And now it's not that exciting anymore." Not the first people to say that about suburban Ohio. And so they itched for a change and opportunity came up in my dad's work to move elsewhere. And the specific opportunity came up to move to Paris in France. And they basically were like, "Yes, let's do it again. Let's immigrate again." They were immigration junkies at this point. "Let's just keep immigrating." So we moved to Paris, we lived there three years and it was an incredible thing for me and my sister. I was seven, she was four. But it was not great for my parents. And this is something, it'll come up in some of the things we might talk about today.

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ANAND GIRIDHARADAS:

This is something that has really shaped my understanding of America also because I am, I think, a pointed critic of where this country is right now in a lot of different ways. But I had the experience with my parents of moving to France when, frankly, they were 10 years more sophisticated than they were when they entered the United States. 10 years more affluent, 10 years more established, 10 years more, they'd traveled a lot in that time, and the way that they had not when they first entered the US. They knew what they were doing. They were older, they had better clothes. And yet from day one in France, the message that every interaction is sending you in that society is, "You will never belong to this place. You can be here. You can be treated well." I'm not talking about a kind of overt discrimination, although that happened. And it happened more to us there than it did here. I'm not really even talking about that. There's just no idea really of becoming French and France is like most countries on earth. The idea that you

can become American, it is so normal to us here. It's actually a very radical idea in the history of the world.

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ANAND GIRIDHARADAS:

My friend Eric Liu, who wrote a great book about his family memoir of his Chinese American family's called, *A Chinaman's Chance*. He talks about— Eric Liu's family has pretty documented, as far as they know, record of living in China, uninterrupted for thousands of years. As far as they know, I don't think any of them have ever not lived in China. They're pretty committed to China, as a lot of Chinese people have been. One generation, they break out. I think his parents move here. He grows up here. He becomes a speechwriter for Bill Clinton, does very well. And Eric makes the powerful observation that he, Eric Liu with thousands of years of Chinese lineage credentials, and like I don't know, 30, 40 year deviation where they briefly tried out America and became citizens. He can't become Chinese. Eric Liu can't get naturalized as a Chinese person, let alone you and me. Eric Liu is not able to become Chinese again. 30, 40 year gap, that thousands of years of chain. We make a million or so, or slightly under, new citizens a year in this country. So the Trump thing is real. The MAGA thing is real, but there is an idea in this country that any kind of person can become an American. And it's an idea that is not just a parchment thing. We make a million new citizens a year. And if you don't believe me, go to Queens.

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ANAND GIRIDHARADAS:

And so that's not a French idea. And the fact that my family experienced that so viscerally and felt it not once, not twice, but every damn day for three years, to the extent that they really… I think they loved the sights and they love the crepes and stuff, but I don't think they had a great three years in the way that my sister and I had a great three years, because I think they were very haunted just by that feeling, that vibe, which I as an adult would've made a bigger impression on me than it does to a child. And so while we had an amazing experience in France, that experience has always shaped my understanding of America. That no matter how bad it gets here, no matter how bad a way we're in, there's an idea here that is a very rare striving in history that is worth defending and worth, frankly, beating the crap out of the other side that wants to do away with that idea. And I think having that experience of another Western country that's actually quite different on that score was very, very formative for me.

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ANAND GIRIDHARADAS:

I was in an English language school there, moved back here, lived in Cleveland for a year, had an awful, awful experience in a boys only prep school in Cleveland that year I got back. Age 10 to 11 or so, of being brutally bullied by, you know… I think— It was like white boys who couldn't handle a brown boy, but it was also like white boys who couldn't handle a brown boy who had just come back from France. If someone had been algorithmically designed to be complicated to preppy white boys from Cleveland, Ohio, it would be a brown kid with a long last name who had just come back from France. It just like broke all of the... People kept calling my mom the French lady. It was really challenging them for them to

understand who we were. Again, I think, you know, our life probably would've been very different if we had been in New York instead of Cleveland in that moment. And then we moved to Washington D.C, suburbs of Washington and Maryland when I was about 11. I was there through the end of high school. I would say just a more broadly, my family is an incredibly— It's an unusual family in the sense that we are incredibly, incredibly close in spite of having had a lot of conflict. I was a very tough kid, just headstrong and I think there's some of that dynamic of you're the weak kid in school being bullied, and you're the tough kid at home who talks a lot and lashes out.

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ANAND GIRIDHARADAS:

And they, in spite of all that, we're just a talking family, where we use big fights often but we're still always together. In retrospect, I realized how weird it was. I often didn't even want to do things with friends. And when I was in middle school or high school on weekends, we'd go out to dinner as a family. We were just very, very tight and close and each other's best interlocutors. The other thing I'd say about my parents as Indian immigrants, is that they are very unusual Indian immigrants. There's inevitable and totally understandable survivalism that can come with coming as an immigrant to this country. It is totally terrifying. It's terrifying in a way that I have never understood that terror. My dad still says, and I think he still has that psychology even though he's not in that state anymore, that there's no safety net, there's no backup. There's no one you can call, particularly when you're on that visa at first. If you have to keep winning the lottery every year just to stay. Nothing can go wrong. So you don't want to spend too much

money. You don't want to speak out in ways that you're going to risk your job, all of that, all of that caution. And you want to do the most lucrative job you can do, and that kind of thing that often is part of that immigrant family culture.

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ANAND GIRIDHARADAS:

My parents had a slightly different take. I think they had the— They were certainly had the ambition and drive and you better work hard in school and you better... "Why did you get a 97 on that test?" That kind of work hard and there's no excuse. But I think for my mother as a woman leaving India, and for my father as a professional, leaving a sporadic work environment and economy in India, they both understood that they came to America for a concept of freedom, a big airy word that I think was very corporal to them. I think it actually was very meaningful. It means for my mother going to the movie theater with whoever the hell you want versus not. It means I see it with my mother still, and in her 60s goes to India now and how much her female cousins will offer a heterodox opinion in a room versus her. Right. It's very real what she came to this country and got, and what my father came to this… My father's age 30 going to boardrooms in American companies and talking to people with a foreign accent, didn't grow up here, doesn't know those sports teams, and they're listening. And he didn't feel he could get listened to in his own country as a 30 year old. And so, I think they took that sense of freedom and combined this thing of like, "You got to work hard, you got to be really good at what you do, but you should do whatever you want to do."

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ANAND GIRIDHARADAS:

And so it's to me a great hybrid that I think is in many ways, the greatest privilege I have is that push, but it's a push not in any particular direction that they want, or that is their understanding of the world. It's a push to excellence or to, I think also from their point of view, integrity and seriousness in whatever. And they used to say, "You got to be a painter, be a painter. Just make sure you're a good enough painter to keep being a painter." I remember my dad— This is sort of the essence of my dad was like, "If you want to be a lawyer, I don't know about law. I don't really know that many lawyers, it's not a profession I understand. I can't really help guide you. You're going to be a lawyer. You should do that. But then you should try to be on the Supreme Court." That was his version of being the Lucy Goosey Indian parent. "Do whatever the hell you want as long as you're at The Met or on the Supreme Court." Unfortunately, I have not satisfied those goals.

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ANAND GIRIDHARADAS:

But yesterday I was having lunch in Washington with a member of the Biden cabinet. And after we got up from the table this woman came by and she said, "I'm promoting National Caribbean American Restaurant Week. Thank you so much secretary for being here." And then she turned to me and she said, "You're the surgeon general, right?" And so in some ways I do feel I have achieved, at least in the perception of some people, that kind of more traditional immigrant success. Doctor, nice suit, military medals, that kind of thing.

NOAH REMNICK:

You were certainly no stranger to elite spheres from a relatively young age. You went to some elite schools, your father as you said, worked for McKinsey. What was your impression of these spaces as a young man? Were you skeptical, reverential, indifferent?

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ANAND GIRIDHARADAS:

It's a great question. I mean, I think one of the things I've learned that I think has defined a lot of my writing, is that a lot of these very elite spaces are ruling spaces. I think this is true, frankly, in every place and in every time in history. They do some things right. They're legitimate in some ways, but are corrupt and self-serving, and contravene the public good in other ways. And different places, different times, the level of corruption, the level of out of touchiness can be very high, can be very low. I think we're at a moment where that's quite high. But an observation I made as I spent time in different worlds like this, going to graduate school at Harvard or working for a year at McKinsey in India, or I was in this Aspen Institute fellowship that was the immediate trigger of *Winners Take All*. One of the observations I made is that the criticisms from outside about how these ruling spaces are ruling are often quite off base. They're based in a lack of familiarity for obvious reasons. Because these spaces are very gate kept. It's hard for people who are not affiliated with Harvard or have no right to be there to actually explain how the power of Harvard works.

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ANAND GIRIDHARADAS:

So you get this conspiratorial thing about Larry Summers destroying the American economy over 30 years, which in many ways is a true outcome. But the mechanisms by which someone like Larry Summers succeeds and navigates institutions and becomes the president of Harvard while freelancing for a hedge fund, or whatever it was that the *New York Times* found he did. And so the way in what that actually works, depends on knowing how those institutions actually work. And whatever, we all know different institutions from the inside. I know MSNBC now from the inside, right. I spent 11 years at the New York Times. I'll tell you the critics, and often I agree with these critics about the meta conclusion. I agree that the *New York Times* both sides things in national politics, particularly around the end of democracy on race, some of these things. Right now in a way that is harmful, not always but it has that tendency, right. And I also know and love a lot of people who work at the New York Times and are grappling with that problem or resisting the idea that there is a problem, all the above. But when I hear those critics explain why they think that's going on at the New York Times and how they think it's going on, they're like living on a fantasy island.

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ANAND GIRIDHARADAS:

It's not the advertisers calling and saying, "You need to give the Republican..." It's not Citibank calling. That's just not how it works. And I know that may sound naive, but I know I worked there long enough myself. The thing is I can actually tell you how it does work and it's much more insidious. And it's much more about, like in all organizations, fear, and hierarchy, and these structures where people are imagining what'll happen if they stick their neck out. And because the critics don't

actually know that stuff, and in some cases don't bother to know that stuff, they make these criticisms that don't really land because they're just not describing reality. And the people in the building are like, "That's just not actually what happens."

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ANAND GIRIDHARADAS:

I will say, particularly in the case in the New York Times, like the idea that advertisers have anything to do with the problem, I can imagine the housing section or something you can maybe make a case. It's just not the mechanism, but there are problems. It's useful to know what they are and being inside those spaces or inside and outside of them can help. TV, I would say the same thing, I'm a political analyst for MSNBC and I'll go on. People who agree with my politics will often then say, "I only will watch you because they're always this and that. Comcast is breeding that." Again, I don't want to be the person saying big corporations are not rigging the system because I do believe big corporations are rigging the system. And I try to be very precise about how they rig the system and where. Comcast executives are not dictating programming on MSNBC. Again, that may sound naive, but you don't need to believe that Comcast executives are the one doing that to believe that there is an excess of fear and caution in these spaces. And the way it works is like careerism and mid-level executives who don't stick their neck out and that kind. And so a lot of what I tried to do in my writing and it's the same with the billionaires thing, I think we can imagine the Koch brothers and Bill Gates and all these people sitting in a room talking about how they want to destroy opportunity in America.

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ANAND GIRIDHARADAS:

That's not actually what happens. It's fun to say that's what happens, but what happens in reality, when you actually do the reporting or go into these worlds, is in a way far darker, because that thing doesn't happen. Like Bill Gates absolutely thinks he's making the world a better place. And the fact that he is continuing to make for a world that is more and more consolidated, that's actually a much darker and more important story to tell. These systems are so powerful that even people who think they're doing a good thing… I don't think Mark Zuckerberg is sitting there being like, "I want to spread disinformation throughout this country and would love to see democracy go." That's what Mark Zuckerberg is doing. That's what he's achieving. I'm a very strong critic of Mark Zuckerberg. But I think there's a certain world in which I see some of my fellow critics imagining a fantasy version of him. It's just not what actually happens in those spaces. I guarantee you Mark Zuckerberg is earnestly thinking about how to make the world a better place. And he is so deluded in the manner of a Mao, or a Stalin, or like one of these, that he genuinely thinks he's making the world a better place while destroying democracy. That's more interesting.

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ANAND GIRIDHARADAS:

How does that happen? How does like 12 people in a room earnestly talking about making the world better, collude to make it much worse with none of them going home, looking at their kids in the eye and thinking that they're doing that? That to me is the more interesting question. And so, in the worlds that I've been exposed

to, which are some of these worlds, a place like Harvard, a place like MSNBC, a place like the New York Times, some of these companies and leaders that I've reported on, I think those of us in journalism and who just write and think about these issues more generally, need a more reported and gritty, and inside portrait of the actual maneuvers, and thinking, and common sense that account for our condition. Because I think the misdiagnosis that a lot of well-meaning people engage in essentially defangs their criticism and makes them sound like they're, frankly, illiterate about the systems they would overthrow. I think these systems are incredibly problematic and deserve criticism that is knowing, and specific, and anthropological, and grounded in a real understanding of how large systems and corrupt bad systems allow decent and well-meaning people to behave in ways that are awful.

NOAH REMNICK:
After college, you moved to Mumbai to work for the management consulting firm McKinsey as you mentioned. What led you to take that job? What was your experience like working there? Did it ever test your values?

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ANAND GIRIDHARADAS:
So much. I wrote about young people who joined places like McKinsey in *Winners Take All*. And yet my experience was not typical of that experience. The people I wrote about were these people who were hooked by a story of McKinsey as a way to change the world. My story was really actually a story of McKinsey is a way to get out into the world. So what happened with me was I was in college,

University of Michigan. History major, studied the history of political thought not a particularly bankable skill. My thesis was about how changing conceptions of both the cosmic and the daily experience of time changed people's understanding of the appropriate size of the nation state. I say that not because people are going to want to look up that topic, but just to understand how, maybe, practically useless my actual skills were. But I had been very clear in wanting to be a journalist and a writer since I was very young, 17 years old. I had the chance to intern at the New York Times, when I was 17 in high school, we had this high school internship program. I interned there for a month, wrote two articles. I was hooked.

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ANAND GIRIDHARADAS:

I actually, very luckily, was super clear. I knew exactly what I wanted, the kind of thing I wanted to do. The only problem was getting the space and chance to do it. It was also 1999 or like when I was finishing college, 2003. It wasn't quite as much of a time of blogs, there were blogs, but the idea of doing it on your own for a while and getting picked up just wasn't there. You needed a job, and I basically tried to get a journalism job. I said, I wanted to do it. I had this idea of becoming a foreign correspondent. I really wanted to go be a foreign correspondent first. I didn't really want to go be— although I was willing to do anything, it still is now, particularly was then, it's a little more transparent now, thankfully. As far as I remember, companies didn't even, the New York Times, didn't publicize journalism jobs. I think there's been a lot of pressure to do that now, in part to

diversify these workforces, and not have it all be through connections, and people finding out about an opening somewhere through their networks.

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ANAND GIRIDHARADAS:

But, there wasn't an entry-level program where you'd rise up to the ranks, or get kicked out, or whatever. You just had to force your way in. I was at the University of Michigan, I wasn't at Harvard or Yale and I couldn't get those jobs. Then I tried to, could I get foreign correspondent jobs? Could I get local journalism jobs, in any of a number of other countries? It was just a struggle. Even though I'd interned, actually, twice at the time. I went to the newsroom, I remember talking to a woman who eventually would become my boss. She was a deputy foreign editor at the time, Alison Smale, and she was like, "You and everybody else wants to be an India correspondent. It's a great ambition, but I'm not giving it to a 21-year-old. Anyone who writes for this paper would love to be posted in India, telling those stories." I think I just had a dream that was a little bit out of step with reality. So then, my idea became— I got this very good piece of advice from Jill Abramson, who was an early mentor of mine. She became the editor of the New York Times, but she was a junior editor in Washington first, and then she was the one who gave me that internship when I was 17. At some point she said, "Don't spend your twenties trying to like force your way into the building, writing one little freelance piece here and there, applying for this, applying for that. Just go far out into the world, and find out about things people don't know about, that you know about." Have stories to tell, basically, instead of try to get things placed.

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ANAND GIRIDHARADAS:

So I thought a lot about where would that be, and where do I go? I had this fateful— I was studying abroad in England, my junior year of college, and I was reading VS Naipaul and his travel books, his, *India: A Million Mutinies Now*, book in particular, third book in his, India Trilogy. And a lot of Naipaul is about this, he's from Trinidad, but he has an Indian family, but he doesn't really know anything about where he comes from in India, and he talks about his Indian past like an area of darkness, which is the name of his first India book. Then he goes there, and he goes there several times, and every time he goes there, it's this sort of, "I hate this. I love it. It's kind of cool I look like everyone else here. I've never been in a place where I look like everyone else. It's kind of awful I look like everyone else here. I'm not special." He just has all of these very complicated and quite writer-ly feelings prompted by that collision of man and subject. Going to India, just, you know, he wrote about a lot of things, but going to India brought up and brought out a lot for him and in him.

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ANAND GIRIDHARADAS:

I think that inspired me and I thought maybe I should—If I had to go far out into the world, go to India and reconnect with my roots. It was a place I didn't particularly love, in part because of some of the stories I told you, and I think the first thing I learned about India is that my parents wanted to leave it, right? It's not a great introduction, not a great endorsement, product endorsement, to say the two people you love the most and trust the most basically said, "Not here, please," but it was also this place of fascination. I think that Naipaul helped me think, moving

to a place you don't like is good for becoming a writer, right, as opposed to just moving to London or something and enjoying yourself. And so, I started thinking about, how do I get to India? Asked these journalism contacts, no-one's sending me to India. So I thought, I'm just going to get some job, someone who will send me to India, and then I'll just try to write on the side, or convince someone to become a writer when I'm there, or somehow pick up that thread. I knew about McKinsey only because my father had worked in McKinsey until the early nineties, and didn't work there anymore. They had this thing of taking any graduate in any field. They don't care what you've studied, which is unusual, and sending you anywhere.

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ANAND GIRIDHARADAS:

So I just thought it was perfect for my scheme of getting to India and becoming a writer, and that I thought that I could survive it for a couple years. I got there, and I was put on my first project for a paint company in a… I thought I was living in Bombay, where I got an apartment, and then they sent me to this other city, called Humnabad, which is a, frankly, kind of miserable city to live in. Tough to get meat or alcohol in that city. So I would say if you ban one of those things, you can at least have the other, but if you ban both it's a little bit of a tough existence. So I'm living in this kind of awful place to live that wasn't where I intended to move, most of the week, Monday to Friday, working for a paint company. On the first day I'm told, I'm 21 by the way, "You should design a new leadership development system for this company," which is the third or fourth largest paint company in India, a large country. I'm like, "I'm sorry?" They're like, "Yeah, you

should develop a new…" I was like, "Do you need me to research a new development program for leaders here? I can research it." Google was relatively new, but I had good skills. "I could Google things. I could Google the word, "Leadership," and print you out something, if that's... Who am I doing this for? Who am I reporting to?"

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ANAND GIRIDHARADAS:

They're like, "No, no, no, we're all doing different things with this paint company. You're in charge of developing the new leadership development system for this company." What that turned out to mean was, I was in charge of developing the new leadership development system of that company. I had to research it, figure out on my own, basically, what are the qualities of leaders? What are the four qualities of leaders at this paint company? No one even told me, I literally just made up whatever I wanted, talked to some people. They were like, "Yeah, initiative." "Great, initiative." So, four things, and then I had to create a grid. They love grids in these consulting firms. Then a grid of, what are the four, what is a one, a two, a three and a four, four being good, one being bad, on each of these four leadership traits, right? So, on initiative, is the guy one, two or three or four? On innovation, whatever.

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ANAND GIRIDHARADAS:

So, that was kind of made up enough. Then they were like— I was like, "Guys, I just literally just..." I did it, but I remember sitting in this room, this windowless room, just literally making up, and then I had to write what are the attributes of a

three on this, versus a four. I was 21. I've never worked in an organization. I don't know anything about this. I studied the history of political thought and time consciousness in early modern Europe, and then they implemented my leadership development system across this company. Just rammed it right down its throat, so that every leader at this company, who's almost all men, were now evaluated at a meeting that I was at. They sat in a boardroom with the CEO, the head of HR, who carried a gun in his sock, and a couple other people. They sat in a boardroom with the McKinsey team and they put a PowerPoint slide, very crucial tool, if you're not familiar, for the consulting firm, PowerPoint slide up with the person's picture, some attributes about them, and then we live, we, this group of people live scored these people who are not in the room, the 40 leaders of the company. They're like, "All right, Vinet. What would you say on initiative?" And then be like, "Three." It's like, "No, he's not a three. He's such a one. I catch him napping at his desk a couple weeks ago." So on and so forth. They evaluated all these guys. Some people were probably fired. Some people were probably promoted. Some people were probably reprimanded, and it was all...

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ANAND GIRIDHARADAS:

I tell you this story because a lot of my subsequent critique, I think, was perhaps seated in this initial experience of the kind of fraudulent construction of authority, which is kind of what kings do with the divine right. There's all kinds of fraudulent constructions of authority in the world. But I think the modern technocratic consulting, finance, construction of authority conducted through PowerPoints and done by these parachuting people who come into a business,

look around for a few minutes, basically use frameworks that they've sold to other companies already, but anonymize them. Then they're basically selling you GM's leadership development system, or whatever. Then real people get fired. Real people get laid off. Thousands of people, often, or production just moved to China, and no one thinks about the fact that, "Oops, we moved all those jobs to China, and we've now created a situation where men in North Carolina don't know what to do after they graduate from high school," as a default rule, and now those men are going to turn towards a kind of political barbarism that is going to set the United States back. They're not able to think of that stuff. They're just sharing these frameworks and protocols and spreadsheets.

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ANAND GIRIDHARADAS:

What's amazing about it is, it's the opposite of expertise. It's the opposite of deep domain knowledge. It is literally the construction of a place-less technocratic knowhow that can just be dropped into any context. I wrote about this a lot in, Winners. I think part of what happens, this is a lot about language, is that these parachute authorities, the consultants, the venture capitalists, the private equity folks, the parachuters, they're more highly educated, often, than some of the people in the companies, the managers in the companies that they're landing into. So the people on the ground, less educated, but know more about their actual world, know more about chemicals, or know more about bread, or know more about paint. The parachuters are often more highly educated, highly confident, for sure, maybe better dressed.

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ANAND GIRIDHARADAS:
They come in, and they basically compensate for the lack of domain authority and knowledge with framework knowledge, right? And they translate the existing problem, or understanding of the problem, or situation in a company, and this happens in the news business, also, where they go into the New York Times, or CNN, to create CNN+ not long ago. They'll translate the problem into their technocratic, consultant language, and suddenly what happens is all the existing people in that industry and business, who actually know about the thing, are rendered illiterate in their own domain. Because now the question is not, "What is the best kind of news coverage for America?" The question is, "What are the three levers of KPI delivery for content generation in a fragmented media landscape?" Right? Suddenly, someone at CNN who knows a lot about media and the public good, and how to tell stories of democracy in ways that engage audiences, that person is suddenly a babbling idiot, in neoliberal, technocratic, gospel speak, and the parachuter is now on top, getting to dictate terms.And when we look at the America of the last generation of mass layoffs, of heedless outsourcing and offshoring, without regard to the consequences of union busting, of any number of things, a lot of it, a lot of it was guided, we now know, by wretched advice from the parachuters.

NOAH REMNICK:
So, do you feel your values were being tested as you were working at McKinsey, and how did it change your understanding of your father's work and your relationship with him? Did you ever butt heads over that?

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ANAND GIRIDHARADAS:

Um, I think my values were tested in the sense that I felt... I was there for a very brief time. I was there for about a year. After that first paint company project, I basically insisted on not doing any more corporate projects. So, I only did internal research projects on globalization, research in globalization. I worked for the Mumbai police force and did some in Mumbai 2020, which is this city development. So I basically was like, "I'm only going to do public sector things," and they probably thought little enough of my skills to think that was probably the best use of my time to work on things that they probably didn't value that much. So my values were not tested in terms of like, you know, I wasn't forced to do awful things, personally, that I objected to or that kind of thing. The way in which my values were tested was, I think, just realizing that we were in all these rooms where we knew less, and maybe had less good instincts and advice than the people across from us, but we were driving the conversation and they were listening to us.

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ANAND GIRIDHARADAS:

I remember sitting with the Mumbai police force, and, you know look, I think there were some very helpful things that some very smart people from McKinsey can do. They had a postal system within the Mumbai police force where every police station would independently send correspondence to the other 55 or whatever stations, right. So each station was managing 55 separate postal relationships and needed to have enough people in hand to do 55 delivery runs a

day, or however many things they had. McKinsey's very good at coming in and saying, "You should have five regions of the city, and there should be one mail coordinator for those things, and you could therefore have more of your cops being cops instead of doing mail runs." Like, you know, I think that kind of stuff is not only harmless, but can be helpful. Police officers are not good at optimizing a mail flow, and they don't have the resources in a country like India to, you know, to have done best practices in something like that. Yeah, every police station in India, in Mumbai, should probably not be conducting a small postal service with itself. Yeah, you can make that more efficient, and consultants are good at that.

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ANAND GIRIDHARADAS:

I think what felt more complicated was a moment that I remember where, in that same project, there was three of us, and the people I worked with there, there was an American guy and a couple of Indian people, brilliant people. These are really smart people, particularly in India, because of just how few jobs there are for so many people. The kind of people McKinsey can get are the kind of people who go to NASA in this country, right, and they're just like the number four person in the engineering school, and India ranks all these things, right? So, people tell you their scores. So, these are some smart, smart people. And I remember we got to this thing, early in the project of, "Let's diagnose what's wrong with the Mumbai police force, the way citizens experience it, right. They're telling us what they think their problems are, but let's not only trust what they're saying. Let's develop our own, independent sense of what the issues are." And so, what the team

proposed to do was walk around the McKinsey office in Mumbai and interview… Most people in McKinsey travel all the time, so they're not in the office. The only people who are always in the office are the secretaries.

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ANAND GIRIDHARADAS:

In this particular office of McKinsey, the secretaries were, almost to a person, all of the exact same demographic, for like complicated Indian reasons that we can go into but probably don't need to. Which is that they were all women, which is relatively common, but they were all mostly women from Goa, which is a very small state in India. But Goa is an English-speaking state, and largely Catholic, and for some complicated set of reasons, that demographic of women from Goa, who grew up speaking English and are Catholic, disproportionately represented high end secretaries in India, right. For whatever reason. So, basically, the only people in that McKinsey office, eight hours a day, were middle-aged women from Goa who were Catholic and spoke English, and my team only surveyed them. That was our survey. That was our citizen survey of what was wrong with the Mumbai police.

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ANAND GIRIDHARADAS:

They just went around and interviewed the secretaries to very affluent men, mostly men, from one state in India, Catholic and English-speaking. I just sat there looking at them, being like, "You realize this is not a representative sample of the city, right? These are not the vendors being harassed by the cops on the street. These are not homeless people being… These are not slum dwellers. These

are not women reporting domestic violence. These are not, you know, people reporting issues with moonshine trafficking." It didn't— I was raising something that was so profound, they were like, "Oh, you're such a journalist." I was raising something profoundly weird to them, that one would need to… We didn't do what I suggested. We just interviewed the Goan Catholic middle-aged lady secretaries. That was our full database of the 20 most common problems reported by citizens in Mumbai about the police. Then we took it to the police who actually deal with real people every day, in a way that those people didn't, and then they listened. Now, suddenly, these career police officers who actually know their world, because we have nice suits, are suddenly like, "Oh, well I guess that's our… Oh, well, we might as well transfer this guy out," right.

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ANAND GIRIDHARADAS:

So, that tested my values. Just like what is this based on? It's like this… Because it has acquired this glow of fact-based database authority, the ways in which it is totally hollow have become all but invisible to people, and even some of the most well-meaning liberal institutions, media institutions in this country, they hire them too, right? So, I think that was just very complicated. In terms of my father, the story there is interesting, and I'll let him tell his story, but my perception of the place is obviously different from his. He worked there for a long time. He was there for 12 years, or something like that between 1979 and '91 and '92. He believed in it. He did that work, he has an MBA. He believes in business, he likes business in a way that's not my thing, but my father has zero tolerance for corruption and malf— Of almost anybody I know, like can't handle it. My father

can't watch Mad Men because he thinks it's a waste of time to spend your time watching people who don't have integrity and behave well. I'm always a little bit like, "It's just art, you're just watching it to be entertained." He's like, "Why would I spend my time watching someone who doesn't have integrity?" Right?

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ANAND GIRIDHARADAS:

So, my father's fussy about that, and while I won't go into the details, because it's his tale, he had– towards the end of his time there, he had his own collisions with it, and I think came away disillusioned, in his own ways, and raised those criticisms and tried, in an internal way. I'm often criticized for not actually fixing anything from the inside, well, other people do that. He tried that. Raised some alarms and stinks, and wasn't heated, and several years later, I'm not saying it's a direct correlation, but several years later, the person who used to run that firm went to prison. There's a new book coming out by two brilliant investigative reporters in the New York Times, about McKinsey that really show extraordinary descent into corruption, malfeasance, propping up terrible regimes, so on and so forth. I think, in certain ways, the model of this kind of constructed authority from the outside was always problematic in a certain way, and could do good things, but could also do bad things, and could obscure the human consequences of things, could obscure what happens behind outsourcing, what happens behind optimization of this or that. I think that's probably been a constant, that's probably been a problem from the beginning of that kind of authority and thing.

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ANAND GIRIDHARADAS:

I do think, as the neoliberal era has proceeded, and intensified in every arena, what has happened to GE and what has happened to Amazon, has happened to McKinsey, also. I think these things have ripened and fermented to a point of real noxious-ness, where the original purpose or virtuous thing has become a smaller and smaller part of the endeavor. Bringing fact-based database analysis to companies that often ran on gut, that was the original idea, and there's merit in that. Some merit in that. I think it has curdled into, you know, like so many other things in our society, a money-making racket that has no values. I will just say, on that, I think my father and I are in complete agreement, and we have different theories of change and different ways of speaking out or speaking in, but I think of myself, whether, I don't know if you would agree with this, as fulfilling his way of looking at the world, and his sense of integrity about these things, not be betraying it in any way.

NOAH REMNICK:
So fast forwarding a few years after some time as a journalist, in 2015 you give a speech at the Aspen Institute that causes quite a stir. I'm wondering if you could kind of tell us the story behind that, how you came to deliver that speech, what message you hoped it would send, and how it was received.

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ANAND GIRIDHARADAS:
So in 2014, I published a book called *The True American*. It was my second book, and it was about a series of hate crimes after 9/11 in Texas where white supremacists shot a bunch of immigrant gas station workers, killed two, the third

one survives, an immigrant from Bangladesh… blinded in one eye, but he survives. He, many years later, summarizing a long story, feels grateful that he was able to regain his life in this country. He forgives the white supremacist, and he fights to get him off death row, and it's this kind of insane story of two men and two Americas and all of that. So I'd written that book, and I gave a TED Talk about it the following year in early 2015, the week before we had our first child. The Aspen Institute, where I was a fellow, there was this thing called the Henry Crown Fellowship, it was a young leader's fellowship, mostly business people in it, but a lot of business leaders in a room together can be quite boring, so they would often throw in a couple of non-business people in every class, so I was one of those people.

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ANAND GIRIDHARADAS:

They asked me to give... at our fellowship reunion every summer of several hundred people, a lot of captains of industry, and then there's also all the billionaire donors of the Aspen Institute, the Cokes… David Rubenstein, and just all these different people are there. They asked me to kind of re-deliver my TED Talk about this hate crime story, and I was like, "Sure." Summer approached, the talk approached, and I was kind of like, "It kind of feels pointless to just give the same talk I gave already that's already online as a video, just to deliver it again when I have this very interesting audience." I have 400 of the richest, most powerful Americans in this room, people who run companies, people who are multiple billionaires. Madeleine Albright was going to be in the room, you know, this and that. I just started thinking about, "There's something more I should do

here instead of just repeat something." I started thinking about it and I realized that there was something in that few years of being a fellow at the Aspen Institute and being in the general company of these people... I mean, I'm not in that world in a sense, I'm not a business person. I'm obviously not a billionaire, but I think a lot of journalists have this experience where just by virtue of covering these things or going to these kind of things, you're adjacent to a lot of these powerful worlds. They're not your people, they're not your values, and they're not your friends, but in a way that just other people don't, you just see it and you're in that world, so I was kind of like that.

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ANAND GIRIDHARADAS:

And I had kind of noticed this strange thing that, in this Aspen Institute world, there was all this talk about changing the world, making the world a better place, doing good and helping this and helping that, but these were all the captains of industry who were causing those same problems at the same time. You had people selling kids sugary drinks as a senior executive at Pepsi or CEO of Pepsi, and then flying to the Aspen Institute and talking about reducing juvenile diabetes in the Black community, and you're just like, "Well, you could just reduce that by not doing your day job." Or you had people talking about, "How do we reduce the racial wealth gap?" It's like, you are the CEO who is busting a union like right now. These people were flying into Aspen to help "solve" the problems that they had caused that morning. And so when I was asked to give this speech and decided I wanted to give my own speech, I kind of came to this idea of taking on what I called the Aspen consensus, which I think in some ways was obviously not

just about the Aspen Institute. It was the idea that, in the neoliberal era, we live under this kind of unspoken social contract that you can tell the super rich to do more good, but never tell them to do less harm, that you can tell them to give back, but not take less, that you can tell them to make a difference, but not ever tell them to stop making a killing in ways that cut every social and environmental corner. And so I decided to write this speech in which I would say, "What if you, gathered here, are not in fact the solution to our problems, what if you are the problem?"

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ANAND GIRIDHARADAS:

Obviously, that's not the typical format for a live speech. I caught people off guard. They thought I was giving a talk about a hate crime in Texas, which is the kind of safe, liberal content that they felt that they could get on board with, and it was very interesting. I got an icy standing ovation. They kind of had to clap, maybe even had to stand, but it was these ice cold death stares. Then one guy came up to me, private equity Baron, came up to me in the bar at the hotel that night and he shook my hand like a congratulatory thick handshake and said, "You're an asshole." I think that summed up how people felt about it. There was a tremendous feeling of betrayal. And it was strange because in this fellowship we read Gandhi, who talked about the utter corruptness of British colonial power. We read Frederick Douglas, "What to the slave is the 4th of July." We read Dr. King and the Letter from Birmingham Jail and the kind of insipid white moderate.

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ANAND GIRIDHARADAS:

I don't think what I said in that speech comes near any of that level of criticism of power and how it works. It was inspired by, in fact, reading those kinds of things over the years. But I think there was just a feeling that, "You don't do this. One doesn't do this. One does not call out people who are self professed, self-declared do-gooders." If you are giving money to causes or you're giving to museums, whatever you are, there's the kind of expectation of immunity, frankly, and I pierced that expectation of immunity with that speech. And I just had kind of meant to give the speech to give the speech, but I have a very wise, astute book agent and she called me and she said, "That's your next book."

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ANAND GIRIDHARADAS:

I said, "No, it's not, it's just a speech about this kind of very niche topic of doing well by doing good and these kinds of things." She says, "Trust me, I've been around a lot. That's your next book." That speech became *Winners Take All*, and it changed my life. Although, I did feel it was kind of niche at the time, it kind of, I think, tried to capture something that had become, in a way, the story of the American economy and sadly writ large, which is we are being ruled by people who defraud us in the morning and donate tiny scraps of the proceeds of the fraud to us at night and tell us they are the saviors.

NOAH REMNICK:

You've said that the plutocrats in our society won't just voluntarily give up their wealth and power, that the rest of society needs to fight back, what does that look like exactly? What is, as you put it before, your theory of change?

01:21:33:00

ANAND GIRIDHARADAS:

I think we have an incredible set of mechanisms for changing the world in this country, and none of them involves Elon Musk, you know. We know how we have empowered women throughout history in this country, and it's through policy, law, and bottom-up movements that made those things happen. We know how we changed the status of Black people in this country, it's through policy, law and people in the bottom-up way making those things happen. Old people used to live in, very large numbers of them, in penury in the final years of their life. At some point, we just eradicated that with Social Security, and we know how we did that, big sweeping policy. We know how we got rid of slavery and passed the 13th, 14th and 15th amendments, the 14th in particular, still basically holding in place every egalitarian kind of institution and commitment in this country. So we know how we've made change in the past. We know that those little kids' fingers didn't get removed from factories in the early 20th century because factory owners had a change of heart or were interested in stakeholder capitalism. We got the kids' fingers out of the factories and put those kids in school because we made it illegal to employ children in factories.

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ANAND GIRIDHARADAS:

We put fire escapes in those buildings because people were sickened by immigrant women burning to death in tenement buildings in New York, and so on and so forth. We know how we've made change. Ask yourself if you're watching this, depending on who you are and where your background, ask yourself... there

are probably many elements of your life that would not have been possible a certain number of years ago. What made those things possible? Real change from below, institutional change. And so I believe we have to first generatively discredit the fraudulent tales of change that we hear from the Elon Musk's, the Warren Buffet's, and the Bill Gates' about plutocratic change from on high, and we have to reclaim democracy as the place we go to change the world. A big part of that, obviously given the current state of our democracy, is restoring it to a condition where it can do that, because if we don't show that it is better, then people are not going to be persuaded of the kind of fallacy of going the billionaire route, and that's a very big concern right now. I don't just think the small-D Democrats are losing the trajectory of the country right now because the right is rigging the system and scheming, I think that's a very big part of it. I think the gerrymandering, the Electoral College, and the Senate and the fila– all these things, it is an unlevel playing field. I think the small-D Democrats would be losing badly if the playing field was fair also. I think, in an honest-to-God way, we're actually just literally losing the argument. I don't think our story is better. I think the actual thing we want to do is better, I don't think our story is better, the way we're telling it. I don't think our narrative's better. I don't think our psychological insight into voters is better.

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ANAND GIRIDHARADAS:

I don't think our ability to inoculate against some of the worst kind of intellectual viruses the right throws out into the public, I don't think it's better. I'm not here to tell you the Democratic party and others on the left are doing the most

phenomenal job in history and they're going to get wiped out in the midterms. I'm here to tell you, to me, the profoundly much more optimistic point that I think they're performing like crap, and that explains why the country's in real jeopardy. They could perform terrifically, there could be different people, there could be the same people doing better, but we're going to have to make a hell of a case for democracy if we don't want to embolden those, whether they're billionaires in the private sector or tyrants and autocrats who want to convince us that it's better that they just make decisions for us.

NOAH REMNICK:
Speaking of making that case, your next book is called "The Persuaders," what does it take to change people's minds in modern politics? What role does storytelling have to play in that?

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ANAND GIRIDHARADAS:
For the very reasons I just said, I spent time over the last couple years, particularly kind of over the pandemic period, with a group of people I now call... called the persuaders, who are people working in various phases of activism, politics, education, cognitive science, kind of electoral messaging, various domains who work on the question of how do you change minds, not in any time, but in this time, in a time of extremes, in a time of polarization? And I think that there's a kind of casual dominant consensus, which I perceive, which motivated the book, that I kind of call "The great write-off," and I think we all do it. The great write-off is basically, "They voted for Trump, they'll never change their

mind," Not true, he would still be president if several of them did not in fact change their mind. It is a mathematical truth that a significant number of them in fact did change their mind, and he is not president today because they did. Or people of these vaccine deniers don't… "Screw them, let them die," some people say. Well, there has been change in those rates, and certain messages actually work, certain people reached them. The White House saying less and local actors saying... there's strategies that worked better than other strategies. You see it with political parties that basically are now fully invested in kind of mobilizing faithful voters, and basically don't do persuasion. Don't talk, you know, don't make a Christian case for the environment, which is a totally slam dunk of a case to make if you read the Bible. Or don't speak in a language of patriotism and freedom to advocate for things like trans rights, which I think is a totally intuitive way to talk about trans rights because what is more in the American tradition than insisting on being who you want to be?

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ANAND GIRIDHARADAS:

So I was interested in people who were breaking against that kind of write-off and who were interested in the possibility of changing minds and who were trying, who were doing it, who were having some success, who were struggling also. And I spent a lot of time with them to understand what they do. I would say the biggest takeaway, or couple takeaways is, one, their mental model of people on the other side of the line from them is fundamentally different from yours and mine and most people's. Most of us assume the people on the other side of the divides from us are quite morally certain in their conviction. I mean, I certainly

lapse into thinking that, you know, white voters who loved Trumpism twice are pretty morally committed to authoritarianism, to certainly a politics of white resentment, so on and so forth. There's a lot of basis for feeling that way. I would say I am one of the people who feels that way. When I followed some of these people, their mental model, not out of any kind of kumbaya thing, purely for the sake of winning elections and defeating things like Trumpism, their attitude is that if you look at the people who voted for Trump, there's probably a hardcore there of half of that group that is profoundly morally committed to that world, has thought about it, understands, like is— died in the wall, and you're not going to say anything to reach them. But then, there's another group, and this is, by the way, true on the other side also, that are there in a much shallower way. It doesn't mean they're not racist… I'm not saying any of this to excuse, I don't want people to come after this saying, "You're giving these people a free pass." They voted for the same mania that the other people did.

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ANAND GIRIDHARADAS:

But the second group, what distinguishes them is that they're more morally confused, they're kind of worldview starved in the eyes of these persuaders I write about. They are much more susceptible to kind of emotional pleas, to a kind of politics of ecstasy, which is, frankly, a Barack Obama rally in 2008 or a Donald Trump rally in 2016. Those are both the politics of ecstasy, a feeling like you're in this large electrifying moment that is bigger and more life-giving than anything you've experienced. I think if you are a profoundly committed fascist, a 2008 Obama rally is not enough to sway you, but if you're kind of a low key racist guy

in rural Pennsylvania, as we know from the data, a Donald Trump can absolutely hook you in, but so can a Barack Obama, so can a Bernie Sanders, actually, with a totally different politics than Barack Obama.

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ANAND GIRIDHARADAS:

And these persuaders understand that when you actually start to look at people on the other sides of divides as containing both the deeply certain and the morally confused, those morally confused people are available to you, but you have to really understand what's going on with them, you have to understand, above all, what is confusing them. What are the contradictions in their worldview? What are the sources of dissonance? They hate immigrants, but they love their gardener, Manuel, and that's actually dissonance, but they often don't think of Manuel as an immigrant, Manuel is just Manuel. If you can play up for them the fact that Manuel is an immigrant and kind of contradicts their whole worldview on immigrants, you can actually get somewhere. I wrote about people who have shown that you can get somewhere, you can change people's minds on this stuff, but it takes a lot of nonjudgmental listening, which is very hard, I wouldn't say I'm very good at it. It takes a lot of eliciting, and it takes a lot of harvesting the contradictions in someone else's psyche, as opposed to trying to impose a correct worldview on someone else. And I think that's become hard. It's become hard for me. I don't think I'm particularly good at doing the thing that the people I write about in the book do, I'm trying to become better at it. I think I am, in many ways, part of the modern style of like, "Get your head right on immigration," as opposed to what is it that makes you feel your town is not the town you grew up in? Let

me hear you on that. It's hard to have that spirit. I also think that's a spirit that might save this country.

NOAH REMNICK:
Lastly, I'm just wondering what your life is like outside of journalism. What brings you joy?

01:32:50:00

ANAND GIRIDHARADAS:
I love to cook. I'm an amateur, but committed cook. I cook a lot of East Asian food, ichuanese food, Korean food, Thai food, Vietnamese food. I interestingly don't cook Indian food, I find it a little too difficult. I never get Indian food right, I don't know why. I also cook a lot of European-American food. The pandemic, interestingly, really grew that for me, as it did for many people. I was kind of always interested in cooking, but I lived in New York, take-out's so easy, you go out. I just didn't cook as much as I wanted to, and the pandemic kind of brought into line the way I wanted to be with the way I am kind of thing. So I'm happy that cooking has become an even bigger part of my life and something that I really love. I'm a husband to an incredible wife, Priya Parker, who's a writer and facilitator and does a lot of… I kind of describe problems and Priya really gets in there and solves them for people and works with large groups to deal with very complicated conflict, particularly around politics.

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ANAND GIRIDHARADAS:

And we're the parents of two kids, a four year old and a seven year old son and daughter, older son, younger daughter. And so my life is also very consumed with them. It's funny, I think both Priya and I… people from the outside may not know this, I think only our very closest friends know this, that I think we work less hours than virtually anyone we know. This is kind of more me than Priya, I think, but now we both do this, we don't work on the weekends at all, we never work in the evenings, the laptop closes at five o'clock and it does not open until the next day. We just really are very rigorous about that because of our kids. So we kind of travel a lot and we are in the world, but we're also very much at home and with our children and in this kind of really beautiful phase of life where you're very actively shaping two human beings who are going to come up in the world that Priya and I are fighting for and writing about in different ways. It just makes very vivid the stakes of all of these questions that continue to consume me.

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