Life Stories
Individual Lives. Collective Impact.

LORETTA ROSS INTERVIEW
THE THREAD SEASON TWO

Loretta Ross, Activist and Professor
February 5, 2024
Interviewed by: Noah Remnick
Total Running Time: 32 minutes and 53 seconds

START TC: 00:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:
Life Stories Presents

LORETTA ROSS:
I started this work absolutely enraged because I was mad at what happened to me as a child. I was mad because I had to deal with thousands of rape victims. And mad when I had to deal with white feminists and mad when I had to deal with people who left the Klan. I was angry. But how we handle that anger will determine whether we build something or burn something down.

ON SCREEN TEXT:
The Thread
Loretta Ross
Activist & Professor

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INTERVIEWER:
Can you please start by just telling me your name and what you do?

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LORETTA ROSS:
My full name is Loretta June Ross, and I'm a professor at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts.

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INTERVIEWER:
So I want to take things back to your childhood years. Tell me a little bit about your youth in Texas and the kind of family that you were born into.

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LORETTA ROSS:
I had really, in many ways, an idyllic youth up until a certain point. My mother was from Texas. Her family moved from Alabama when they had been enslaved to Texas in 1867. So I've got deep, deep roots in Texas. My father, on the other hand, was an immigrant from Jamaica, came over here when he was a child, like six years old or something. I don't know anything about my father's roots because he didn't come over with his parents. So the only grandparents I knew on my father's side actually weren't related to us. But it's on my mother's side that I really, really know my roots in Temple, Texas. I still have family that lives in Temple, Texas, but because my father joined the military, I was born in Texas, but within three months after that, we started traveling around the country, and in some instances we were overseas. And so I went through first grade in three different states: Texas, Oklahoma and California.

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LORETTA ROSS:
So a lot of people don't have that kind of constant uprooting and destabilization when they're getting educated. But I like to think that it taught me resilience going to different places every 6 to 18 months, always being the new kid, being pretty much of an introvert because my best friends were books. So I spent a lot of time buried in books. I'm one of eight kids, and I was number six, and there's three girls, I'm the middle girl, with five brothers. Because my baby sister Toni was severely disabled, Mom, after being a domestic worker, had to come out of the workforce in order to take care of Toni. And so it became the family's job to take care of Toni, and particularly it became mine. And so I learned to not bring my mother's attention to my problems, because we all were devoted to Toni.

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INTERVIEWER:
So you mentioned that your childhood was relatively idyllic up until a certain point. When did it take a turn?

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LORETTA ROSS:
Yeah, my childhood was relatively idyllic in terms of family and being in the bosom of family a lot until I was 11 years old. My mother had started a Girl Scout troop for Black girls in the 50s, because we weren't allowed to join the white Girl Scout troops. And so on a Girl Scout outing at 11 years old to the amusement park, I strayed away from my troop trying to chase a ride that I wanted to get on, and I got lost. And so this G.I. in uniform came up to me and offered to help me find my troop. I'd been around G.I.s

all my life, so I actually felt safe, but I was not safe because he, you know, put me in his car. And then he took me into some woods that were nearby and raped me. And everything changed after that. I didn't even know what was going on. I remember just screaming my head off and he kept punching me in my face, telling me to shut up.

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LORETTA ROSS:
But strangely, he was probably quite young. I bet you looking back now, this guy was probably 18 or 19, 20 years old. But to an 11 year old, he looked like a man. Strangely, he somehow acted like we'd just been on a date. Because he could have left my bloody body in those woods. And instead, he brought me back to the top of my street after he asked me where I lived, dropped me off and kissed me as, you know, he left me there. Well, I came home all bloody and beaten. My big sister Carol, who's nine years older than me, saw my condition, my bloody face, these bloody white jeans I had on, and she helped me wash up and she put me to bed. And I didn't have the words to say what had happened, but I think Carol figured it out. And later on, when mom finally came home after panicking about losing me and Carol telling her I was already home, and I think they had a conversation about what happened. But mom never asked me about how I got lost and what happened after that, so I think Carol kind of filled her in.

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LORETTA ROSS:
But that's when everything changed because I didn't know anything about sex. My mama's religiosity kept her from talking about that with us. I

knew something really dramatic and horrible had happened, but I still didn't know exactly what it was. So I became even more introverted after that, staying in my room, reading books. I was a pretty good student because I always got a lot of A's and stuff because I, like, I liked studying, I liked school, but I didn't have any close friendships. I was different from other 11 year olds after that. And so I became mom's unhappy child, as I said. And I think my mother was being triggered by what happened to me, because she had also suffered childhood sexual abuse, but she didn't have a way of communicating that with me.

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LORETTA ROSS:
And so we fought all the time in power struggles. But she was also trying to groom me into becoming a housewife, because my mother was the only Black woman in our neighborhood who didn't work for a living. So she thought that that was the ultimate way to become a woman, to be, to be able to stay at home, take care of your kids, have your husband provide for you. And that's what she wanted to groom her daughters into. That life that that she had attained, that she thought was like the golden egg at the end of the struggle, and I wanted no parts of that vision from my mom. And so I was rebellious. I wouldn't stay in the kitchen and learn how to cook. I was grudging about doing the housework. Whatever my future was, it was not going to be as a domestic housewife. Not at all.

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LORETTA ROSS:
Another strain between my mother and me was that she was also grooming me to take care of Toni for the rest of my life and Toni's life. And

that was also a role that I wasn't embracing or wanting to do. And so I knew that as soon as I graduated high school, I was gonna go to college as far away from that kind of grooming my mother was offering me as I could. I was really lucky that I was a good student, so starting in 10th grade, I started getting a lot of college offers. I went to a predominantly white school, and so I knew my future was going to be in college, not as somebody's housewife. But another detour happened when I was 14, going into the 10th grade. Because my mother and I coexisted without any real closeness in this household, she decided me to send me off to stay with her aunt, which would have made her my great aunt, for summer so that she could get a break from my sullenness when I probably wasn't…

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LORETTA ROSS:
I probably was a difficult child to deal with because of how apart and separated I kept myself from the rest of the family. And so she sent me off to stay with this great aunt in Los Angeles from Texas, we were living in San Antonio at the time, and she thought I'd be safe, except that this great aunt had a nephew named Melvin, who was married 27 years old. And Melvin decided that he would ply me with alcohol as a way to have sex with me when I was 14. This was in the summer of 1968. I became pregnant in that summer because of Melvin. And then once Melvin found out I was pregnant, he ran. I mean, literally, he joined the Merchant Marines to get away from my father's wrath because he knew my dad would have killed him. And so I returned home from Los Angeles to San Antonio, pregnant at 14.

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LORETTA ROSS:

And I kept it a secret from my mom because I kept thinking I was going to wake up... Every day and it would just be over. It would just have been a nightmare that I would just wake up from. But in my fifth month, I couldn't hide it anymore. And so I told my mom what had happened. She was unbelievably angry. She and my dad talked about it. They stuck me in what was called a home for unwed girls back then, it was very common to sequester pregnant teenagers in these homes. And they would have their babies in secret, give the babies up for adoption and return to normal life, or as normal as they could be after you had something like that. My son was born April 9th, 1969. I had turned 15 by then, and I gave birth at this hospital that I think was a Catholic hospital, because the people running that hospital broke the rules. They were supposed to just whisk my son off to the adoption agency.

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LORETTA ROSS:

And instead, the morning after he was born, they brought him out with all the rest of the babies that had been born the night before, and they put them in my arms. And I looked down and all I could say is that he's got my face. He's got my face because my son looks just like me as a baby. He's got my face. And so I don't know whether it was adolescent rebellion or mother bonding, but I couldn't go through with the adoption after that. And I had not planned on keeping him, so I hadn't chosen any name for him. And so within an hour they were bringing me his birth certificate to put a name on it. And I was like, I don't know. So I chose the middle name of two of my brothers, Howard Michael. And so Howard Michael Ross is

how I became a mother at 15. So at 16, I left San Antonio to go to college at Howard University.

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LORETTA ROSS:
I left my son with my mom and dad, but it all kind of fell apart in my second year of college because my mother wanted full custody of my son. I late-- I learned later that because we were retired military, all of us had health care. Mom, dad, the kids until we were 18. But Howard did not have any health care. My son Howard. And so the only way she could get him into the military policy would have been to adopt him. And to do that, she had to sue me for custody and and put on this paperwork that I had abandoned my child, so that she could get Howard into health care. But all I heard at age 17 was that my mom is taking my baby away kind of thing. So I rushed home and, took my son, bought him back to DC with me, and tried to make a life for us after that.

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INTERVIEWER:
These were the days before Roe, obviously, and you know, one child you carried to term. And I understand that on another occasion, you chose to have an abortion. What did those decisions teach you about the importance of legalized abortion? And tell me a little bit more about that landscape and your decision making at the time.

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LORETTA ROSS:

In 1970, I went to college. And my mother, being the wonderful Christian woman she was, would not sign permission for me to obtain birth control, because I was 16, I was under age, we had to be 18. And I fought with her briefly, but I had no power there so she wouldn't do it. Well, I got to college and I started dating this guy who was at his first year of law school. And we had sex three times and I became pregnant again. And so, fortunately for me, Washington, D.C. decriminalized abortion in the summer of 1970. In the fall of 1970 I needed an abortion. And my law school boyfriend was more than happy to pay for it because he was in his first year, he didn't plan on becoming a parent. I hadn't planned on becoming a parent again. And so he paid for it.

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LORETTA ROSS:
Since it was legal, I was able to go to the Washington Hospital Center and have it. And and this was in the days before amniocentesis, so nobody knew I'd had two babies up there, not just one. But I'm very glad that I had access to abortion, because the thought of becoming a mother with three kids at 16 was not a supportable thought. I knew the reality of parenting one child, I wasn't ready to parent three. So I'm forever grateful that at the time I needed access to abortion, it was there for me and I could afford it and it was legal. But at the same time, I wanted to prevent future unplanned pregnancies because I'd already had two unplanned pregnancies. This was not how I wanted to go through life. I'm still trying to go to college and graduate, and so I went to Harvard University's health care center trying to obtain birth control. And that's where they introduced me to the Dalkon Shield, an IUD that they were freely distributing throughout the country.

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LORETTA ROSS:
They meaning A.H. Robins Manufacturer. So I accepted implantation of the Dalkon Shield and... As my strategy for preventing future pregnancies, but they didn't warn us about the dangers of the Dalkon Shield, as a matter of fact, it's design defect, which was this--- It was a triangular piece of plastic, and the design defect was that they attach a string to it so that when it was time for removal, the doctor could just jerk it out. But that string-- string attached-- operated like a bacterial wick. And it kept drawing all kinds of contaminants up the string into the uterus of the women who had it. And so it led to sterilization, acute pelvic inflammatory disease, a sterilization. So I got sterilized at 23. And so that was my entire reproductive career. A baby, an abortion and a sterilization. And in hindsight, all I can say is that I have been trying to ignore my plumbing, but my plumbing kept calling for attention. And so, eventually it was a 25 when I got the first job-- my first job in the movement at the DC Rape Crisis Center.

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INTERVIEWER:
What made you decide to begin working at a rape crisis center, and what did you learn from your time there?

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LORETTA ROSS:
I didn't actually decide to work at a rape crisis center. I was introduced to the Rape Crisis Center because I was fighting for my apartment. I came

home one day to my apartment, which was in [?], and a big notice was plastered on every tenant's door that we had 90 days to move because they were converting our building into condominiums. And I had just signed a new lease with my apartment building, so I felt like I was getting kicked out. You know, kind of like, get out. And they're breaking everybody's lease. Well, somebody else had posted something saying this isn't right. We should-- we should meet about this. And the only room big enough to hold us all was the laundry room in the basement. And so that's where we met. It was doing that tenant organizing against the conversion of my condominium, that I met this woman who was also fighting a conversion, a condo conversion, and her name was Nkenge Touré.

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LORETTA ROSS:
Nkenge had been a member of the Black Panther Party, and she was the current executive director of the DC Rape Crisis Center. And so, we first started running into each other at these housing meetings with the Citywide Housing Coalition we were both working with, and finally, Nkenge asked me, she said, "Loretta, why don't you come over, you know, work at the rape crisis center, volunteer at the rape crisis center?" I remember telling Nkenge, "I don't want to go over there and work with those white women." Because I had this stereotypical attitude about what feminists were, who feminists were. And, you know, I was believing the media bra burning, middle class white women. I couldn't afford to burn any of my bras, so I didn't think I had anything in common with them. But Nkenge kind of looked at me over her glasses. She said, "Sister, would I lead you wrong?" And I'm like, "No." These are the Black Panthers, right? I mean.

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LORETTA ROSS:
People in the Black Panthers, we knew were serious about liberation. And so, at Nkenge's invitation, I came over and started volunteering at the Rape Crisis Center. And then when the Nekenge resigned, I applied for and got the job to replace her. So I became its third executive director. That's where I really got introduced to the concept of feminism. It was that job that allowed me to attach words to what I'd been through: the incest, the abortion, the sterilization. I didn't have words for any of that stuff. And so in 1979, I became the director of the Rape Crisis Center. And I'm convinced that that job saved my life because that was my calling.

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INTERVIEWER:
So you helped formulate the theory of what we know today as reproductive justice. Tell me about how that concept came about and what you saw as its importance.

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LORETTA ROSS:
In June of 1994, I was fortunate enough to attend a conference organized by the Illinois Pro-Choice Alliance. At the time, the Clinton administration was trying to do its first version of health care reform. And Hillary Clinton had been in charge of that effort. And so they sent a representation to the pro-choice conference trying to recruit us to support the Clinton health care reform plan. But strangely enough, they decided that they would omit reproductive health care from the health care plan as a strategy to lessen

Republican opposition to it. But for us at this pro-choice conference populated by feminists, we couldn't understand why the Clinton administration would come and ask for our endorsement on such a male centric plan.

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LORETTA ROSS:
Because if you omit reproductive health care, you're omitting the main reason women go to the doctor. Because our second becoming a woman moment is our feet up in those stirrups. And so that night, a Georgia state legislator named Abel Mabel Thomas invited us to her hotel room. And she said, "I don't know what's going on with this health care plan, but we need to do something. We need to make a statement about this as Black women." And there were 12 of us that ended up in Abel Mabel's room. The thing that we also problematize was that abortion health care was always separate from other health care issues, and it was always separate from the reproductive rights issues and social justice issues that we thought were important. For example, every time a woman misses her period, she has this whole oh my God conversation going on in our head.

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LORETTA ROSS:
"Oh my God, am I pregnant? Oh my God, can I keep the baby or do I have a bedroom to put this child in? Or can I stay in school? Can I keep my job?" And we argued that the answers to those oh my God questions determine whether or not someone is going to keep a planned or unplanned pregnancy, because if they have good answers to those oh my god questions, then they're likely to turn an unplanned pregnancy into a baby.

But if they have bad answers to those oh my God questions, they're likely to turn even a planned pregnancy into an abortion. And so we critique both the pro-choice and the pro-life movement for ignoring those oh my God questions. And only starting with the pregnancy, when you really need to go upstream and find out what was going on in that person's life before they became pregnant, to even have an inkling of what they would do with an unplanned or planned pregnancy.

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LORETTA ROSS:
So we call those oh my God questions social justice issues. And so we spliced together reproductive rights and social justice to coin the term reproductive justice that night, in Able Mabel's hotel room. Because we felt as Black women that we wanted the answers to those oh my God questions to be part of the work fighting for abortion rights. But because we were Black women, who are always subjected to different strategies of population control, we wanted to fight for the right to have the children that we want to have as well, because white women aren't pressured to have unnecessary sterilizations or hysterectomies. But we have a long tradition of Black women going to the hospital for something wrong with their toe and being in, you know, ending up sterilized like it was a two for one special at Applebee's or something.

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LORETTA ROSS:
And so we had to fight for the right to have the children that we wanted to have. And again, we critique both the pro-life and the pro-choice movement because they don't give sufficient attention to what happens

after the child is born. And so we said that we have to talk about gun violence, or inadequate schools, or tax policies that lead to the underfunding of schools, or the lack of clean drinking water or adequate food for children to go to school with. All of those things are issues that concern us as Black women. The second tenet of reproductive justice has to be the right to have the children that we want to have, and the conditions under which we want to have them. And this includes not only refusing unnecessary interventions like cesarean section, but also using midwives and doulas. Because our studies and research shows us that when you have these birth attendants available to you, that you have better pregnancy outcomes, reduced infant and maternal mortality, and that's gone on to grow into an entire separate birth justice movement.

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LORETTA ROSS:
And the third tenet, the right to raise your children in safe and healthy environments, brings us in conversation with all the other social justice movements, whether it's environmental justice, economic justice, education justice, health justice, on and on. And so that's how we defined the concept in 1994. In September of 1994, I went to the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, Egypt, and I found that women from the global South were using the global human rights framework to make the same kinds of demands that we were trying to uneasily fit into an inadequate US Constitution. So I made it my commitment to bring and infuse into reproductive justice, fighting for human rights. And then that was in September of 94, and then a decade later, the Queer People of Color Caucus within Sister Song, my form organization that have been founded in 1997, said that the reproductive

justice analysis was inadequate because it was too focused on reproduction–

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LORETTA ROSS:
And what about people who didn't want to have children? What about people who were queer, LGBT? What about the human right to bodily autonomy, gender identity, sexual freedom and sexual pleasure? And so and so a decade after reproductive justice was created, they added a fourth tenet. And so that's its present basic definition, but it's a very adaptable framework, because if indigenous women are using it, they talk about sovereignty, if immigrant women are using it, they're talking about citizenship. If queer people are using it, they're talking about gender identity and the right to marry and stuff like that. So, I like its expansiveness and its inclusivity for reproductive justice.

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INTERVIEWER:
You're a veteran of the feminist and reproductive justice movements. You're now a professor at Smith College, one of the most prominent women's colleges in the country. What have you observed about the emerging generation of feminist thinkers and organizers during your time here?

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LORETTA ROSS:

When I look at the landscape today, I look at bitter partisanship between people on the left and the right. I think the right wing has been so radicalized that they have become anti-democratic. They basically said, if we can't monopolize power in this country, we'd rather destroy the country. Almost like they want to fight a new civil war and see if they have a better chance to win it this time. They're actually using the same successionist kind of language. On the left, I see us holding a winning hand. I mean, those who are opposed to human rights, they're fighting truth, they're fighting evidence, they're fighting history, and most of all, they're fighting time. And we've got that on our side, but we're risking blowing it by our call out culture. That we're into attacking each other for not having the right words, not knowing the right gender pronouns, not knowing the the locust-- the latest woke thing on TikTok.

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LORETTA ROSS:
We're cannibalizing each other, and we're destroying a lot of our social justice organizations with the call out culture. And so the last six years, five to six years of my attention, hasn't been on issues, but on process. How we do the work is as important as the work that we do. And we can't not beat back this rising fascism and authoritarianism if we weaken ourselves by turning on each other instead of to each other. The fundamental issue with call out culture is that it replicates what we say we oppose, the prison industrial complex. Because when our capitalist society wants to punish somebody, they silence them, they exile them, and in many ways they dispose of them, because we never want to hear what has happened to people who have been-- who have become prisoners.

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LORETTA ROSS:
We just want to know what they did. And so I have to ask those of us who are still promoting human rights and challenging the call out culture: why do we think we're going to be successful using the same tactics of the prison industrial complex, when it doesn't even work for the state? Punishment. Silencing. Exiling. This disposability. And so I think we have a better chance of building the power that we need by transitioning from a call out cancel culture into a culture of calling in. And calling in is basically a call out, you know, but it's done with a different motive. Because when you call people in, you're emphasizing love and respect for them, as opposed to blaming and shaming them because they're both accountability processes. We don't want to give a pass to harm that people are doing. But, you know, we can say what we mean and mean what we say. But as I say, we don't have to say it mean, that's a choice. We can invite people into conversations instead of fights. If we use the calling in techniques I'm trying to teach people.

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INTERVIEWER:
The work you engage in is so heavy. The stakes are so high, the issue is so personal, and yet you exude such joy and positivity. What do you do to maintain that temperament?

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LORETTA ROSS:
I have benefited from a lot of mentors in my life that taught me the importance of maintaining joy and hope. I mean, I remember when I was

young and doing the tenant organizing or the anti-rape organizing, and my mentors back then said, "Loretta, you've got to learn to party as hard as you work. You just can't take yourself that seriously anymore. Trust me, if you take care of yourself, the the oppression will still be around. The movement will still be around. Take care of yourself." And then Leonard Zeskind, who taught me everything about fighting fascism, he said, "Loretta, you need to lighten up." You know, "Fighting fascism should be fun. It's being a fascist that sucks." And so that's my sustainable practice. And I think there should be a human right to hope. Because without hope, we don't fight human rights violations.

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LORETTA ROSS:
Because without hope, you've given up the expectation that things can change and get better. And so hope is not an option if you do human rights work, it's a necessity. And so I want to encourage people to know how they can make their lives matter, how they can make a difference when the world's a mess, just start cleaning where you are. Even if everything we're dealing with feels very overwhelming. And, my mother said this to me when-- after my pregnancy at 14, she put me on the bus to Howard University. She said, "Loretta, what I admire about you is that you don't let success go to your head and you don't let failure go to your heart." And so that's been my mantra all my life. Don't let success go to your head. Don't believe the hype. Don't believe you're all that. But also don't believe that you can't become more than what happened to you.

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