



FATHER GREG BOYLE INTERVIEW
THE THREAD SEASON ONE

Father Greg Boyle, Priest
August 30, 2023
Interviewed by David Bender
Total Running Time: 35 minutes and 2 seconds

START TC: 00:00:00:00

GREG BOYLE:

I think it's important to always. Imagine. A god that's spacious and expansive. And and that's important because I think there's nothing more consequential than your notion of God. If if if your God is puny, then you have to be If your God is spacious, then you'll be intimately welcoming and generous. And so you discover the generosity of God. And then you choose to be that generosity in the world. That's how it works. You know, you receive the tender glance and then you become the tender glance.

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Life Stories

Father Greg Boyle

Priest

Welcoming The Unwelcome

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DAVID BENDER:



Father Greg, as I know, a lot of people call you or Father G. You grew up in Los Angeles. Talk about growing up. You were one of eight kids.

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GREG BOYLE:

Yeah, I was born in Los Angeles and I have five sisters and two brothers. And in effect, I was born and lived in the gang capital of the world. But there was no chance that I would ever join the gang. I mean, I won all the lotteries, parents and zip code and education, which has nothing to do with morality, more with location and being privileged.

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DAVID BENDER:

As you're growing up. There comes a time in life where you sort of see a path for yourself. You chose to pursue it. How did that happen? How were you drawn to it? Was it your calling?

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GREG BOYLE:

Well, I was educated by the Jesuits, so and I found that they had this combo burger of joy and fearlessness. So they were hilariously funny and they were prophetic. Especially in those days. It was, you know, the Vietnam War. And so to watch them be so out there in terms of their protest and I was drawn, I entered the Jesuits. So I was ordained in 84, and then I was assigned to Dolores Mission.



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DAVID BENDER:

Dolores Mission was a location in Los Angeles that determined a lot of the work that we're doing based on where it was next to the two largest housing projects. Is that right?

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GREG BOYLE:

Yeah. Well, you know, we had two parishes in Los Angeles that were administered by the Jesuits. So we'd been asked many years before if the Jesuits could come in here and do that. So it was the poorest parish in the city. Nestled in the middle of two public housing projects, Pico Gardens, Aliso Village. And it and what later evolved, it became the place of the highest concentration of gang activity in all of Los Angeles. So we had eight gangs in my parish. Initially, the first two years, that was not so much an evident thing. But then by 88, it just heated up and I was burying kids.

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DAVID BENDER:

I saw at one point that and this is some time ago, I think close to 200. And I'm sure that number. This, I think, was from speech he gave a decade ago.

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GREG BOYLE:

Yeah. No, I'm I think I. 265. Where I am now.



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DAVID BENDER:

I'm struck, Greg, by the fact that unlike so many people who deliberately send young men and women off to war and never keep count, never keep track, have no idea these are people that you didn't send into this life, but you're very aware and you've kept each one very real to you. I'm just struck by that that you do know the count.

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GREG BOYLE:

Yeah, well, part of the reason I counted was because they didn't count. And so, you know, in the early days, it would be, you know, eight lives in in the housing projects were not worth one life in Westwood Village. And so that was becoming, you know, ever present and clear to me. So. So then that started this thing where I kept track and I have a book and I write the name and and and the number.

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DAVID BENDER:

As you saw this happening. You did something about it. You created homeboy. What brought you to creating this entity that has grown so much?

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GREG BOYLE:

Yeah, well, the first thing we did was we started a school because there were so many junior high middle school age gang members who had gotten the



boot from their home school. Nobody wanted them. So in the middle of the day, they were wreaking havoc and selling drugs and writing on the walls and were violent. So. That was the first thing we did. That was kind of the pressing thing. So then I walked out to them and I would say if I found a school that would take you, would you go? And every single one said, Yeah, I would. And then I couldn't find one. So we started one. And so that's kind of how it evolved. It was a kind of an outreach to this population. And then they said, you know, if only we had jobs. And so we marched around the factories that surrounded the projects trying to find felony friendly employers, and that wasn't so forthcoming. So we just started things, you know, a maintenance crew, a landscaping crew, a crew to build our child care center, all made up of rivals, members of these eight different enemy gangs. We had a slogan in those days, nothing stops a bullet like a job trying to get employers. And the need was so huge. Every gang member wanted a job. Nobody said, that's okay, I'm okay doing this, you know? And even, you know, gang members who drove sold drugs. You know, you think, how are you going to keep them down on the farm after they've made money hand over fist? And yet every human being wants their mom to be proud and their kids not to be ashamed. So it was not a tough sell.

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DAVID BENDER:

It seems to me that the essence of that is in believing that there is no such thing as a bad person. It's someone who hasn't yet seen their own goodness. Do you believe that all people have a spark of the divine of goodness in them?



GREG BOYLE: [00:06:57:00] Yeah. I'll answer that by telling a brief little story. I was at the L.A. Times Festival of Books. I was on a panel with a rabbi and a columnist and. And I was saying that the two principles that are kind of foundational that we hold here at home, boy, is everyone is unshakably good. There are no exceptions and we belong to each other and there are no exceptions. And then I asked the crowd, I said, don't. Do I think that all our vexing complex social dilemma that need our addressing would simply go away if we embrace those two foundational notions. And I pause and then I said, Yeah, I do. And the entire audience burst into laughter, which kind of startled me. And when the laughter subsided, I. I said quietly, Yes, I do. And I do. And I think gang members have taught me that for 40 years that that everybody's unshakably good. Now, there's some things that block the view, you know, despair that's dark or trauma that's enormous or real mental illness. But none of it touches their goodness. Their goodness is intact. So the idea is, how do you how do you find it?

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DAVID BENDER:

And it seems like a lot of these kids have grown up not seeing and not having any way of seeing their own worth. That's the first challenge, right, is getting them to see themselves the way perhaps the way that God sees them or the way that exists, that they just cannot possibly see it given their circumstance. So is that.

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GREG BOYLE:



Yeah, I mean, I had a conversation not long ago with a homie named Joseph, and I've known him since he was ten years old, now 45 or something. And, you know, his father was gang member. His father died of a heroin overdose. Joseph has overdosed many times and has never died from it. But so we were finishing a conversation and he says. You know, I think life is just removing the blindfold. He said, I think it's just removing the blindfold. And I said, Well, what do you see? You know, when the blindfold falls. And he thought for a second he put his hand on his chest and he said, Goodness. And that's the whole idea. You know, we're allergic around here to holding the bar up and asking folks to measure up. You know, we want to show up to them with a mirror and say you're exactly what God had in mind. When God made you. There's nothing missing here. And once they know that truth, they become that truth. They inhabit that truth. And indeed, no bullet can pierce it.

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DAVID BENDER:

I'm struck by how you have said that over and over again, that you don't rescue people, you don't fix people, you don't pull people out of gangs. You stand with them. And by being with them in some way, you are more whole.

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GREG BOYLE:

You talk about the margins, the poor, the powerless, the demonized, the voiceless, the easily despised, the readily left out all those people who are at the margins and you go to the margins not to make a difference, which is in every commencement address I've ever heard, you go to the margins so that



the folks at the margins make you different. If you go to the margins to make a difference, then it's about you and it just can't be about you. So but then you go there to be made different and then it becomes about us. There's something that happens in it. This is how people don't burn out, you know, because they go to the margins and they delight in the people they find. So you go where love has not yet arrived and you love what you find there.

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DAVID BENDER:

You know, you talked about someone who lived at the margins. Mother Theresa, who you've quoted, famously put herself among the most despised people, lepers. This was where she was most present at the margins, among the least among us and among her people. And the quote that you used of hers is, the problem in the world is that we've forgotten that we belong to each other.

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GREG BOYLE:

Yeah, it is Mother Teresa quote I. It turns out I was in Philadelphia. I was on a panel and I quoted, as I always do, I say the problem in the world, Mother Teresa tells us, is that we've forgotten that we belong to each other. Well, the Philadelphia Inquirer kind of went back and checked it. And and the actual quote is something like, you know, if we continue to be at war, you know, it's because we've forgotten that we belong to each other. So then I liked it even more because you could fill in the blank, which I had neglected to fill. And, you know, if you have 75,000 homeless people living in tents in downtown



L.A.. It's because we've forgotten that we belong to each other. And, you know, if you have people dying of gang violence, it's because we've forgotten that we belong to each other. It just doesn't matter. You can fill in that blank with any complex, social vexing dilemma. If that persists, it's because we've forgotten that we belong to each other. So I think it's kind of a helpful guide, you know? And if we remembered it, you know, would we have 75,000 homeless sleeping on the street? No. I mean it because it's it's kind of how that's how powerful a notion it is.

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DAVID BENDER:

You've written a book, *Barking to the Choir: The Power of Radical Kinship*. And one of the notions, the idea of other rising people. You don't believe that there is the other.

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GREG BOYLE:

Yeah. You know, it's funny. Recently I was on a on a plane and I was in my aisle seat in exit row with two homies. And I see this guy boarding and he's wearing a T-shirt. He's very tall, and I'm trying to figure out what's this T-shirt say? And I can read it. And it says, And we were in Philadelphia that says, Philly is everybody. And I remember thinking, wow, how great kinship connection, a community of cherished belonging, mutuality. And as the t shirt got closer, it said Philly versus everybody. And I went, Oh, shoot. We were so close there. You know, and that's that's that's kind of the notion, you know, how do we arrive at nobody versus anybody. And but it's a good gauge. It's



how you catch yourself if you're demonizing anybody, if you're underwriting anybody, if you're kind of relegating somebody to be outside the circle of compassion. All of these things are the opposite of how God sees. And so, you know, how do you maintain the integrity of that, you know, where there is no us and then there's just us and. And so, you know, I would maintain that God's dream come true is not that people worship God, but that we be one. That's the whole ballgame. And so everything is inching its way to that, even here at Homeboy. You know, healing is kind of the primary thing. Everything is secondary. But what's the point of healing? The point of healing is then to create and nurture into being a community of cherished belonging. So. So that's the the fruit of of your own personal healing and coming to terms with whatever was done to you or whatever you did and then moving on to what? To creating a culture and in a community where no one is left out.

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DAVID BENDER:

How do you measure healing? Is there a metric for it?

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GREG BOYLE:

Healing is never about so much a, you know, moral judgment. It's about a health assessment. And so you're always everybody is on a continuum of two steps forward, eight steps backwards. You know, we're all crazy here at Homeboy Industries. Thank God we're not all crazy on the same day. So. So everybody is nobody's well until everybody is well. And and so you're trying to walk each other home to wholeness and and we all have an experience



that's human of being fractured and broken and wounded and traumatized. And and so we're moving towards. Not holiness. I mean, holiness is being whole. Somebody told me the other day, which I had never heard before in the Scripture, Jesus says, Be perfect as your father in heaven is perfect. But the Aramaic is not perfect. It's whole be whole. When then when you think about that, then you go, Yeah, I like that. You know, it's all interchangeable. Holy, healthy, whole. It's all the same thing. And if you if you measure it against your own experience, nobody has ever met a holy person who wasn't healthy and whole and nobody's met a whole person who wasn't holy. And I think that's how it works. And and, you know, unfortunately, there's been this moral overlay that's never helped us and it's never kept us moral. It's just kept us from each other. So where we say these are good people and these are bad people. And it's just not how God sees. God sees God's people, period.

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DAVID BENDER:

So much is done in the name of Scripture or the Koran or any holy book. It is used often to create otherness, to create war. That's been as long as any recorded history shows us. How do you reconcile that and what does one do about that? The people, deep faith who do things that certainly don't reflect the God of love?

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GREG BOYLE:

Yeah, a homie who writes me every morning. Email. We email each other. We look at the readings of the day and from scripture, and then we just each



whoever gets up first writes a little thing and and he wrote and said, you know, we need a mystical lens, you know, a filter where you can read the scripture in such a way and say, you know, Yes, yes, no, I don't believe that. Yes, yes, No, that's completely off. You know, so you encounter in scripture a wrathful God and you go, no, the day will never come when God is wrathful or they'll try to temper it. They'll say, God, he was slow to anger. Then we'll know God is no to anger. So it's you know, it's all human projection and. And natural. But it requires a filter now. You know, a mystical filter. Once you know the god of love you, you sift out these things that aren't aligned with the God we actually have. So it comes to a place once you know, you know who that God is, then then you can't otherize. You can't demonize your human. So you have to catch yourself. But we're all walking each other home to health because in wholeness, because none of us are well, until all of us are well.

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DAVID BENDER:

Can you be whole? Can you be holy in your view and not believe in God?

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GREG BOYLE:

Oh, yeah. I mean, because again, I think being holy is about being healthy and healthy people are loving people and God is love. So for me, there's no. Contradiction in that at all. You know, people are that's the measure. The measure is, you know. Are you loving? And the only people who can pull off being loving and cherishing are healthy people. So so, you know, you want to remove the obstacles and you want the blindfold to fall and you want people



to You can't really love goodness as the prophet Micah says, unless you love, you know, you know, love goodness in here. You can't love goodness out there. And it's kind of a prerequisite. And so it. You know, the Dalai Lama, who I was privileged to meet, somebody, asked him on BBC, well, you know, what's the mark of authentic religion? And he said the marking measures. And he put it both hands over his chest and he said warm heartedness. And I thought, well, that's it. You know, it's not about adherence to anything. Gandhi said, You know, I have chosen to be a disciple of Jesus. And and he not once stopped being a Hindu. And so that was kind of the idea. You know, it's about warm heartedness. It's about love. It's not about adherence to a belief system. And so can you can you pull this off? Can you pull off holiness without believing in God? We have so many examples.

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DAVID BENDER:

And what you just said is is enormously helpful because we know that there are a lot of people who have an obstacle. They either believe in a different God and there's amnesty that comes from a disagreement over which God or they believe in no God. And they're told that they are evil and bad for not believing in the God, in their family or the God of their community.

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GREG BOYLE:

Yeah. You know, I just don't buy it. You know? I mean, because I think that. You know, the God we actually have is spacious and wild. As Meister Eckhart used to say. He was, you know, a mystic and a theologian. And he said it's a lie.



Any talk of God that doesn't comfort you. So, you know, it just it's so expansive, but it's not difficult because you get to a place that, you know, by definition, heaven is the place that you want to spend eternity. And and if it's, you know, a God who's judgmental and. You know, kind of a jerk then nobody wants to spend eternity there. And that's how, you know that chances are God is not a jerk. I've never uttered that sentence before, But. But that's what I mean. You know, in this very office, there was a young woman named Nellie who has had all the worse things befall her kids, taken away abuse of every imaginable kind, prison gang ever sold drugs, used drugs. And I just I stand in awe at what she's had to carry in her lifetime rather than in judgment at how she's carried it. So she's sitting in front of my desk back there, and I don't know, she has a light bill she has to pay or something. So I'm writing a check to help her out. And and she leans, you know, with her chin resting on her fist in front of my desk, and she says, Damn, gee, I wish you were. I wish you were God. And I laughed. I said, Why? And she goes in her eyes swell up with tears and she says, I think you'd let me into heaven. And it just broke my heart in two. And I stopped writing the check. And I leaned and I grabbed her hands and I pulled her in and I looked her in the eye and I said, If I get to heaven and you're not there, I'm not staying. And I believe that, you know. So do I think anybody's in hell? No, I don't think it exists. Or, as the mystics say, maybe it exists, but it's empty.

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DAVID BENDER:

You talked about a man named Louis who had a dream with you in it, and he was in darkness. Can you tell that story?



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GREG BOYLE:

Yeah. So there's the homie I know named Lulu, and he was a gang member, and he was selling crack cocaine, as they did in those days. And then he became his own best customer. Finally, I convinced him to go to rehab. He reluctantly agreed. And so he went to this place. I drove him to this place. In the hills above Los Angeles and 30 days in, his younger brother did something that gang members never do. He put a gun to his head and took his own life. So I called Lulu and I told him and of course he was devastated. And I said, Look, I'm going to pick you up for the funeral, but I'm going to drive you right back to the rehab. So I go pick him up. He gives me a big but I so and he gets in the car and he says, I had a dream last night and you were in it. And he said, we were in like a classroom size room, but there were no windows, no lights, no illuminated exit signs, no light creeping under the door. It was just pitch black. And I know you're there, he tells me. But you're silent. And so am I. And so he says that in the silence, I reached into my pocket and I have a flashlight and I. And I pull it out and I aim it steadily on the light switch on the wall. And as he tells me the dream, he says, I know I'm the only one who can turn that light switch on. I'm really glad that you happen to have a light switch, a flashlight. And so he follows the beam of light steadily until he, with great trepidation, stands in front of the light switch and he takes a deep breath. And he flips the light on and the room is flooded with light. And now he's sobbing in the telling of the story. And he says the light is better than the darkness. Like, he didn't know that to be the case. And then he said, I guess my brother just never found the light switch. Well, I've never had an



experience like that in my 69 years of living, that in an instant my whole life changed. I changed everything how I was doing things. And I probably ten years into this work and I just stopped by it, I realized that I had been trying to turn the light switch on for people. And you can't do it. And I and I probably was always perilously close to burnout. And I've never been since because of that dream that he told me. And then I just stopped. And it wasn't about me. And it wasn't about fixing or saving or rescuing or. Saving anybody. It was. It was just being content with the fact that everybody owns a flashlight and everybody knows where to aim it. And none of us are well until all of us are well. So help people. Aim the flashlight in the general direction of the light switch. And watch people who are who will respond to that invitation. You know, step towards the light switch and they'll find their agency to be able to do that.

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DAVID BENDER:

Homeboy which started for schooling, then jobs. You tried a lot of different things. Can you explain.

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GREG BOYLE:

Something about homeboy? Yeah, sure. So Homeboy Industries, we've now evolved from that time when we were started a school and a jobs program. We've now evolved. Nobody kind of thought this up, much less me. But we've backed our way into now becoming the largest gang intervention rehab reentry program on the planet. So 10,000 folks a year walk through our doors



here wanting to reimagine their lives, you know, and, you know, and all of them come barricaded behind a wall of shame and disgrace. And the only thing that can scale that wall is tenderness. But healing is kind of the centerpiece. So it's 18 month training program, but it's mainly time to kind of dedicate yourself to your own work, you know? And so we have therapy and free tattoo removal and 13 social enterprises, just as enterprises, if you will. Bakery restaurants, homeboy, Electronic recycling. But more than anything, is the culture, you know, homies and homegirls walk through the doors and they come with what psychologists would call a disorganized attachment. You know, mom was frightening or frightened, and you can't really calm yourself down if you've never been soothed. So the place is a safe place where folks feel seen and then they can feel cherished. We have so many of done 2030. We have somebody who 47 years in prison and. You know, they will say we're used to being watched, but we're not used to being seen. And so that's kind of the liberating thing is to be seen. And then they, you know, sort of something of a sanctuary and then they become the sanctuary that they sought here. And then they go home and they present that sanctuary to their kids and suddenly you've broken a cycle. And so that's kind of how it works. You know.

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DAVID BENDER:

You mentioned the tattoo removal, and there's a wonderful story about someone that-

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GREG BOYLE:



How that started?

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DAVID BENDER:

How that started. Can you tell the story of how the tattoo removal process began?

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GREG BOYLE:

Many years ago. I was sitting at my desk at another office in a previous headquarters, and a guy comes in named Frank who had never met before, and he was just two days out of Corcoran State Prison, and he was sitting in front of my desk and among his many tattoos on his face was bald, black, old English letters on his forehead that said Fuck the world. And he looked at me and he said, You know, I am having a hard time finding a job. I said, Well, Frank, maybe we can put our heads together on this one. And then at Memorial Hospital, I found a doctor named Dr. Jack Brenner, who had a laser machine, and I coaxed him into giving me an hour a month. To chip away at Frank's forehead and a few others. And then. In no time. I had a waiting list of 3000 gang members who wanted the same treatment, so we couldn't stay with that arrangement. But I always add that currently he's a security guard at a movie studio and there is no trace left of the angriest, dumbest thing he'd ever done. Proving, as they say, that all of us are a whole lot more than the worst things we've ever done.

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DAVID BENDER:

There is no end point to this. This is a conversation I hope to be having for a long time. But when I see something may seem like it's out of left field. Music.

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GREG BOYLE:

Yes.

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DAVID BENDER:

What music gives you joy? How does music touch you, sir? Can you speak to that?

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GREG BOYLE:

Yeah. You know, it's funny. I'm kind of stuck. In our generation, you know, I mean, a little bit, you know, But I'm kind of I'm such a news junkie that that's kind of what I listen to all the time, you know, and a political junkie. So that kind of takes precedence over actually listening to music. But I'll retrieve, you know. From from the 70s, you know, Joni Mitchell and Crosby, Stills Nash and Young and and and the Stones and, you know, the Beatles. So I can retrieve those things.

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DAVID BENDER:



When you listen to Joni Mitchell, when you listen to the Stones, The Beatles, Crosby, Stills, Nash, it touches something in you.

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GREG BOYLE:

Yeah. I mean, I because I can, you know, I can just now you can just go to YouTube and have something playing, you know, like Woodstock, Woodstock or or the White Album or all these things, you know, from my youth, you know, that, you know, kind of brings you back. But, you know, like concerts or. Or who who who does music now? Yeah. Not so much. So I don't know anything.

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DAVID BENDER:

I'm going to out you. You're. You're. You're. You're a hippie.

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GREG BOYLE:

I'm a I'm. I'm an old hippie. I, you know, guilty as charged. But I'm also geezer. And so I don't really know how all these things work. You know, homies have to. So they they were changing my Siri voice to. This Irish woman. They say, What voice? Well, what are my options? Well, Irish, I couldn't get to it. But she you know, she she gives me directions, you know, And I'm so glad that they did that because, you know, she'll say turn into the car park and all these things that remind me of my relatives from Ireland. And and I my favorite thing in fact, I'm hoping the title of my next book about it is When she'll say



Accident Ahead. And then there's this pause and you wait and she says you're still on the fastest route. And I love it. I'm consoled by it. I think, Oh, great. I'm still on the fastest route. I don't even think it means you're on the quickest route, but it's the surest route, you know, you're going to get there. And and so I that's kind of, you know, I think love. It's still the fastest route. It's still going to get you to exactly where you want to get, especially at this time where we're there's such a tribalism and polarizing and huge gulfs and divisions that, you know, love, it's still the fastest route.

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