



Darren Walker

President, Ford Foundation

Hope and Courage in Action

Lesson Introduction

Interview Log: Interviewed on September 6, 2022 by Noah Remnick

- Access *The Thread* episode of Darren Walker on our [YouTube channel](#) or at [LifeStories.org](#) and download the transcript [here](#)
- Access his long-form interview on [LifeStories.org](#) and download the transcript [here](#)

Learning Objectives

Social Studies Focus

- Examine President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty and the origins and impact of Head Start
- Examine the principles of democracy today
- Understand the role of philanthropy in a democracy

English Language Arts Focus

- Examine the value and virtue of human dignity
- Examine the principles of democracy
- Examine perspective taking from the point of view of one philanthropic leader
- Explore the idea of purposeful work and a meaningful life
- Use Darren Walker's episode as evidence to write a rhetorical argument, commentary, or synthesis essay

Episode Overview

Darren Walker recalls his childhood in Louisiana and early exposure to the Head Start program. He discusses his challenges and choices at the Ford Foundation, highlighting the need to address inequality. Walker reflects on the impact of the sudden death of his partner and the lessons of grace and generosity that guide him.



Biography

Darren Walker, credited by *TIME*, *Rolling Stone*, *Ebony*, and other publications as one of the most influential leaders today, is president of the Ford Foundation, a \$16 billion international social justice philanthropy. Before joining Ford, Walker was vice president at Rockefeller Foundation, overseeing global and domestic programs. In the 1990s, he was COO of the Abyssinian Development Corporation, Harlem's largest community development organization. Darren Walker now co-chairs New York City's Mayoral Advisory Commission on City Art, Monuments, and Markers, and has served on the Independent Commission on New York City Criminal Justice and Incarceration Reform and the UN International Labour Organization Global Commission on the Future of Work. He serves on many boards, including the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, the National Gallery of Art, Carnegie Hall, the High Line, the Committee to Protect Journalists, and the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History & Culture. He is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the American Philosophical Society and is the recipient of 16 honorary degrees and university awards, including Harvard University's W.E.B. Du Bois Medal. Educated exclusively in public schools, Darren was a member of the first Head Start class in 1965 and received BA, BS, and JD degrees from the University of Texas at Austin.

Photos: Ford Foundation President Walker Delivers Remarks at a Post-2015 Development Panel Discussion in New York City. (Alamy) *left*; Darren Walker and Beulah Spencer arrive at a state dinner in honor of Chinese President Xi Jinping at the White House, Washington DC. Sept 25, 2015. (Getty) *right*



Teaching Tip: First Take

A **First Take** is a warm-up writing or conversation exercise created uniquely for *The Thread* that strengthens media literacy skills. Like an opening song in a musical, the first stanza of a poem, or even the first impression one person makes on another, the First Take asks students to reflect and share their initial thoughts and feelings about the episode's opening.

Suggested Steps

- Read the opening of Darren Walker's episode aloud to students:

Hope is the oxygen of democracy. When we have more hope, we will have a better democracy. But in order to generate hope, people have to believe in something.

- Ask and Discuss:** What do you learn about Darren Walker from these opening sentences? What insights can you infer?

- Next,** have students do a one-minute quick write reflecting on what he shared or have students get into pairs and share their thoughts and feelings.

- Last,** as a class discuss the reasons they think the filmmakers choose this opening for the episode?



Photos: Darren Walker, Wall Street. (Darren Walker) top; Percy Sutton Award Honoree Darren Walker speaks onstage during the 10th Annual Apollo Theater Spring Gala at The Apollo Theater. June 8, 2015. (Getty) upper left; Darren Walker as a kid. (CBS, Darren Walker) upper right; Darren Walker with his family on porch as a small kid. (Head Start Promotional Video Screen Grab) lower left; Gloria Steinem, Francois-Henri Pinault, Darren Walker, and Sally Field attend the Vital Voices Solidarity Awards at IAC Building on Dec 9, 2019. (Getty) lower right



Teaching Tip:

***THE THREAD* Up Close**

After watching the interview, have students debrief his life story with these suggested questions:

- ▣ What values did Darren Walker discuss in his episode?
 - What did you learn about these values from his discussion of these values (e.g. human dignity, humility, courage, leadership, grace, generosity, love)?
- ▣ Darren Walker explained that he transitioned from working in banking to a different career after being involved in a community school in Harlem. He described this transition as “coming home.” In your own words, what do you think this reflection means?
- ▣ Reflect on his love and relationship with David Beitzel. What words would you use to describe how Walker recalled their partnership?

After discussing, have students return to ***The Thread*** episode and engage them in a close read and analysis of his interview using the video and transcript. Depending on the lesson, question, or theme you are aligning ***The Thread*** with, have students annotate the transcript, select passages that reflect the assignment, and explain their reasoning in class.

Here is an example of ***A Thread*** connection: If you are exploring the role of the social safety net in a democracy, this excerpt is important:

“I was very lucky to grow up in a country that believed in me. And the way a country commits itself to its people in part is committing itself to the potential of the human capital in its society, especially that human capital that has historically not been able to be fully realized. And so the Head Start program, public schools, the Pell Grant, private scholarships, all of these investments made it possible for me to get on the mobility escalator and ride it as far as my talent and my ambition could take me. And that is something I wish for every American. Unfortunately, too many people in this country believe that the government is not serving their needs. That may be true, but it is also true that there has been an effort to discredit the idea of government. So we have to take that on. We have to acknowledge the threat posed by those who would seek to destroy. The institutions that our democracy relies on. And that is why investing in hope is so important. Hope is the oxygen of democracy when we have more hope. We will have a better democracy. But in order to generate hope, people have to believe in something. Part of what they have to believe in, in a democracy, is in their actual government, and I think what we are seeing today in America is a contestation of the idea of government. My hope is that democracy wins.”



Connections

- ▣ What did you learn from Darren Walker about strengthening democracy?
- ▣ How do you understand the relationship between democracy and hope after listening to this episode?
- ▣ How does the Ford Foundation define impact? How do you define impact?
- ▣ How do you understand Darren Walker's explanation of investing in democracy? What is the role of philanthropy in a democracy?
- ▣ How do you define the responsibilities of working for a more just, fair, and equitable society?
- ▣ What new insights did you gain about (yourself, your life, your community, your world) from Walker's thoughtful story?

Activity: Hope and Courage in Action

Darren Walker recognizes his goal in leading the Ford Foundation, one of the most influential philanthropic organizations in the United States, is to advance the work of a more just, fair, and equitable society:

- ▣ Have students read Darren Walker's essay "[Toward a New Gospel of Wealth.](#)"
- ▣ After reading, post the question: "What does a more just, fair, and equitable society require?"
 - Have students either gather in small groups to discuss their initial reflections and have groups share out a brief summary.
- ▣ Next, have students choose one of these questions to write a persuasive essay:
 - How do they see hope and courage in action in their school, community, or nation?
 - What do they believe is the responsibility of the government to advance opportunities for all its members?

Note: Some of the evidence for their claim must come from Darren Walker's *The Thread* episode. They are encouraged to seek out other published writings to support their claims.



Additional Resources

- ▣ Learn more about the Ford Foundation
- ▣ Darren Walker references two important pieces he read in preparing to lead the Ford Foundation: Andrew Carnegie's 1889 essay "[The Gospel of Wealth.](#)" and a quote from Dr. Martin Luther King, "Philanthropy is commendable, but it must not cause the philanthropist to overlook the circumstances of economic injustice which make philanthropy necessary," from his sermon "On Being a Good Neighbor." [A draft](#) of this sermon can be read in context at [The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute](#), Stanford University
- ▣ Darren Walker spoke of his late partner David Beitzel. Learn more about Beitzel's life and commitment to the arts by exploring the [Adams-Tillims Lecture Series](#) Walker established established at Bennington College in honor of Beitzel

