

Title: Arthur Brooks, Love Your Enemies
Episode: 51
Podcast: Half Hour of Heterodoxy

Transcript

Debra Mashek: Hey *Half Hour of Heterodoxy* listeners! This is Deb Mashek, the Executive Director of Heterodox Academy and I'm sitting in today for Chris Martin, our regular host of *Half Hour of Heterodoxy* and today we're doing a special simulcast with the "How do we fix it?" guys.

Richard Davies: We're going to start with a commercial for Heterodox Academy. They're a neat organization and promote viewpoint diversity at colleges and universities.

Jim Meigs: Deb Mashek is co-hosting with us today for the second time and she's the head of the Heterodox Academy. Deb, can you give us like a quick thumbnail of what your mission is?

Debra Mashek: Absolutely. So we work to create college classrooms and campuses that welcome diverse people with diverse voices and that equip learners to engage with that diversity and that takes a lot of work on the habits of both heart and mind and we're focused on promoting open inquiry and constructive disagreement and if you ask why would we bother to do such things, without these exchanges and without these diverse points, important ideas go unexplored, key assumptions go unchallenged and tribalism goes unchecked, eroding the quality of research and testing in higher education.

Richard Davies: Thank you.

Debra Mashek: My pleasure. Thank you for inviting an elevator pitch.

Richard Davies: Love your enemies, Arthur Brooks. Political differences are tearing this country apart. Our nation is more polarized than it has been at any time since the Civil War.

Jim Meigs: That anger is one reason that so many people feel that the country is on the wrong track and a lot of parents worry that their children won't have the same opportunities that they've had to lead a good life.

Richard Davies: Today's episode is a joint podcast. *How Do We Fix It?* and *Half Hour of Heterodoxy* are publishing this episode together. Deb Mashek of the Heterodox Academy is joining us.

Debra Mashek: Our guest is Arthur Brooks, the President of the conservative-leaning American Enterprise Institute. Arthur is a social scientist, a musician, an author of *Love Your Enemies: How Decent People Can Save America from the Culture of Contempt*. Welcome to our podcast.

Arthur Brooks: Thank you. Great to be with you.

Richard Davies: Arthur, if we could start. Can you tell us about that phrase “love your enemies”? It speaks to really the wisdom and radical teaching of the world’s great religions, doesn’t it?

Arthur Brooks: That’s right. This is subversive and it’s sort of a crazy-sounding idea. But the idea behind most major religions ethically is that it’s pretty easy, pretty conventional to love your friends or to love your family, although people go in and out of that too. But to love your enemies is something entirely different.

When you look at the great religious teachers from Jesus to the Buddha, they talk about the fact that when you love your enemies, you see them in a different way. You change your own heart and as such, you don’t destroy your enemies. You destroy the illusion that they were your enemies in the first place.

That’s what I’m trying to do with this book *Love Your Enemies*. It’s about the concept that here particularly in the United States, we talk about politics, that we’re treating each other as if we were intractable foes, enemies and in point of fact, that’s the wrong way of seeing each other. It’s contrary to the teachings of the American founders.

Jim Meigs: In your book, you write, “We don’t have an anger problem in American politics. We have a contempt problem.”

Arthur Brooks: Yeah, that’s right. So anger is a hot emotion. It’s not inherently unhealthy. It basically says I care what you think and I want to change the way that you think because I care about you. It’s interesting – a little bit of literature on this. In the social psychology world that suggests that anger is not highly correlated with separation and divorce among married couples.

The problem is when you take anger and you mix it with another emotion, which is disgust, disgust which treats another person as a pathogen. Not their ideas. The person per se. Anger and disgust are a compound, a toxic compound. Kind of like ammonia and bleach where individually, they can be troublesome. But if you put them together, they turn into a gas and they ...

Jim Meigs: Chlorine gas.

Arthur Brooks: Chlorine gas. You don’t want that. Yeah, that figures that the editor of *Popular Mechanics* knew that.

Jim Meigs: Well, it killed a lot of people in World War One

Arthur Brooks: It did. It did indeed. It did indeed.

Richard Davies: We should explain that Jim is the former editor and chief of *Popular Mechanics*.

Jim Meigs: For listeners of *Half Hour of Heterodoxy*, they may not know this stunning ...

Arthur Brooks: It's a pretty cool background. But anyway, that's not my point. My point is that that – the kind of damage it could do – that could do to the people. Contempt does to marriages. It does to families. It does to friends and it does to the United States of America.

What's happening is – and by the way, contempt was defined by Schopenhauer in the 19th century as the conviction of the utter worthlessness of another person. It's a cold emotion. Anger is hot. Contempt is cold. It says you're not worth caring about.

When you express that, the research is very clear. People will become your enemy. That's the best way to alienate people. This is an incredibly impractical way to treat other people because if you're talking about politics or ideology or – you want to convince other people. You want to persuade other people.

The very worst way to try to persuade other people is by insulting them, by treating them with disdain, with contempt. God forbid with hatred and yet that's what we're doing in America today and it's ripping us apart.

Debra Mashek: You talked about what contempt can do to our families and to our communities and to our democracy. What does contempt do to ourselves? When we feel contempt for others, what's the impact on the self?

Arthur Brooks: That's a really interesting point. So as you can imagine, when you're treated with contempt by another person, whether it's by a public figure like a politician talking about people like you or whether you're being treated with contempt by a mob, an angry mob, let's say at a university, what it does is it raises your level of loneliness. It raises depression. It's correlated with anxiety of course.

But the interesting part to me is not that – that's pretty obvious. The interesting thing is when you treat another person with contempt, it's correlated with increasing levels of stress hormones that you increase anxiety and stress in your own life when you treat other people with contempt.

There's nothing good that comes with contempt. The basic problem here by the way is not that we dislike somebody else's ideas. There's nothing wrong with that. There's nothing wrong with having disdain for somebody's ideas because they're wrong or even bad and evil. The problem is when we conflate people's ideas with those people themselves.

Separating ideas from people is a critical ability that we're supposed to be able to maintain as adults and yet this is not what we're teaching on too many campuses. This is not what we're talking about in politics. Even at the highest level of the American political structure. We're conflating people and their ideas and dismissing them with contempt. As such, it's creating enemies among people who should not be enemies.

Jim Meigs: A lot of people might say that's fine as an argument against contempt. But your book goes a lot further than that and says love your enemies, which even for many religious folks is a very difficult concept to accept, especially in practice.

Arthur Brooks: Yeah, yeah, it's – and it's hard for me. I'm not going to deny it.

Jim Meigs: But is it practical?

Arthur Brooks: It is practical and the reason I call the book *Love Your Enemies* and not *Be Civil to Your Enemies* is because civility or tolerance are garbage standards.

Anybody who says, “My wife and I are civil to each other,” you would say, “Well, you guys need counselling,” or that my employees tolerate me. You would say that I have a big morale problem at my workplace and forget even agreement because agreement is a terrible standard. Agreement is a form of intellectual monopoly. We need to disagree as part of the competition of ideas.

So we need something that's a much higher moral standard and we need something that we can – in which we can disagree better and the standard for that is probably love. The standard for that is actual solidarity. It's putting ourselves morally in the place of other people and I believe we can do it.

Now the reason I talk about loving your enemies is because I believe that contempt in our society today is not just a terrible thing that we do. I think it's a habit that we're engaged in. In the book *Love Your Enemies*, I talk about the part of the brain that processes habits, good habits and bad habits.

There's an ancient part of the brain called the “nucleus accumbens” which processes rewards. It bypasses the prefrontal cortex where you have our conscious cognitions and that means that you do things whether you like them or not without thinking about them. That's how we communicate with other people in a very suboptimal way.

When couples are quarreling and they're on their way to the divorce court, it's because they have terrible communications habits. They talk to each other in a way that's deeply, deeply suboptimal and dangerous as a matter of fact. So when we have the habit of treating other people with contempt, whether it's our spouse or fellow Americans or people on campus or wherever it happens to be, we need to break the habit and to break the habit, you have to do something new in the place of a contempt that you used to feel.

You have to expand the range, the time between the stimulus that you have, the feeling that you have and the response that you choose. The tendency is to just – you're treated with contempt. You feel threatened. You feel angry. You respond with contempt. You take the time. Choose the reaction and you need to choose something radically subversive and positive. That's choosing love.

Jim Meigs: You have an example in the book that I really enjoyed about – after you wrote your first book, you got a really angry, nasty email of somebody just going through chapter by chapter telling you what a complete and total idiot you are. It's the kind of thing all of us see every day

now on Twitter in shorter form. People feel the need to reach out and just tell people that they should just go climb under a rock. But you handled it in a really surprising way. What happened?

Arthur Brooks: So the first – I was a professor at Syracuse University before I came to the American Enterprise Institute in 2008. For 10 years, I was professor after finishing graduate school and I had the happiest life because professors have or should have the happiest life.

I was laboring away in relatively professorial security, working with my graduate students. I had written a bunch of books that nobody ever read because they were very boring. But I wrote one book which was equally boring. But a weird thing happened to me which it hit the news cycle in just the right way.

The president said something about it and my life changed overnight and by the way, changed permanently to this day. What happened – it was a book about charitable giving. It had a lot of math in it.

Jim Meigs: I remember it.

Richard Davies: Charitable giving, and one of the concepts was that I believe that people of different ideological perspectives give as much as each other, right?

Arthur Brooks: Yeah, that's right. Well, the whole idea was that – to test. It was simply an empirical book that said, "Who gives more, conservatives or liberals? Who gives more, secular or religious people? Who gives more, poor people or rich people?" and it turns out in every one of those cases, it's kind of surprising who gives the most because it contrasts with the people who think they give the most.

Virtue is a funny thing. OK. So I published the book and I kind of waited for the phone to not ring. But it rang and because weird things started – it just hit the news cycle in just the right way and I started selling hundreds of copies a day and I didn't know. This happens to people sometimes. It happened to Jonathan Haidt and some other people that we know and love, that a college professor suddenly get into the – get into the public life.

The weirdest part was not the TV and radio I started doing suddenly. It was that I started getting email from total strangers by the hundreds. It's very easy to get a college professor's email. You just look at the directory of the university. Actually, they stopped doing that mostly. But back in those days, it was easy and I got – you know, every day tons of email from people who had read my book and they said, "I loved it," "I hate it," whatever.

Anyway, a few weeks after the book comes out, I get an email from a guy in Texas. Dr. Professor Brooks, you are a fraud. Now, it's a terrible way to start email but I kept reading and I noticed that this email is going to be like 5000 words long. It's super long. It took me 20 minutes to get through it, but I'm game. I'm a good sport and I'm reading through this email noticing that he is – as you mentioned, is going chapter and verse every way that my book is terrible.

I mean every data set, every assertion, every equation. It was unbelievable. Like the columns in table 3.1 are reversed, you idiot. Stuff like that.

For some reason, I was conscious of my feelings and I noticed – I was thinking to myself, “This guy read my book.” I was filled with gratitude because I had written tons of books and nobody read them. I mean my family didn’t read them. I mean who would read them? The question is, why would I write them? But that’s a different question.

So I decided, you know, I got nothing to lose with this guy. So I’m going to write him back and I write him back. I said, dear so and so, I know you hated my book. You think I’m a hopeless stooge, really stupid. But man, it took me two years to write that book and I put my whole heart into it and you read the whole thing. I’m so grateful to you. Thank you.

Debra Mashek: What happened next?

Arthur Brooks: So 15 minutes later, I get an email back from him and he says, “Dear Professor Brooks, if you’re ever in Texas and want to get some dinner, give me a call.”

Debra Mashek: There you go.

Arthur Brooks: From enemy to friend. Now, I didn’t – I’m not some saint. I’m not behaving virtuously. I just did it by accident. By the way, I did not have dinner with that guy because I didn’t want to end up chained to a pipe in his basement or something weird like that. But it did teach me this very instructive lesson, that you can change your own heart because I felt great when I wrote back that email.

Nobody has ever said, “You know, I wish I had been more of a jerk with that person.” People are always glad that they passed up the opportunity to be a jerk, which I did, by sheer serendipity. Then that guy, his heart changed and I said to myself that’s an instructive lesson. That’s what I think back to now that I’m more in public life and I hear insults constantly and I use them as an opportunity.

Debra Mashek: So one of the things I found myself reflecting on is love is natural. So we have love, parental love. Romantic love is, you know, as we can tell universal.

Arthur Brooks: But in decline by the way.

Debra Mashek: Yeah, yeah.

Arthur Brooks: Romantic love is in decline in America.

Debra Mashek: And then the tribalism is also natural and I’m wondering if contempt is also natural. If so, how do we stack the deck in favor of love?

Arthur Brooks: So there’s a lot of – you as a social psychologist of course know this and for me even to talk about it, this is bringing coal to Newcastle to tell you about this. But of course

tribalism has – there’s a lot of literature that suggests that people are naturally forming their tribes.

But that proclivity is not destiny. This is the beautiful thing about – we’re the masters. There’s this whole idea for the longest time we were tabula rasa. That we were – it was all environment. That turns out that that was wrong. We swung back in the other direction and it was all about our genetics.

Well, the truth is – I mean the latest thinking about how we behave is that it’s kind of 100 percent and 100 percent. We have all these natural tendencies but they have switches. They have moral switches. We have conscious actions that can turn these tendencies off and on. It’s a beautiful thing.

The classic example of this is that alcoholism has a hugely genetic predisposition. But if you turn off the switch by not drinking, if you have it in your family, you’re not going to be an alcoholic and the same is true for tribalism. Look, if you understand it and you don’t want it, you can rebel against it. You can be the master of yourself. This is the most encouraging thing about being fully human, that we’re not like dogs. We’re not like some pack animal.

We’re human beings and we can decide to do something truly subversive for our own nature. My own view is that if you’re not at war with your own deleterious proclivities, you’re a slave. You need to be a master. You must be at war with yourself. The day that you declare peace on these tendencies is the day that you start to decline and this is the most beautiful thing about these religions.

I mean the Buddha was telling people to do things that were against their nature and that was the beautiful thing. “If it feels good, do it,” is the message of fools.

Christianity is subversive to our nature for a reason and that’s what I want.

Richard Davies: Arthur, you’re a well-known conservative and when I told a few friends that we were going to speak with you, one of them said, “Oh, he’s conservative. He’s head of the American Enterprise Institute.” So I’m asking this as a liberal. Why should liberals read your book?

Arthur Brooks: That’s a good question. Were you talking to my wife by the way? Was she the one who sent you the –?

Richard Davies: Your wife is a liberal?

Arthur Brooks: Although I do come from a mixed family. I’m from Seattle and my mother was an artist and my father was a college professor. So guess what their politics were.

I’m sort of the black sheep politically of the family. Why should they read my book? The same reason that I should read somebody’s book who disagrees with me because I want to have a more interesting set of experiences.

What's really distressing about what's going on in the United States today is that we silo our sources of information such that all the television programs, the radio shows and the newspapers and the columnists and all our sources of data, of stimulus, are those that say you're right and the other side is stupid.

Well, I don't want to live that way. That's super boring to me to live that way and it should be boring to everybody else because – and by the way, it should be alarming to other people because that's exposing yourself to being manipulated, being used and being bullied by people on your own side.

I have data that show that seven – something like seven percent of Americans are kind of what I call the “outrage industrial complex” and they're everything from politicians to members of the media, to parts of the entertainment industry, to parts of academia, that are manipulating other people to hate their fellow Americans because they think differently than they do. They dehumanize people and they profit from it. They get better careers. They get more clicks. They get – sometimes they even get rich and famous by setting Americans against Americans.

So the reason that I want to read things that are outside my silo is because I want to humanize people who disagree with me and I think that political progressives who – you know, people I grew up with, people I love, who by the way in many cases I'm quite sure are right and I'm wrong. I just don't know in what yet. I'm not going to find out unless I read what they have to say and I think we should share ideas and love each other.

Jim Meigs: Richard, your question I think reflects something that comes up in Arthur's book which is the a priori assumption on somebody that well, if that person is a conservative, I already know what he's probably going to say and I know why he's going to say it and a conservative might make the same assumption about a liberal and you talk about a concept in the book called the “motive attribution asymmetry”. I love that kind of psychological jargon. Explain that.

Richard Davies: Yeah, yeah. I had no idea what that was when I first –

Arthur Brooks: Yeah, yeah. No, it's a great thing and it's – there's a guy who teaches at the Kellogg School of Management in Northwestern University named Adam Waytz and Adam Waytz has written about motive attribution asymmetry. What is it? It's a case where two sides opposing each other in a debate or in a conflict, both sides think that they are motivated by love. But the other side is motivated by hatred toward them. You see it typically in something like the Palestinian and Israeli conflict.

Both sides believe that they're correct and motivated by love and the other side is simply motivated by a hatred toward their group. Now that's something pretty conventional in a warfare context.

What we don't like to see isn't a political context because politics is not just war by other means. It should be a way that we adjudicate disputes in a democratic and a competitive way inside a peaceful country, at least the way we understand it in the United States or should, right?

Richard Davies: Yeah. I do think you're raising a really interesting point is I think in America we think this is a uniquely American problem and it's not. I mean it's happening in Britain with Brexit. It's happening in the Middle East.

Arthur Brooks: Oh, no, no. I mean I spent years living in Catalonia in Barcelona as a matter of fact and there are families who can't talk to each other because of the Catalan – they can't talk to each other because of the Catalan independence question. I see families that are being ripped apart and right here in the United States, one in six Americans has stopped talking to a family member or a close friend because of politics since the 2016 elections. It's catastrophic. Why? Because the level of motive attribute asymmetry.

I'm motivated by love. You, if you're on the other side, are motivated by hatred toward me and people like me. That is as great in American politics today as it is between Palestinians and Israelis and that is horrible. It tears people apart. We don't like it. We don't know how to deal with it. We don't know how to fix it. It's propelled by these communication's ticks that we've got. It's fired up and is manipulated by the outrage industrial complex and we got to fix it.

The whole job of my book is to talk about how we can actually fix that and it can start with each one of us because we are the beginning of the movement that we want to see.

Debra Mashek: So let's talk more concretely about that. What are the tips, the advice, the takeaway? How do we fix it?

Arthur Brooks: I talk about it all the way through the book. This book is really – it's the most how-to guide of anything I've ever written.

Jim Meigs: I was actually surprised by how much it was. Really a manual for ways of thinking and interacting, not just a philosophical or political argument.

Arthur Brooks: Yeah. Well, I wrote the book twice and the first time I wrote the book, it was just what behavioral social scientists like me do, which is to state the problem and have a whole bunch of data that show that it's a huge problem and then lament the problem and talk a little bit about the problem and then stop.

Debra Mashek: The directions for future research.

Richard Davies: Yeah, yeah, the directions for the future research. That's also a journalism problem.

Arthur Brooks: Yeah, it is a – part of the reason is because we were very good at identifying complex human problems and then when we can't find a good complicated solution to the complex problem, we have to let it be or we have just a terrible little perfunctory last chapter that has five complicated policy solutions for a deep, complex and adaptive human problem that's spread out over the entire treatise.

I said I won't do that. So what I did was I spent a lot less time showing what is manifestly clear to everybody who's – putting one foot in front of the other in America today, which we got a big problem. That's the easy part. We have the complex, adaptive human problem and I spent the entire rest of the book, which is – at least records the book saying, OK, here's how we think we got to fix it.

I basically talked about how I've tried to fix it in my own life. I'm the head of a big institution in Washington DC. It has been running for a long time. It's at the center of a lot of polemical, political stuff. And what have I done to try to be part of the solution to the problem? How do I understand the role of leadership of being a good person, of being ethical about how to try to fight – how do I personally try to fight against the scourge of identity politics while not shedding the common human stories that actually – that should and can bond us together? I distill it in very – into five things that every American can do.

Richard Davies: Well, let's walk through those.

Arthur Brooks: Yeah, sure. So let's start with rebellion. If it is in point of fact the case that 93 percent of us hate how divided we are as a country but we keep participating in the problems that we have. The first thing to do is to start muting the seven percent of people who don't hate it and who as such are firing us up, that are encouraging us to fight each other, American against American or human against human.

So basically my advice, my first step in the process is standing up to the man as it were, the people who are using their leadership to make us hate more, even though we don't want to do that, and have a lot of tips on how to do that. You know, go through the list of the people that agree with you, the people in your favorite newspaper, the people on TV, the people that you're listening to in media, maybe your favorite professor who says, "You're right and the other side is stupid and evil."

Make a list of them. Not on the other side. Make a list of the people on your side and X them out. It doesn't mean being contemptuous toward them. It means self-defense. It means muting those voices such that you can get a clearer view of what's actually going on around you without being blinded to it. That's step one.

Jim Meigs: Another step that you talked about – I'm not sure if it's on the list of five but it really struck me was as you're trying to interact with people in a positive way, if you can't quite muster up love, at least you can fake it.

Arthur Brooks: Yeah, I know. Yeah. So that isn't one of the steps but it's related to the steps for sure because one of the steps is don't show contempt for anybody under any circumstances. But you can't break a habit by saying just don't do it. You can't say to somebody, "Just don't smoke."

The way to stop smoking is to do something every time you will want to smoke. Why? Because the nucleus accumbens, the part of your brain that governs habits, requires reprogramming and the way that you reprogram it is you get a stimulus. You wait before you react and you put something else instead of the old reaction.

So every time you want to smoke, drink. So – for example. OK. So every time you feel contempt, what do you do? You show – I have the story in there about asking the Dalai Lama this question. What do I do when I feel contempt, your holiness? He said, “Show warm-heartedness.” It’s very Dalai Lama, right? Very Buddhist. And I said, “What if I don’t feel warm-hearted?” and he says, “It doesn’t matter.” It doesn’t matter because attitude follows action, not vice versa. It’s an incredible, empirical regularity of modern social psychologists that show that you can make the personality you want. If you want to feel more grateful, show more gratitude. If you want to be more loving to your spouse, act as if you were more loving.

It’s an extraordinary thing. If you want to be happier, smile, crinkling up the corners of your eyes with these little muscles called the “orbicularis oculi muscles” that – and they govern a truly happy smile.

Jim Meigs: Is that faking it?

Arthur Brooks: It is faking it and that’s the beautiful thing. That you can fake it and you can build the cognitions that you want. This is the essence of mastery. It’s mastery over your own brain. You’re not a slave to your emotions. On the contrary, you can change your emotions. The most illustrative and interesting teachings about humanity that the Buddhists teaches that the emotions are an illusion.

Emotions are an illusion of what’s actually going on around us. Emotions are useful for helping us to process actual experiences around us and to process threats for example. But they’re an illusion a lot of the time. You feel tired and then you – just like right now, when we’re talking, I’m on a book tour. And I just had this new book come out, right? And I’m doing a lot of interviews and you know television and speeches, and I’m not sleeping very much. And it kind of easy for me to get down and my emotions will get wrapped around this thing.

I’ll say I don’t know. I mean I don’t think this – I don’t think anybody really likes my book. And I think you know that emotion is an illusion, there’s nothing new. I mean there’s nothing that – I have no new information as such since your emotions tend to trick you. You need to actually own your emotions. Is that right, Deb? You’re the psychologist.

Debra Mashek: I concur.

Arthur Brooks: Thank you, doctor.

Debra Mashek: What about – yes. What about step number three?

Arthur Brooks: Step number three is the *Get out of your bubble*.

Debra Mashek: Oh yeah.

Arthur Brooks: It’s the go where you’re not invited necessarily. Say things people don’t expect and listen to people who disagree with you with love. It’s so empowering to do this. These days,

it's harder and harder to find people who disagree with you because were deeply siloed. Part of it is this terrible and metastatic influence of social media.

Social media is what people cocoon themselves and they substitute human relationships with virtual relationships with people. And that's a dangerous thing to do because every link, every human link you make, you break with somebody and put in an electronic link instead, you will become more depressed, you will become more anxious, you will become more lonely. It's very dangerous, very bad thing to do.

Social media should never be a substitute for relationships, only ever a compliment. But it's also a dangerous business because you can surround yourself, you can curate your friend group in ways that you wouldn't be able to do otherwise. You can silo your information. You can also do this by going to university where you only take classes and talk to people where people agree with you and this happens all the time at major American universities.

They were designed so the different people would be mixed together. But then we get more homogeneity, we get more racial and gender diversity but we get more ideological homogeneity, a very dangerous business. Don't do that. Fight against that, find people who are really, really different. Embrace radical diversity, the scary kind which is idea diversity. It's a thrill actually.

Richard Davies: That's right at the core of heterodoxy [0:28:31] [Crosstalk]

Arthur Brooks: I know it is. That's why this is a really heroic work that you're doing. This is the reason by the way that heterodox and all the affiliates, the products, and the things that you're doing at Heterodox Academy are getting really famous really fast. Because you do this stuff and you'll go, "Oh, oh yes. Oh I want that. I want that so bad," which is really encouraging to me.

Jim Meigs: Yeah. Number four.

Arthur Brooks: Yeah, I can't remember number four. What's number four on the list? I wrote the book.

Jim Meigs: Oh let me... You mentioned loneliness. And this is something that comes up in your work and that of a lot of other thinkers are really going back more than 20 years as we look at the kind of atomization of our society. This tendency towards contempt, some people who don't agree what feeds into it and but it's having some really profound and profoundly distressing impacts on our society.

Arthur Brooks: What, contempt itself as [0:29:25] [Crosstalk]?

Jim Meigs: No, the loneliness of the isolation that we're seeing increasingly.

Arthur Brooks: Oh the loneliness. Oh, for sure. Yeah, for sure. Yeah, I have a podcast right now and this – it's called *The Arthur Brooks Show*. It's not original. And I have on – in the

second season of podcast, I'm focusing on love and one of the episodes is the love of friends. And what you see is that loneliness is increasing in America today.

Some people say that it's actually an epidemic. Cigna, the health services company actually has a whole division of people working on the loneliness epidemic because it's so – you know depression is such an expensive phenomenon but it's also just a terrible phenomenon in people's lives, anxiety, the whole idea that “nobody knows me.” Well, these days, 13 percent of Americans say that they have no close friends. You know, that nobody actually knows them.

It's an extraordinary thing and it's going up and it's especially among young people. And we know why we're losing our ability to make friends with social media. There's an epidemic of fear. John Haidt and Greg Lukianoff, when they wrote *The Coding of the American Mind*, for my money, the most interesting thing in that book is that there's an epidemic of fear among young people.

The big problem is that the campus culture wars that are going on are not actually the problem, it's the symptom of the problem. And it's a fear epidemic that kids don't get out of the house, kids don't date when they're in high school. Dating in high school is down 30 percentage points since I was in high school. It's extraordinary.

Richard Davies: How can they measure that though?

Arthur Brooks: They measure that by asking people, did you date last year? And they found that when I was – in the 1980's, 85 percent of people at high school, the high school seniors were dating and today, it's 56 percent of high school seniors are dating.

Richard Davies: And you're not skeptical of that number at all?

Arthur Brooks: I'm not really because I have teenagers and I was one. And so, it's basically between the two cohort groups that I belong to and know the best. You know it's funny when I talk about these whether people – something or unless something like a third less likely to be in love than people were when I was that age. And that's if –for my money, that's because people are fearful of relationships. They're fearful of being together. They're fearful of having any conflict. They're fearful of being rejected.

I asked my son, my son's a junior at Princeton and I said, is this true? And he said, “No one dates.” That's a really dangerous phenomenon. The stuff that we hear on college campuses of “I reject any possibility being challenged in my ideology or the way they see the world.” The knock on effect or the parallel effect of that or the same phenomenon, a branch of the same tree is “I'm not going to date anybody.” “I'm not going to...” I mean conflict is conflict. You got to be an entrepreneur with your life, right?

Debra Mashek: So, I'm curious. What does that mean to be present in the lives of others? I'm thinking about maybe you with your sons, you with your coworkers, you with your strangers, you with that person who throws a piece of trash out the window you know driving in front of you and you feel contemptuous, at least, I do at that moment. I'm wondering how do we...

Arthur Brooks: Well, that's justified.

Debra Mashek: Oh yeah, I could be contemptuous, so...

Arthur Brooks: Or you're contemptuous of the action of that other person.

Debra Mashek: Right.

Jim Meigs: There you go.

Arthur Brooks: That's a very important thing to do.

Debra Mashek: Yeah, that's good to see if it...

Arthur Brooks: If you could be contemptuous of the ideology but never of the person. And if you can't, we can't make that distinction, that means we're falling prey to people who don't want us to make that distinction. Because they're profiting from you thinking that somebody else is the other as opposed to simply thinking I disagree with the way that person sees the world.

And now, and then that's being present with somebody, by the way. You can be absolutely present with somebody even though you – that you hold one of their opinions in disdain if you say it's still that person is my sister, that person is my brother.

Debra Mashek: I think curiosity also plays a part there like I'm not going to try to convince you you're wrong and I'm right. I'm just – I'm really curious how you're seeing the world.

Arthur Brooks: Yeah.

Debra Mashek: And whatever you say, wherever you are, I can accept that. I don't have to – it's not trying to change me per se.

Arthur Brooks: Yeah, yeah. That's one of the things actually I remember my fourth role. I mean it's been – it's really [0:33:17] [Crosstalk].

Richard Davies: Wait, we'll come back to that.

Arthur Brooks: Yeah, yeah. But the hope that this is your point which is that you – if you want to connect with somebody, this has really changed my life a lot because if I've tried to put these things into action. I tried to live the principles in this book before I wrote the book. So I knew it was – this was not...

Debra Mashek: Yeah, to field test it.

Arthur Brooks: Yeah, totally. I'd imagine that sort of ethnographic study on all the people I disagree with. And one of the key things is to look for the moral roots of what somebody else

thinks as opposed to simply – you know it’s funny there are all these books and articles that you see about how to be an active listener, what they all are is instructions on how to pretend you’re listening, right?

What you really need to do is to listen deeply for the moral roots of what somebody else is trying to say. And one of the things that I recommend is when you listen to somebody with whom you disagree, you start by saying, “Can I see whether or not this is what really motivates you?” And go deep, deep, deep to what’s written on their hearts and see whether or not it’s right.

Almost inevitably if you do and you get to the point where they say, “Yeah, that’s it.” You’re going to say, “I think the same thing.” And what we disagree on these different ways to get that. And that is a deep human connection. That is pure pleasure and satisfaction when you get to that point.

Debra Mashek: And that’s also... sorry, I just get...

Arthur Brooks: No, no.

Debra Mashek: That’s also, you know you’re talking about loneliness and that sense of not being seen. But to go the heart of what’s written on someone’s heart to see that is saying I see you and I care for you.

Arthur Brooks: Right. Yeah.

Debra Mashek: I mean I care for the hurt, I care for the pain, the anxiety, the fear and that’s a very common human experience.

Arthur Brooks: Yeah. Yeah. That is – that, Deb, that’s love. That’s the essence of what it means to love another person. You know to love the other person, Saint Thomas Aquinas defined love as “To will the good of the other as other.” Think about it. It’s not, I want your good for my sake. It’s the “I will Deb is good. I will Richard is good as I will Richard is good as Richard.” And the only way that I can do that is to find it was written on Richard’s heart and to look at it and then to respect you enough to say, “I have an idea. I got to tell you about my idea to meet your objective.”

And that’s how we’re supposed to be talking to each other as opposed to going straight to the disagreements. See, what happens is there’s a proof of a science theory that says that you should – that there should be common moral, the moral core in a society around which different ideas compete. And when they do that, they’re like electrons rotating around the center of the atom. But when the moral core collapses, then the ideas, competing ideas hit each other head on and that’s a holy war over politics. And that’s really deleterious and that’s where America is today.

Jim Meigs: I was struck by your rule number four which gives us a model for how we can disagree. And actually, states disagreement can be healthy but has to be done right.

Arthur Brooks: Yeah. So one of the big mistakes that we make is when people are disagreeing in a damaging, in a hurtful way. This is able – let's just agree more or let's just agree to disagree. That's wrong. Disagreement is great because competition is great. You know it's – nobody objects to the competition politically. It's called democracy.

As a matter of fact, we demand it. One party elections are pretty boring or and the elections that are not free are terrible. Most of us, the mainstream viewpoint is that competition is good in economics, it's – you know markets that bring out excellence in people, not unfettered, of course. We actually need some regulations and certainly should be bounded by morality.

But the competition of ideas is actually the most critical of all because where a society is being propelled by ideas, not by conventions and not just simply by biological stimuli, but by ideas that's what makes a fully human. And without a competition of ideas which is also known as disagreement, we get stagnation in mediocrity.

So we don't need to disagree less, we need to disagree better. And this is what we talk about as finding the moral core and competing on ways to achieve it.

Richard Davies: I'm a little surprised by number five. Because to me it's like, duh! which is disconnect from unproductive debates.

Arthur Brooks: Yeah, you know disconnect even from unproductive stimuli. You know we are truly over stimulated. The most amazing thing is the extent to which because we can know stuff, we have to know things all the time. We have to know them continuously.

Debra Mashek: And right now. Yup.

Arthur Brooks: Right now. Right now. And you know the social media is the worst for this because you have access to all the information in the world quickly and you can get you know people that are more or less in your network can be pushing information to you constantly. That's not healthy. That's actually not, certainly not the way our brains were neither developed nor have evolved.

We have not evolved sufficiently such that we can filter information at a really high rate and continue to maintain any sort of emotional and psychological equilibrium. And the result is we're out of equilibrium. The most extraordinary thing for me is academic because I see people at really distinguished universities, people I've admired my whole career who have stopped writing books, have stopped writing articles and they're simply tweeting 40 and 50 times a day.

They've substituted Twitter for their economic or their – for their – they've substituted Twitter for their academic corpus of activities. It's actually really, really sad. We don't need to be connected very much. We don't need information and to the extent that we're getting it, we certainly don't need to be sharing it and so one of the ways to be a happier person. And you know at the end of the day, the reason I wrote this book is really two reasons. We want to be more persuasive. And nobody in history has ever been insulted into agreement, just a truism.

We also want to be happy because we deserve to be happier people. We need to – and some – and things are systematically making us less happy. GDP per capita has been going up for decade after decade. Happiness, wellbeing is stagnant and at best and probably declining. There's no policy that's going to fix this. We all know in our hearts that the problem is in our hearts. And so we need the secrets to this.

So the point of this book is how can you be more persuasive and at the same time become happier and more successful as a leader. And a lot of that starts with just being weirdly less informed about polemics and controversies in our midst.

Jim Meigs: I want to pivot to something that your own life might inform and it's something that's in the news right now. This crazy conspiracy of all these rich people to bribe schools and coaches and test takers to get there, not particularly well-qualified kids into these elite institutions and it's gotten – Richard and I were talking earlier about this hunger for status that centers around higher education and how that is actually hurting the country.

And I looked at you know your career as you said, you spent about 10 years out of academia, didn't finish college and you went to work at a trade. It's almost like someone who went and decided to be a carpenter for 10 years and then went back to college. And yet, here you are, one of the pre-eminent thinkers in our public discourse. Obviously, and you didn't – when you came back, you didn't go to Harvard. You're going to Harvard to teach now. But you didn't start out there.

Arthur Brooks: Yeah. I couldn't get it. I couldn't have gotten there, [0:40:20] [Crosstalk] the way to get to Harvard if you can't get in is that join the faculty. It's a great country. This is a great country.

Jim Meigs: So I'm fascinated with this circuitous route you took and maybe that shows that people are too hung up on getting into Harvard in the first place.

Arthur Brooks: Yeah. Yeah. You know this is – there's this – it's funny. You know we say that – we talked a little bit earlier about the fact that there's a natural tendency to tribalism, there's a natural tendency for contempt. There's a natural tendency to put people in the other category, in-groups and out-groups and this is what we naturally do, but we can't give into it. And one of the things we tend to is creating natural hierarchies.

You know if you leave people to their own, their basic proclivities without any sense of ethics, without any sense of propriety if we – without any sense of basic humanity, what will make me happy? They'll wind up putting themselves into status hierarchies. They'll buy you know becoming a barren of some kind and they'll you know figure out some way to increase their status in society.

In American society today where we've had this insane system of trying to push college for all, where we basically say increasingly if you don't go to college, your less somehow, you're socially less. You're probably not very smart. We have all these dumb expressions like that guy is as stupid as a bag of hammers. Well, man...

Richard Davies: Talk about contempt.

Arthur Brooks: That's contempt. It's also contempt for the trades. Right there is what that comes down to. And you know that's wrong. That's – it's also a really, really damaging thing. Not everybody should go to college. It's – there's all kinds of good things you can and should do. We have a huge worker shortage in America, a shortage of skilled tradesman in this country.

And the reason is because we have college for all mentality and the result is you know people who are not paying attention to this, they want high status. Their kids are not very motivated, their kids are not, maybe not very talented in academic things and so they basically do what they have to do which is what people done for time immemorial which is buy their kids' way in. It's amazing.

Richard Davies: I want to react to what you said about social media. Because right now, it seems almost everybody is blaming social media for a lot of ills in the society and I'm wondering whether they're actually right. There are really great things about social media and I'm thinking that perhaps it's getting blamed for the fact that already we are atomized as a society and we aren't as communal in the way we design our towns, our cities, our ways of life as we should be.

Arthur Brooks: Yeah. So whenever there's an innovation in the way we communicate with each other, it starts by with a huge – it goes through basically, three phases. There's a huge promise. It's a new promise of American life. You know when the telephone was first developed, the idea was that it was going to make everything easier and people are going to communicate better, a thousand flowers were going to bloom.

And by the time it is ubiquitous across American households by the 1950's, there was a huge social problem which is there are people who wouldn't go out of the house for two and three weeks at a time. It was – and people thought this was phase two, which was where this new technology became a substitute for human relationship. People became lonely, they became depressed. They would sit in their darkened homes and only talk to people by the telephone. They would become basically anti-social.

So phase two is always – it's the work of the devil. The first is the work of the angels and then it's the work of the devil. And then phase three finally comes along. It usually takes between 10 and 20 years when people accommodates the technology and they take it from the substitution phase to the complimentary phase where people learn how to use the technology, so it becomes a basic compliment to their relationships. The promise is too big. The second phase is awful. The third phase is basically we have you know complimented the way that we deal with each other.

Now, it turns out as a business proposition, I'll be an economist here for a second because that's you know what I do actually in my day job is that in the third phase, when it's a compliment, it's actually a really low profit margin – these products because it becomes a commodity. It just becomes everything as everything else. You know you can't tell really the difference between AT&T and Verizon cell phone service. Cell minutes are the ultimate commodity. It just depends

on the kind of coverage where you live. That's actually what's going to happen with social media.

We're in phase two of social media which is like the zombies are coming to eat our brains. We feel like it's ruining our society, that we're depressed, maybe were even killing ourselves, who knows? It's just – but phase two, ultimately, I believe will give rise to phase three in which we'll use it responsibly. Already, my kids use social media pretty responsibly more responsibly, certainly, the people 10 years older than them.

Richard Davies: So some of these problems we're talking about might be solved.

Arthur Brooks: Oh, I'm extremely optimistic, Richard. I mean it's just – and I'm not a technologist, I'm not a you know I don't believe in the – you know I'm not a utopian and all that, but I've just seen this pattern again and again and again in technology and you got to go through phase two so you can get to phase three. It's going to be OK.

Jim Meigs: How do we get to this place where we're so comfortable looking down on people who don't have the same kind of cool jobs that we do?

Arthur Brooks: We're classes, we're elitists.

Jim Meigs: Yeah. Yeah.

Arthur Brooks: That's our problem. We're immoral. That's the problem. We have a tendency to look down on people. We want to find people to look down on. And we went through a phase in American life where there's a big run-up in the amount of GDP per capita and so we were able to start consuming more and more and more luxury goods and higher as the ultimate luxury good. It's super expensive. It is a mark of being – of the ultimate intellectual leisure in a lot of cases.

In point of fact, if you're doing – there's a lot, there's lower status, there's higher income but lower status from engineering than there is from something like philosophy still.

Jim Meigs: Right.

Arthur Brooks: And so sending your kid to college is something that you need to do if you're going to be a member of sort of that Thorstein Veblen's leisure class at this point. A status is a terrible thing but that's what we tend to do.

Debra Mashek: If I can offer up another hypothesis.

Arthur Brooks: I would love that.

Debra Mashek: This rule of or this issue of needing to be validated and seen and it's – I wonder about status and being willing to buy one's way and or buy one's child's way into a college. If

that's also a way of making sure that child is seen and its, again, maybe a humanizing sort of motivation.

Arthur Brooks: Well, I mean in point of fact, we know that when somebody has a college education that life can be easier for the kid. That's not completely true actually because if you have a skilled trade, you'll never you know miss a meal it turns out. But there has been...

Debra Mashek: And you're probably have a lot less student loan debt.

Arthur Brooks: You have a lot less of student loan debt. You'll start working early. There's a lot of good reasons to do that but most people don't know that. There's an information lag. It's a very interesting thing because my own kids are very different this way. I had a kid who really loves studying and went to a fancy university.

And then my second kid is really, really gifted with his hands and he wanted a job working outside where he could work hard. And he's – he bypassed college and he's working as a wheat farmer at Idaho and he's a carpenter's apprentice during that – during the winter. And he is that man fully alive.

Here's the weird thing. He went to a prep school, **somewhere in [0:47:24] [Phonetic]** Washington, a place in Bethesda, Maryland. A really nice prep school, they got him ready and nearly all of his friends went to college. A bunch of his friends now from his graduating class are kind of struggling in college and their parents will call to me and said, "How did you do that? How did you find a job?" I said, "He found the job."

You know he was super motivated and he knew what he wanted to do and it was a question. My only job was to say you know you have a responsibility to be honest, a responsibility to be compassionate, you have a responsibility to find a way that you can serve the most. And if being – making – he's making these cabinets. I mean he just blows me, I'm so proud of him. I see the stuff that he builds, I was like there is zero way I could ever done this in my life. I have no idea how he knows how to do it.

And he can shoot and he knows how to fly fish and he drives a of \$400,000 combine. He's harvesting 60,000 pounds of soft white wheat per hour. I mean it's just – I can tell you it is amazing. And by the way, he's making money.

Richard Davies: That's a great way to end it. Arthur Brooks, proud of his kid.

Arthur Brooks: Oh, yeah. I'm so proud.

Richard Davies: Thank you very much.

Arthur Brooks: Thank you.

Richard Davies: So we had a lot of things to say about why you should love your enemies and not just tolerate people you disagree with. And also, the broader questions raised by social media and the problem of loneliness.

Jim Meigs: You know the point that came through that I really liked was that we're not saying everyone should just get along and be civil and he's not saying that we should all agree. And Deb, I know this will resonate with you because the whole idea of Heterodox Academy is it's OK to disagree. We're not trying to all reach a compromise, we're trying to find a way to respect people enough that we can have really intense conversations about disagreements that are productive to get us somewhere that help us learn and maybe change our thoughts or maybe change somebody else's thoughts but do it in a way that's productive.

Debra Mashek: And for me, one of the big insights and it gives me a lot of hope when we think about tribalism is ingrained. It's part of our nature, love is part of our nature. And when Arthur was reflecting on you know our genetics, our biology is not destiny that we're in charge of how we respond to situations. And when we feel that flare up of emotion, when we feel the contempt coming up that we can still pause it, that we can delay our response time and turn to a more constructive way of engaging with other people as people as opposed to dehumanized entities that we've somehow – we somehow othered in a way that it shuts down families, it shuts down communities and democracy.

Richard Davies: Yeah, this is not necessarily about changing your mind or thinking any differently about politics and about the role of government than you do or I do already. Jim and I disagree about a whole bunch of things, but the ideas that we can still go off and have a glass of beer after it.

Jim Meigs: Yes, I really recommend this book. I mean one of the things that's been so great over the last four years of *How Do We Fix It?* we're coming up on our 200th episode is getting to meet these thinkers and really engage with these ideas. There's so much has happened in our society that really needs to be fixed and it's really problematic. And yet, it makes me optimistic to talk to people like Brooks and John Haidt and Francis Fukuyama, and so many other thinkers that have been you know sitting here with us at these microphones. And Deb, with your organization trying to bring this spirit into college campuses, boy, that's an uphill battle. But you're optimistic.

Debra Mashek: We're – I am optimistic. We're optimistic because we do see that changes happening. We do see people opening their hearts, opening their minds and leaning in with curiosity and with humility and asking people, how do you see it? And I would give you all some kudos too for modeling how to do this in this podcast and inviting people to lean in and try out new ideas.

Richard Davies: Yeah, we want more disagreement though.

Debra Mashek: Yeah.

Richard Davies: We want people to tell us how to make it better.

Debra Mashek: Right. *How Do We Fix It?*

Jim Meigs: That will be our next job.

This podcast is produced by Heterodox Academy. Find us online at heterodoxacademy.org. On Twitter @HdxAcademy and on Facebook.

[End of transcript]

Transcription by Prexie Magallanes as [Trans-Expert](#) at Fiverr.com