Wildkit Way Transcript: Season 2, Episode 6

Announcer:

Welcome to the Wildkit Way, a podcast that gives the mic to Dr. Marcus Campbell, the superintendent of Evanston Township High School. Join us on this audio journey. As Dr. Campbell shares his stories and insights and has honest real conversations with people who make ETHS and our community, the incredible place it is.

In this special episode of the Wildkit Way, we share excerpts of a powerful conversation sponsored by the Family Action Network between Dr. Campbell and Dr. Eddie Glaude, the James S. McDonald Distinguished University professor at Princeton University, and author of the book, we Are the Leaders we have been looking for. Let's jump right in.

Marcus Campbell:

Thank you to Dr. Eddie Glaude for joining us tonight. It's like a celebrity is in the house. So welcome Eddie. We're calling each other Eddie and Marcus tonight, so we're not doing all of that. And welcome and how are you doing today?

Dr. Eddie Glaude, Jr.:

First of all, I am so delighted to be here. I'm amazed at what this school, this district represents in so many ways, Lonnie and what Fan has been doing is just a gift. I want to thank all the people behind the scenes; those who are getting our mic levels right. Just the folks behind the scenes who are making it possible, folks with standard security folks who are taking photos, all of the folks. So just thank you. So I'm really excited to be here and talk with you, especially with you.

Marcus Campbell:

So we're here to talk about the book, the new book, "We are the Leaders We've been Looking For." And you start the book setting a context of the last 10 or 11 years or so, and take your time with this question. Okay, how did we get here as a country with the unraveling of democracy? You name those who have been, we've lost through the police violence, Covid. You talk about a lot as you set the book up, and we'll talk about the book being a series of lectures and all of that. But how did we get here, Eddie?

Dr. Eddie Glaude, Jr.:

It's hard to summarize. I delivered these lectures in 2011, and when I delivered the lectures, Michael Brown was still alive. Sandra Bland was still alive. Baltimore hadn't exploded. Ferguson. The quick trip in Ferguson was still around as it were. So, so much happened between then and now. How did we get here? In July 5th, 1852, Douglass delivered his July 5th oration at Old Corinthian Hall in Rochester, New York. And he said that there was, in that speech, he said that there was a reptile, a serious reptile in the nation's bosom, which was slavery, right? So we could tell a story about that serpent that has been eating the entrails of the nation since its formation. So there's a contradiction that's been at the heart of the politics from the very beginning. What does it mean to give voice to a notion of freedom predicated and based upon an intimate understanding of unfreedom. John Adams saying to King George, we will not be your Negroes. So there's that kind of account, how did we get here? It's almost genetic. And then there's the immediate situation. And the immediate situation is that the economic and political philosophy that has organized this country since 1980 has fallen into contradiction. It is collapsing right in front of us, the deep divides in terms of income inequality, the ways in which we have been transformed from citizens and community with each other, to people in competition and rivalry with each other where there's been an evisceration of the public good. And then you take that and you place it alongside of workers' wages, and you put that alongside of demographic shifts where it seems that the browning of America isn't something far off because we've got these racially ambiguous children on Cheerios commercials and all of these interracial something's going on culturally that doesn't make sense to rule America something is happening. And then in 2008, all of it evidences itself with the election of Barack Obama, the nation's first black president, and then we get the Tea Party, and then we run John Bainer and we run Paul Ryan out of the, we get all of this vitriol rooted in grievance, deep seated hatred, a sense of uncertainty about who we are. And if you are a reader…you said, take my time with it. So I am (laughter)... If you read Ralph Ellison, Ralph Ellison wrote a piece, Marcus, in April of 1970, in a special issue of Time Magazine. He would republish the essay "In Going to the Territory" in 1986, but the essay was titled "What Would America Be Like Without Blacks?" He says, in every moment when the nation grows weary around its struggle for democratic equality, it reaches for succession. Or it reaches for the fantasy of a lily white America where we have to rid ourselves of the problem of race, whether it's immigration, let's send them back to Liberia, right? Whether it's let's put them in our place, let's get them out of view, get them out of our consciousness, as it were. And so here we are in this moment with all the things I've just talked about, increased grievance, a sense of economic precarity, deepening inequality, a kind of evisceration of the public good where we don't have a sense of obligation to each other, right? Folk feel like they've lost the country. And then you get the tricky magic. And whenever the nation feels like it's losing its way, it's losing its sense of identity. It has to reconsolidate whiteness. So it needs its scapegoats, it needs its inwards, it needs its illegals, it needs its F words, it needs… the mob organizes such that some notion of American identity can feel that that can be reconstituted. And that notion is always rooted in this idea that ours is a nation in the vein of old Europe.

Marcus Campbell:

In the book, you highlight so many voices of folks who've come before us and you make their words and their thinking relevant to us today. Like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Ralph Ellison, John Dewey, James Baldwin, Tony Morrison, Cornel West, MLK, Malcolm X, Ella Baker, Frederick Douglas, W.E.B. Du Bois , Fannie Lou Hamer, Michael Harrison.

Dr. Eddie Glaude, Jr.:

Are you signifying right now?

Marcus Campbell:

Okay. I guess my point is there are so many voices that you lift, and I'm interested in this connection that you draw between Ellison and Emerson. How does that conversation really shape the themes of the book as we get into a little bit of substance?

Dr. Eddie Glaude, Jr.:

Oh my goodness, it's absolutely critical. I was just thinking about the importance of Ellison and that Emerson debate because Emerson calls us to higher forms of excellences. I mean, there's an adolescent way of reading self-reliance. You just, an individual who can just do and pursue your own aims and ends untethered, unencumbered. And that's an adolescent way of reading Emerson. But Emerson's perfectionism that we are always trying to leave behind a self to reach for a higher self. Now, what does it mean to think about that across the railroad tracks? What does it mean for me not to be lumped into some homogeneous blob? This is what black people, this is who black people are. What does it mean for me not to be reduced to a tangled web of pathological statistics about black poverty? Black black, these sorts of things? What does it mean for me to think about black individuality, and so Ellison comes into view. So Ellison's often engaged in this conversation with Emerson. He actually splits Emerson into two characters, an invisible man. He does, right? Because you get Emerson the trustee and then…

Marcus Campbell:

Bledsoe for sure.

Dr. Eddie Glaude, Jr.:

Exactly. So you see what I mean? So now we're nerding out. We're good.

Marcus Campbell:

Yeah, we are nerding out now. And I'm trying not to do that. (laughter)

Dr. Eddie Glaude, Jr.:

So, Ellison is engaged in this.

Marcus Campbell:

Just don't eat chitlins in public.

Dr. Eddie Glaude, Jr.:

Exactly, doc. Exactly, doc. But Ellison also is an unabashed patriot. He's the one who's defending the Vietnam War. He aestheticizes things. So part of what I'm trying to do is to figure out the relationship between these two and how I fit in there. It's central. What does it mean for, what kind of politics is it, Marcus? Self-cultivation in the pursuit of a more just world to bring Ellison Emerson across the railroad tracks. What does it mean for you and me to reach for higher forms of excellences, to engage in the arduous task of self-creation where I can be fully who I take myself to be, understanding that it is only possible if the world is conducive or the world is constituted in such a way that will free me up to do so. Now I'm in a different space than these two folks who are so important to me.

Marcus Campbell:

So Eddie, I have a building of almost 4,000 kids.

Dr. Eddie Glaude, Jr.:

This ain't a building, this a damn college. (laughter) This is no building.

Marcus Campbell:

Yeah, we got 4,000 kids here and 700 adults. What is our responsibility to our young people in this moment?

Dr. Eddie Glaude, Jr.:

Lord have mercy. Why would you put that question on? What is our responsibility to our children in this moment? What is our responsibility? Well, we have to model, at least it seems to me we should. What? It means not to lose one's soul in the face of evil. What does it mean to be truthful to oneself in the face of ugliness? What does it mean to refuse to take the bribe? How does one model a way of being in the world where integrity, love, care, sincerity, courage, or values that matter? What should we be teaching our children in this moment? Oh my God. How to don't run away from your fears. Sit with them in this moment, doc, the country, the foundations of the republic have cracked. We all face the moral choice. Lemme just say this every 10 minutes, I said it earlier today, every 10 minutes in Gaza, a baby is either injured or killed. I don't care where you stand in terms of the position. I don't care where you stand vis-a-vis, I do care, but it's not really what I'm trying to suggest about Israel and Palestine. If you are okay with that stat, something is happening in the soul. And what we need to be teaching our children, I think it's in the journey between womb and tomb, from the first breath to the last breath…what matters is how you live in between with courage, decency, integrity, and love. And so we can't become callous hearts in the midst of all of this ugliness and evil.

Marcus Campbell:

Yesterday I was prepping for this conversation, and I can hear the helicopters that were getting the video of what was happening at Northwestern. The television is on, and Donald Trump's immunity case is being argued before the Supreme Court. I'm reading in your book your conversation about Frederick Douglass and revolution and all of that. And I have to ask, where does this work situate itself at this moment in history?

Dr. Eddie Glaude, Jr.:

If we don't take responsibility for democracy, for American democracy, if we think we can continue to outsource that responsibility to others, we will lose this country. I think there's a through line in the book. It's a through line, and it's almost cliche: we have to be...we are the leaders we've been looking for if we're the leaders we've been looking for, we have to be better people. We have to become better people. And if we're going to become better people, we need to build a better world because the world as it is, gets in the way of us becoming better people. And so I am of the mind that we're at an inflection

point, much of the way in which our society has been organized. It's collapsing right in front of us. We have a generation of young people who've come of age, and many of them have drawn the conclusion that the place is broken and it's a reasonable conclusion to draw. And the moral question that's in front of them, they're trying to answer in interesting sort of ways and in complicated ways, and they're trying to answer it in a country that has forgotten how to disagree. So we're expecting our children to disagree reasonably when we can't disagree reasonably as adults. And so this book fits in the moment, I think Marcus, as a call for us to take responsibility for ourselves such that we can take responsibility for the nation.

Marcus Campbell:

In the book you say disposition matters and character matters. And what do you say to folks who… they're all about justice and they're not about character, they're not about disposition, and they justify maybe unpleasant dispositions because it's really about justice.

Dr. Eddie Glaude, Jr.:

Oh, see, the moral question is the beating heart of everything I do. And the moral question is what kind of human being do you aspire to be? What kind of human being are you? So if you don't invest, so if you are pursuing just and democratic ends by undemocratic and unjust means, then what's going to happen is that you're going to end up producing another form of tyranny. So if you're not democratic in the very way you struggle, you're going to end up with Mugabe. You see, you're going to end up with people who will distort the aims and ends. My wife is Jamaican. And you can think about decolonization, you can think about independence, and you think about the way in which PNP and JLP function-- the People's National Party and the Jamaican Labor Party and how they function. And then you see that this political party that they are just simply functioning against the underneath is the app, the colonial apparatus still doing its work and you just get elites, brown elites mostly rotating, right? Doing the same kind of thing. So we got to struggle democratically. If we're struggling for democratic ends, you got to lead democratically if you want democratic ends because if you don't lead democratically for democratic ends, if you lead undemocratically for democratic ends, you're not going to achieve those ends at all.

Marcus Campbell:

So, in the book, you talk about this journey of self-creation and you do it alongside of Malcolm X, which is brilliant. I'm not going to nerd out on Malcolm's autobiography, told to Malcolm, told to Alex Haley and Manning Marable and reinventing Malcolm, we're not going to do that. But you talk about his father and you talk about your father in the journey of self-creation. What do you mean by you identify in the book that it's not about this narcissism as practice as you call it? What do you mean by self-creation? What are

the dangers of when a person has not gone through this journey of self-creation who want to advocate for justice?

Dr. Eddie Glaude, Jr.:

Oh, absolutely. If you don't have this kind of self-reflexivity, unexamined life, Socrates says it isn't worth living. One of the things we need to be teaching our children beyond this moment is that this is the canvas upon which you create art. This life is the canvas upon which you paint brilliant colors. And so what does it mean to kind of, I'm a country boy from Mississippi and nobody was reading books in my household. My mama had her first baby in the ninth grade. She cleaned toilets for a living and then she became a supervisor of the janitorial staff at Ingalls Shipbuilding. My daddy was the postman. That's high cotton back in the day. So was able to afford us a middle class life as a result of carrying that bag and walking in Mississippi summers. But that's all we had was the newspaper. So I'm finding a world in JRR Tolkien, in Terry Brooks' "The Sword of Shannara," right? I'm reading my way into something in "Coming of Age," Anne Moody's "Coming of Age in Mississippi." Those sorts of texts; finding language in worlds to create myself, to engage in self-creation. But as a kid that's happening in the household. And I was talking about this early, it's always difficult to talk about this. My daddy scared the [---] out of me. He loved me, loved us unconditionally, but his love was hard. It left his marks and bruises. But one of the things that happened, at least to me from an early age is I guess I was a bit too delicate for certain things. My mama said I was born to push a pencil. He deposited fear in my gut, and I felt for so long that I was a coward because I was so afraid of him. And Malcolm became this resource for me to create myself anew, something we need to tell our children every single day, right? The world conspires to make you small. That much is true, but the question you have to ask yourself every single day is, will you be complicit?

Marcus Campbell:

I am thinking also about this conversation about Ella Baker in the book. Now, we cannot have a conversation about this text without talking about Ella Baker. Share a little bit about who Ella Baker was and what about her practice really demonstrates the kind of work that you're talking about tonight.

Dr. Eddie Glaude, Jr.:

So it makes sense given the arc of the book. So what I'm trying to do in the book is I'm trying to bring the prophetic down to the ground. We don't need prophets, people who are anointed by God, who carry the truth to us to hold us accountable. We don't need those sort of folks, although they might be important. They're not the end all and be all. We don't need someone to remind us of a covenant that we're failing to live up, to remind us of the cost. If we fail to live up to the covenant, what we need to understand is

that the prophetic is an act of the imagination to be able to see beyond the current condition of one's living, to imagine what is possible. And by imagining what is possible, we can critique what is. And all of us have that capacity. So let's bring the prophetic down to the ground. We don't need heroes, although we have them. We need representative folk, great people. Emerson teaches us great people come to us such that even greater people of possible. I don't want to lose myself in my imitation of my heroes. So because Malcolm was so important to me, I bought my horn rim glasses. I grew my goatee. I tried to smell like revolutionaries. I didn't know that they had oils. So I was rubbing incense on my neck, right? I'm from the country, right? I'm country. Yeah, you were that guy, huh? Yeah, I was that guy. Oh, he walks in, he smelled like Egyptian musk. I still do you want to smell it? I still do. Right? So heroes, just like prophets, can distort and disfigure democracy because when you give yourself over to the hero, you stop working on yourself and you follow them.

Marcus Campbell:

It's not about the pulpit, but the pew.

Dr. Eddie Glaude, Jr.:

It's not about the pulpit; it's about the pew. And remember, when you got fans in the pew mercy and celebrities in the pulpit, the church is dead, right? Because somebody has outsourced their faith journey and then somebody else is doing something else. We ain't going to get into that. (laughter) So heroes tend to bulge out and obscure. They can become immediately tyrannical. They're not necessarily that, but they can overrun democratic life. So here I am, I bring Dr. King down to the ground. He's a hero. One of my models, I bring Martin, I mean King Malcolm down to the ground. He becomes a wounded witness. What does it mean? He's no longer the shining black prince, but he's just as wounded as I am, flailing and failing, trying to figure out how to change the world even as he's engaging in self-creation. Trying to figure it out. Trying to figure it out. Now all of these men, because what am I trying to do? I'm a wounded young boy with daddy issues. So it makes sense that I would end up in the lap of a woman. It would make sense that the arc of the book would end up with the radical democratic praxis of Ella Baker. She was field secretary in the 1940s for the NAACP, so she's helping organize chapters in the South. If it wasn't for that work in the South, Bob Moses would've never met Amzie Moore in Mississippi. Amzie Moore is a connection developed by Ms. Baker in the 1940s, which is a whole different political moment in interesting sorts of ways. It's not an entirely different one, but it's a much more complicated one. Given the left is politics that's animating black America at the time. So in 1940, she's a field secretary. She's the first executive director of SCLC. So when Dr. King decides to organize the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Ms. Baker is the one who gives it infrastructure. If she had to deal with all of those preachers, I'm not...(laughter)

There's a book that needs to be written entitled "All the King's Men." Yeah, those are some complicated dudes. And then there's a reason why when in 1960, April of 1960, after the Wildcat sit-ins in Nashville, in Atlanta, in parts of North Carolina, after those young people who became the shock troops, troops of the movement, they gather at Shaw University, and in April of 1960, they found the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Why are they at Shaw? It's Ms. Baker's alma mater, and she's the one holding off the legacy organizations from trying to co-opt this student energy. And at the heart of our politics is this idea that is not to helicopter in and guide and direct in local communities, but to create the conditions under which indigenous leadership will emerge. How else does a Unita Blackwell show up? How else does a Fannie Lou Hamer show up? How else do the brothers and sisters in Lawrence County, Alabama show up? And so the idea she used to tell the young organizers, "shut up and listen, you might learn something," right? So the task is not for me to come into a space and overrun it with the power of my personality. The task is for me to enter into that space in collaboration and cooperation and coalition and alignment to help create the conditions for an indigenous leadership to emerge. It is a local politics close to the ground. And so even when she loses her memory as an older woman, because her politics, I call it a politics attending, coming out of my reading of Sheldon Morris, a politics attending is a politics that wants to deal with you close to the ground of the sense of connection, a sense of loving, attending, caring, that politics, attending, even when she lost her memories, the first thing she would ask you if she met you...

Marcus Campbell:

Who are your people?

Dr. Eddie Glaude, Jr.:

Who are your people? Now from Mississippi, that's a question aimed at what: locating you. Where you're from, trying to get a sense of the wind beneath your wing. You see what I mean? So Ms. Baker, for me, that's why I end the book with her. She resists this politics that focuses on DC where you got to run a black person for president so that everybody down ballot can get excited and turn out to vote, and then suddenly you get a Carol Mosley Braun or a David Dinkins or something. She resists this idea that there's some leader, some black man mostly who leads the march, and then all of us just follow. And then we don't know what the hell happens after the march is old, right? She wants to engage in a substantive politics close to the ground. I call it network localism. But it makes sense that a young boy from Mississippi who had daddy issues, who's committed to trying to become a better human being in the pursuit of a more just world, would end up with his ears attuned to one of the most radical democratic theorists we've ever produced. And that's this black woman from North Carolina.

Marcus Campbell:

Well, I think we're just about at time, but thank you, Dr. Glaude.

Announcer:

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