

**CRITICAL**

**CONVERSATIONS**

Event transcript featuring **Van Jones**

# **EDUCATING TO REBUILD THE AMERICAN DREAM**

Jan 20, 2022

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**CONVERSATIONS**

Event hosted by **New Roads School**

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# Critical Conversations Speaker Series

## Featuring Van Jones

### TRANSCRIPT



Guest  
**Van Jones**



Moderator  
**Luthern Williams**  
Head of School  
New Roads School



Moderator  
**Mario Johanson**  
Director of Student Wellness and  
Human Development  
New Roads School

### MARIO JOHONSON

Welcome to the Critical Conversation series interview with Van Jones. Good evening friends. My name is Mario Johanson and I will serve as this evening's event moderator. I'd like to welcome our esteemed feature guest, Mr. Van Jones, New Road's Head of School, Luthern Williams, our local and national partner schools, the Cotton On Foundation and New Road's Spanish language, culture, and literature instructor, and Critical Conversations interpreter, Carmen Anders. We're also pleased to welcome graphic recorder, Jessamy Gee from Think In Color Australia, who's here to help capture our thinking. Justin May will be creating a live visual representation of the output from our session today that will be made available to our partners.

Van Jones' honest and poignant social commentary has made him one of the most compelling and powerful public voices in America. A US media personality, New York Times bestselling author, social entrepreneur, and world-class change maker. His reach transcends age, race, geography, and political ideology. Jones is a CNN political contributor and host of Amazon music podcast, Uncommon Ground with Van Jones in which he offers his unique take on how we can come together across lines of difference to solve the greatest challenges facing us today. A go-to voice of reason heralded for his bipartisan solutions oriented approach Jones is known for his unscripted, true telling style, and an established history of bridge building across party lines. It is our immense pleasure to welcome Van Jones as our guest this evening.

In recognition of our time limitation, I'm going to jump right into the heart of things. This conversation will be centered around four dimensions of discourse, the personal dimension, the educational dimension, the sociocultural and political dimension, and the historical dimension. When it's time to transition to another question, I will deliver

a gentle tap of this chime as an indication that we're ready to move on. And Luthern you have to promise to listen to my chime.

LUTHERN WILLIAMS

I'll try to listen.

MARIO JOHONSON

All right, let's be. Let us begin with the first segment, the personal dimension. In your book, *Rebuild the Dream*, Van, and yes, I did get an approval to refer to Mr. Jones as Van. You refer to the middle class as, "America's greatest invention." Can you provide a brief synopsis of your family history and related to your own personal conception of the American dream? That is what role did education play in your family's realization of the American dream?

VAN JONES

Well, first of all, I'm just glad to be here with everything that's going on and the challenges that I think that we're all facing individually and nationally and everything else just to be in conversation about anything remotely important is I think pretty critical. Well, again, I was born in 1968 on the edge of a small town in rural west Tennessee. '68 as you know that was the year that they killed Bobby Kennedy. That was the year they killed Dr. King, the Democratic Convention in Chicago that year was bloody. It was like they were trying to kill hope in America the year I was born. And I've been trying to figure out some way to bring some of that hope back.

My father was born in abject poverty in Orange Mound, Memphis, Tennessee. At the time, one of the biggest ghettos in the south. He grew up in what you would've called the shot gun shack. He joined the military to get out poverty. Everybody was running out of the military, my father ran into the military because he was that committed to getting out of poverty. And then he put himself through college. Using that opportunity that military affords you, he went to a little black college called Lane College in Jackson, Tennessee. He married the college president's daughter, my mother because my dad was no joke. He knew what he was doing. And then he put his little brother through college, my uncle Milton. He put a cousin through college.

Pretty much as I always say, almost everybody in my family who got out poverty, got out of poverty on this bridge called my father's back. And then when he died the picture they put of him on the funeral program was him standing in front of Yale Law School the day I graduated with his hands in the air and saying to me, "You're a ninth generation American. Ninth generation American, but you're the first person in our family that was born with all your rights recognized by the government and look at what you've done."

When he got out of the military, he was a school teacher. My mother was a school teacher, all my uncles and aunts were school teachers. My grandfather, obviously, was a president of a college. So education has been the way up and the way out for my family. I'm I've had the best of both worlds. I went to the all public schools in Jackson, Ten-

nessee. Alexander Elementary School, Tiger Junior High School, Jackson Central Mary high school, and the university of Tennessee at Martin undergraduate. And then I was blessed to go to Yale for law, taught at Princeton. I was a fellow at MIT. So, I've seen the best of the public school experience, the best of the private school experience. And what I will say is as my dad says, "Nothing stops a bullet like a job. Nothing stops a bullet like a book," and we've lived that as a family.

#### LUTHERN WILLIAMS

Well, it's interesting, and so good to have you here, Van. When we think about the audience that you have tonight. I mean, the audience it's made of traditional public school folks, it's made up of independent school folks, it's also made of charter school folks. And I am interested in the phrase that you use killing hope. And what do you think is the role of education in restoring that hope and on the pathway to the American dream?

#### VAN JONES

Well, I don't think you can understate or underestimate or overstate or underestimate the impact of a teacher on a child, positive or negative. At the end of the day your parents, my parents did not know enough or have enough time to teach us everything we need to know. At some point there had to be a teacher. There had to be a coach. There had to be a counselor. There had to be some other adult to step into the breach and that person has a tremendous impact. If that teacher as we've all had looked at you skeptically, you looked at yourself skeptically. But if that teacher looked at you with high expectations and belief, you look at yourself differently, and the older your child gets, and I'm a proud parent, the more that the teachers and the coaches and the other folks have the impact.

And so, what I would say is that this is not... Hopelessness is not a luxury that we can afford in reaching this next generation. They are going to face the biggest challenges that any generation has faced in humanity. These are the most consequential decades for humanity from an ecological point of view, from a democracy point of view, from a technological point of view. And the future is not yet written and we might feel hopeless or beat up or scared, but they've got to live on this planet. They've got to live in this society, and we don't know what they're capable of. If we tell them that these problems can be solved, we tell them that the ecological crisis, the economic crisis, the social crisis can be solved. Then they'll go solve them because they won't know any better. But if we are so busy trying to convince them of the sins of the past, and the pain of the present, and the fear future that they become cynical, then there's no hope at all. So it's ironic the adults have to transmit a small amount of hope to the next generation, and they will give us a large payback of hope as they take us seriously and move forward.

#### LUTHERN WILLIAMS

Well, and it's interesting in that I remember in your book, *Rebuild the Dream*, you talk about your experience at Yale University, and you talk about how the sum of the injustices and the contrast between incredible privilege and

poverty and lack of opportunity that you saw there and how that motivated you. Could you talk a little bit more about that?

VAN JONES

Well, yeah, I mean, the crazy thing is if you tell these young people and I used to be a young person, if you tell these young people something about, I don't know, liberty and justice for all, they might overhear you. If you make them say it every morning with their hand over their heart like we used to, they might actually think that you're serious. And then when they look around they don't see liberty, they don't see justice for everybody, then they might want to do something about it, and that's what happened with me. I got to Yale and what I noticed was I was a good Christian kid from a small town. Look, I've never done any drugs. I've never had a beer. I've never had... Look, I'm completely... I mean, I have other issues and problems, but as far as drinking and smoking, that was never my thing.

And so, I was pretty fair minded about it when I get out to Yale. And what I saw was a bunch of kids at Yale doing every drug imaginable, and none of them getting arrested. A bunch of kids at Yale doing every drug, smoking everything, and none of them got going to the police precinct. If anything, they went to rehab or maybe they withdrew for a semester and went to Europe, but they sure weren't going to jail.

And yet four or five blocks off campus in Urban New Haven, Connecticut kids doing less drugs, less money were going to jail, going to prison with police sirens out there every day. This was the 1990s, and it was a real eyeopener from me. I was good. I was like, "Well, Jesus sees both these sets of sinners." I grew in the black church. I was like, "Jesus sees all of you," but you're not all being treated the same. And so, rather than taking my law degree and maybe making some money I said there's a stench in the nostrils of God to see kids the same age group doing the same behaviors within eyesight of each other, and some going on to graduate schools and great wealth and others going to prison and coming back 10 years later with no prospects, no hope. That's not liberty and justice for all. And so, I've used whatever educational privilege and platforms I've had to try to fight against that.

MARIO JOHONSON

And let me move to the next question, gentlemen. Many BIPOC and BIPOC for our listeners refers to Black indigenous people of color. Many BIPOC folks talk about the inherent obstacles of the American nightmare that is systemic, structural, and institutional racism in the pursuit of the American dream. As an African American, what role did education play in your family's mitigation of the American nightmare? In other words, how did your family mitigate racism in order to fulfill their conception of the American dream?

VAN JONES

Well, my parents were public school teachers in my county as we were desegregating. And my father was the assistant principal of my middle school, or we called it junior high school. And my mother was a teacher at the high

school I went to. And so, I had protection because of being Mr. Jones' son, being Mrs Jones' son. And they knew even when I was in elementary school to go and look in the classroom and make sure that they hadn't put myself on this side of the classroom with the so-called special needs kids just because I was Black.

When they were desegregating the schools, inside the classroom it was still segregated. So they would put all the white kids on one side and they were so called advanced and they would put the Black kids on the other side and they were so-called special needs. And if you were a relatably smart Black kid or a very slow White kid, you'd be in the middle. And so, the classroom was literally segregated. My mom would go and make sure to take me from the left side of the classroom to the right side of the classroom. And so, I had people fighting for me from the very beginning. I think it's important to recognize that.

In my household excellence was considered a weapon against racism. Many African American families who are middle class will tell you that, that we were told and in no uncertain terms, and there was no age at which you were too young to hear this, that you were going to have to be 10 times smarter and worked in times harder than the white students to get the same level of credit, attention, and respect, and no excuses just excellence get on with it. And there was something terrible about that, but it's also something very useful about that. We believed that excellence was a weapon. We did believe that if we outworked everybody, that we would at least be able to find a way. From my point of view, I don't think much has changed.

I wish I could say a lot has changed. I don't think that much has changed. I still think that when my little Black son walks into a department store or into any area and a little White kid walks into, I think the presumption is different. I think people would be shocked to know that my son is 4.0 student with Mandarin and physics and all that kind of stuff, stuff I can't do because they look at him they assume he must just be some kind of an athlete. And now he also is a great athlete, but academically he's extraordinary. I think he has to prove that. I don't think that's presumed in 2022. And so, I think those of us who care about education, and believe in education, it doesn't solve every everything, but it's very, very difficult for a kid of color to have a shot at all if they're not afforded a world class education.

#### LUTHERN WILLIAMS

Well, it's interesting because I really identify with what you're saying, Van, because my parents gave me the same exact message. And I'm thinking for folks of color who do not have parents who are engaged in that way or can engage for them in that way. What is the responsibility of the educational institutions to ensure that these children reach their potential?

#### VAN JONES

Well, this gets tricky now because you see in Florida, they try to pass a law to not address any of this stuff in an educational context if it might make somebody uncomfortable. And so, I think to be honest now we have a double challenge. On the one hand, we need to focus our efforts on recognizing that it's not a level playing field yet in America, it's just not. If one kid only has to jump three feet off of their parent's shoulders to dunk and the other kid has to

try to dunk from the parking lot. That's not a fair test. So, we should be very just unapologetic in placing resources, support, extra support, where it's needed. We're not talking about equality. Everybody gets the same, the person who only needs two inches to make it across the finish line gets two inches of help, and somebody who needs is two miles away gets two inches of help. That's equality, but it's not equity. It's not fair. And so, we need equity.

So, I would say that that's one half of the challenge, but there's another half of the challenge, which is there is a fear, and it's an understandable fear on the part of some who say, "Well, hold on a second, are we being more divisive in the way we're going about trying to heal the divisions?" Are we adding by focusing on the inequities, are we creating a context where it's harder to get to unity and to a whole society. And I think we can't just blow that off. I think we have to address that. Part of what's going on in the country is the old story of America's falling apart. It's falling away and there is not a new story yet that can hold all the pain and all the promise, all the beauty and all the terror of who we really are.

And so, some people say, "Well, listen, whatever new story is I want to focus on the pain because the pain got left out last story." Other people are saying, "Hey, if you over focus on the pain, then nobody's going to America, and you're going to have division and strife, and people are not going to be able to have a functional society. And both sides are right. There is a solution to this though, which is simply to say that America has always been two things and not one. It's always been two things and not one.

America has always been on the one at its founding, the founding reality was ugly and unequal. That's not Van Jones putting America down. The founding reality was ugly and unequal according to Thomas Jefferson. You can go to DC right now and go to Jefferson Memorial right now tonight and walk up those stairs tonight and look at marble and stone and see in Jefferson's own words, "I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just." What's he talking about that? Doesn't sound like triumphalism from the founder. That is him saying, "I'm concerned about the enslavement. I'm concerned that a mayor having founded itself on slavery, God could wipe us up." That's Jefferson saying that the founding reality was ugly and unequal, and I like to believe that in some of his quieter moments, he might have thought about the fact that women didn't have the right to vote or any other rights that even White men who didn't own property couldn't vote, that the Native Americans were being and wiped out. That the founding reality of America was ugly and unequal even according to the founders. I don't know why we have to argue about that. And if that's all America ever was, we shouldn't have a lot of patriotism, but the reality is that's not all America was.

In that same Memorial you can turn your head a few degrees and see something else. And it says, "We hold these truths to be self-evident that all are created equal." The founding dream, which is about equality. So that's what America is. It's this unbelievably beautiful, tragic place. This rainbow people, every color you can imagine are all... Every kind of human being ever born in one place at one time trying to close the gap between the ugliness of the founding reality and the beauty of the founding dream. That's who we are. Now, that story's big enough for everybody. In that story you can tell the good and the bad, but you've got a direction now, how do we close the gap? Each generation between the ugliness of that founding reality and the beauty of the dream. That's an American story that everybody can stand in and have a place.



So, you can focus on the kids who need the most help, and you can tell a story that lets everybody have a place of honor within that journey to get us to where we're trying to go. But these are serious times now. We're in a civilizational crisis when the story falls apart because all civilization is a story that makes everybody get up in the morning and act right. When the story falls apart, then sometimes you wind up with when you don't have civilization, you can sometimes have civil war and the story's falling apart. But I think those of us who are close to these kids who see their beauty. America's grandkids are going to look different than America's grandparents. They already do. They're still America's kids and they're still a way forward for all of us together if we'll take it seriously.

LUTHERN WILLIAMS

I have two follow up questions.

MARIO JOHONSON

One second, Luthern, let me just transition you gentlemen to the next segment and then you can pick it up on the other side. That's the educational dimension. We're going to focus on the educational dimension and kind of the framing before you jump into the specifics Luthern is has to do with the role of education in fixing our seemingly broken democracy cause in large part by crippling political polarization. This segment is intended just kind of where you gentlemen have naturally migrated to, which is a conversation about the role of education. Luthern, I'll turn it back over to you.

LUTHERN WILLIAMS

Well, I think that I wanted you to comment a little bit on Du Bois. He talked about when he was at Harvard, I was in Harvard. I was never of Harvard. And interestingly enough even some of the African Americans who have had access to very high quality education, I think that probably resonates this notion of being in the institution, but not of it. And then also connected to that, this whole enlightenment idea of America as the dream of the enlightenment and this principle of the inherent dignity and worth of each person, and how you think that either is realized in our education or is not. And how can we get there if we're not there?

VAN JONES

Well, there's a lot there. I mean, I do think that if you are running an elite school, public, private, or otherwise, you may be surprised at how alienated some kids may feel. They might be smiling behind tight teeth. That what they say to you may not be what they say about you because they're walking in two different worlds. And most of us who come from underestimated. I just say underprivileged, not to say underestimate. Most of us who come from underestimated neighborhoods, and communities, and towns have to walk that dual. I think you mentioned W. E. B. Du Bois. You talked about that double consciousness that you are on the one hand you're participating in something,

but you're also observing yourself participating in it because you're really not of it. And at any point in time, you feel like they might come and get you and you'll be out of there.

But look, I just want to say I had a White male professor in college, very conservative. He had been in the military, he worked for George H. W. Bush, or was a big fan of his. He had a big picture of himself with George H. W. Bush in his office. His name was Gerald Ogg, O-G-G at the University of Tennessee of Martin. We couldn't have been more different, and yet he recognized my talent and my drive and my hunger. And he reached out to me and I was going to withdraw from the university. My at that time was a Black Student Alliance president at Vanderbilt University. I was thinking maybe I would withdraw from university and go try to see if I could get into Vanderbilt or just move to Nashville. I just didn't feel like I fit in on that campus at that moment.

He reached out to me, and he said, "I want you to stay here." He said, "Trust me, if you bend over here and work hard, I'll be with you and you can get anywhere you want to go from the University of Tennessee at Martin." I just saw Professor Ogg three months ago in Knoxville. He drove all the way across the state. I flew into Knoxville to give a speech. He drove all across the state just to see me and shake my hand. You can vote different. You can look different, you can pray different, but you can still believe in these kids, and you can still go above and beyond to make sure that... I wasn't the easiest student to deal with, but he went above and beyond the call of duty.

And so, for all these divisions and all these isms and all these identities and all sort of stuff. In the end of the day, it comes down to two people, a teacher and a student. It comes down to, can you see in that child something they may not yet see in themselves? And can you bet on them, and can you believe in them? Even if they wind up growing up and voting against you. I mean, he helped me now. I was working to try to get his party out of power. So, we still love each other because there's something bigger than the political disputes of the day.

So, I just want to say, if you're in education right now in the middle of a civilizational collapse, in the middle of an ecological collapse, in the middle of a democracy collapse, a technological transformation. You yourself every day are trying to figure out what the heck is going on. You yourself every day may feel overwhelmed. You yourself may feel confused. And yet you have to figure out some way on a distance learning or in person some way to give some direction to young people, and it's a heroic quest that you're on. And you've been given something that is precious cargo for the future of the world.

And so, you may not have all the right answers. You may not know what the Metaverse is and NFTs and all NFTs, all this type of stuff. I'm having to learn from my children what the hell heck is going on these days. They teach me as much as I teach them now that they're in high school. But what you do know is that every one of those children has an unbelievable potential and a destiny inside themselves to do something significant in this world. If you can... And then I don't care what color they are. I don't care what background they have. They can tell if you believe that, or if you don't. You can't fool them. If you believe that they can tell it, and if you don't believe that you can't fake it. And so, I would just ask all of us as we go through all these changes to cultivate more capacity for belief in the best in people, especially for the best in young people. Cultivate more capacity, just especially with knuckleheads and the tough ones, and the ones that are hard to deal with. Those are the ones that are crying out for our help and for us to

triple down in our belief in them. And you never know which one of these kids in five years, 10 years, 15 years, or 30 years you're going to wind up driving across the state to see.

#### LUTHERN WILLIAMS

Well, one of the things that I think is really powerful because we have a lot of White educators on this. And I think a lot of them are asking sort of what is their role and what can they do? And you gave a very powerful example of when this teacher saw, heard, and valued you. I want to talk a little bit more about what do you think it takes for a kid who may feel that they're in a place, but they're not of it to remove their mask and armor to be vulnerable enough so that they can make that kind of connection with a teacher who can help them transform their lives?

#### VAN JONES

I think trying to get a kid who's from an underestimated background to buy into the institution may be difficult. That may be too much of a leap as a goal, but trying to get them to buy into that one champion that they have at that institution. That's not impossible. I think we got to be honest. You got kids who some kids are going home, they're driving one way and the other kids driving the other way. It may be 10 years after graduation before that kid from that underprivileged background says, "Hey, I'm proud that I'm from that school." While they're there, they're having to negotiate so much, but you as an individual can be that champion, and they can buy into you.

I had a couple individual champions at Yale. I had a couple individual champions at Princeton. I had a couple individual champions at the University of Tennessee at Martin. I had a couple individual champions at MIT. It's only now in my 50s that I feel that I can say I'm a Yaley. I never said that. I said, "I'm at Yale," but when I'm walking across this campus, I better have my ID in my hand because [inaudible 00:30:40]. It's only now that I got this great beard, I can walk and say I'm a Yaley, and it's not going to bother me. We got to be honest. But can that student have an individual champion, an individual connection? Yes. I think that we can make too much of race. We can too little of race. We can make too much of it.

Listen, I'm going to tell you one thing. And if people get mad at me on the left, I offend my progressive friends quite often. I think that sometimes we can when we're trying to get this identity stuff sorted out because it's been mistreated and been pushed to the side, and now we're trying to pull it to the center. There could almost be a mistake in the interaction with each other that the main question is, "Are you like me?" Are you Black like me? Are you gay like me? Are you old like me? Are you female like me? Are you like me? That is a key question because those differences do matter, but it's not the most important question for a child. Are you like me is never as important.

Are you like me is never as important as do you like me? Do you like me? Do you see me? Do you value me? Do you believe in me? Do you like me is always more important than are you like me? And if you can manage the ways in which we're different, but lean into the ways in which we're the same in that you want a future for yourself and so do I. You want a great life and I want a great life for you. Then you are at least in the right spiritual zone with a child, and I think it's important that we be in the right spiritual. This stuff is complicated. These kids have different

pronouns and all kinds of stuff. And look, I'm learning. That's new stuff for me. But at the end of the day, that child needs to know not the institution. That's too hard, but there is somebody at that institution that likes them and loves them and cares about them. They need to know that person by name. And then I think later on down the line, they might be able to put the t-shirt on a different way.

MARIO JOHONSON

Wonderful. It sounds a lot like the way we describe our school. Let me transition you gentlemen to the third dimension, the sociocultural and political dimension. The question here is as private, public, and charter schools, how can we cultivate informed, compassionate, responsible, and engaged citizens who can tackle the existential national and global problems that they will inherit?

VAN JONES

Anybody got any hard questions?

LUTHERN WILLIAMS

That's an easy one, Van.

VAN JONES

That's too easy. I'll pass on that one. Give a hard one. Look, I think a couple things. One is I hope that these challenges do bring out the best in the adults. This ecological crisis is real. Last year, sometimes the past two years, Texas froze, like froze. Texas literally froze. It's like a piece of the Arctic had fallen off and landed on Texas. And inside that same year, Seattle, which is usually so cold, they don't even have... I mean, central heating and air was 110 degrees, 150. It was hotter in Seattle, which is usually very cool than some parts of Sahara desert. And it was colder in Texas than some parts of the Arctic. That's not the planet that you grew up on. You no longer live on the planet you were born on. I'm going to say that again. You no longer live on the planet you were born on. There's already been that much disruption of the climate that the idea that Texas could freeze, at the same time Seattle could fry. That's not the planet you were born on.

So, that's a big change, and we've got to take it seriously. There's the rise of China and Russia, not because they're different from America racially, or because they talk differently. But because those are authoritarian countries and we're democracy. These are big, big questions. And I think that what I would say is that educating young people as if they're going to be on a heroic journey to save everybody. Again, I grew up in the church. There's a time when David and Goliath is the right model, but there's also a time when Mr and Mrs. Noah is the better model. I believe we're heading into Mr and Mrs. Noah times. Who can build a big enough arc to get enough people together to save enough lives, so that we can survive the storms that are coming.

That's the change. That's the challenge. David and Goliath fighting on the deck of the Titanic both are going to drown. Who's going to build the arc? Who's going to bring people together and who's going to prioritize the sheep over the wolves when you build that arc because if you don't prioritize the right folk in the right order then the powerful people, the will prevail and the weak will be victimized even on the arc. So, you're building an arc in these. You're building an arc, and you're trying to save values, and you're trying to save culture, and you're trying to save lives, and you're trying to save dignity. And you're trying to prepare a generation to go out and do that in the world.

I think the magnitude of the challenge and the size of the opportunity should bring out the best in some people. It may intimidate some people, it might be too depressing. I want you to hear what I'm saying, but there's some adults that are listening to me and there's some young people that can hear what I'm saying that we need giants. We need a generation of giants who can understand all these racial and gender and sexuality and ecological issues just like this, not to fight over it forever, but just to be able to use that as a springboard to a better society. If a civilization is collapsed and then one needs to be built and born. Can you build a human civilization more at peace with itself and more at peace with this earth than your parents and your grandparents did? Can you guys come together and do that? If we give you the technology, if we give you the education, if we give you the encouragement, can you guys be that generation that comes and does something beautiful like that? Somebody has to, maybe it can be you. I think that giving young people a mission that's bigger than just your identity group or your political party, or your country. Giving them a bigger, more global mission might give them the impetus to overcome some of the things that have crippled our generations.

#### LUTHERN WILLIAMS

Well, it's interesting because one of the things there that I think is recurring in what I hear you saying is we need to learn how to treat each other human beings, and with the assumption that we all have inherent worth and dignity, that that's kind of a foundational piece, but also in this heroes journey it was really interesting, your use of the word heroes journey because I'm thinking, "Oh, wow. We need to cultivate this generation who can fix the democracy and renew and reinvent the American dream." So, what do you think they need in their backpack for this task and to face these existential threats? I mean, what do you think they need in their backpack?

#### VAN JONES

Well, a couple things, couple things. They need things that don't go together. They need a very strong humanities background so they understand the value of human dignity and human worth, and that everybody has a story. And they also need to understand finance, technology, and Mandarin. You can have all the warm fuzzy feelings as you want, but if you can't put it on the app as a blockchain and crypto that mug and finance it then you going to be in trouble. And by the time you're my age, Mandarin is going to be very, very helpful.

So, I don't know, but I tell you what, giving them a big mission rather than a small one and letting them know on the front end they're going to need everybody. That there's, I don't care how. If you're White, there's not enough White

people. If you're Black, there's not enough Black people. If you're straight, there's not enough straight people. If you're gay, there's not enough gay people. If you're left handed, there is not enough for you, whoever you are to get this done by yourself. That the problems that you're going to have are going to require your ability to partner across lines of difference, and that capacity to know yourself and be proud of yourself, but also to be able to have the empathy to understand the other people and partner effectively across those lines of difference, that's going to be key to your survival or the world survival. Whoever you are be, love yourself, be proud yourself, but there's not enough of you to get this done by yourself.

#### MARIO JOHONSON

And speaking of big missions, our next question dives right into that, and it is the following. Specifically addressing the American nightmare how can schools contribute to dismantling the legacy, structures, and practices of white supremacy to liberate our children and the nation?

#### VAN JONES

This is becoming a very, very tricky conversation because like I said... My CNN's right over here just driving me crazy. I'm so tired of my being on the news, but Governor DeSantis down in Florida, bless his heart, is trying to pass bills so that you can't make someone uncomfortable, a White person uncomfortable talking about race. Well, that's tough because it's an uncomfortable subject for Black people, and people of color to talk about. And so, I think in terms of trying to make this work, I'm just a practical pragmatic dude. I wonder if uplifting the John Browns. I wonder if uplifting the White anti-racist and freedom fighters might give some people some comfort. I think that there's something going on where people are so binary and so top down in their thinking. So stunted in their development.

They can only imagine that if somebody's up, somebody else has to be down. That if somebody is being elevated, somebody else must be being depressed and oppressed. So, their fear is, well, the White folks were on top and treating the people of color bad. And so, now if you try to fix that, well, now you're going to put the people of color on top and the White people are going to be treated bad. Now, nobody has said that in 400 years. There's not a single... I mean, you can't find any evidence that people of color have some agenda to want to enslave White people or... You can't find it, but that's the fear.

So, look, I'm a practical person. How do you go about addressing it? How do you do it? Well, first of all, we need to start identifying issues where there's common pain, that could be common purpose. There are some things that are affecting all of us, pretty bad addiction, mental health, child poverty. There's a lot of things that we should be able to talk about because folks in Appalachia who are White are suffering from it. Folks who are Black in the hood, folks at the border, folks in the Barrio, some folks in Hollywood and Beverly Hills are suffering from some of these issues around addiction, around mental health, there are certain issues. We should be looking for some common issues, some common ground.

I don't think it's unfair. It shouldn't be this way. It shouldn't happen this way, but I don't think it's unfair to mix in heroes and sheroes of all colors and backgrounds who believe in human rights and human dignity, so that it doesn't seem like we're just saying, "Well, look like these Black heroes and these White people were oppressing them." That's one dimension of it, but you always had... Look, even the Black Panthers were supported by Jane Fonda. I mean, you always... There's never been just black folk by ourselves. So, maybe there's some way to talk about this where people can see themselves in the story as heroes and sheroes too. Maybe they wouldn't be the lead character, but they could be the in the script, and that might be some way to get it done. This is getting trickier now because there's a backlash against what happened in 2020 with Black Lives Matter. And now it's talking about CRT this, and all kind of nonsense.

We have to find some way to reset the conversation. We want dignity for everybody. We want empathy for everybody. We want those people who have maybe been unfairly advantaged to recognize that so that they can use those privileges for the good of all. And we want the people who have been unfairly disadvantaged to be seen in that so they can be empowered for the good of all. There's no agenda that's against anybody. It's an agenda that's trying to get us all to the place where we can stop wasting genius. We have too much genius on Native American reservations being wasted. We have too much genius in prisons being wasted. We have too much genius out here on these streets with people unhoused being wasted, and we can't afford to waste anybody's genius. So we're just trying to get everybody's genius recognized and lifted up. And that should be something everybody can get back on board with. The genius of Dr. King is being more and more, I think, vindicated in that he was able to articulate this agenda in a way that was more likely than not to bring out the best in America. Now, they killed him. So unless you know how tough it is, but we need a little bit of that back in the equation, I think.

#### LUTHERN WILLIAMS

One of the things that I'm most excited about with the Critical Conversations is it is a collaboration with independent schools, charter schools, and public schools because in the media there has been an emphasis in terms of divide schools. And one of the things that I'd like to hear you talk more about because to me we all have to... All of the schools have to be able to work together to produce the workforce and the citizens that we need. And we also need to be able to cultivate these giants as you call them who can work together across differences. So, I mean, what could you see? I mean, what do you see the role of this collaboration being in helping with this work?

#### VAN JONES

Well, look, I mean, I don't think you're special in that it's unusual to have this mix, but you're not special in that I think all institutions and networks have to answer this question of what are we going to do? We could be by the end of this decade a nation unrecognizable to itself. When you have the Asian American community being just viciously targeted on a regular basis just thrown up on social media as just people to be punched. And I mean, what is that? When you have the worst wave of anti-Jewish violence, and bias in a century just ripping through American society, and we've barely even talk about it. What is that?

So, the good thing about this network is that you got everybody at the table already. And I think that what has to happen is there's a real... We're victimized now by these devices. These devices, people aren't as dumb as you think they are. They seem dumb to you because these algorithms send us down on completely separate rabbit holes, where you're getting different information than I am. And if you don't believe it, it's unbelievable. We think we're programming these phones. These phones are programming us. If you like a couple of conservative posts, just a couple, the algorithm figures out, okay, I'm going to give you more of that. Because these apps were never designed to give us information. That's a lie. They were designed to give us endorphins to show us what we like and give us a little brain tickle so we stay on the app. You are the product. Your time, your attention is what is being monetized.

So they have no incentive to give you what you need. They give you what you want and how they know what you want. What did you like? What did you forward? What did you share? What did you comment on? They're going to give you that. So you could like a couple of conservative posts and within six months you might be in QAnon because they will have given you so much of that. Now, you're looking at everybody else, assuming they're all getting the same information you're getting, and you're down a QAnon rabbit hole, and don't know it. Same time, if you're African American and you're like a couple of Black Lives Matter posts. Within six months, you might think a Black person is being killed by a White police officer every day even though it's not true, but they're going to give you so much of that, that you'll be down your own rabbit hole, and don't know it.

Now you got two people, both think the other one's crazy, and we're all crazy because even if you were to search right now for climate change. If you're a conservative, it'll say climate change suggested word fraud. If I'm a liberal, the algorithms will say climate change suggested word, crisis. So even when you're searching for information, the algorithm is already biasing the information you're searching for. Do your own research. You can't do your own research on your own phone because the algorithm is already biasing. What you're seeing on your own phone. Nobody is telling people this.

So part of the education has to be letting people know these things are very, very useful, and they're very, very dangerous. And there's no instruction manual that tells you what I just told you. They hand you these things. It's like handling handguns to toddlers. You don't know what you of in your hand. If you point at your own face, you're pointing a weapon at your face to somebody else's benefit. And so, these are the kinds of things that we have to be very, very clear about with people. So, when you ask the question, how do we do all this? I don't have good answers, but I do know that we're better than this, that I know. I do know that this level of fussing, and fighting, and arguing, and people more interested in outrage and outcomes. People who are... There's got to be some way where if you're a straight White dude, you don't have to feel as if your only choice is to go with extreme right wing ideology. I love all of my conservative friends.

I'm talking about something different, extreme right wing ideology, or to be a part of a liberal movement that's going to put you down every day. And when we say straight White male, we always mean somebody who did something wrong. When we say straight White male, we always mean the anti-Christ. When we say straight White male is always a negative. You should be in a situation we have to pick between the White supremacists, and what might feel like the woke supremacist. You got to be able to... Your dignity should count as well. Okay? And at the same



time, those of us who are people of color are tired. We're tired of washing our words. We're tired of tip toeing around the issue. We're tired of feeling like we got to take care of everybody else's feelings. We're tired of when we finally do say what we want and how we feel and how we see it, then being accused of all kind of anger issues and everything else. We're tired. So you got people who are tired on one side and scared on the other side, and the children looking at us like we're crazy.

And so, there's got to be some opportunity for us to have real conversations as adults and you guys are in the best position possible. It's tough. Y'all also real sensitive people and empathetic and weirdos and stuff. So, when conflicts come up and well somebody's being insensitive now everybody's upset. And like, you didn't mean, you feel hurt. So, it's a lot of drama among educators. There's a lot of drama.

#### MARIO JOHNSON

This is a perfect segue actually into our last question, Van, which is what's at stake. If we as Americans don't reimagine education, democracy, and the American dream and humanity.

#### VAN JONES

I said before, you have civilization and civil war. Civility is key to civilization. When you take out civility, you don't have civilization. You don't have civilization you have civil war, and I'm not joking. So, everything is at stake democracy. Democracies don't last long historically. This is the most fragile form of government known to humanity. Very rare does a democracy last more than a couple 100 years. It's just, it's too fragile. All it takes is one good, strong push, and you'll have 1,000 years of darkness. I like system that we have. It drives me crazy. I spend my whole life fighting it, but I never left the country. I never moved any place else. I like our system. I wish it was less corrupted by money. I wish it were easier to move in a positive direction consistently. But I like this.

I like being able to vote. I like being able to have freedom, and liberty and fight for more of it. Not guaranteed, not guaranteed. And so, teaching people that it's right to love something, everything doesn't have to be cynical. Everything doesn't have to be a joke. Everything doesn't have to be a put down. Everything doesn't have to be snark. That you can love a country and want it to do better. That you can love yourself and know that you ain't perfect. That you can love your neighbor and want your neighbor to love you back. That you can love this planet. You can love all the little critters that you read about in the little nursery book. Those animals may not be here by the time your kids are grown. Elephants and sharks and all that stuff.

It's all right to love, period. The love is all right. The love is a damn point. And we have to stop being shy about that because the people promoting hate are not shy. The people promoting division are not shy. ISIS is chopping folks' heads off and putting it on YouTube. Okay? They're not shy. The people marching down streets talking about Jews will not replace us. They're not shy. The people promoting hate are not shy. The people promoting love are shy and try to hide our little big hearts behind some cynicism and some mean tweets. And we're not fooling anybody, or we want to try to out hate the people who are hateful.

And I'm going to tell you right now, most of y'all suck at hating people. You try to hate people, but you ain't good at it. You're never going to out hate these haters, but you can out love them. You can outwork them. You can out organize them. You can out inspire them, and that's what we have to get back to. It's as simple as that. I'm on CNN. I wish we didn't have to watch the news. You guys can turn it off, I can't. And I know we're better than this, and I know that the kids deserve better than this, and I have a great deal of confidence in you guys as educators to deliver what they deserve and what they need.

#### MARIO JOHONSON

Thank you, Van Jones and Luthern Williams. This has been an incredibly informative and engaging discussion. Tonight's guest will receive an email invitation to join us for a reflective dialogue and deeper discussion as we transition from theory to meaningful engaged action. A final point, if you are connected with the private or public school community that would like to partner and join with us, please reach out by our website. That is [critical-conversations.com](http://critical-conversations.com). We thank you so much. We thank our esteemed guest, Van Jones. We thank you our head of school, Luthern, for your vision and holding of our community. And we thank you all guests for being here with us this evening. We thank the Cotton On Foundation for its support, and we hope to see you all soon. Have a wonderful evening. Thank you.

#### VAN JONES

Thank you guys. Appreciation.

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**CONVERSATIONS**

presented by

**NEW ROADS SCHOOL**

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