



Library podcast

2014 Seattle Reads “For All of Us, One Today”: Meet Author Richard Blanco

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[0:00:40] “Good afternoon. I'm Chris Higashi, Program Manager of the Washington Center for the Book at the Seattle Public Library. I direct the library's annual Seattle Reads series, so welcome to the final day. This is day four of four. This is event number nine. I know at least two people who are rather exhausted, but as I, as I told Richard, every year by the end of it, we say basically we're both exhausted and exhilarated for what we see happen and what we hear every year for Seattle Reads. So we're not complaining. Okay, this is the 16th year of Seattle Reads. The library's widely widely renowned and emulated one book community reading program. I think you know that we are the creators, that Nancy Pearl and I dreamed up this little project in about 1996. We launched in 1998, so we are now doing 16 years and since then it has been done in hundreds, well thousands, of communities, cities, towns, every state, all 50 states, and even internationally. Yeah, pretty fun.

[0:02:05] So we are grateful to all of our Seattle Reads sponsors. If you got a program booklet, they're all listed, but let me just mention them: the Wallace Foundation who was there at the very beginning, the Seattle Times for generous promotional support for library programs, our media sponsor KUOW public radio, Beacon Press the publisher of this memoir. Actually, I forgot to thank the University of Pittsburgh Press your poetry publisher, who's also been great. And our independent bookstore partners Elliott Bay Book Company, Elliot Bay's been with us also from the very beginning. We also had invited this year Open Books: a Poem Emporium, one of only a handful of poetry-only bookstores across the country. And finally, last but not least, the Seattle Public Library Foundation. It is private gifts to the Foundation that make possible Seattle Reads and hundred, thousands of library programs every year. Richard Blanco, so I was really charmed by something Richard said early on in the book. “I'm 45 days old, a character

[0:03:17] in a story, already a character, a character in a story already of three countries.” Richard is going to say more about that, of course, also about his right and left brain self. The the working as an engineer when he started to explore his creative side through writing. Richard has published three

books of poetry to critical acclaim. He has a full length memoir due out in September. So we are of course hoping to bring Richard back to read from that memoir. And now please help me welcome the wonderful poet, memoirist, children's, oh did I say children's book? God, you have a children's book coming too. With with the with Dave Pilkey, the illustrator of the *Captain Underpants* books. Okay, that's coming too, in a couple years. Alright enough of me- Richard Blanco.”

[0:04:17] “Hi everyone.

[0:04:23] Is this all right? Okay, great. Thanks everyone. It's wonderful to be here and it's again the last of nine events. I am exhausted but wonderfully exhausted. I can't, you know this whole experience, I've had nothing like this experience of being celebrated this whole week and again this whole idea of interaction and having people read your book. It's the way that I think you know, especially in the roots of poetry, of oral tradition, it's the way that I think literature is enjoyed best, savored best. It's the this idea of coming together and sort of sharing, coming around the proverbial campfire that literature and poetry can be. So I thank you all for being here and sharing with me in this journey. All right, what I'd like to do is give you some some autobiographical remarks, some things about my sort of past and what I what I call the road, the emotional road to the podium in DC and then maybe we'll just open it up for comments. I can read a poem here and there, this is all very casual and comfortable. I'm here

[0:05:21] for you. I'm here to answer your questions. I want to make sure that that I connect with whatever you want me to connect with, so we'll open as much time as possible for just free-flowing communication and questions. As Chris mentions very eloquent eloquently, but I put much more colloquially or poetically maybe,

[0:05:42] I always say I was made in Cuba, assembled in Spain, and imported to the United States. Which is shorthand for a very sort of convoluted early beginnings which my mother was seven months pregnant when she left Cuba with me, then we went to Madrid because at that time you couldn't there were no direct sort of immigration to the United States from Cuba, so I was born in Madrid. 45 days after I was born, we emigrated to New York City. And what that meant and I always look back on that as I started when I started writing, as sort of this wonderful foreshadowing of some of the things that would come to obsess me about place and home and belonging and what does that mean, and what does that look like, and cultural negotiation, is, when you think about it, at 45 days old, I belonged to three countries. I, my newborn photo was actually my green card photo. So my green card was my first official ID ever, I guess maybe besides my birth certificate and I had lived in two world class cities by the time I was 45 days old

[0:06:48] And then to add to that script about when I was four years old, we moved to Miami and Miami set the stage for yet some more sort of culture negotiation issues. As we like to say in Miami, we love living there because it's so close to the United States and you don't you don't need a passport. But what it meant, you know one side of that equation is that I grew up between two imaginary worlds. One was one was the 1950s and 60s Cuba my parents and grandparents and the community at large, this place, this homeland, this paradise where the sugar was sweeter and the salt

was saltier and the mangoes were tastier and the beaches were better, etcetera, etcetera. This wonderful place that we're going back to some day, so don't get too comfortable. Place I had never been, a place that I was from but I had never been, had no idea except through photos and and telegrams and letters that were still coming in. But the other imaginary place as I said, I grew up in Miami's unique cultural environment, I grew up in a very undiverse community.

[0:07:55] -verybody was Cuban. So, you know diversity is relative. 98% of my classmates were Cuban American kids just like me. The grocer was Cuban, the lawyer was Cuban, the gardener was Cuban, the mayor was Cuban, my family was Cuban, the neighbors were Cuban. So I didn't feel quite like we were in America and I think Miami still feels that way of course, but as a little kid that was especially, I thought America was some place we were going to eventually, I thought we were just waiting to really go to America. And and so that was the other imaginary world that I sort of created, a real imagined world and how I contextualize a lot of my sense to this day. I'm still adding to the Brady Bunch and Mary Tyler Moore and all these sitcoms. These shows, these reruns that were playing in the early 70s, are still playing. I really believed there was a Brady Bunch house out there that we were, I was going to live there someday. I really believed there were people like like like Marcia Brady and people like

[0:08:57] Michael Brady and [inaudible]. I believed there was a Little Beaver in every town in America and I really really believed this and it just added to the mythology of America and we were again working class you know immigrants. I, I never traveled till I was 25 so that continued to add to that sort of myth. Give you a little more insight into how, so I'm telling you all these things from a distance right, from retrospect. It wasn't like I was thinking of these things consciously when I was growing up. I was always a left-brain right-brain kid. I would draw flowers and then propulsion systems for jet engines that I was designing. I always would do something really left brainy and manly with Legos and then sculpt something abstract out of my Play-Doh and things like this. I scored exactly the same analytical and verbal sections of all those standardized tests. So when it came time to decide a career there were several factors involved, one, again, as a working class family struggling to just survive, the idea, we weren't

[0:10:02] talking about arts around the dinner table, the idea of the possibility of being a career in the arts was just completely outside the realm of possibility, it just didn't even enter. There's also a cultural divide. Had my parents even been into the arts, we would have been speaking of not of Robert Frost and Walt Whitman, but we would have been speaking about Jose Marti, Nicolas Guillen and Wifredo Lam and another sort of art art arts tradition, a Latin American arts tradition. So that wasn't presented either, I mean, Robert Frost was not around the dinner table. And then enter also my grandmother who was a very homophobic but a woman who was as homophobic homophobic as she was xenophobic. So anything that was culturally odd to her was also gay. Like things like Fruit Loops were gay because she didn't understand Fruit Loops. Play-doh was I gay, anything in English gay, Cub Scouts gay, uber gay.

[0:11:00] And then, so you can imagine, she lived with us for all my childhood, you can imagine when I said, I want to be a poet or a painter, no, ain't gonna happen, ain't gonna happen. So that was

another factor. So I, again, I went on and decided to study engineering, a lot of influences from my dad and whatnot. But in general our society supports these more traditional careers, and that's usually the message anyway. But it was when I started working as an engineer that I discovered language for the first time, really discovered language. I didn't realize how much writing was involved in my work, in my work, reports, studies, letters, proposals, about 70% of my job was based on writing and everything that was a plan needed to be somehow be translated into words to for the client or for for the contractor. I mean it all came down to words. And I started really falling in love with language and realizing it was a malleable thing, that it was a living thing, that it wasn't something that you can only

[0:12:04] write a sentence one way, but that you needed to write the sentence depending what you wanted to get out of the person at the other end. So the idea of audience, of tone, of diction, of all the stuff that I was just learned sort of on the job so to speak, and I just fell in love with language and then basically that's when my right [inaudible] graduated and had established a pretty fine career and starting excelling in my job because of the writing. I was the one getting the proposals, I was the one who had great client relations through my communications with them. So then my right brain came out to play and said, oh what can we do now? And I just started doodling poems, as I like to say, like any good 24-year old or 25-year old, these really horrible love poems and really horrible. Well, even then I was still had sort of an archaic sense of what poetry was, so I was like writing about daffodils as if they were daffodils in Miami, I'd never seen a daffodil in my life. I thought you know, the weary Wordsworth,

[0:13:04] you know, the things that I used to with still had from 101 famous poems textbook. So entered it as a very naively that eventually grew very very quickly to love poetry and get up to speed and a lot of people helped me along the way, a lot of people pointed me in the right direction. Eventually I get and I apply to masters in fine arts and creative writing at FIU who rejected me the first time. We laugh about it now.

[0:13:38] And I get into my very first writing course in my master's program and Campbell McGrath was my my buddy, my mentor, my everything, my voice inside my head, my editor, everything, the only person I've ever studied with. We read some Whitman and some Ginsberg and some Frost and he said here's your first assignment. Write a poem about America. Well, that was exactly what Obama said, you know, basically 20 years later, write a poem about America. So I don't mention this in the book because I didn't want to come across as a little cocky, but I did for about two minutes, I was a little cocky. I was like, I got this don't worry, I got this OB, I got this Obama, don't worry. Been writing about America, I felt, for three volumes of poetry. Because basically that was at the center of all my work, was this idea- what is my place at the table, what is cultural negotiation, who do, where do I belong in America, what is America, what is being Cuban mean, what does it mean being Cuban in America, where do I belong, where am I from?

[0:14:41] And these questions that in a sense were very personal but were also very universal to me, I realized in the end. In some ways they're questions we all ask of ourselves in some way, shape or form, at some point in our life, this idea of where do we belong. And by that it doesn't mean, it doesn't

mean as far as like, what country we belong but it could mean something as simple as what neighborhood in Seattle do we belong. And I'm just fascinated with that. I'm fascinated with that as an engineer as well, because what I do in engineering is change the hardscape to create community or sense of community, but that idea I think, is a perpetual human question. This idea, you know, we've been doing it since you know, it's in our literature, it's in our traditions of faith, you know, Garden of Eden, the promised land, it's in our literature at Avalon and Shangri-La. It's even in our pop culture in our songs, you know, *Country Road, Take Me Home, To the Land I Belong*, you know, John Denver. That sense of that, we

[0:15:38] are always seeking that place that makes us whole. It's a myth almost mythological proportions of what that search does for us and and how that idea of home changes throughout our lives. And I'm just fascinated about it. I think it's a constant thing that we don't even really always realize but that sense of home and why is your neighborhood feel good to you or not, or why did you choose to live where you live or why, etcetera, etcetera. So flash forward all this, as the book mentions, besides the besides the incredible journey of being inaugural poet, besides all the fanfare, besides all the creative turmoil and triumphs, besides all that, the greatest gift that the Inauguration gave me was to have a new sense of the place at the table in America. So that Little Ricky who had always been asking, you know, where am I from, that idea as an immigrant that you always feel, I'm not really quite American, a hundred percent American, America is some other little Beaver somewhere in some other town I've never been to. That

[0:16:44] sense of just being asked to read, to to address your country, is just an amazing amazing feeling and the sense of welcoming. That was just a complete surprise to me when I got up to that podium it all happened all at once. Until then, I was just making sure I didn't I wear I wore the same socks and and making sure all the pages of the poem were still in there. But that whole experience was cathartic in so many ways, but that is to me ultimately the greatest gift that the Inauguration gave me and also a renewed sense of hope which I think is reflected in the poem. Ironically your poetry sometimes premeditates your own conscious thoughts. That the idea, you know at some, at one point and this is a question that's been coming around a lot lately and I welcome more conversation about it. That it seems like my book is eternally optimistic and people have questioned, like how could you sort of be so optimistic when there's so much crap going on? But I got to tell you it was it's not I'm not you

[0:17:48] know, Little Orphan Annie and I'm not putting on my rose-colored lenses. But the idea of reconnecting with those ideals that I forgot from grade school, that little feeling of like when you first hear those words liberty and justice for all and and that sense that that that even though we're not there yet, and even though there's a lot of struggles and setbacks, that those founding principles are still intact. They are still there and they were there, in black and white, and during the Inauguration you really feel that, when you're present there. And this little golden box that nobody can touch and it's still a guiding light. Do we screw em up? Sure, we do sometimes, but the idea is that America is a story, just like I'm born. I tried, I tried to relate that metaphor in the book into the idea that I was born into a story. I was born, at 45 days old, and so much of my life was already decided for my parents and grandparents and I always I always think what if they never left Cuba, who would

[0:18:41] I be, you know, all these other decisions. Are you really plopped in the fifth act of the of a play and go, you know. And the same idea I think holds, I've realized, was true of America, that we're still in the middle of the story. The story hasn't finished and each each of us has to contribute a sentence, a chapter, something and that and to continue that narrative. Are there chapters we don't like and we want to erase? Certainly, but the story is not over and just like a nonprofit organization whose mission is set so high that probably the idea is that you set it high enough so that there's hundreds of years of struggle to get there, of working to make sure that ideal happens. I feel like those ideals are like the mission statement of America, those founding principles and that there's no need for angst because we we're working at every day. And sometimes sometimes you don't get the right donors. Sometimes you don't get that you have issues in your nonprofit world organization, but together it all

[0:19:45] hopefully moves forward and at the end of the day we take three steps forward and two steps back. Hopefully there's a forward momentum and I've certainly seen that in my my own lifetime. My selection, just sort of, have a moment of recognition. My selection as the first immigrant, the first Latino, the first gay, openly gay man, which if I wasn't by then, what a what a way to come out, but thank God I was. Would have been a great surprise to my mom.

[0:20:17] That my, my, yeah, I think the Earth trembled when that when that came out in the New York Times and there's an earthquake somewhere in Florida where she's buried. That wouldn't have been possible just ten years ago. That would have not been possible as much, whatever political motivation might have been behind it. That wouldn't have been possible just ten years ago and that gives me hope that you know, in some ways we are, we are still on mission, so to speak, we're all working towards that. So that's my Orphan Annie speech, but but I welcome that conversation because it's interesting how people, have have, the book, has caused some angst within them about like why can't I feel this way or or, how could he feel so positive about what happened, that experience, so hopeful, so pollyannaish? Maybe. Right, some questions and I'll read poems maybe as they come up, as questions come up.

“Thank you. Were you ever able to find out how or why you were selected? And if so, would you share that?”

“Sure.

[0:21:28] I really want to say something like, issue a press release like, Obama's like my third cousin or something like that. Just cause a scandal. No, I don't know yet. And as of the writing of the book, I didn't know. But I did meet the president, in the, he invited my partner and I to a meeting in the Oval Office and I was more nervous for that than the Inauguration. And amongst other things and he complimented me on the poem and saying Senator so-and-so and these people and how wonderful and people at work had said, given him feedback and what an amazing moment and on. And then he sort of looked at me squarely in the eye with a little hesitation, kind of saying, almost apologetic a little bit and said, well I got to be honest, you know, your work was brought to my attention. Which was his

subtle way of letting me know, don't ask cause I ain't going to tell you number one, and number two, if I think if he would have wanted to tell me exactly the details, that would have been the

[0:22:27] moment that he would have chosen to do that. So, I think they, the White House Administration, he, as well, prefers to remain in that, in the more romantic version of we, this is our poet, we found this this poet who represents America in such amazing ways and whatnot, as he's been quoted in in the press releases.

[0:22:51] And I also still prefer to him, of him, of thinking of him absorbed in the Oval Office with my book telling telling him, telling his chief of staff to cancel his meeting with Putin or whoever, he's like, I'm too much into this Blanco guy right now. Or him and the first lady snuggled in bed and and reading poems, you know and saying you should get this guy in here, honey. Somehow I always picture them in blue pajamas, I don't know, maybe his Democratic blue I guess, I'm not sure. So but I, I always end this with that, I can't help but think what really cinched the deal was that if I think if the president would have been born abroad, he would have been writing on similar themes as I do, what's my place in America. I mean his biography's more complicated than mine, he was made here, done there, I don't know what, there are still questions, but he wasn't born in America right, please. I really can't be president. That's for sure. But yeah, I can't help but think and I was always attracted to his story before his politics

[0:23:57] because of that very nature. I felt like we could have been, you know, the same two kids, you know asking the same questions like, why are why are we eating pork on Thanksgiving again? Like, you know something else going on at school, in the history books, in your home life is a complete other sort of experience and and wonderful mess, you know. That's right. She's picking."

"Thank you very much for coming to Seattle and being with us. So there are these two sides to you, the engineering side and the poet side. I'm an artistic son and his twin brother's an engineer and I don't know what happened. But what I'm wondering though is, as you look ahead, where are you going to put your energy, more toward one than the other or?"

"Yeah, sure."

"What, can you make money from both?"

"Well, I think I think it's a big fork in the road, obviously. I was a practicing engineer till December 12th, when I got the phone call. I have not, I have not looked at a set of plans since then. I've been busy, so happily busy and wonderfully,

[0:25:04] it's a great blessing. So, you know, I think I've come to terms that ultimately my legacy, if this, is sort of a higher power going, like all right, you should go this way. You know, I'm going to follow that. It scared, I'm a little bit hesitant, because again, you know, I've always been wired, I've always needed two sides of my brain working. I think it's how I work best. So I'm a little hesitant because I wonder what's going to happen with with my, you know, busy hands are happy hands.

That's kind of like goes for my left brain. If not, I start doing spreadsheets of like, you know, when optimal times to change the cat litter and like, you know, I start spreadsheeting and you know, probably file Mark, my partner somewhere, you know, I get really anal retentive. And sometimes I start taking it out on the work, on the poetry, that's happened in sometimes when I haven't been engineering. But since I have a lot of busy work now as a full-time poet, there's a lot of the business end of poetry now. I've

[0:26:02] never had to earn a living as a writer and and that's something new to get used to. But there's a lot of there's a lot of mundane wonderful details that I love preoccupying my left brain with and I think I'll be, that'll be my day job now, you know, this email, that email, sending this to that person, the blah blah blah blah and then still have my night job, my night job, my poetry, so so, but definitely I don't think there's any turning back.”

[0:26:30] “Yes, I was wondering about your mention of Sandy Hook and your poem and how that incident moved you to include it in your poem.”

“Yeah, certainly, I, I’ll elaborate elaborate on a little bit more than perhaps is in the book. You know, every every creative endeavor to me is an emotional endeavor and every time I sit down to write a poem, it's not just sort of an exercise, but there's something that needs to erupt, something that needs to come from my very soul. And to be honest and very candid, there were points in writing the Inaugural poem. Again, I had come to this point in my life, had moved to Maine, I felt as a sort of what we call in Spanish, [Spanish language], a person without land, it means literally, but it also means sort of a person without country. I don't, I always felt that I was always going to float between these imaginary worlds. And I was somewhat comfortable in that. When I got the assignment, I had to ask myself very very deep questions. Is this your country? I mean it's time to admit, you know, whatever,

[0:27:40] or get off the pot. I had to say, Richard, do you love America? Is this, as in the second poem, is this the country where you're going to choose to die? Because as a poet I couldn't write an honest poem unless I had had to answer those questions and if those questions were no, I was going to have to call and say, listen you need to find someone else because I can't write a poem for our country, for our country. Sure, I would have done that, but it felt that way, I needed to press myself. And in the circling around that, Sandy Hook happened, and for obvious reasons that we were all touched and all moved and we all,

[0:28:18] we all wanted to climb through that screen and go hug one of those parents, you know. And watching the ceremony and suddenly I felt like, yes, this is my family, this country is my family. I felt the sense of you know, it's of belonging and realizing how much I cared for America. And It's sad that it was through this tragedy, but I knew right then and there it opened what I call this emotional door that was able to say yes to the poem and yes to everything that I felt about America and Americans and the way that we come together in such amazing ways, for each other. And you can see where that led into the Inaugural poem right, community, being there, being part of a whole, being, everyone counts in some, in whatever way, we're all part of a a larger whole and that just opened the the floodgates for me emotionally. And so I knew then that I wanted to memorialize them in the poem and

do the best I could to make sure that there's always a reference throughout history for them and those parents and everyone

[0:29:19] else in in that town. That was a tricky thing because creatively you don't want to, you don't want to seem, it's like something archaic in the long run. So it has to be you know, it's a poetic sense. It's not, it's Sandy Hook, but it's sort of any child that's left behind, any child that is absent in some ways, because of our failures as a as a community perhaps or as a country.”

“As an Asian-American your appearance at the Inauguration made a strong positive impression on me. I would guess however that you probably got some negative reactions later because you're Cuban American and being gay. Would you speak to that? You know, what were some of these negative reactions, how did you address them?”

“Sure, it's a great question. And maybe that's part of my pollyanna, pollyannaish, pollyannaishness in the book. Zero.

[0:30:21] Unless my partner was hiding it from me.

[0:30:27] I, I was expecting it too. I was like, we crashed four Gmail accounts as messages of people like yourself from all over the country, from all parts of the world, immigrants in America and had, saying for the first time I felt like I belong in this country. That you know, that that from military personnel, from grade school kids, from people in, what's the name of the bus that, came from, from from assisted living facilities that that that groups that people are walking, Senior Living centers, where people were gathered around who had seen Frost. Who felt like like like just, so that whole spectrum of of people responded positively and I was waiting for those messages. I was waiting for them, to you know, you uhr, you uhr, you, you know, what do you think you are? Unless my partner hid them from me. The worst ever, and this is funny, there were some grammar Nazis.

[0:31:32] And I'm like, I don't know how to write English, I just know how to write. You know, I've never [inaudible] I can't, they don't know. Anyway, I'm not , I'm not going to like, embarrass myself. But and then another one who wrote me a letter which is kind of funny. He loved the poem and everything, but he had a great point, he'd like, the sun doesn't go all the way to Hawaii, which is where the president

[0:31:56] was born and I said look, I thought about it. But once I, I just said, I just said over the Rockies meant Hawaii too.

[0:32:08] That line, over the Rockies, as like it would have gotten a little ridiculous. If I you know, one more, one more, one more pass on that opening stanza would have been would have been a little too much. [Inaudible] Aloha? Yeah, we laughed and corresponded, but seriously, it was a, it was a wonderful surprise to me and a comment that was very powerful. Not one negative, you know, bigoted sort of response, might they have thought it, yes, are there people out there that probably

have thought it, yes, but just the idea that they didn't dare to vocalize it was is very powerful. [Phone ringing] Is that me?"

[0:32:54] "I'd like to thank you for writing the book. I read it in one sitting and then went back to read it again. But what I wondered is, when I was growing up, that wasn't poetry, poetry rhymed. And the first time I read a poem which wasn't rhyming, I said it really isn't a poem, it's a story, it's telling me something. And what I wondered is, how is poetry presented to children now, in the school system? Do they get the rhyming one, the blank verse one, do you have any idea about that?"

"I'm not I think obviously they start with with nursery rhymes, which is not necessarily poetry. Just because something rhymes doesn't mean it's poetry. So I think but I think they present them with, hopefully, I think my my whole problem or my whole new thing, issue that I want to take up is how do we bring the education of poetry up to speed? Because a lot of people sort of still hold that, still hold that, to that notion. We haven't been rhyming for decades. I mean it's and there's I mean, there's great, there's great figures of literature,

[0:34:00] of poetry spawned by our country and throughout the world that don't rhyme, at least not strictly. And you know, our poetry and literature like anything else has continued to evolve. It's not, it doesn't stay in one place stagnant. So if you look at, you know, what what art, what what Picasso did, versus what's contemporary art now, I mean this is the idea of conceptual. Art is just continued to, like everything else, it continues to evolve, if not it it's dead. And so, we certainly don't write the the way we did the way Wordsworth used to write so, you know, the idea of everything changes and it's an evolving art. So it's it's a poem, trust me. Part of it is and what I want to say to this for you and your own readings is that it's not that there, it is, it's not that there isn't rhyme anymore. It's just that we have stopped using specific rhyme patterns at ending rhymes. There's a lot of internal rhyme, there's a lot of imagery, there's a lot of rhythm that we pay attention to in poetry, internal rhythm of

[0:35:07] the line. There's a lot of all the same things that the poets have been worrying about for 300 years or more, we are still worrying about. That hasn't gone away, it's just that convention has changed. But what makes a poem and its soul, its essence, is still very much intact. There's still a lot that carries over. We're just finding new and exciting ways to create that. But poetry again, has evolved like any any other art in response to many things, mostly our consciousness, who, how human beings see themselves in the world and art as a reflection of that. And I think, I forget what what what author said something like, there's no more poetry after the Holocaust. You know, that sense that that you know, a rhyming poem after World War II, just, I mean World War II for example and yeah, I feel like I'm speaking out obviously, but what what I've been able to you know, think about how poetry has and literature has affected, I mean it shattered our whole system of so many different so many different ways. It shattered the visual

[0:36:15] art world, well it shattered poetry too, it turned poetry into on its head and and the idea of like sort of a rhyming poem that you know just didn't feel right in the consciousness of our humanity anymore. Plus, we just like to play with stuff, you know. I mean, like any artist, you just want to push things to a new level. But I I guarantee you that all the stuff that makes a great William, a great

Shakespeare poem is still in a contemporary poem. There's a lot more than just, right, imagery, the rhythm, all this is still, we still have vestiges of that that are very important in poetry."

[0:36:53] "So I could say you know, as everyone else has said, yay! thank you for writing this book. I so much appreciated your naming this poem an occasional poem. So when I first read, you know, occasion has two meanings and when I first read it, I thought a once in awhile poem, what is he talking about? And then I realized that you were talking about a poem for an occasion."

"An occasion right."

"Yeah, and I still..."

"It was new to me, that's what the press called it too, to me it's a poem. But yeah it is an occasional poem."

"An occasional poem, right. And it made me think about, you know, other contexts in which I have heard or delivered or written occasional poem, like occasional poems. I actually wrote a poem for a memorial for a friend of mine and that was an occasional poem and I didn't know what to call it until you named it in your book and now I know. I also wanted to point out to you that one of the things that I think is bubbling up is the use of poetry in scientific circles or technical circles. So I went to a lecture by Seattle Arts and Lectures

[0:38:05] and it was an oceanographer from the University of Washington and his whole presentation on the oceans, and he's a scientist, was peppered with poems that he read. They weren't his poems, but they were poems, there was visual art, and he even included music that he thought made a statement or illuminated what the ocean was about. I also do garden garden education. [Chris Higashi interrupts with a reminder about time]. Okay, and I always start my workshops with poems. So I just want you to know that that is permeating the culture in many places. And thank you for your impetus there."

"Well, I hope, well I hope to be part of that and that's kind of what's been happening since the Inauguration. In so many different ways. Someone just told me recently actually that NASA is requiring candidates, I think candidates for for for their school, to write a poem. I did a poem, a commissioned poem and a pitch commissioned occasional poem for the Tech Awards which are run by the Museum of Science and Technology in Silicon Valley with Google and the rest, which is the

[0:39:23] honor people are using technology for humanitarian purposes and solving problems. They asked me to write a poem and it was presented. I'm reading in engineering firms. I've seen that happen. It made me think of one other thing. I just was recently at a science a science research science as a keynote for research research science department at Purdue Affiliated University. It's insane what what's been happening with poetry and as my my confidant, publicist and I have been thinking, the arts and poetry is the new keynote because it gives everyone a grounding. And I got to tell you, I don't know if you all go to those conferences or whatever and it's kind of like they always

have sort of a keynote who is kind of either preaching to the choir basically. But some when you throw something out of there that's completely, somewhat related, like there's someone who can speak to the human condition and something else magical happens. If you create a better person, you create a better engineer, you create a

[0:40:26] better scientist, you create a better gardener, you create a better, etcetera. But certainly that's been that's been one of the wonderful legacies of the Inauguration. The Inauguration connects poetry and America in a way like nothing else does, at a scale that nothing else does. So people have been coming out of the woodworks, engineering firms, law firms, every kind of advocacy group, asked me to be keynote and and I just, the weirder the venue, the more I want to do it. Because I I now have sort of felt I have stepped into willingly into this position of, sort of almost evangelizing poetry or creating poetry converts to sort of dispel some of the myths or at least engage people in contemporary poetry. So that the because I saw so many eyes open up just from that moment of the Inauguration. People crying, as I mentioned in the book, coming up to me in the middle of the street and hugging me and crying and and the four, you know, four Gmail accounts, the drawings from grade school kids all over the world. Now, it might be

[0:41:29] the first time they ever heard a contemporary poem by a living author. If we can do that more often, if we could pass a law that every Inauguration has to have a poet. So I get very excited for poetry, you know, and that's kind of that sense of a greater purpose that I'm doing something for the art, not just for myself [inaudible] for my for my own glory or whatnot. It's really what keeps me going. You know, it's kind of like, it's kind of this, you know, it's kind of like having that that put out there, like what you just said, you know, understanding that poetry is is here. It's alive, its vibrant, it's vital, it's relevant.”

“Hi,

[0:42:12] I'm curious if you've been back to Cuba? And if you have any plans to write a book about your mother and her memories and her leap of faith to leave seven months pregnant. And I would also love to hear you read a poem before I have to go pick up my kids.”

“Okay, sure, that's a good point.

[0:42:32] I've been to Cuba several times, including the first my first book of poetry details my very first trip. It's funny because I always say return to Cuba, because it feels like a return, but of course I wasn't born there, but it felt like I'm born there. And it was amazing experience in many ways, it filled in a lot of blanks as I described in the book, you know, my mother my mother left her entire family, eight brothers and sisters, every aunt, every uncle, every niece and nephew behind and the third inaugural poem was very much inspired by her. But I write about her a lot and she already wants commissions. So if I write a book about her, she's, she said she should get royalties for all the inspiration she's spawned in me. So yeah, she is she is the way I trace my my lifeline and my storyline to Cuba and you know, I'm not too much of a hocus hocus pocusy kind of person, but I was

in her womb seven months when she made this journey and left her entire family. Got in a plane from Havana, never had, never flown

[0:43:34] in a plane before, to Madrid in November. I can't help but that I picked up all that all that mojo, you know, all that angst, all that feeling, I connect with her in that way, deep spiritually, emotionally so much. So she's in all throughout my my poetry for in various contexts and for very various reasons. So I'm going to share a poem about her. Why not? A short one and this is actually from my first book. And this is just comes comes to mind and it deals with that first instance that my mother became a human being, if you know what I mean. That first instance when you as a late teenager, or young adult realize, my God they're human. Like they they've suffered, they've made mistakes, they've done the best they could, they feel, they're sentient beings, and for me that moment came very quietly and unexpectedly while watching her at a supermarket and it's called *Mother Picking Produce*.

[0:44:45] She scratches the oranges and smells the peel, presses an avocado just enough to judge its ripeness, polishes Macintosh's, searching for bruises. She selects with hands that have thickened, fingers that have swollen with history around the white gold of a wedding ring she now wears as a widow. And like the archived photos of young slender digits captive around black and white orange blossoms, her spotted hands now reach into the colors. I see all the folklore of her childhood, the fields, the fruit she once picked from the very tree, the wiry roots she pulled out of the very ground. And now, among the collapsed boxes of yuca, through crumbling pyramids of golden mangoes, she moves, the same instinct and skill.

[0:45:50] This is how she survives death, and her son. These humble duties that will never change, all those habits of living which keep a life, a life. She holds up red grapes to ask me what I think, and what I think is this, a new poem about her, the grapes look like dusty rubies in her hands. But what I say is this, they look sweet, mama. Thank you. Thank you for that.”

[0:46:38] “Thank you so much for coming. I wanted to thank you for a new title, something I will be writing about. From the Mayflower to the Potato Famine to the Great Depression.”

“Is that something you're doing, something you're doing?”

“Yes, I'm going to now.”

“Oh great.”

“You've totally inspired me.”

“Good good. You know I imagine when you mentioned the Potato Famine you're speaking about Irish, your Irish ancestry. Yeah. You know, it's interesting because this is a conversation that sometimes comes up a lot and again, sort of the difference in in immigration and immigration communities and cultures depending on what, on the timing, you know in the United States and at a time where, for

example, my partner, my partner's grandmother is first generation born from Poland, born in America and yet they don't really talk about you know, not that they shy away from it, but you know my his his father only spoke, well, I should say and he's also German, German and French Canadian, it's never talked about. I mean, or I should say it's talked about, but

[0:47:44] it's not like, there's no curiosity. And I asked my partner Mark, don't you want to go to Poland, like Germany or like, you know Montreal, we live three hours away from there and look up your, you know, your great grandmother's home? And like and it was just it was a different time. You weren't allowed to be proud about that so much and and you know, I thank goodness. There's a poem in the in the second book, in the third book called *Of Consequence and Consequently*, which deals about being born to that story and about, you know, all the circumstances of my if you know if I would have been, I wouldn't be writing this kind of stuff had I been my grandparents' generation. There just wasn't a place for it. And it's amazing when you think of so much rich stuff that has been missed, so many stories that haven't been written. I especially think of the Italian immigrant group who have contributed in so many ways, I mean, It's just basically Americana, pizza I mean, you know. And yet there's such a such a poverty

[0:48:43] of that represented in literature. And it's so yes, please do, we need to remember those stories and put them down for for everyone, for America. We need you, we're we're missing a chapter.”

[0:48:56] “Hi both, I have two questions and both of them have to do with biculturalism. Like when I was coming in today, I was so happy not just with the beautiful weather but also that I could learn more in the next hour about a subject that I'm just thirsty to know more about. So which two authors in the past, or three, have you most identified with, people who were truly bicultural, you have a lot to pick from. And my second question is, do you think biculturalism with someone who's less talented than you are, often ends in overwhelm and people go to their grave just being impaled on their experience of biculturalism instead of enriched by it?”

“Okay great. I'll say that the first author that I ever read that actually gave me permission to write about my life figuratively speaking, you know, when I abandoned the daffodils, was Sandra Cisneros. Sandra Cisneros, who has about three books of poetry and a novel and several short stories. And she was really one of the one of the true sort of one of the first I should

[0:50:20] say truly sort of that that that told that story. It was and and so many kids have been inspired to say oh like I can write my story too. That I didn't have to write about daffodils, that I could write, when my assignment come, you know came, which was write a poem about America, I ended up writing about why you know, why why are we eating pork on Thanksgiving and and talking about that and my biculturalism, my confusion and my yearnings and my all the rest. So I think that's that's one one person. To answer your question honestly, and this is something that I think we should all think about.

[0:51:01] In literature, okay, it's it's odd because what I'm going to tell you is odd, but trust me or maybe it's just me that I'm odd, craziness and weird. But I, there's an attraction to the other, like your attraction to what you're saying to me. Well, I have the same attraction to Elizabeth Bishop, is one of my greatest influences, you wouldn't think. *It's a Good Life*. Robert Haas. These are people that inspired my work for the same reason that in *I Love Lucy*, who did I like? I mean, we all know why we all like Lucy but you would think that it's like that I would really like Ricky Ricardo. I hated Ricky Ricardo, he was just like a goofball, like I knew Ricky Ricardo. Ricky Ricardo was everyone in my family basically, you know. I wanted something different. I wanted to see what other people thought of the world and how they, they looked at it and how they constructed a poem. And how... So the same attraction to the other, being the other, you're actually attracted to the other. So a lot of those influences have come

[0:52:03] in that way because I know my story, you know, and yes, I enjoy, you know, I enjoy several Latino authors and whatnot, but not, and every experience is unique and especially amongst immigrant groups and Latino groups. I mean, this is complete different histories and whatnot, but I get it. You know like, I get it too much and so it feels like just like my audience is not Cubans. I don't write for Cubans. They know what, they know their lives. I write to take my experience and share it with the others to help them, perhaps understand some and to understand how my experience is in some ways universal. I think all arts strive to make that universal, that that universal connection, finding that common human denominator because whether you're Irish or Polish or German or Cuban or Italian or if you came on the Mayflower, we've been writing about the same thing since the dawn of of time, right. Love, hate, sex, betrayal, anger, loss, all those same things, just the scenery changes."

"Hi Richard."

"Hi Carolyn."

"I just wanted

[0:53:13] to ask since you know, we first met in Miami all those years ago and I experienced the Cuban community there. How has the Cuban community responded to your work, beyond family? I mean, you just said you don't necessarily write for Cubans. And of course the hispanic community involves people from Chile, Argentina, Central America, Venezuela, all over, but how has the Cuban community beyond the family responded?"

"Surprisingly, amazingly, it's kind of the same as your question about, I was expecting like, you know a bunch of backlash or whatnot. Surprisingly, amazingly, and I think it was a sign, I don't know when the last time you went to Miami, but it was a sign of how much Miami has changed. I was fretting that there'd be all these questions, the same old dumb questions about the embargo and what do you think about Castro and blah blah blah. I was like, nobody asked me about Castro and nobody asked me about the embargo, nobody asked me about... They were just so overjoyed and that that you know, our little son of Miami

[0:54:19] has been selected for that. It was it was insane though. It mean it was, I was watching it from afar because obviously I'm living in Maine, but my whole family's life stopped and there are news vans parked, you know across the street everyday. My neighbors thought my mom had won the lotto because when the news went out, like there are eighteen vans, like like SWAT teams surrounding my mom's house. People bribing my brother to get my cell phone number. My brother had to stop his work and just take care of my mother and schedule interviews an and it was beautiful. It was beautiful. So I do say that some of the, and just between you and I, I do say that some and this is the only thing that hurt me a little bit, and I won't mention any names. But that the very very some very old time Cuban American or Cuban politicians that even that from South Florida or from Florida in general, Cuban, my parents' age Cuban or my grandparents' age Cuban. Some of them didn't bother even to say well congratulations. And that I did, that

[0:55:30] was the only only sort of little tinge that I thought, you know, you can't put politics aside for a minute. It it really stung a little bit because it was like, I'm your son. You know, I'm I'm I'm the product of our community and this moment has nothing, my selection in some ways, yes, it's a political it's political but it's not, you know, it's like you can't be proud about something great. You have to stick to the party line like to do that. So that was the only thing that sort of I felt a little a little sad about and I mean not even sad but just that I noticed I should say. But it was amazing is Dade Dade County was a blue state this year, I mean during the presidential election. And I think a lot of it exactly what you say, the influences are a lot of Venezuela and Colombia and all the other Latin American countries has really cosmopolitanized, can't believe I just said that, did I say it right? Cosmopolitanized Miami in a in a great way, because I think there's more sharing of ideas plus

[0:56:25] the older generation. And I don't say this, because I respect my older generation, I think they have, they have, everyone in America has a right to, sort of, to sort of feel what they want to feel and and the older generation is a different experience than my generation and they just have a lot of hurt feelings and a lot of loss and whether they were responsible for for that being the case or not. But there are a lot of things, people, I always see people getting caught in the crossroads of histories and things that that affect their view on life, but I honor them too, you know, the older ones. I think, you know, Miami gets an unfair rap sometimes as just being this right-wing like neighborhood thing. There, there's historical reasons why they've shifted and sort of hold on to that space and in some ways they're also puppeted by larger groups to keep on feeling that way instead of moving towards healing or connection. But I think that's all that's all a matter of days, I think. I think it's really it really has to, there's

[0:57:25] no, there's no way, but it's a start changing, it already has I think.”

[0:57:31] “Actually, I was just going to ask you to read *One Day* because I think you...”

“*One Today*, sure, and we'll take a question and then read, that last question and then we'll read. I'll try to be brief.”

“I wonder if you’d speak a little bit about language. I’m intrigued that in your wonderful memoir, all of the poems were translated. Did you do the translation and what about the difficulty? When when I read them there was a different flavor sometimes in one than the other. How do you manipulate that?”

“I, I didn't translate it. Because number one, I didn't have the time, number two, I didn't want to, I didn't want to mess with that. I mean the the poem was too important to not hire a professional translator. My my Spanish, I've always known two languages, I've, I don't ever remember not knowing two languages. Because I got here when I was 45 days old because if we were poor, basically I was probably in daycare by two. And I remember Jay, my little African American friend is the one that taught me English every day. And my parents

[0:58:33] would ask me, by the time I was three years old, my parents were asking me, how do you say this? How do you say that? So I never remember a space where I didn't know two languages, but I was raised, I was educated in English. So Spanish is a much weaker language. It's the language of the home. It's the language of [Spanish language], you know like, it's it's an eighth grade Spanish, so to speak. I can communicate perfectly with everyone and...”

“So you don’t write poetry in Spanish?”

“I do write in Spanish, but I write it as a reflection of of a bilingual mind, but I would never hold myself up to the like of the traditions of Latin American poetry proper in terms of Neruda or Borges or anything of this nature because it's a whole different tradition. I write it usually when I go to Cuba and I start thinking in Spanish a lot, as a tribute to something that's happening in the moment that feels like it's happening because it is happening, in Spanish. And what I like to do is translate some of them in my own work and I usually try to include a

[0:59:26] poem or two from that experience. I like to translate my own work, but what I do is I'll start translating line by line or a couple lines at a time and changing it in the English if it doesn't work, then reverse translating it and changing it in the Spanish. And if it doesn't work in the Spanish and I change it in Spanish and then go back into changing the English and this is ping-pong. And it's just it's just a great exercise because I'm finding a language in between the two languages somehow, which is where I exist emotionally right. I exist between languages and so when you read the poem and the book, it looks like a literal translation, but they're really co-created in a way. So that's one little thing I like to do, but you can only do that with your own work, you know. And one thing I learned in the translation was a great experience, was gerunds are apparently like vulgar to the ear in Spanish. So I get the poem back in a different tense like and I love gerunds and ing verbs and in English

[1:00:25] they actually have the opposite effect, they keep the motion going where in Spanish it bogs down the rhythm and it starts sounding vulgar, vulgar to the ear. So that was really funny. Like I was like and yeah, there were terms like that just couldn't, we had to make compromises because there were terms especially with the first poem, that one, the first of the three, that one was had so many cultural references, had so many entrenched weird syntax that there was in there and really twisted

syntax. That one was the most difficult. One more, maybe her, I don't mind staying a little later, Chris, that's that's fine."

"Thank you. What language do you dream in?"

"English."

"English."

"Yeah, occasionally, I think if I spent... [phone message sound interrupts]"

[1:01:16] I think I remember, I think I remember dreaming in Spanish every once in a while. It probably happens when I'm in Cuba, when you're there long enough, you start thinking in Spanish before English. Otherwise, I'm always, most of the time, not when it's simple sentences or simple things but when it's more complex thoughts, I always have to think of them in English. It was hell during the interviews. I mean I did probably like two two dozen interviews during the Inauguration and I had to like go from, I'd tell my publicist something like, okay is is this one, is the next one English or Spanish? He's like, Spanish. Okay, start talking to me in Spanish, I don't want to hear any English for like 10 minutes because I had to like go into Spanish mode and I had to stop trying to sound as eloquent in Spanish as I would in English in presenting these complex ideas because then inevitably I would get, so I had to like really keep it simple like si, non. I had to really keep it simple, and I had to make mental

[1:02:10] notes. Okay, you know my work has been about cultural negotiation and the idea of like, I was like [unintelligible] and I just had to dumb it down because otherwise I was just so yeah, but I do think in Spanish, in some ways, little pieces, I cuss in Spanish. All right, *One Today*. I don't know what I can tell you about this poem that you don't know already, that's in the book. I will say that this poem keeps on, at at some point as you read in the book that at one point, *One Today* wasn't my favorite and my mother's was my favorite. Over time because poetry is amazing how it starts again revealing to the, to its own author all these subconscious elements that were in there and I've realized that this poem is one of the most personal poems I've ever written. That that wish that wish to be home that sense of home and belonging that I, that has been carried in my heart since the day, you know, I wrote my first poem is exactly what's in this poem and that while I was wishing

[1:03:15] that for all of us, I hadn't realized, that all of us, *One Today*, that all of us meant me too. That that it was my wish to come sit at the table with everybody else to be part of that *One Today*. Until then, it hadn't really hit me. What I wish for myself is what I was wishing for our country, was wishing for every one of us, so...

[1:03:38] *One Today*

[1:03:45] One sun rose on us today, kindled over our shores, peeking over the Smokies, greeting the faces of the Great Lakes, spreading a simple truth across the Great Plains, then charging over the

Rockies. One light, waking up rooftops, under each one, a story told by our silent gestures, moving behind windows. My face, your face, millions of faces in morning's mirrors, each one yawning to life, crescendoing into our day: pencil-yellow school buses, the rhythm of traffic lights, fruit stands: apples, limes, and oranges arrayed like rainbows begging our praise. Silver trucks heavy with oil or paper, bricks or milk, teeming over highways alongside us, on our way to clean tables, read ledgers or save lives, to teach geometry or ring up groceries as my mother did for twenty years, so I could write this poem, for us today.


[1:05:12] All of us as vital as the one light we move through, the same light on blackboards with lessons for the day: equations to solve, history to question or atoms imagined, the "I have a dream" we keep dreaming, or the impossible vocabulary of sorrow that won't explain the empty desks of twenty children marked absent today, and forever. Many prayers, but one light breathing color into stained glass windows, life into the faces of bronze statues, warmth onto the steps of our museums and park benches as mothers watch their children slide into the day. One ground. Our ground, rooting us to every stalk of corn, every head of wheat sown by sweat and hands, hands gleaning coal or planting windmills in deserts and hilltops that keep us warm, hands digging trenches, hands routing pipes and cables, hands as worn as my father's cutting sugarcane, so my brother and I have books and shoes. The dust of our farms and deserts, our cities and plains mingled by one wind--our breath. Breathe.

[1:06:54] Hear it through the day's gorgeous din of honking cabs, buses launching down avenues, the symphony of footsteps, guitars, and screeching subways, the unexpected song bird on your clothesline. Hear: squeaky playground swings, trains whistling, or whispers across cafe tables, Hear: the doors we open for each other all day, saying: hello, shalom, buon giorno, howdy, namaste or buenos dias, in the language my mother taught me--in every language spoken into one wind carrying our lives without prejudice, as these words break from my lips. One sky: since the Appalachians and Sierras claimed their majesty and the Mississippi and Colorado worked their way to the sea. Thank the work of our hands: weaving steel into bridges, stitching another wound or uniform, the first brush stroke on a portrait, or the last floor on the Freedom Tower jutting into a sky that yields to our resilience. One sky, to which we sometimes lift our eyes tired from work: some days guessing at the weather of our lives, some days giving thanks for a love that

[1:08:38] loves you back, sometimes praising a mother who knew how to give, or forgiving a father who couldn't give what you wanted.

[1:08:53] And so we head home:

[1:08:58] home through the gloss of rain or weight of snow, the plum blush of dusk, always always--home, always under one sky, our sky. And always one moon like a silent drum tapping on every rooftop and every window, of one country- all of us--facing the stars and hope--a new constellation, waiting for us to map it, waiting for us to name it--together.



[1:09:56] [Applause] You're very welcome. I just want to make one small comment. Those of you, I saw some of you following along, what did you notice? [inaudible]

[1:10:00] I just want to make that little important moment, point out the the how reading poetry alive and how as I've read this poem more and more, the poem's still speaking to me, it's still, I improvise, much like when you hear recorded song and from your favorite person, you go to the concert and you see them go into a rift and when when you play the song live it tells you what it wants to do. And so and so, there's a little improvisation even in poetry and I just want to make that point of the great sort of oral [inaudible], the oral tradition. That's the DNA of poetry, it's meant to be read out loud. Thank you."

[1:10:49] This podcast was presented by the Seattle Public Library and Foundation and made possible by your contributions to the Seattle Public Library Foundation. Thanks for listening.

