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0:00:02 Speaker 1: I don't know. Say it with me. "I don't know!" Good God, it is liberating! I am a towering mountain of ignorance! I don't know! We're taught to believe that everything has a reason. And so we observed the world, we see what happened, and then we defined the thing that happened as the reason the thing happened. But I think a lot of the time, we end up mixing up thinking something with knowing something. This is why it can be so impossible to talk about certain topics with certain people.

0:00:28 S1: They've tied those suppositions to themselves so tightly with knots of narrative and constructed reality and values, that there is just no untying it. And maybe, unsurprisingly, in those situations, the best course of action is just to be friends. Maybe even ask them about that thing that they've created, because to them, it's immensely valuable. The world as we perceive it, as we've built it inside of ourselves is a lie that we tell to ourselves, not out of deception, but out of necessity. We have no other choice. We simply cannot understand the world as it is and so we construct, but sometimes I just have to tell myself the thing that is definitely true, the truest thing I can say, which is that I don't know.

[music]

0:01:17 Speaker 2: This is the Everyone's Agnostic podcast with Bob Pondillo and Cass Midgley.

[music]

0:01:42 Cass Midgley: Welcome everyone. I'm Cass Midgley. This is the weekend of June 6th, 2015. Bob and I have taken some time off to do some fun things with family and friends so I'm pulling out of the archives. Back on April 4th, I taped a few random interviews at the American Atheists Convention in Memphis. So today, I'm posting a few selections from that experience. The first, is a nine-minute interview with Dave Kong. Kong was personal friends with Madalyn Murray O'Hair, the founder of American Atheists, and he has witnessed the movement from the beginning. And for those who may have little exposure to Madalyn, I've posted an 11-minute excerpt from a speech she gave at the 1972 convention, 10 years after she founded the movement.

0:02:24 CM: Next is a six minute interview with comedian Keith Lowell Jensen, who performed a stand up routine at the conference. I've also tacked on a three-minute excerpt of a bit he performed there. Keith has his own podcast called "It's Funny Because," available on iTunes and Facebook. Lastly, I play a fascinating talk given by Dr. Jennifer Michael Hecht called "Poetic Atheism". She wrote a book that changed my life called "Stay: A History of Suicide and the Arguments Against It." She argues that to say there is no meaning in life, or that we have to make our own seems misguided and that meaning has always been a part of community and culture. We need not

invent it.

0:03:08 CM: She earned her PhD from Columbia University in the History of Science and European Culture. She's also the author of a book called "Doubt: A History: The Great Doubters and Their Legacy of Innovation from Socrates and Jesus to Thomas Jefferson." Also another book, "The Happiness Myth: The Historical Antidote to What Isn't Working Today." I think you're gonna enjoy Dr. Hecht's talk and overall the hodgepodge of my experience from American Atheists convention. Today's beautiful segue music is performed by a friend of the show, Nikolay Gavlishin. Subscribe to our podcast on iTunes, Stitcher, TuneIn, and most podcast platforms. If you're feeling grateful for our podcast, patreon.com is like a tip jar for our work. That's patreon.com/eapodcast. I hope your life is enhanced by this episode. Thanks for listening and be a yes sayer to what is.

[music]

0:04:15 CM: So what's your name?

0:04:17 Dave Kong: My name's Dave Kong.

0:04:19 CM: Kong?

0:04:19 DK: Kong, K-O-N-G like the big gorilla.

0:04:21 CM: King Kong?

0:04:22 DK: Yes.

0:04:23 CM: I'm Cass.

0:04:24 DK: Hey, nice to meet you.

0:04:24 CM: Good to meet you. So you were raised religious but...

0:04:28 DK: Yeah. Raised in a Episcopalian church. I always suspected something because my dad never went to church, except on Easter and Christmas. And my mom went to church, but we used to go to midnight mass. She'd come up with some excuse to go to the bathroom with me and we'd just much hang out in the bathroom and pretty much miss the sermon.

0:04:48 CM: So neither one of them were very serious?

0:04:49 DK: Neither one of them seemed to be very serious about it, which it never really occurred to me 'til later in life. And then, when I was about eight, and I know those people, they would say, well, this is a really foolish reason, but I'd come across the book "Chariots of the Gods", and I'd read it and I said,

"Well, I don't necessarily really believe the whole alien thing," but what he's basically saying are that if these stories in the Bible actually happened, there had to be some sort of scientific basis for it. So I very quickly said, "Well, if that's the case, then there really are no gods." And so I told that to my mom. At the time, she told me, "Oh you're wrong, you're very very wrong."

0:05:21 CM: At eight years old?

0:05:22 DK: At eight years old. And so I just kind of shrugged it off and then never, didn't really give it too much thought, continued to go to church with her. And then when I was 15, I formed an atheist rock band.

0:05:31 CM: Okay.

0:05:32 DK: And so of course, we're working on my band, and one night my mom comes up to me, and she says, "You know I've been thinking about it. You're right." She said, "There is no God." And so, score one for mom. That was cool.

0:05:42 CM: Yeah, very much.

0:05:43 DK: And then my band, at one point... I grew up in Des Moines, Iowa. And we finally had a big gig at Adventureland theme park. So we did the advertising with these flyers about the band and didn't really say anything about being anti-religion. Well, we did have a joke at the bottom that said, "Distributors to religious publications will be bodily evicted." You know, clearly a joke. It caused an uproar. I could not believe it.

0:06:04 CM: Just that little subject?

0:06:05 DK: That little thing and suddenly, parents started calling my mom, churches started calling my mom, principals of schools were calling my mom.

0:06:11 CM: Tell me again what it said?

0:06:13 DK: It said, "Distributors to religious publications will be bodily evicted."

0:06:15 CM: So tracks, people giving out tracks would be bodily removed?

0:06:18 DK: Yeah. So parents were calling my mom, the sheriff's department called my mom. And she just said, she just told, "I agree with my son. Piss off." And hung up.

[chuckle]

0:06:28 DK: And finally Adventureland said, "Oh well this is too hot to

handle. Here's your money back." And we just said, "Oh, we were clearly on to something. Let's go to California."

[chuckle]

0:06:37 CM: Yeah, you would've thought that they would like... Sometimes the controversy brings out more people sometimes.

0:06:42 DK: Oh, yeah, well this was Iowa in what, 1979? Or something like that. They were hardly ready for it.

0:06:47 CM: Even now, Iowa is probably pretty conservative.

0:06:49 DK: And even then, we were not...

0:06:52 CM: It was a joke.

0:06:53 DK: Yeah. And we didn't consider ourselves an atheist band. We just like, well, we do our little anti-religious thing and it's just fun. It's... Boys will be boys, it's good, clean fun, what's the harm in it? And then we moved out to California and started playing. And suddenly, it's in the mid '80s at this point, and then suddenly, we're at these gigs and people are going, "Hail, Satan" and giving us the devil horn sign. And we were just embarrassed. We're not into that and nor do we want to be associated with that. So we just declared ourselves an atheist band. And before I'd left Des Moines, we'd seen... Had the fortune to see Madalyn O'Hair speak at Drake University, a rather famous speech that she gave. And so when I was in California, I finally contacted her and said, "Hey, my band is an atheist band, could we sign up under the family plan for American Atheists?" And she was fine, she said, "Yeah, go ahead" and we signed up. So we were proud, card-carrying American Atheists members.

0:07:40 CM: What year was that?

0:07:40 DK: It was... It had to be in like '82, '83.

0:07:43 CM: Wow. So you've been a part of this for a long time.

0:07:45 DK: Oh absolutely.

0:07:46 CM: You've probably been to several of these conferences? This is my first conference.

0:07:49 DK: Yeah. Well that's just it. I went to a conference in '88 to promote our upcoming album and it was in Minneapolis. And Madalyn was really good, she'd put in a couple of notices about our band in her newsletter here from time to time. And I went to the convention for the first time. And everybody knew who I was, "Oh you're that guy in that band."

0:08:07 CM: Wow. Was Madalyn one of the founders of it? Or..

0:08:10 DK: Oh she was definitely the founder of American Atheists. Yeah.

0:08:11 CM: See, I didn't realize that.

0:08:12 DK: Oh, absolutely. She was a firebrand. You talk about the firebrands we have now, she was a firebrand.

0:08:18 CM: Yeah, I've watched some old YouTubes of her.

0:08:20 DK: Yeah, she was incredible.

0:08:22 CM: So I guess my question is, you've watched it evolve over the years?

0:08:26 DK: I have. I absolutely have.

0:08:27 CM: What's different? What's good? What's bad? How's it improved?

0:08:30 DK: It's exploded, are you kidding?

0:08:32 CM: So the numbers.

0:08:33 DK: Yeah. Well, right before Madalyn retired... Disappeared, she put me on the National Board so I was on the National Board for like 13, 19. I had... Lost track of the years at this point. But then I retired slightly before Dave Silverman became President. I've just watched everything just grow and explode. I've seen her visibility within the general culture, just improve. There's atheist characters on TV all the time. In fact, if anything, they mock the religious, and it's just really a good thing to see.

0:09:00 CM: So you sense there might be grassroots movement. Like there's something changing, even in America.

0:09:05 DK: Oh, absolutely. Yeah. And part of it, I must say, was the agreement of all the various atheists and free thought groups to cooperate. Because when I started out, they weren't cooperating. And in California, with Bobbie Kirkhart, we were one of the first states to say, "Hey we really have to work on these things together, or we're gonna all be screwed."

0:09:24 CM: Yeah, maybe Jesus was right, a house divided against itself will not stand. [chuckle]

0:09:28 DK: I'm sure you could quote other people with similar quotes. But yes.

0:09:33 CM: You still have rock and roll hair. Are you still a musician?

0:09:35 DK: I still have rock and roll hair. The band folded, the hair didn't.

0:09:39 CM: Okay. So what have you been doing since? What do you do for a living?

0:09:42 DK: For a living? I work for a law firm. I do computer work for a law firm.

0:09:46 CM: So you're like their tech guy?

0:09:47 DK: I'm their tech guy, yeah. I'm it. I'm IT.

0:09:52 CM: Is it usually, I guess... What do we got, I guess about 750 people here?

0:09:56 DK: That's what I've heard, something like that.

0:09:57 CM: Is that pretty normal in the last few years? Or does it get bigger every year?

0:10:01 DK: It varies. After the Reason Rally, we had a huge convention in DC, and the next one was pretty big. This one's just a little bit smaller. But they wax and wane.

0:10:11 CM: Two steps forward and one step back.

0:10:12 DK: Right, yeah. I mean when we first started doing conventions after Madalyn had disappeared, we were clocking at like 200-300 people. So this is definitely an improvement. And just frankly, just the local grassroots activism is just amazing. I mean that certainly wasn't around in my days.

0:10:28 CM: I think you're right. I think you're onto something, that we're getting better at organizing.

0:10:32 DK: But I also really agreed with JT Eberhard's speech last night where he was saying now that we're getting larger as a movement, we can't let various philosophical differences suddenly split us apart. And that...

0:10:43 CM: That's a good point.

0:10:44 DK: That would definitely be our downfall.

0:10:45 CM: Which is what has happened to religion, right? Because it's like, "Well, do you immerse in baptism? Or do you sprinkle? Do you speak in

tongues? Or do you not?" I mean they found a thousand reasons to split open, and they ended up very being splintered. But yeah, so if we can just say, "Look, we just want..." What do you think are the main things? Separation of church and state? I mean what are the main platforms that American Atheists...

0:11:08 DK: Yeah, well, American Atheists has always stood on the platform of complete and absolute separation of church and state. And that was always their main thrust, and then also the work to protect it and enforce atheists' civil rights.

0:11:18 CM: Yeah. Keep the nativity scene off the public lawn.

0:11:24 DK: Yes. And some people say, "Oh that's just, you're just arguing over petty stuff". But symbolism is important, that's why it's there.

0:11:31 CM: Well, the Constitution's important.

0:11:31 DK: Yeah, exactly. Yes.

0:11:35 CM: Well, thanks for talking to me.

0:11:36 DK: Hey, it's been a pleasure.

[music]

[pause]

0:11:49 CM: So that's my talk with Dave Kong. He's an energetic guy. He was a lot of fun to talk to, really fast. I had seen him the night before they had a little costume party, and he was fully painted in gold paint, and I don't know if he was... I really don't know what character he was supposed to be, but he was a lot of fun to talk to. I thought it was interesting that he questioned God at eight years old and never looked back. But this was his 27th conference to attend and he's been on the board of American Atheists for over 20 years. He's no longer on the board but he served for over 20 years. Just an interesting talk.

0:12:31 CM: Next up I'm gonna play a clip from Madalyn Murray O'Hair, a talk she gave in 1972 at the the American Atheists conference. She surveys different types of atheists. She doesn't like atheists at all, is how she starts out. She resents atheists being called "negative." She breaks down the four... Well, let's see, how many types here, several types of atheists: Primitive, which is just kind of starting out; philosophical, which are kind of braniacs; practical, hateful... She doesn't like hateful atheists. Fanatical atheists, she doesn't like, and lastly what she calls "Maslovian," which I have to think means self-actualized or something. But she ends the talk with, or at least this

portion of the talk, with my favorite poem, "For Whom the Bell Tolls" by John Donne. So here's Madalyn Murray O'Hair, 1972.

0:13:37 Madalyn Murray O'Hair: I'm asked to speak to you tonight on the question, is atheism the religion of the future? No. That ends that speech. [laughter] Why atheism won't be the religion of future is a subject that's very dear to me, and we need only to consider the atheist to discover the answer. And that's what I'm here to do tonight, consider the atheist. I don't like atheists very much, if at all. This is highly unusual, given that I am their principal and most articulate spokesman in America. And what brought this situation about and why they cannot be the Messiahs in our culture is the subject matter of my discussion this evening.

0:14:30 MM: Since the prefix "a-" in a word of Greek derivation gives a negative sense to that word, an atheist is simply a person who is not theistic, whatever theistic means. And I recognize, and I'm sure you recognize, what Webster has to say and it's always important to make a reference back, that theism is a belief in the existence of God or gods, especially belief in the existence of one God viewed as the creative source of man, whatever creation means to the astronomers, or physicists, or to you, or to me, as the creative source of man and the world, who, not which, but who, transcends, yet is imminent. And I don't know what transcends means. I do not know what imminent means, and for that matter, I do not know what eternal means, or create means, or transmigration, or grace, or prayer, or God. And I don't think anybody else in the world knows.

0:15:46 MM: These are nonsense words, which has special esoteric nonsense meanings to theistic idiots of all brands. Now an atheist is a person who simply does not accept that view, the view of theism, as I said, whatever it is, and properly stands in opposition to it. Because "a-" used as a prefix is a privative and negates the word. Now many people say that atheists are negative because of their appellation, but the prefix "in-" gives a negative sense to a word too, as in "independence," and is in fact a negative word. It simply means free of dependency, and independence is a treasured word in American culture, as someday, the word "atheist" will be. To use a negative derivation does not mean that the philosophy of living, the Weltanschauung flowing from it is in any sense, negative. Only the most uneducated would have so little respect for language as to make such a gross supposition. But everything depends on what one means.

0:17:12 MM: Let's look at atheists, known according to the degree of guts they possess also as agnostics, ethical culturists, humanists, free thinkers, objectivists, secularists, rationalists, iconoclasts, and God alone knows how many other names to hide what they are. But tonight I'm going to call them all "atheists" because fundamentally they are against a theism. There are primitive atheists, philosophic atheists and practical atheists, and I have been all three. There are also hate-ridden atheists who usually convert from

Catholicism, fanatical atheists who usually convert from Jehovah's Witnesses, and the primitive atheists, I meet everywhere in great numbers today, usually on campus.

0:18:15 MM: A primitive atheist is one who comes of intellectual age, does a double take at Christianity, finds it to be incredible as any thinking person would, and announces, "I don't believe all that crap," and lets it go at that. These people usually join the Unitarian church, [laughter] or the Ethical Culture Society, and live happily ever after with substituted dogmas, creeds, and routines to fill a gap they imagine was left in their lives. They float around in a small esoteric group, which plays the game of discussion in private, specifically the game of "We exceptional few, and are superior" philosophy. The philosophic atheist does a triple take of Christianity and gets hopelessly bogged down in reading Bible, King James, Standard, revised, renewed, re-edited, re-interpreted.

0:19:30 MM: And then, he turns to the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Torahs, the Book of Mormons, Science of Life, [0:19:38] Urantia, I Ching, and other holy books, all of which are trash. He knows the teleological argument for God or the ontological argument, or the epistemological argument, or the pragmatic, or the moral argument, and how to refute them all in excess. He delights in a two-hour discussion of Pascal's choice, and he can use up hours of priceless living time analysing all of the religious theories, history-diverse theologies. These people have been 10 years in the American Humanist Association and they live happily ever after, deeply immersed in obscurism, reading in depth the genteel, erudite, and completely worthless articles in the journal of that society. They play the game of beating ideas to death with words, and they usually flaunt PhDs. I need to delineate the other kind of atheist too, the one who has a hatred reaction to it all.

0:20:53 MM: He can recite an extraordinary number of incidents, where priests were discovered to be living carnally with their housekeepers, or he gleefully collects news items, where ministers appropriated \$15.73 from the roofing fund, or where ministers were named as correspondents in divorce cases, or where a young choir boy accused the male director of indecent advances. All of these people belong to the Friendship Liberal League. This type of atheist never gets beyond his hatred and usually, this atheist has a trauma conversion to atheism, and not an intellectual one, and he can well have a trauma conversion back to theism, and proliferate these atheists do through every other category of atheist. Then there is the sectarian atheist, who flourishes only in bitter internecine warfare in the atheist groups and in factional strife therein, about who is the better atheist, and they all belong to the American Rationalist Association, and a great number of them belong to the United Secularists of America.

0:22:11 MM: Then there is another atheist, a Maslovian type, who just has a natural human thrust to what is healthy and natural in life. His is a gut

reaction, as well as an intellectual one. He has a way of life, an underlying basic positivism. He is grounded in life and its natural rules. He has a free-wheeling, open-ended philosophy. His emphasis is on the worth of the individual, his human dignity, his intelligence, his ability to order his own life, his ability to enjoy the emotions with which he is endowed. And his emphasis is on reason, life experience and common sense.

0:22:58 MM: His life, this atheist, is unadorned with creeds, dogmas and rituals. He does not feel that he is a part of a chosen people, but only a part of mankind. He knows no sacrificial redemptions, he bends no knees, and he bows no head. He is as negative as Columbus, who denied the flat Earth. He is as destructive as was Galileo, who saw the Earth as a part of a whole. He is as anti as a physician curing a disease. He is interested in here and now, not in fantasy, and he sees religion, theism, as simply being irrelevant to human life. He has no negative emotion-laden reaction to religion, simply because that isn't worth his time. And I am here tonight, I am certain, with this type of atheist predominant in this audience.

[applause]

0:24:07 MM: Then there is the atheist who realizes finally, that every aspect of living depends on the total living of all mankind, he recognizes the need of a better cultural philosophic base, and he looks at the old, old poem with new eyes, and recognizes it as a new truth. And you know it all: "No man is an island, entire of itself, every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less. Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind. And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee."

[music]

0:24:59 CM: Alright, so there's Madalyn Murray O'Hair, and I hope you enjoyed that. Fascinating woman and somebody needs to make a movie out of her life. She was brutally murdered, and that's part of her story. Now up next is Keith Lowell Jensen, the comedian that spoke at the American Atheists Convention. So during his comedy routine at the convention, he mentioned something about his wife never having been religious, and he himself was raised religious. And so there's this difference that they run into sometimes, and I thought it was a lot like Bob and I, as far as the way our relationship has formed. And then we talked a little bit about the fine tuning argument near the end, but overall, he's a funny guy, great guy, and I recommend his podcast called, "It's Funny Because," Available on iTunes. So here's my interview with Keith Lowell Jensen, followed by an excerpt from a comedy bit that he did during his routine at the convention. Enjoy.

[music]

0:26:07 CM: Oh, thank you so much.

0:26:08 Keith Lowell Jensen: Absolutely in love with it, would you?

0:26:10 CM: So I'm Cass.

0:26:11 KL: Keith.

0:26:11 CM: Keith Lowell Jensen.

0:26:13 KL: That's me.

0:26:14 CM: So your wife raised completely atheist, no energy around it?

0:26:20 KL: No, not quite.

0:26:20 CM: Oh, okay, good.

0:26:21 KL: Her mom was religious, but she just... And her father wasn't, and she just followed her father's... She never...

0:26:27 CM: She took her father's route. Yeah, so she never drank the Kool-Aid, it never was this energy... You know never was this energy?

0:26:31 KL: At no point did she believe.

0:26:32 CM: So when the Jehovah Witnesses come to the door there's just like "No, we're an atheist family", and she can be real sweet about it. You have this energy around it, because, you're still...

0:26:42 KL: I exaggerate that on stage. That chip on my shoulder which I think seeing my wife interact with people has sort of influenced me to temper that. It's more when I was a young atheist that I think I was more kind of in your face, and did have that chip on my shoulder.

0:26:59 CM: So some of that energy, I don't know for me, 'cause I was Christian, and then... There's a little bit of shame involved for me, because it was like when it finally did dawn on me that there was no Adam and Eve, and then it just all came crumbing down, I was pissed. I felt like I'd been lied to. And I felt like how gullible I was for well into my 30s. How embarrassing is that?

0:27:23 KL: Who did you feel lied to you?

0:27:25 CM: Well that's the thing, is there's no blame game going on, I mean my mom and dad, you know the Church, or whatever, but here we are, and that's where I find myself is we're in a bizarro world.

0:27:35 KL: Yeah.

0:27:36 CM: Because we're still... Like 80% of Americans, or whatever, a third of of the human population considers themselves Christians, the biggest religion in the world. And yet here we are, or at least I am, saying "It didn't happen."

0:27:50 KL: I think that there are liars out there, who are just exploiting it.

0:27:54 CM: Yeah, charlatans.

0:27:54 KL: Yeah. But for the most part I think the people in my life sincerely believed, so I didn't have that anger as much as a defensiveness, you know, and then and initially, a great depression of that whole like, "Well, what is the meaning then?"

0:28:10 CM: There you go, the bedrock falls out.

0:28:12 KL: Yeah.

0:28:13 CM: And how now shall I live? And...

0:28:14 KL: Right.

0:28:15 CM: That's a tough, that's the learning curve for me.

0:28:18 KL: Yeah, yeah.

0:28:19 CM: It was about nine years to where... And it was stair step, cause you know I think maybe you made reference to this, but I know for some it can just become, you go from Bundy, to progressive, to liberal, to Deepak Chopra, [chuckle] There's the woo-woo you hang onto, this new age stuff, or deism, or something, and then, for me eventually, it all just disintegrated, to where we're just almost cellular beings that are just here, and it's crazy that we're here. It seems... I mean even Hitchens would use the word "miraculous" sometimes, as far as this is crazy. I mean when you think about evolution, what are the odds, that the oxygen level, and the temperature and everything was just right for these cells to... But anyway, it's the mind fuck of all that.

0:29:05 KL: And I'm no scientist, but that thinking still baffles me, because I don't think that the oxygen, and the temperature were right for these cells. I think that had the temperature and the oxygen level been different, [chuckle] we might have evolved differently. We're so convinced that conditions were just right here and then we did find a life form in... Is it Mono Lake?

0:29:29 CM: I don't know.

0:29:29 KL: It's an exception to every other organism just found within the last couple of years, because it evolved under a different set of conditions.

0:29:38 CM: Okay.

0:29:39 KL: And I think it's arsenic, that it actually utilizes within its system.

0:29:43 CM: That's a good point because without broadening those options, the... What is it the argument that complexity, or something about to where it's just like, you know, it goes... Theists ends up using it for an argument for theism.

0:29:57 KL: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

0:29:58 CM: Because it's so improbable that it had to be, it's so exact?

0:30:02 KL: Right. 'Cause things don't get more complex, they break down.

0:30:05 CM: Yeah. Anyway, I don't know how much you've gotten into, I don't get into the debate side of it so much but...

0:30:12 KL: Sometimes I do, when I need to write jokes 'cause I'll come up with inspiration for funny stuff when debating with people...

0:30:16 CM: Are you a full time comedian?

0:30:19 KL: Yes and no, I mean this is the main way that I make my living, but I hang on to a job working for a friend of mine in town for stability.

0:30:26 CM: What town?

0:30:27 KL: In Sacramento, California.

0:30:28 CM: Okay.

0:30:29 KL: Yeah. I think I'm overly risk averse. I had periods in my life where I grew up poor.

0:30:36 CM: I have recently been... I've become a junky for Marc Maron's show or Pete Holmes' show where they're interviewing comedians. Sometimes I kind of feel like I'm getting inside the head, there's...

0:30:45 KL: Well, check out mine. It's called "It's Funny Because".

0:30:48 CM: I will.

0:30:48 KL: And we talk to comedians about method and about what's behind the jokes and...

0:30:52 CM: Fantastic. So let me write that down, what's its called?

0:30:55 KL: "It's Funny Because".

0:30:56 CM: "It's Funny Because".

0:30:57 KL: And it's me and Johnny Taylor, another great comedian.

0:30:59 CM: Okay.

0:31:00 KL: Who's also an atheist.

0:31:01 CM: Well, the thing is I work in Nashville but I live in Murfreesboro, it's about an hour commute, one way. And so what's saved my life from just hating everyone else on this road...

0:31:14 KL: Podcast.

0:31:14 CM: Is podcasts.

0:31:15 KL: Yeah.

0:31:16 CM: And so, man, I would definitely will. I definitely will. Well, Thanks for talking to me. Cool.

0:31:19 KL: Yeah. Good talking to you, man.

0:31:20 CM: Good to meet you.

0:31:21 KL: Yeah.

0:31:24 KL: Have you guys seen this tattoo going around on the interwebs, the dude got a tattoo on his bicep, right around his big old "I workout" bicep. He had a tattoo that says, "Thou shall not lie with a man, as one lies with a woman. It is an abomination," which means snowmen really did it. I didn't... I didn't finish school...

[laughter]

0:31:48 KL: Well, who's got the attribution? Leviticus. And the reason people past it around, it's the attribution's fucking funny. 'Cause Leviticus is the book of the Bible that says, "Don't get a tattoo, you douche bag". I'm paraphrasing but that shit's in there, you could look it up.

[laughter]

0:32:07 KL: So that's why people pass it around but what I find really funny about it, it's just the wording, "Thou shall not lie with a man, as one lies with a woman". I don't think that really says, "Don't be gay". That just sounds advice on positions, doesn't it?

[laughter]

0:32:27 KL: Like good advice.

[laughter]

0:32:32 KL: But I was like, "Well, hang on, you decide you want to fuck a dude and you just go jump in right into missionary position, you might end up frustrated."

[laughter]

0:32:47 KL: Possibly, even injured. You gotta get the legs up a little higher. And I'm sorry if I got too graphic at the end of it there for you. I haven't put that in those. I have a lot of gay friends and they would come up to me after shows, going like, "Oh, hey dude, we can do it in missionary position, all right." And then maybe me, I'd always answer with, "Prove it". But I would get weird and I sleep sometimes, so I... And that shit. But obviously, that's not what this dude meant to get a tattoo on his arm, that's not what he's expressing. What he is expressing is, "Don't fuck dudes." That's right there on his bicep, "Don't fuck dudes." That's what he had to say to the world. And that's a weird sentiment, when you're expressing a part of your internal self externally in a way that's permanent and sharing it with the world, what he chose was, "Don't fuck dudes"? I mean, to me, that begs the question, "How shitty is this guy's memory?"

[laughter]

0:33:43 KL: 'Cause mine's fucking awful. And I almost never forget not to fuck dudes. I'm not going all memento on my ass. You know what I mean? I don't just go fuck 'em, it's that easy. Thank you guys so much.

0:33:59 CM: So, that was Keith Lowell Jensen, funny guy, good guy. Next is Doctor Jennifer Michael Hecht and a talk that she gave at the American Atheists Convention in April 2015, entitled Poetic Atheism. It's mostly about suicide and why it's important to stay. That's the name of her book and here's Jennifer Michael Hecht.

[Applauding]

0:34:27 Dr Jennifer Michael Hecht: I love being here. I'm always making this an explicitly secular argument, but it's very nice to be among atheists and be able to just not have to hedge that one. My interest in the subject started because I lost two friends to suicide. We weren't that close anymore, we'd all gotten our PhDs up at Columbia in the '90s and we've been good friends then. And after one friend did it, the other one wrote her posthumous afterward to her poetry book, and they were both very successful. Then the other one did it.

0:35:08 DM: And somehow that year and a half in between, because I write about atheism, because I write about doubt, you almost become an atheist priest. People ask you questions and as a historian I have some answers because I know how a lot of people have lived with either doubt or atheism all over the world throughout history. I know that there's no God. People say you can't know, but I know there's no Superman, 'cause I know when we made him up, and I know when we made up God. And I know we made up the afterlife and I know how it's changed in different places and times. The whole idea of agnosticism comes out of ageing scepticism, but it's invented in the late 19th, early 20th century as an idea that you can't prove something to not being there. But you can. You can't prove that there are no unicorns, 'cause a goat could just have one, but you can prove there's no pegasai because wings would have to be the size of a football field to pick up a horse.

0:36:17 DM: So there are things that are patently ridiculous. The earliest doubters... The earliest atheists I found in history... Straight-out atheists, 'cause in the Psalms, which go back really far, it says "the godless this and the Godless that" and we just sort of don't notice it. But the ancient Cārvāka in 600 BC, before Buddhism... And indeed we think Buddha was influenced by the ancient Cārvāka. They said "If souls could exist without bodies, you'd also see mangoes hanging in the air with no tree, but you don't." Every brain, every mind I've ever encountered is gray and smushy. None of it hangs out in the sky. So it's a... It's...

0:37:02 DM: Again, as we all know, extraordinary claims need extraordinary proofs. But as a person who sometimes suffers dark times herself, I felt like I had to think this through, that we we had to think about what we could do for each other about sadness and about misery. And the idea of surrendering to something just... What can we do? And I began to think that the feeling of meaning is sufficient to the definition of meaning. Just as the feeling of love is sufficient to the definition of love. You don't always feel love. But you remember you did, and you remember other people probably are now. And meaning, too, isn't always a feeling we have, but we have felt it. So to say that there is no meaning, and to say that we each have to create our own meaning, seems misguided. I think meaning was always in community and culture and it is now. We haven't really lost anything. There is no God-shaped hole.

0:38:14 DM: What first came to me was the notion that we need each other,

that if a suicide causes this much pain, and this much suffering... And indeed, people through history have noticed that when one person does it more people do. We call it cluster... Suicidal clusters, or contagion, or social modeling. One leads to more. And that means that if you stay, you're doing a service, and you deserve our gratitude. If you stay for other people, you're doing something. Crying and useless is fine. Crying and useless is a million times better than dead. I'm not speaking at all about end-of-life care. And I have a sort of loose way of defining that by saying, "If one medical professional or member of your family or your friends thinks maybe you've had enough whatever it is you've... " Okay, you're a different category, and that needs to be adjudicated on its own terms. But if you know that even you in another mood would hate what you're doing, and you know everyone you know will be upset and think it was not the right thing to do, then give yourself a little more time.

0:39:30 DM: And the ideas matter. People... Their first response to this is always, "Well, somebody who's feeling that sad doesn't have access to ideas." But it doesn't turn out to be the case. I get mail every day from people saying that either one or the other argument worked for them. The first argument is that you stay for community. And most secular philosophers throughout history have argued this, that we owe each other to stay. Socrates told the students and friends in the room with him where he drank the hemlock, "You may not do this unless you also are condemned to do it by a court of law because we need each other."

0:40:14 DM: The second argument is about your future self. You don't really know who that guy's gonna be. Don't kill him. He may know a lot of things you don't know. If you think of what you knew 10 years ago, it can be pretty persuasive. I certainly hear from college kids who are moved most by the friendship argument. The idea that they could hurt their friends. It's statistically very clear that if you want your niece to make it through her dark night of the soul, you have to make it through yours. A soldier wrote a piece... An ex-Army Ranger wrote a piece for The Daily Beast saying he read the book and that she changed it for him, that if you want your fellow ex-Army Ranger to make it through his stuff, he said, "I guess I have to make it through mine. I have to accept the help people have been trying to give me." Because he didn't want to get help.

0:41:09 DM: And I'm certainly not offering this as an alternative to help. Help is great for everybody. I'm a big booster of talk therapy. I think it's... I think it's a route to the truth. You get to see the world a little bit. Look at us. We each have this little skull and these two little viewpoints and we're trying to see the world. And anytime you can get a little bit of an idea of what your biases are, you become wiser. It's just... It's a way of seeing more.

0:41:42 DM: The... The idea that... Well, look, if God didn't make up morality, and he didn't, then we did. And I'm very impressed. We don't always hit the mark but we try, human beings, lots of human beings try to be good. And we

feel moral feelings, which you can explain in a way by explaining it away. There's just something very strange and real about being human. Even consciousness is a weirder trick than virgin birth. I mean, if I didn't see it with my own eyes, I'd never believe it. The poet wrote "Ode to Joy", and "Romeo and Juliet"? It's really quite extraordinary. It's bizarre. It's the bizarre that's behind religious bizarreness. The most rationalists of religion, of people who believe in some notion of God, do so often because of consciousness.

0:42:55 DM: But I meet weird right where I meet it. I don't make another tertiary level of weird to cover up the weird that I see. So is existence very strange? Oh, my, yes. Do I then assume some other strange things from it? Not the best idea to me either for truth or for help. So I go through history, and I look for what people have said about suicide. And what I've found, well I sort of had this hunch before I went into it.

0:43:25 DM: It was very much confirmed that Christianity kind of overdid it in its attack of suicide. I knew that, but I didn't know exactly why. When you look back, what happens is the ancient world, the Greeks and the Jews is what Christianity is made of. And both of those traditions were not rabidly anti-suicide. They... Samson asked God to help him have just enough strength to kill the Philistines, but also himself. He says, "I'll die there, too." So the Jews are sort of against it, but not always. And the Greeks are more against it than you'd think, but not always.

0:44:08 DM: What happens is martyrdom. The emperors had actually... There were so many Christian martyrs in the early days of Christianity that there were cases where the emperor just said, "If anyone else here wants to die for Christianity, could you please go home and do it yourself?" And people did. But after Constantine makes Christianity legal, it's not the state religion but he makes it legal, there's no need for martyrdom anymore to stand up for their religion. And yet it goes on, and on, and on. And so Christian councils starting in the 400, 500s, start saying things like, "If you were on the martyr list, if someone was martyred by suicide, but in fact wanted to die, you're off the list." That was the first one. You don't get to really be a martyr. And then they start doing things like burying outside the church cemetery, and eventually, torturing the corpses, consistently torturing the corpses.

0:45:20 DM: Everyone thought of suicide as a worse crime than murder because you were stealing from God, instead of someone else. So when the martyrdom keeps happening centuries after Christianity is no longer... Nobody is dying for it by anyone else's hand, the church makes these draconian laws, including eventually confiscating the estate. So you really hurt your family. A lot of the more subtle Christian thinkers gave the two reasons I gave you that you shouldn't kill yourself because of community, because you're needed. It's not your job to figure out if you're worthy all the time. Sometimes you have to let the community help you with that, and also... So community and yourself. But they also said, "God doesn't like it." And that was just too easy a way of

saying, "You mustn't do it."

0:46:21 DM: So the enlightenment kind of went a little too far in the other direction. Obviously, even Voltaire, who tells you not to kill yourself, he has wonderful line of, "This person who kills themselves, if they'd just waited a week, might not have wanted to." He was thinking sort of practically. Diderot was very against suicide, wrote a huge diatribe about it in the encyclopedia. Kant says, "When you destroy yourself, you destroy the world."

0:46:55 DM: But the... But I was saying, Voltaire actually does struggle against these draconian punishments of the church. But it's David Hume who really writes the piece that people think of as giving people the right to suicide. And he says, "If God drops... If a rock was falling on me, and I step out of the way, am I disobeying God? When we built houses, there weren't houses when God made the world." But he's making these arguments that the church has no right. But he definitely is a little flip about it. He's making jokes, and in a way, you're arguing people into the grave. Rousseau is famous for an argument for suicide. But it is answered by a much better argument against. And that's the one that he ends with. So the enlightenment is by no means uniformly open about suicide.

0:48:01 DM: But this argument that the church shouldn't be stopping us made us sort of put it on the roster of rights. But if morality exists at all, it's about not harming people, and not harming yourself. Even John Stewart Mill, with utilitarianism, he says, "The few things you can't do are: Sell yourself as a slave to someone. You can't give yourself as a slave to someone, you may not use freedom to take away your freedom," Mill says, and for the same reason, you're not free to hurt other people. And he says, "You're not free to kill yourself. You would be taking away your own freedom."

0:48:46 DM: So, it's really... The ideas come about in the enlightenment, they're a little too flip, and then you see them again in the beginning of the 20th century, Sartre, very big on... Every philosopher through history says that you come into the world and then you find out about your meaning, but the meaning's already there. It's in the community. It's in the culture. Sartre is the one who turns it around and says, "No, you rise up," because he's an atheist philosopher, and we connect this idea of a kind of harsh world with being a good atheist, like we are willing to see what's there. But really, again, it's that God-shaped hole a lot of the time. Death is not an abyss. There is no abyss.

0:49:40 DM: If you thought that you were gonna walk straight and then that you come to a cliff, you got an abyss, right? I invented a little philosophical doodad of the notion of the holding. What if we had never thought of gravity, but we believed that everything was being held down by some god who was looking after us, keeping us and all the stuff, from flying out into space? If you realized that at some point, that that was not the case, you might feel there

was an abyss out there, and it might be freaky. Every culture, as it comes out of a religion or a dogma, misses those things, and takes it for granted. I mean, in the late kingdom of Ancient Egypt, was there some woman who missed the pyramids? Remember, even the afterlife in that world wasn't for everybody.

0:50:37 DM: It was a first only for the Pharaohs, and then you buy into it if you have money, but it was never for everybody. That's the thing. There've been more people through history who haven't believed in God than who have, and we're told the opposite, but it isn't true. Confucianism has no God. Theravada Buddhism has no God. These are systems of ways of feeling, and ways of being with each other, and we know when this Judeo-Christian idea came into being, and it has these attributes. Most people through history have not lived with the idea of an afterlife, and you don't hear them saying through history that they need one, or that they miss one.

0:51:20 DM: You don't see it, and a good deal of the Bible is written before we have an afterlife. Job has written before there's an afterlife. Ecclesiastes says, "Why should a man die differently than a dog?" If we were the only ones on the planet, you could maybe guess these things, but you look around, and we're animals among animals. And we have something very special, which is culture and community, but to assume that there's something... A special situation for us, isn't... It doesn't make sense once you're sort of seeing everything. If you really did think you can step on an ant and nothing happens, it begins to be clear that we're organic. The thing is, you're never gonna ask yourself, "Am I alive or dead?" and get the wrong answer. As far as you're concerned, you're always alive. Don't worry. Also, life's exhausting, who wants another one? It's ridiculous.

[laughter]

0:52:19 DM: So I've allowed myself to roam on topics because it is early, and I didn't sleep well. But I also just wanted to sort of share this point of view, which is what... I call it "poetic atheism." It's very close to humanism, but I like making a point that we're really talking atheism here; no spirit, no ghost, no nothing, no supernatural. But the poetic part is to say that when we only lean on science to... We're missing half the patrimony, that most artists and poets are doubters at least, because why else would you become one? You're trying to figure out the world for yourself, so it's really, you have a few poets who write about God, but most of them don't. Keats knows he's dying and he's already coughing blood, and he's writing about it: "When I have fears that I may cease to be," and then in the last two lines he says he goes to the beach, and he goes down to the wide world to think, "Till Love and Fame to nothingness do sink." He goes to the beach, not the church.

[applause]

0:53:25 DM: I'll stop there, 'cause I want questions. Yeah, well, I'll just say, I

want it to be clear that there is a way of speaking about meaning and morality without God, because we always have been, right? The holding wasn't holding us. We were always doing it, and we're doing it now, but the more conscious you are of it, the more beautiful it is. And for community, we're doing what needs to be done which is show up. It's good to come out of the closet, but you also have to leave the house.

[applause]

0:54:17 Speaker 8: Hi, thanks for being with us. One of the most profoundly sad suicides I know of is David Foster Wallace, and how for many years, had suffered depression that seemed to be untreatable.

0:54:34 DM: David Foster Wallace is a very sad case because he actually was saying that he felt cured, he just didn't like the meds he was on, and so he went off of them, and it was very soon after that that he did it. But yeah, it's very tragic, but it also reminds us. Most of us think we're gonna be happy when we're successful, and it just doesn't work. It doesn't work. You just... What works is trying to be successful, so you work hard and have purpose, and have direction. Sometimes though, success makes someone feel very guilty for not being happy, because we all believe this thing.

0:55:12 DM: And so when you see the very successful using drugs to the point of death or killing themselves, it looks like a conundrum, but it's not really. They found out they were still sad, and the rest of us are running towards it the rest of the whole life. But yeah, with him it's tough to lose a person like that.

0:55:37 Speaker 9: And thank you for talking this morning. I have a couple questions, but I'll pick...

0:55:42 S?: Keep it to one.

0:55:43 S9: Right, right. Do you choose the terminology "killing yourself" or "committing suicide" in lieu of dying by suicide or pathologizing suicide to the point of making suicide a disease and thinking of it psychiatrically, and then why?

0:56:04 DM: That's a great question. I think that, well, we can sort of show with lots of different kinds of statistical studies that suicide is much more impulsive than we usually think. We think it's the sort of chronic end-point of an almost biological disease, and that's not what we see. What we see is people are very often have had a loss or humiliation within a few months before. There have been lots of different studies and different ways that we can look at that, so I think shame is one of the big things that happens. If a person feels shame, it's very hard to get rid of that, and you can feel shame for things you didn't do. Things that happened do you. But yeah, with the

terminology, it's certainly one of the things where, yeah I prefer...

0:57:04 DM: Yeah, I don't think it's mostly the end-point of a biological disease. And more people die by suicide every year in this country than by murder. It's the top third killer of people under around 45, and between like 15 and 45, it's one of the top ten killers in the country for every age. People who do it the most are older white men. Women try more, but complete less, we think because of access to guns. More than half of the gun deaths in this country are suicide, and more than half of the suicides in this country are guns. Access to means. I get letters from people saying that they put their gun, they wanna hunt, but they keep their gun somewhere else, because they know themselves. In the '90s, the UK made it illegal to sell large amounts of acetaminophen. You had to buy them in a bubble pack, only a few at a time. Big deal, so go to a couple different pharmacies, buy 'em, and pop 'em out, right?

0:58:15 DM: No. No, people don't... If there are a couple of steps you have to do in order to kill yourself, you're likely to survive because it doesn't stay that intense that long, so get the means out of the house. But we're talking 40,000 Americans every year taking their lives, and that means that some people who don't think that's going to happen to them might need to hear now that when you have that thought, don't let your worst mood kill all your others. Be on guard. Just be on guard. We all have homicidal thoughts, we don't have to debate, "Does that mean I should..." We know that's wrong. And suicide isn't quite right, and it isn't quite a right. So if you put that in your head before it happens, lots of different studies show that many people who attempt never attempt again.

0:59:14 Speaker 10: Can you relate all of this religion and doubt and suicide to attachment theory in psychology?

0:59:25 DM: Yeah. Attachment theory is, the basic idea is that you can study usually a mother and her child, and if the child expects the mother to meet the needs, they roam farther, they behave differently when they can't see their mother, and psychologists relate that kind of, if you're not well enough attached, later on in life, you do seem to have intimacy problems and some difficulties. So these days, people believe misery is mostly biological. I think it can become biological, but I think that attachment theory is one of the many ways we talk about, whether your body has been sort of rigged up through your childhood to be worried or miserable or tense, to expect to feel those ways and then sometimes we give the reasons for it.

1:00:31 DM: But yeah, one thing I love about the mail I get about this is that it gets people to therapy, and I very much believe in therapy, so I'm not at all trying to replace it. But I am saying even in schools, we tell people how to find... See the warning signs in other kids. 'Cause colleges now, it's beating alcohol as a death in colleges, and in countrywide, it just surpassed auto

accidents. It's really on the rise, it was 30,000 a year when we checked in 2000, and then in 2010 it was up to just under 40,000 and then it hit 40,000.

1:01:17 Speaker 11: I thank you, Jennifer, we are out of time. However, thank you so much, Dr. Jennifer Michael Hecht.

[applause]

[music]

1:01:28 CM: That was Doctor Jennifer Michael Hecht. Before that, Keith Lowell Jensen, the comedian. Before that, Dave Kong. So that's our podcast for this week, thanks for listening and we'll talk to you next week. Bye-bye.

[music]

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