



# *Meet Your Instructor:*

# CORNEL

# WEST

The philosopher and self-proclaimed “cracked vessel” illuminates our deepest questions about life and love, jazz and justice, our roots and our routes

**S**ometimes, when he’s introducing himself, Dr. Cornel West likes to joke about his academic title, which he earned by way of a doctorate degree in philosophy from Princeton University in New Jersey. “Well, I won’t say *doctor*,” he says with a smile. “I can’t heal nobody. I don’t want to mislead people. It’s just a PhD in philosophy, that’s all.”

His humor belies a historic accomplishment—he was the first Black man to earn a PhD at New Jersey’s prestigious Princeton University—but it also hints at a broader truth. Cornel is impossible to categorize. If you avoid calling him *doctor*, you can choose from a number of other descriptors: philosopher, author, activist, actor, recording

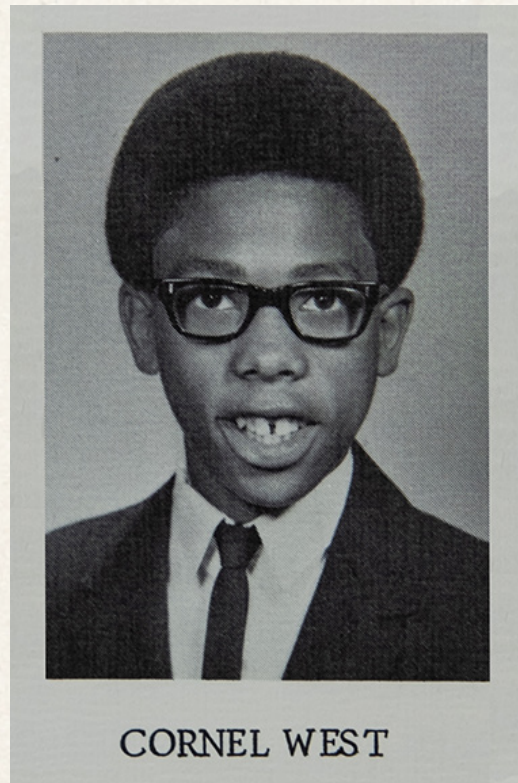
artist, public intellectual, man of faith, music fanatic. The throughline connecting all of these callings is not a single ideology—although in his class, you’ll hear him return again and again to the vital importance of criticism, compassion, and courage—but an exquisite attunement to the world. Like the jazz musicians he reveres, Cornel has always valued flexibility, improvisation, and the rejection of rigid and reductive views.

The son of a teacher and a civilian U.S. Air Force administrator, Cornel was born in Tulsa, Oklahoma, as the post–World War II baby boom neared its peak; he spent most of his childhood in Sacramento, California. By third grade, he was already practicing civil disobedience: He was kicked out of school for refusing to salute the American flag, having learned that a great-uncle had been wrapped in one after he was lynched.

Cornel studied Near Eastern languages and civilization at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, earning his bachelor’s degree with honors in just three years, and did his postgraduate work at Princeton. After finishing his PhD, in 1980, he quickly established himself as a titan of academia and one of America’s leading intellectuals. He taught at both of his alma maters, as well as at Yale University in Connecticut, the University of Paris, and Union Theological Seminary in New York. He has also written essays for American newspapers like *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*, authored some twenty books, recorded three spoken-word albums (see page 23), and appeared in the *Matrix* film franchise (twice).

Through it all, Cornel has proved to be equally at home in any number of ostensibly contradictory contexts: He’s as comfortable speaking publicly with late-night comedy talk-show hosts as he is with conservative news pundits; as passionate behind a lectern as he is on the front lines of a protest against police brutality; as articulate in the pages of a book as he is on a hip-hop track, trading lines with respected American rappers like Killer Mike and Talib Kweli. Regardless of the medium, Cornel’s ferocious intellect never outshines his underlying passion for humanity. He’s fundamentally a man “trying to love his crooked neighbor with his crooked heart,” as he often says, paraphrasing the English poet W.H. Auden. (Cornel’s eclectic references, which might jump from French philosopher Simone Weil to American R&B star Keith Sweat, are something of a personal trademark.)

Now, Cornel is offering his insights to you. In this class, he raises some fundamental—and potentially unsettling—



*Cornel's senior portrait from John F. Kennedy High School in Sacramento, California, 1970*

questions about what it means to be human; unpacks the idea of love (specifically, which of its many forms is best for humankind); and discusses the effect of heritage and community on our identity as a species. He also explores some major philosophical concepts and thinkers, from antiquity to the present, and illuminates how different modes of thought can help you confront injustice, cope with grief, and connect with others. Throughout, his lessons are suffused with music, which Cornel argues is “an integral part” and “constitutive feature” of most people’s lives. “It constitutes so much of who we are in terms of our own pilgrimages in space and time,” he says.

He hopes these teachings will provide you with tools for thinking—and feeling—with a greater depth. In Cornel’s opinion, examining your life with honesty, courage, and compassion isn’t just a moral obligation. It is, he says, “one of the great joys of being alive.” If Cornel is correct in that he “can’t heal nobody,” he might just help you heal yourself.



# Neurodiversity *at Work*

**Corporations are beginning to recognize that the world contains a vast range of cognitive experiences—and that their teams should follow suit. Here’s how a growing number of neurodivergent people and their allies are quietly revolutionizing the workforce**

**R**ICHARD’S DYSLEXIA made for a challenging journey through the school system, but he came to see it as a well-spring of paradigm-shifting ideas and business smarts. As a student, he managed his dyslexia by learning to collaborate, taking copious notes, and developing other “compensatory skills,” to borrow a phrase from Julie Logan, a professor at the Cass Business School in London who has run studies on dyslexia in the workplace. The value of those skills became clear with Richard’s first business endeavors. “Where others saw problems, I was able to see solutions,” he wrote in a 2022 blog post.

“Insurmountable challenges became endless opportunities.”

The corporate world is beginning to embrace neurodiversity—defined by Merriam-Webster’s dictionary as “individual differences in brain functioning regarded as normal variations within the human population”—including those with dyslexia, autism, Tourette syndrome, and ADHD (attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder). Virgin, for one, has invested in Auticon, a Berlin-based IT and technology services firm that employs people with autism as technology consultants.

The work of inclusion begins early in the recruiting pipeline, as many neurodivergent people have skills

that may not be apparent in a typical job interview. Blue-chip companies like SAP, Hewlett Packard Enterprise, Microsoft, Willis Towers Watson, and Ford have all made changes to their hiring processes in order to access more neurodiverse talent.

Make no mistake: There’s a long way to go. According to a 2022 study published by the Deloitte Center for Integrated Research, 85 percent of Americans on the autism spectrum are unemployed. So in order to reap the inherent benefits of a diverse workforce—while recruiting and retaining top talent—some companies are ending exclusionary hiring practices, rethinking office environments, and more.

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## RETHINK

The first step involves unlearning assumptions about how a team member should behave and understanding that dyslexia and other expressions of neurodiversity are not diseases or deficiencies. This shift goes beyond office dynamics: In 2022, Richard and Virgin partnered with the global charity Made by Dyslexia and the social media platform LinkedIn, which now allows users to add “dyslexic thinking” to their profiles, giving potential employers an opportunity to view dyslexia as an asset instead of a hindrance. The campaign also successfully worked with Dictionary.com to add an entry for “dyslexic thinking,” framing it as a form of cognition rather than a disability.

## HIRE SMARTER

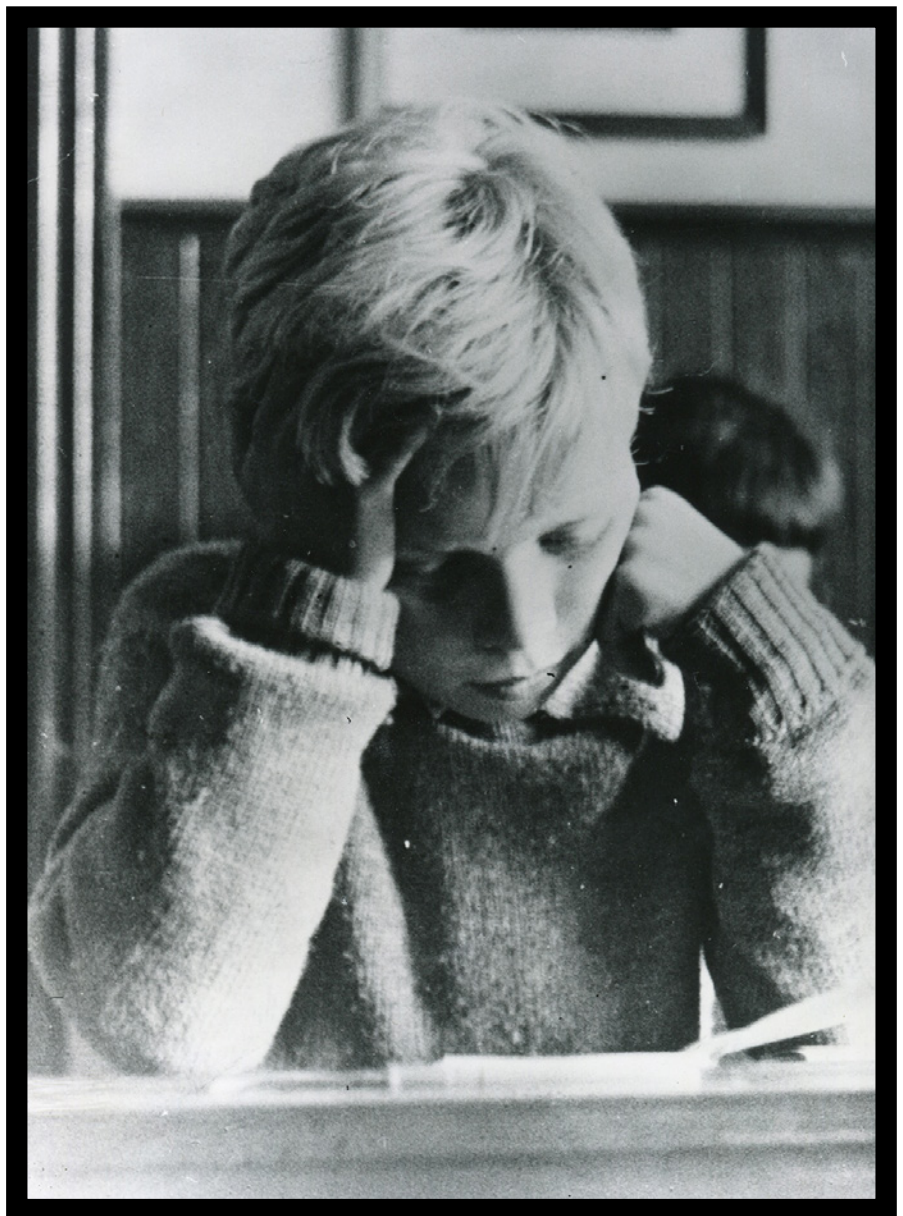
The corporate hiring process can be woefully inadequate when it comes to identifying the full range of an applicant’s abilities. EARN—the Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability Inclusion, an organization funded by the U.S. Department of Labor—recommends that companies use job descriptions that clearly describe the work expected and avoid vague and potentially discouraging “nice-to-haves” like “strong communication skills.” When the time comes to interview applicants, EARN recommends conducting them in quiet environments that don’t overwhelm candidates who have certain sensory responses. Another option: swapping the interview for a trial work session, so applicants can showcase their work skills and worry less about social ones.

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**FATHER OF MAN**  
Young Richard at school

*“Where others saw problems,  
I was able to see solutions.  
Insurmountable challenges  
became endless opportunities.”*

—RICHARD



## SUPPORT

Along with more neurodiverse hires, some companies are bringing in “social partners” (government or nonprofit orgs dedicated to partnering with neurodivergent people on the job) and organizational coaches to help with day-to-day issues that may go unnoticed by neurotypical employees. These groups can also encourage employees to form support groups and volunteer as “work buddies” who will advocate for their neurodivergent peers.

## TRAIN

Neurotypical employees and managers can undergo training modules that lay out the experiences and needs of their teammates. This training, plus a sustained commitment to its teachings, can help employees understand accommodations they may see around the workplace.

## PERSONALIZE

EARN recommends that managers offer employees accommodations like flexible schedules, noise-canceling headphones, and gentle reminders of a company’s social principles. And EARN stresses that neurodivergent employees need to be the ones guiding any customizations to the work space, even if they aren’t clear at first on what those customizations should be.

Empirical evidence suggests that when companies invest in getting to know their applicants better and accommodating their individual needs once they’re hired, everyone benefits. Recognizing the power of neurodiversity is not only good for the bottom line; it’s a step toward a more equitable workforce.

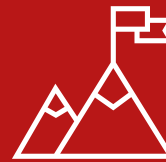
# WHAT’S YOUR SECRET SUPERPOWER?

*At home and at work, it’s often hard to see perceived “weaknesses” as the vital strengths they can be*



## 1. IDENTIFY THE POSITIVES

Make two lists. For one, write down a personality trait you’ve come to view as a weakness. For the other, list the ways this trait has shaped your life for the better. Suppose you wrote “oversensitive”: Is it possible that your sensitivity comes with deep emotional intuition and keen self-awareness? A quality that might seem damaging to your performance at work could, at the same time, be a source of serious productivity.



## 2. CHALLENGE YOURSELF

Now it’s time to work with your “weaknesses.” You can start by paying attention every time discomfort arises. Maybe you feel nervous whenever you have to broach a difficult topic with a colleague; instead of avoiding these crucial interactions, try shifting your focus from your concerns to theirs through active listening (think eye contact, paraphrasing their points, and asking follow-up questions).



## 3. REACH OUT

We all feel trapped by our own neuroses from time to time. Now that you’ve explored some of your challenges, ask a friend: “What do I do well?” You might not receive the answer you’re expecting. If you feel like a nervous wreck sometimes, perhaps you’re more compassionate toward others with similar struggles. This empathetic instinct could make you an excellent leader—especially if you recognize it.

## CASE STUDY

# THE POWER OF LONG-TERM ORIENTATION

How Seth found serious value where others did not

**For 13 years**, the payment-processing platform PayPal rode shotgun with the online marketplace eBay. In the years following eBay's 2002 acquisition of PayPal, the latter grew dramatically; by 2013, eBay purchases were responsible for less than a third of the payments it processed (by total dollar volume). And so in 2014, amid a corporate landscape dotted with companies splitting in the hope of boosting stock prices, eBay announced that PayPal would spin off and become a publicly traded entity in its own right.

At first, Seth and his team at Baupost didn't see much investing potential in the split—but thorough research led to a compelling thesis. For starters, there was the fact that eBay could eventually replace PayPal with a new payment processor, which meant keeping more of the transaction fees for itself. The way the spin-off was settled, PayPal would continue to process eBay's transactions for some five years, at which point eBay "could go out and cut their own deal with anybody," as Seth puts it. When Baupost bought shares in 2018, the full impact of this transition was still a few years away; they reasoned that investors who

held out might see big returns once the transition occurred and earnings growth accelerated.

But Baupost's thesis went beyond the PayPal transition. Three additional factors quietly presented themselves.

### FACTOR 1

Upon learning from public statements that eBay intended to grow its advertising business, Baupost predicted that earnings would rise.

### FACTOR 2

Seth and company identified what they saw as "hidden assets"—eBay's online classifieds business and the ticketing platform StubHub—that could boost eBay's value if they were bought by private or strategic investors. Sure enough, both assets were sold in 2020 for billions.

### FACTOR 3

Baupost noted that eBay had a habit of buying back its own stock—a move that companies often make if they believe that their stock has been undervalued. Baupost predicted that the company would increase leverage to buy back more stock, boosting the value created by those "hidden

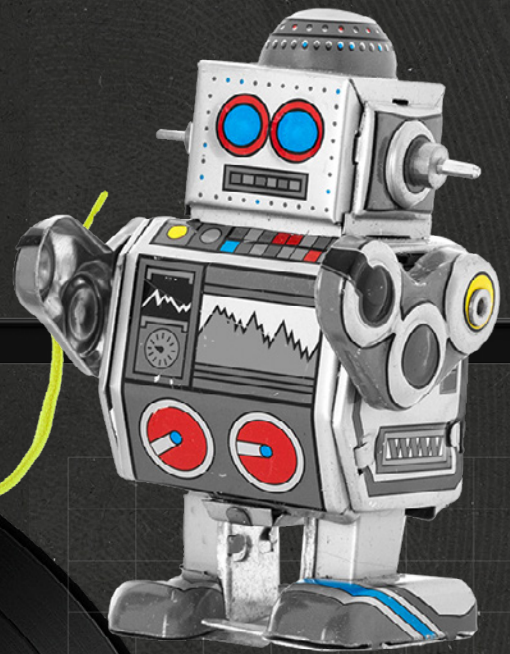


assets.” Correct again: In 2021 eBay’s board authorized \$7 billion in buy-back funds.

On top of all this, Baupost felt that many investors were overreacting to negative growth trends. The fundamentals of eBay were good; the company was likely to keep growing, even if the numbers were unremarkable at first. Lo and behold, the shares Baupost bought in 2018 eventually rose from \$27 to \$80—Baupost’s largest dollar profit on an investment. “It was simply a straightforward company,” Seth

says. “By good investment analysis, by due diligence, Baupost was able to find the opportunity.”

Simple, straightforward—and yet it took contrarians like Seth and team Baupost to do the research, spot the opportunity, and patiently wait for their thesis to be realized.



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## ASSIGNMENT

### COMMUNITY-BUILDING BRAINSTORM

**When it comes to rallying people around your company, Alexis has three words: “Give a damn.” Caring for your present and future customers is paramount, whether you’re courting them on social media or winning their loyalty after a purchase. The following questions will help you identify how you can catch the attention of strangers and engage them in broad, open-ended, and even profitable conversations.**

#### **WHO ARE MY PEOPLE?**

Lean on friends, family, coworkers, and acquaintances to try your product, follow your company’s social media accounts, and provide feedback. You might be surprised at the community you already have. And your inner circle’s activity can help attract strangers.

#### **WHAT CAN I OFFER?**

This is about more than your product; in order to build a community you need to create content—articles, visuals, memes—that has intrinsic value. Let the interests and concerns of your desired users inform the pieces you develop, and be sure to post frequently and consistently.

#### **HOW WILL I SURPRISE AND DELIGHT?**

Virtually every facet of your brand can be customized.

Alexis is a believer in fun graphics, quirky web copy (even the error pages), and other details that make users feel like they’re in a unique space created by people who actually care about their experience.

#### **WHO’S OUT THERE?**

Once people start engaging with your product or content, get in touch with them. Respond to their comments with gratitude and curiosity. The rewards are twofold: You’re building customer loyalty while gaining ground-level information about your brand.

#### **WHAT’S MY SWAG?**

Think about merchandise that your community might like. Basic offerings include stickers, mugs, and T-shirts, but other options might be particularly well suited to your brand. The email marketing platform Mailchimp, for exam-

ple, generated excitement and media coverage by offering stuffed animals modeled after their simian mascot.

#### **WHOM WILL I FOLLOW?**

Pick ten social media accounts run by people or organizations in your target industry. Whenever a post catches your eye, retweet and/or reply to it. Depending on the platform, you might also benefit from the use of relevant and robust hashtags.

#### **WHERE WILL I WEIGH IN?**

Pick five media outlets where your background and opinions are the most relevant and leave comments on one story in each. Remember Alexis’s remark that, for budding founders, small publications can be just as important as major “incumbents” (such as newspapers of record and well-established magazines).

## DECK OR MEMO?

**A memo can be an effective alternative to a deck. But what is a memo, exactly? And is it the better option for you?**

In his class, Alexis reveals that he's been receiving a lot of memos—text-centric documents that lay out a startup's vital information without relying on in-person presentations—from founders seeking investment. "The memo format actually works really well," he says, adding that it can be "a really nice alternative to a PowerPoint presentation."

Memos come with a key advantage—and a steep challenge: They can stand alone, but they require exceptional language skills. (Y Combinator, the incubator that once provided seed money to Reddit, is one of several startup-related entities offering memo templates.) When the time comes to contact investors, do an honest self-appraisal to determine the best format for your pitch.

### IS MY PRODUCT DESIGN-HEAVY?

If you intend to offer a product whose appeal is largely aesthetic, prove your design savvy with a visually arresting **deck**.

### AM I A STRONG WRITER?

A good **memo** tells a startup's story in clear, vivid, and compelling language. It's an opportunity to showcase your intelligence and present a unique voice.

### AM I A STRONG PRESENTER?

If one of your main strengths is the ability to command a room, opt for a **deck** and use the presentation to make an indelible impression.

### HOW MUCH TIME DO I HAVE?

If you're pitching widely while scrambling to build your business, you might not have time to present to every investor on your list. A **memo** can excite them—or allow them to decline without the additional step of a pitch meeting, saving time for both parties.

### ARE MY STAKEHOLDERS 100 PERCENT ALIGNED ON THE COMPANY'S VISION?

If not, a **memo** can double as a definitive resource for your team and a way to update any investors you've already secured. And the process of writing it might even make you clearer on your goals and challenges.

## I WANT MY MVP

It's ideal to have a minimum viable product, or MVP—your product in its simplest form, with just enough features to attract users and elicit feedback—on the market. It doesn't need to be perfect; a good start is good enough.