

Being There

Journalist, author, and Shawnee native Krista Tippetttalks to *Oklahoma Today* about the power of words, hope, and joy in today's world.

BY MEGAN ROSSMAN

For more than two decades, Krista Tippettt, founder and CEO of the On Being Project, has interviewed some of the world's greatest thinkers. From poets, philosophers, writers, and artists to business, humanitarian, and political leaders, hundreds of guests have spoken with the Shawnee native about life, nature, spirituality, and human connection. This interview series, known originally as *Speaking of Faith* and then as *On Being*, was born in 1999 as an occasional series that became a regular national program in 2001. It first aired on two local Minnesota public radio stations before eventually blossoming into four hundred across the country. In 2022, *On Being* left National Public Radio and now independently produces new episodes in spring and autumn. Winner of the Peabody Award, National Humanities Medal, a Four Freedoms Award from the Roosevelt Institute, and a *New York Times* best-selling author, Tippettt currently is working on her fourth book at her home in Minnesota.

Have you been back to Oklahoma in a while?

Yes. My mother still lives there, and I get back a few times a year. My son went to the University of Oklahoma as well. So I still have a big connection.

Most people are familiar with *On Being* as a radio show or a podcast, but it's part of a larger undertaking, the On Being Project. Can you talk about what that encompasses?

It has flowed out of the *On Being* show and podcast and the way people have taken the show into their lives to be a source of reflection. So everything we've

been doing is trying to meet that and serve that. You probably hear a little bit of the vocabulary of my Southern Baptist upbringing. Not what my grandfather expected. We have another podcast, a poetry podcast called *Poetry Unbound*, because I think poetry is really rising up, as it does in all kinds of cultures and times when usual language gets fraught and we become more mysterious to each other. And we're doing convenings in what we call "quiet conversations." We're also creating something called *The Lab for the Art of Living*. We have this deep, beautiful archive of twenty years of shows, including some people

who aren't with us anymore, like Mary Oliver, John Lewis, and Desmond Tutu.

In your book *Becoming Wise*, you had a list of some of your favorite words, which were *nourishing, edifying, redemptive, courageous, generous, winsome, adventurous, curious, and tender*. Since then, are there words that you would add to that list as some of your favorites?

What a good question. *Emergent* has really entered my vocabulary, partly because of the scientists I talk to. I think there's so much going wrong, there's so much bad news that we can tell. And then there are also these kinds of beautiful things unfolding and these things we're learning. I'm really fascinated with what we're learning about our bodies and our brains and the natural world and about how a forest functions, which really is about how vitality functions. It's different from how we've thought about what it means to create, to organize, to build, and to grow. It's so much more about what is emergent than it is about having the right strategic plan. And I feel like it does also describe what I've learned about how life really works, even what we know in our professions and our organizations, as well as our families: We plan, and then things do not go according to plan. And that is predictable and inevitable, although we plan as though it's not true. Those are also very often the times we grow and learn things. So I think for me, the language of emergence as a model of thinking about how vitality functions and how change happens is really important. It's a whole new frame



Krista Tippettt's grandfather was a Southern Baptist evangelist, and she holds a master of divinity degree from Yale University.

BETHANY BIRNIE

"I'm having a couple of conversations this season about AI and I feel like there are kind of two extreme poles around this. This is a huge technological revolution."



Krista Tippett's *On Being* guests have included everyone from the 14th Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh to Rosanne Cash and Maya Angelou.

CHRIS DANIEL'S PHOTOGRAPHY

for seeing things. A word I didn't have on that list that was implied—but I feel is maybe important to say now—is the word *love*, understood as being as complicated as we know it to be, and not *love* as a feeling but *love* as the way we behave. As an action. I feel like it's not a word that we would associate with what public life looks like right now. But I hear more and more people saying we must grow into our capacity to love as human beings as a practical thing. If this is the highest thing we're capable of, we have to figure out how to make that real. I think that sounds idealistic, or it could sound impractical or unrealistic, unless you see that we take hatred very seriously.

We're more comfortable with hate, it seems.

We're comfortable with it. We see it at work everywhere. We work with it, right? We create categories of laws around it or we take it to court, or we don't take it to

court. Hate is connected to fear, and fear is the most powerful force in a human life aside from love. Love is the only other thing we're capable of that meets it in power. I think we have to use the word [*love*], and we have to live into the word in all its fullness.

That's lovely—and *love* being associated with compassion. That's something I feel like we could use more of in our world right now.

And even tough love, right? I mean, there are all these ways we love people we're closest to, which don't always look like being gentle or being forgiving, but they all have the purpose of wanting the best for the other person and wanting to stay in relationship and wanting there to be healing where there's brokenness.

Are there words that really irk you or that you think we should avoid?

One thing I'm so aware of—and I've

talked to people about this on the show across the years—is that the way we use language is so violent. We use a lot of violent images and words. It's scattered throughout our ordinary conversation. You know, *killing it* and *trigger word*. I think one really deep thing that Christianity—and our great spiritual traditions at their best—tell is that the words we use matter, and they have force. When we use language of war and shooting and violence, when those are all the metaphors that come out of our mouths, we get warped around that.

What words would you use to describe Oklahoma?

I feel like my body memory of Oklahoma is the body memory of childhood. And it's not just that Oklahoma is different; the world is so different now. I don't know if I have a word. You know, in some ways Oklahoma feels like a dramatic place, the way it gets represented nationally. I live in Minnesota now, which is also not on one of the coasts, but it's a really different part of the country. It's the north, it's a very blue state, it has a Scandinavian heritage and a different culture. I see how Oklahoma can kind of be shorthand for *red state* and Minnesota can be shorthand for *blue state*, and the truth is so much more complicated. And every time I go home, that's what really comes home to me: that we are so much more complicated than those labels. And it's so important for our sanity—much less for our ability to envision a future that we want to walk into—to not let ourselves fall into those simplistic labels.

You've interviewed so many people. Who are some of the guests that have stuck with you the most?

I always feel like my favorite interview at any given moment is the last person I interviewed. I just did an interview

a few days ago with Reid Hoffman, who is the cofounder of LinkedIn. He's kind of a philosopher inside the tech industry. I'm having a couple of conversations this season about AI, and I feel like there are kind of two extreme poles around this. This is a huge technological revolution. I don't think most of us can wrap our minds around it, yet it's with us. How do we shape this technology to human purpose? It's in its infancy, and we're less starry-eyed than we were when social media came along. I think we're cynical for good reason, but we have this moment, this opportunity to have agency. Reid is somebody who's right in the middle of that industry. And this is what he wants to talk about. So I'm excited about that. And it was amazing to be with Mary Oliver. I was with John Lewis in Montgomery at this Civil Rights pilgrimage that he used to do for members of Congress on both sides of the political aisle. And John O'Donohue—the Irish poet, philosopher, and theologian—that's a show that a lot of people have listened to. Of course David Whyte. There are so many people. One person I interviewed was Joy Harjo. It was during lockdown, so she was in her apartment in Tulsa, but that was wonderful.

Have you ever had interviews that went off the rails, or you were like, "Oh, this person is just insufferable?"

There have been interviews that don't make it to air, which happens frequently in a lot of shows. Because we're not a breaking news show, I don't have to interview anybody. We get to take a lot of time thinking about the subjects we want to cover and what voices we might want to draw out. Who's out there saying something interesting and additive right now? We really invest in having a good sense before I do an in-

terview that this is going to work. Then there's always a surprise. You don't know exactly where the conversation is going to go.

Can you tell us about any of the upcoming guests?

I'm interviewing this amazing woman at Harvard who's been important in a lot of internet privacy things that we're all using or benefiting from. Her name is Latanya Sweeney, and she has a really different perspective on AI than Reid Hoffman. I'm interviewing the actress Kerry Washington. I'm interviewing Nick Cave, a singer who's had big losses in his life. Also Kate Bowler—she's a theologian and wrote *Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I've Loved*. She's really wise and funny. Baratunde Thurston, who is a comedian and hosts this PBS show *America Outdoors*, and that's a fun one as well.

Are there any poets or writers that you would recommend to our readers?

I was just reading some David Whyte poetry this week. I was reading this little book of his that I hadn't read before called *Still Possible*. I read a lot of fiction when I'm not working, because I read so much heavy stuff.

What else have you got coming up? What's going on with you?

I'm just getting into a different rhythm of life now. I'm figuring out what it means to have times that we're in production and times we're out of production. When we're not in production, after November, and for the foreseeable future, I'm going to be working on this book and trying to finish it. And then we are working on *The Lab for the Art of Living*, and we'll be launching that probably in early 2024. It'll be resources for thinking deeply and speaking together and

poetry to keep our hearts soft and our souls open. We have a website, onbeing.org, and we have a seasonal newsletter called *The Pause*.

What brings you hope and joy these days?

I think of hope as a muscle. I think of hope as a choice we make to orient towards what is life-giving—not to deny or not take seriously what is hard and challenging and dismaying but to take the good that's happening as seriously—and be committed to working with that. The word *joy*, maybe I would add that to the list too, that question you asked me a while ago. That word has come up again and again and again. Not just the word—the thing. I think there's something new happening. This has been a very hard time in the life of the world and in the life of our country to be alive. Joy is one of our biggest sources of energy and resilience. And so even as we see what is hard, we have to also know what we love, and we have to know what delights us, and we have to know how to get renewed. I was born in 1960—I wasn't taught to live that way. I was taught to be productive. And if all you are is productive, you get burnt out. There's been a lot of burnout in places where it has been a tragedy for our life together. I feel like it's a strange time in that there's a lot to despair about, and when that's true, I think we also get more keenly aware of joy when we can seize it. I'm definitely feeling that, and I'm trying to pay attention to it in the world and see how my work can be nourishing to it. ■

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The latest season of *On Being* began airing September 20. onbeing.org
Hear the full interview on the November 6 episode of the *Oklahoma Today* podcast. OklahomaToday.com/podcast