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CHRIS DAVIS: Hello, and welcome to the Career and Academic Research Center podcast. I'm your host, Chris Davis. It is my great pleasure to introduce today's podcast. I had the honor to sit down and speak with Professor Cornel West. Professor West is one of the most prominent intellectuals in the country.

Some would say he is, in fact, the most respected American public intellectual of our time. Having taught at the Yale Harvard, the University of Paris, Princeton, and Union Theological Seminary, it was with great joy that we learned in 2016 that Dr. West was returning to Harvard to become Professor of the Practice of Public Philosophy at the Divinity School, and also to teach in the Department of African and African-American Studies.

Dr. West is someone who needs little introduction, but it's worth mentioning that he is a very prolific author. One of his seminal books, *Race Matters*, had its 25th anniversary last year, and it was discovered by a whole new generation of readers. *The Huffington Post* wrote recently that *Race Matters* helped change the dialogue about race and racial reasoning in the US. Very true words.

The Washington Post wrote that the book was as moving as any of the sermons of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Junior. Published the same year in 1993, prophetic reflections, *Notes on Race and Power in America*, won Professor West the National Book Award. He is the author of over 20 other books, including two co-authored with Professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr., the Director of the Hutchins Center for African and African-American Research at Harvard University.

It was a great privilege to sit down and speak to Professor West in his office at Andover Hall here on the Divinity School campus in Cambridge. I also had the opportunity to ask Professor West about his work with James Venable, a student who graduated with his ALB from Harvard Extension School last spring.

At the end of our talk, I was also able to confirm what Reverend Paul Russianbush had said about Dr. West several years ago, that he's the best hugger in the Academy. It's true. The following are excerpts from our conversation.

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So if we're ready to go, Dr. West, thank you so much for taking the time to do this today.

CORNEL WEST: Thank you. And I salute you for being such a force for good, Brother Chris.

CHRIS DAVIS: Thank you. Thank you. It's an honor to speak to you. So today I wanted to talk a little bit about a few things. I manage the Career and Academic Resource Center at the Harvard Extension School.

CORNEL WEST: Wonderful.

CHRIS DAVIS: And you've worked with one of our students as well.

CORNEL WEST: Brother James.

CHRIS DAVIS: Yes, that's right.

CORNEL WEST: He's at Yale, doing his thing. So he is flourishing and flowering, I'm telling you. I just had a message from him. He's having a great time. He's a brilliant brother.

CHRIS DAVIS: Mhm.

CORNEL WEST: Came out of Texas.

CHRIS DAVIS: Yes. And I was very happy to be there at his graduation this year.

CORNEL WEST: The graduation, yeah.

CHRIS DAVIS: So that actually leads into the first question that I wanted to ask you. So each school at Harvard has its own unique identity, its own unique population. Ours is unique in that we serve non-traditional adult learners.

Rarely are two alike. James's story is a very unique one. Did you find that his unique backstory, his experience, brought anything to his work that, for example, with your students of the Divinity School or at FAS, that are quite different from those student experiences?

CORNEL WEST: Oh, sure. I mean, variety and diversity goes hand in hand with high quality for people who are mature enough to learn and listen from people who are different than them. And so the beautiful thing about Harvard Extension is you have people with high levels of experience, high

levels of wisdom, that haven't always filtered through the formal institutional structures. And that's the best of any community when you have that kind of openness, that kind of really, vulnerability.

See, one of the things about Harvard is that traditionally, it's been a site for ruling class formation. Which makes things too predictable. So people are very smart, very talented, very exposed, very enriched culturally in their own environments, in their own silos. But it's too predictable.

You see, education is about vulnerability. It's about being unsettled, unnerved, unhoused. Being open to that which you're not used to, to have to defamiliarize yourself with ways of being in the world. Harvard Extension is magnificent in that regard.

I was blessed. Actually, my son Clifton attended courses at Harvard Extension, way back in the '90s, when he was also down in Atlanta. He'd come back and forth. And he had the time of his life here.

CHRIS DAVIS: Oh, that's wonderful.

CORNEL WEST: Hugo Bedau used to teach, who was Philosophy Professor at Tufts. And wonderful classes in Emerson Hall. And he used to just come home with a smile on his face. I said, ooh, Harvard Extension. Some serious things going on. James Venable's the same way.

CHRIS DAVIS: Mhm. You know what? I thought of you particularly because I'm part of a group that's looking at inclusion and belonging at the school. All of Harvard is doing this right now.

CORNEL WEST: Ah, uh-huh.

CHRIS DAVIS: But so much of your work is centered around poor and working people, about class. And it's been interesting to think about how our student population is very unique in that regard.

CORNEL WEST: Right, right.

CHRIS DAVIS: Where people who ordinarily may not have the opportunity to attend Harvard do through our school.

CORNEL WEST: Absolutely. And a lot of it's just a matter of veritas, truth. See, the condition of truth is to allow suffering to speak. You'll never be able to be truthful about yourself if you don't come to terms with your own wounds and bruises.

That's true for any community. True for any society. It's true for the world. I mean, that's part of the great insight, if not downright genius, of Christianity, that you find truth on that cross, where that suffering is tied to the truth that's unarmed and a love that's unconditioned.

So the cry that you have, the voice of the suffering, the laughter of the Roman soldiers. You see, that's cruel. That's cold. That's indifferent.

But that love cry is in opposition to that callousness, you see? And at Harvard, its motto was veritas. Truth. This is not some abstract proposition. This is the lived experience of opening yourself and allowing a love to flow.

It's a love of truth, love of beauty, love of goodness, love of neighboring Christians. Who you know, we literally love our enemies. But that's a very, very profound tradition. And Harvard is not intelligible without Harvard Extension, in regard to this issue of veritas and truth.

CHRIS DAVIS: Several days before we met, Professor West was invited to the University of British Columbia to discuss the intersections between race, democracy, and justice. During the talk, he had this to say.

CORNEL WEST: The grandma and grandad and those folk who shaped me in such a way that I would just be decent rather than rich or wise, rather than just smart. I see students all the time at Harvard-- it might not be the case at University of British Columbia, you are further along in this regard.

[LAUGHTER]

Oh, I got the students thinking, oh, I got to be the smartest in the room. No, don't worry about being smart. Let the phones be smart. You be wise.

There's a lot of smart white supremacists. A lot of smart misogynists. Lot of smart anti-Jewish folk, anti-Arab folk.

Where's the wisdom? Where's the compassion? Where's the empathy? That's what's required in talking about race matters, class matters, gender matters, empire matters, homophobia matters. And yet our young folk, drifting.

CHRIS DAVIS: I was intrigued by his remarks. And I wanted to follow up. Because he specifically alluded to advice he gives to young people and to students that he teaches.

So very recently you spoke at the University of British Columbia. And you made reference to the distinction between smart and wise when you're teaching. And I also noticed that you, in an interview with the *New York Magazine* several years ago, you said, "Smartness is not some kind of value that I put a whole lot of weight on.

There are smart Nazis and smart xenophobes and smart patriachs, and so forth." I was very intrigued by those comments. Could you expand a little bit on that?

CORNEL WEST: Yeah, I mean, I was saying, let the phones be smart. We got to be wise. There's a very deep difference.

See, wisdom has to do with learning how to die in order to learn how to live. And there's no rebirth without death. There's no growth and maturation without death.

So when you criticize an assumption that you have and you give it up, that's a form of death. That's a form of education. Because you emerge on the other side more fortified, much stronger, more determined. And you hope with more compassion.

So you can be a smart Nazi. You can be a smart thug. You can be a smart gangster.

You can be a rich thug. You can be a rich gangster. And right now, we have a neoliberal culture that evolves around wanting to be the smartest in the room and the richest in the room.

See, that's a form of spiritual poverty. It's a form of moral emptiness. You see? So if you want to be the wisest in the room, that means that you got to work on your compassion, your critical consciousness, and how you go and spread it to others.

Because there's no way you can be wise and keep it all to yourself, and hoard it all, you see? You have to share it. Why? Because you were not always the wisest. Somebody shared it with you.

So you become pietistic. And all piety is, is to acknowledge that you have been dependent on those who came before. Beginning with your mama, who gave birth to you. And your daddy and your grandparents, and the others, the language that you acquired, and so forth and so on.

It's no accident that some of the smartest and richest folk want to tell the lie about them being self-made. As if they gave birth to themselves. You see? It's impossible. It's impossible.

So that wisdom is about humility. It's not about cupidity, the love of money. No, compassion is about empathy. It's not about chicanery. It's getting over.

And this is part of our culture these days. We got a joyless culture that's obsessed with insatiable pleasure. You can get all the pleasure in the world, still have no joy. Still be empty.

See, Harvard Extension connects the best of an intellectual humility with a moral tenacity. 'Cause you can still morally fight and ethically engage the world. But also, still have a humility. That's a sign of unbelievable maturity, you see? And I must say, that I think that Harvard Extension deserves much more attention, focus, and spotlight than it gets.

CHRIS DAVIS: Thank you for saying that.

CORNEL WEST: Oh no, it's a fact. Definitely.

CHRIS DAVIS: So you've been teaching close to 40 years?

CORNEL WEST: 41 years now, yes.

CHRIS DAVIS: Do you get the same pleasures out of teaching? Does what motivates you to teach, has that changed?

CORNEL WEST: Oh, no it hasn't changed at all. I've just been blessed. It's one of the greatest blessings to be able to bear witness in a classroom of young people learning, listening to be challenged.

I have to learn how to die as a teacher. I've got to examine myself. Week in and week out.

Day in and day out. Year in and year out. And so you remain vital, vibrant, fresh, and challenged.

'Cause education is about being unsettled so your mind can grow. You shatter your parochialism and your provincialism. You become more international, become more humanistic, in terms of concerned about other ways of looking at the world, other people's modes of being in the world. And yet in the end, we're still inadequate and fall short.

Samuel Beckett says, "Try again. Fail again. Fail better."

That's the story of our lives. "Try again. Fail again. Fail better." They put you in the coffin, they say, relative failure. He tried, but he fell short.

But how much did he accomplish in falling short, in terms of how much love did he give? How much service did he provide? How much inspiration and encouragement did he dish out?

How many books did he write? How many teachers and students did he touch? Or she touch? You see, that's not a curriculum vitae. That's a life lived. Makes a difference.

CHRIS DAVIS: Yes. Well, Dr. west, I know we're short on time. So I want to say, thank you so much for this conversation. It's an honor to speak to you. And I appreciate your time very much.

CORNEL WEST: Well again, I salute you. And I hope one day I get a chance to teach in Harvard Extension.

CHRIS DAVIS: I was going to say, I would love--

CORNEL WEST: I met with a dean there last year. And she said, oh, you must teach. I said, I would love to. I know my dear brother, David Lamberth, who teaches in summertime.

CHRIS DAVIS: Yes.

CORNEL WEST: He has a magnificent time in the summertime. I look forward to teaching. Martin Kilson, my old mentor used to teach in Harvard Extension for many, many years in the Department of Government. I used to go listen to him lecture if I was in that school. So there will come a time when I'll get a chance to be blessed to teach at Harvard Extension.

CHRIS DAVIS: Yeah.

CORNEL WEST: Indeed, indeed. Well, thank you so much, brother Chris.

CHRIS DAVIS: Thank you, Dr. West.

CORNEL WEST: Appreciate you.

CHRIS DAVIS: Thank you so much.

CORNEL WEST: Appreciate you. Appreciate you being so patient, because I had another 5:30 thing across town.

CHRIS DAVIS: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. I know you are full.

CORNEL WEST: But you got what you wanted though, right?

CHRIS DAVIS: Yes.

CORNEL WEST: OK. That's the important thing.

CHRIS DAVIS: Thank you so much.

CORNEL WEST: And you all come in so well prepared. I'm telling you, boom, you hit this thing, you're ready to go.

CHRIS DAVIS: Thanks to my colleague, Michael, yes.

CORNEL WEST: Absolutely.

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CHRIS DAVIS: You have listened to the "CARC Podcast." This is the podcast from a Career and Academic Research Center here at Harvard Extension School. And I hope you will join us again.