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The Axe Files - Ep. 160: Sen. Cory Booker

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Axelrod: [00:00:00] Senator Cory Booker great to be with you on what has turned out to be kind of a momentous week here in Washington.

Booker: [00:00:08] You used to be so you used to have this look about you this gritty political war and you look downright professorial.

Axelrod: [00:00:14] Yes.

Booker: [00:00:14] I wish people could see how professorial you look.

Axelrod: [00:00:16] I must say that that is a tonic to be out of this town and observing. Sometimes but. But enough about me let's talk about you. Everybody has a story. And yours is is is more of a traditional kind of middle class story. Talk to me about your folks they both were executives at IBM.

Booker: [00:00:45] Right. I mean look to be black in America. You you may have a middle class story but you are very conscious of that you are just feet away from poverty and discrimination. I don't think there's any middle class African-American or wealthy African-American that doesn't have family members who are poor that doesn't have stories of extreme deprivation and challenges and so.

Axelrod: [00:01:08] And your dad actually had one of those stories.

Booker: [00:01:11] Yeah I was one of those kids and folks from all different backgrounds have this where you are growing up in privilege that is so astonishing to your parents they almost feel like they have concerns like how could I be raising my kids. And so I got lectures if I burn toast it's like don't throw that away boy scrape that off and eat that because my father would look at me and just say shake his head and say you get angry with don't walk around this house like he hit a triple base. You were born on third base. You need to understand where you come from. You can't forget where you come from and tell these stories about what it meant to be mountain living in the mountains in poverty to a single mother. Now thanks to Professor Gates Henry Louis Gates. Trace my history back into slavery and so on my dad's direct line it was slavery single mother poverty single mother poverty single mother poverty my dad was born with really no we use the word hope but no vision for college or challenges. And his mom though was sick and he was then raised by his grandmother was sick. He was then taken in by a family that wasn't his blood. So I would say we are where we are as a country not because of these simply because of these great founding fathers presidents people you see written history books it's ordinary Americans. And I always say that conspiracy of love is what often has brought us as a country forward. And so my dad was forced to go to college like you're going to start thinking about college he couldn't afford it. And it was a church collection that got him off to college so was the are a lie on those people put dollar bills in the collection plate. And then in college he lands in the 60s and college and bears witness the sit in movement started in North Carolina to this incredible civil rights movement. He talked to me about being involved in student protests and just being amazed that Americans who weren't even living in his community even from his state were participating for his freedom and he's again that's the conspiracy of love. Then he gets to Washington D.C. and has the God just luck to meet my mom and the two of them face what if you're a woman in America if you're gay in America you're Irish in America. There was a point that folks didn't want you. And this was a time that corporate America didn't want blacks but activists in this city. Conspiracy of love again it was blacks and whites through organizations like the Urban League that fought to get companies to hire qualified blacks and next thing you know my dad is the first black salesman hired by IBM in the entire Virginia region. This is what happens when you let qualified people

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get an opportunity whether they have a Bindi or wearing a headscarf or are gay if you let qualified people be a part of the team and get on the field. Great things happen. My dad was so successful he made I-beams Gold Circle the top five percent of salesmen and globally and gets a promotion to Manhattan. And next thing you know he's trying to move into towns in Harrington Park where you.

Axelrod: [00:04:06] You'd mention you're never far from discrimination you saw some of that your family saw some of that when you moved to that suburb of in New Jersey.

Booker: [00:04:15] Well again let's be clear. You know and that's what the awkward thing about being in Congress where I sit at the Congressional Black Caucus table and you look across the table and you see you know Maxine Waters John Lewis. These folks from who who are from my parents generation I have seen nothing like they saw and what my parents saw I didn't experience so I didn't know this. This is a story told to me but when I at the time my parents were moving into Bergen County New Jersey there was most of the town wouldn't sell to black people and again that conspiracy of love people white people and black people joined in this organization called the Fair Housing Council and sent in white couples behind my parents test couples. When my parents were told the house was sold the couple would find out it was still for sale and my parents fell in love with this beauty home and Harrington Park New Jersey. But they were told it was sold. The white couple that was still for sale put a bid on the House bill was except that paper was drawn up on the closing. The couple didn't show up. My dad did and a volunteer lawyer Marty Friedman. God rest his soul. And the real estate agent was so upset he got caught in the sting. His reaction wasn't I'm wrong I'm breaking the law I'm sorry. He stood up and punched my father's lawyer in the face and sic the dog on my dad. And so it was in this legal outrage that my family eventually moved in as my dad affectionately call this the four raisins in the tub a sweet Vanilla Ice and so that's the shock that my dad who literally just years earlier would know it was poverty and hardship. My mom a similar story and yet they're raising their kids in a environment that is my grandfather once said to me it was a dangerous dream to have to think that one day my grandchild would be going to Stanford Yale. He would give me these speeches all my graduations and say even if I had articulated this aloud in front of some people it could have led to harsh recriminations from folk that I would dare articulate what you're experiencing as a child.

Axelrod: [00:06:14] So you would you let me just ask you this though. You you grew up in that town. What was your experience because there must not have been many African-American kids in your school and so maybe it's one of the most privileged places to grow up.

Booker: [00:06:32] My best friends are still in that community. It was a commune of love and caring and goodness. But yeah when you're different and people's understanding of African-Americans are from TV and media you face a lot of sort of subtle knocks on your. And when my parents were always worried about is that my self-esteem or my self-concept would be so warped in an America that didn't value African Americans that didn't see them as equal or it had subtle vicious yet vicious bigotry that said you're not smart enough or qualified enough. So I have painful experiences from my childhood of being different and people making assumptions or facing discrimination. But I say that in the context of it was a blessed community to grow up in. I mean I'm still close to my teachers who went out of their way to help me. I mean you have to understand this is a community that by the time I was 18 years old but for the love of this community. Coaches who are guys that just worked full time jobs and would come back and they would care more about me at times it seemed than their own kids on the field. Teachers you know my Mr. Walker one of my great great teachers. I mean he was the guy that forced the kid that was afraid of speaking in front of crowds to get on the stage and do the school play. He did the school dance where the moment I first ever asked the girl to dance in the first moment I ever had to face rejection at the same time. He's got his old practice practice. You know he is basketball. This is these are folks that are heroes to me. And and really collaborated so that by the time I was 18 years old I was president of my class honor student high school all American football player. You know it was a period of my life that you know

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despite some of the challenges I faced as a middle class as you said African-American The reality is I have so much to be thankful for. And so much indebtedness to Harrington Park.

Axelrod: [00:08:31] And you know this issue of race is so deep and so it has so many tentacles in our society so much so many complications when Skip Gates did his exploration of your lineage. The other element of it was that you had White great grandparents and you are one of your grandparents. And and in your political career particularly in the early parts of your political career one of the challenges was you were accused of not being black enough.

Booker: [00:09:07] Yeah. Well I came up through urban politics in a majority black city and ran against one of the more epic figures in New Jersey politics. Sharpe James Sharpe James who was friends with the Clintons I mean he was a powerful powerful man and I had the audacity in a city that was struggling with poverty and environmental desolation and challenges to come up as a grassroots tenant organizer and young lawyer. You know I was taking on this this icon and and it was an epic clash Actually it was captured in a movie called street fight that was nominated for an Oscar for crying out loud. It was one of the first of a lot of generational fights between the next generation of African-Americans. And B the fact President Obama faced that when he talked about Rush and lost just like I did in my first attempt to Sharpe James so you have these African-American's of that generation they weren't just elected leaders they were they were trailblazers. They were barrier breakers.

Axelrod: [00:10:14] Yeah, no they were they were part of the civil rights movement but my question is for you personally. You know Obama wrote a book called Dreams from My Father which I'm sure you've read about the challenges of being of being biracial and sort of finding his identity and I guess I'm wondering did you have you struggle with that and when you would when you were attacked as you were. Did that create in you any kind of struggle in terms of your own identity or were you very clear. I mean both your parents are African-American lived the African-American experience. Were you clear on who on your identity from the very beginning.

Booker: [00:11:03] Yeah I mean that's a difference between--One of the many differences between President Obama eyes he is a biracial kid where he had a white mother. Both my parents are black and both my parents are steeped in African-American culture. Both are graduates of historically black colleges. My mom is a you know a Delta black fraternity. I grew up in a lynx family and other black African-American orientations over that time. I was a kid from growing up in black church growing up in a black family. My identity was very very frozen and strong and rooted. My parents specially were raising me you know when I put on the white community really made sure that I was connected to places like Newark to cultural events to history. So my challenges with race which you're right it still continues to be one of more insidious forces undermining America's Truth is a cancer historic racism implicit racism. And we can get into that. It's still a cancer on the soul of America. But my experiences in my life of discrimination of being that twentysomething black kid pulled over by the police fearing for my life from law enforcement you know those experiences of mine were sort of shook your soul. But I had I had these deep roots from parents who never made me question my beauty never made me question my purpose and my parents were very clear with me that black culture luxuriated it enjoy it. Know who you are. Know the honor of the history the chords of American history whether it's Irish Italian Chinese in America they are so strong that go back to our earliest days that you are part of this legacy of struggle. And my parents wanted me to define my blackness not just on the foods that I ate or the music that I listen to. They were so ardent in trying to say that you are part of an American core that is all about struggle and it's all about the fight for more inclusiveness and making this nation more just so you know I think in my experiences in Newark you know the only thing I felt when I heard things like Sharpe James said is I just I hurt because I saw how much it hurt my parents that they taught their child to do exactly what I was doing in Newark. And yet a man that they saw as their peer would try to attack him in such ways.

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Axelrod: [00:13:39] I guess it's not just about lineage but it's also about class. I mean you've had like a storybook life in some ways you've you know you went to Stanford you were all everything there you played on the football team you were student body president. You went to Oxford. You went to Yale Law School. And so there it isn't just a distinction of race but a distinction of class. And then you go from Yale. Well before let me say something please. When you go from Yale to Newark I'll follow up on Yale in a second. You went from Yale to Newark. And you you came from an entirely different experience then as a class matter then the people you were vying to represent first as a lawyer and then as a politician had a you had you. How did you overcome that barrier.

Booker: [00:14:40] Well look I get that Stanford gave me was giving me the freedom to immerse myself in the work that my parents told me about. So starting to work in places like East Palo Alto East Menlo Park and falling in love with that work and I knew by the time I was 18 19 years old that this is what I wanted to do. And in fact this is who I wanted to be with. You know I want to be with the folks that are facing outrageous oppression. I want to live in communities that were in struggle. And so from East Palo Alto East Harlem New Haven Connecticut. While I was doing what I was doing to get my education I wanted to stay close to the communities. Alice Walker has this incredible book called In Search of my mother's garden and I still remember reading a couple of pages that so spoke to my heart in terms of my aspirations and sort of quoted or paraphrase it because I might get a few words wrong. But she's talked about she has a letter in it to black revolutionary artists and you understand when you're a kid in your teens and twenties you're you're so upset at this country and the fact that it's swearers that it's a country of liberty and justice for all. But you see clearly in so many communities where it's falling short of that. And so she writes this letter that I thought was speaking directly to my heart where she said the real revolutionary is always concerned with the least glamorous stuff raising a child's reading level from third grade to fourth. Filling out food stamps for people because they've got to eat revolution or not. The real black revolutionary artist is always close enough to the people to be there for them when they are needed. And so you know as a young man for me as you went through 10 years of higher education I always knew it was a journey to get to my community. And when I say I'm I mean I'm not just talking about black people. It's a people I feel like I am one generation literally my father grew up in a community like the ones I live in right now we've got 100 United States senators. I think I'm the only one that lives in an inner city all black community. My median income in my community is \$14000. Everybody's focus was on the shooting in Washington last week that ran 24/7 on CNN. While there was a shooting on my block right across the street from me. Around the same time. And those shootings happened every single day and CNN doesn't give a damn or doesn't seem to really care. When on my street there are recovering drug addicts and in the place across the street. So I want to be there with people that don't benefit from this country. And that was sort of my call.

Axelrod: [00:17:27] I get all you want and I get that you want to be there. I guess my question is how hard was it to persuade the people who you who are who you were there to represent that you were of them and that you weren't just using them to advance your own your own career.

Booker: [00:17:48] Well look you and I both know this. There's a saying that who you are speaks so loudly I can't hear what you say. And you know one of the things you did for me is it humbled me more than I ever thought. It broke me in ways broke my heart. I always say if you don't if your heart's never been broken by this country you don't love her enough. And in Newark as shattered me in many many pieces and a lot of folks in that community rebuilt me. And so when I when I moved into Newark and as I said I've worked in inner cities before I moved into a section of the city that I was shaken by in my first days. I mean literally moving my stuff in to the neighbor. I still live in this neighborhood and my stuff was stolen out of my car. I was moving back and forth into this one room boarding house next to a crack house across the street from the projects. And you're right that transition especially in this neighborhood was a little jarring in the sense of OK. My my my college life is over. I'm now an adult and I'm now starting a career as a young attorney. And there are and I'm living in the neighborhood. Now this is the first time in

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life I wasn't going back to a dorm but I was living at night listening to gunshots looking outside the bathroom window watching a 24 hour drug trade. And there's something I found in my life and everything I've done is that when you kind of get to the end of everything that's familiar and you jump into the darkness that God or the universe sends you people that will guide you and that's what happened to me in Newark. And you know I always one of my favorite moments of my life was the arrogance with which I went to the tenant president in those projects around me knocking on her door intro saying I'm here you know sit down don't worry.

Axelrod: [00:19:35] You know as you were--Did she greet with the same enthusiasm?

Booker: [00:19:38] So now here I had dreamed about finally living in the community I felt connected to. And her response was she couldn't be bothered with me. And while I might have thought somewhere in the corners of my mind I'm writing in and I'm going to help save folks. She looked at me actually with pity and like you the saved kid you know you need to get your head screwed on straight. And in those first conversations one of the things she did to me which was one of my favorite moments in my life because it was like Lesson number one from my city was she takes me down to Martin Luther King Boulevard where I was living across the street from the projects now the next year I would literally move into those buildings and would live there for about eight years. She says to me Tell me what you see. You want to help me. Then tell me what you see. And I describe the neighborhood just like I just described it to you. Projects crack house. Just describe the neighbored and the more I talk the more angry she looked. And finally she just looks at me and she says dismissively you can't help me. And she starts storming away from me and I run after her and I grab her from mind as respectfully as possible just almost like I don't know if I was just angry confused and like what are you talking about. And then she looks at me hard. And she says boy you need to understand something the world you see outside of you is a reflection of what you have inside of you. And if you just see problems and despair and darkness that's all there is ever going to be. And you can't help me but if you're one of stubborn people every time you open your eyes you see God. You see love. You see beauty you see dignity. Then you can help me. And she walks away from me leaving me there you know thinking to myself OK grasshopper. Ended the lesson and then I did something that--

Axelrod: [00:21:20] Let me just stop you for a second and we take a short break to break on such a such an inspiring point. But we need to take a word from our sponsor. We'll be right back. Sure. I want you to pick up your point. You know I'm one of the reasons I asked you that question is that when then state Senator Obama spoke at the 2004 convention one line in his speech that sticks in my head was we have to end the slander that says a black child with a book is acting white and it spoke to sort of these class issues that. And so there are discriminatory attitudes that go both ways that are so destructive. And so that's why I ask the question.

Booker: [00:22:17] I don't. First of all I so miss Obama and her husband so much.

Axelrod: [00:22:25] I suspect you've used that line before.

Booker: [00:22:27] I knew of any person knows when a politician is getting in line. He knows he can get a chuckle and break the mood. Look that's not the black community that I know where anybody has slandered folks because they're getting a book I come from a black community where on an eighth grade graduation it is a party. People are celebrating. People are rejoicing. I cover black men when I sit in a black church. The pastor. If a kid got a good report card takes time out of a sermon to point kids out. So I I know where these tropes come from times that the way I see them where people want to talk about that is not cool in the black community to read but that is such a crock. And I challenge anybody to walk with me to any of my schools and see how much education is valued and revered in the black community and the black culture. I come from a culture in our country that its heroes are people like Booker T

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Washington who brick by brick built Pitofsky Institute where Mary McLeod Bethune one of the greatest educators this country's ever had or hailed as heroes still in black and black communities today. So the way we talk about race in this country sometimes frustrates the hell out of me because I see the struggle every day. I'll go back to it Thursday night. Mitch McConnell could let this healthcare bill die as it should. And I'll go back into a black community and on my block as I told described to you before. Not a lot of people of wealth but they understand and the kids in that community understand that there's an urgency to get an education. In fact if you saw the things I've seen in my 20 years at Newark I remember a great woman in Montclair New Jersey that donated to me like I don't know five hundred children's books and I've done a lot of things given out free hotdogs at barbecues. But people and I'm not exaggerating. Lined up around the block. We had to go back and try to find more books because they wanted children's books for their kids. And so please understand people try to make these differentiations based upon race between what white kids might want in black kids by one. All parents have their common aspirations for their kids. And I'm I'm I'm telling you right now in Newark in Camden in Patterson in Passaic it's the same hunger for the American dream and everybody knows that the pathway to get there is through education and the irony and the awful evilness in this country is that just based on your zip code we still are a nation that's going to it's going to determine what kind of education that you get. It is a violence that is being conducted against children in this country when they being it's a new type of slavery. It's a new type of and it's not imprisoning the body but it's imprisoning the mind by denying people access to education. And it's so insidious. When I was coming up in Newark that in fact the one woman named Miss Martinez who was the education writer for The Wall Street Journal she no longer is. But that time I met her she was she was working for one of those famous periodicals on the planet Earth. And her story is the story of so many kids in Newark because when the schools weren't providing families they could they would use fake addresses in the in the predominately white suburban towns and those towns would use taxpayer dollars to hire private investigators to go follow around children often minority children see where they go home. And this Martinez was one of those kids that was caught brought in the principal's office not allowed to call her parents forced to sign a confession. The irony is she was pulled out of a journalism class. And so the desperate fight still in America. There are families and communities still fighting just to have the same kind of education I got in an affluent town. So please don't tell me that there are that isn't that that reading in Newark or black communities is considered acting white. No it's actually something--

Axelrod: [00:26:22] You know I had this I had Arnie Duncan on this podcast some time ago and he talked about his mother who you may know ran for years. I mean heroic woman in intercity reading program and she was and he talked about the fact that gangs threatened her life if she showed up the next day. So maybe that experience was different than the ones that but that was that was the sort of you know I just think there are a lot of obstacles. I agree with you on the immorality of school funding.

Booker: [00:27:00] And but it's deeper than that. And this is what I'm going to do every day in the Senate to try to wake people up because if that was just the problem if it was just that my schools and communities were facing difficult challenges in school funding.

Axelrod: [00:27:19] No I agree with you I'm making the same point. I think there are there are the the remnants not the remnants but the impacts of generations of discrimination of the of the stripping of economic assets from these communities the lack of opportunity particularly for young men. Right. And the pervasiveness of drugs and gangs and violence that all all are a part of the equation.

Booker: [00:27:51] So I want I want to expand that equation because we don't we don't talk about what it means that kids in my community in Harrington Park and kids in my community in Newark commit drug crimes at the same rate no different when blacks and whites but the parents of kids in Newark are going to be arrested for that four or more times for those drug crimes and the two of the three last presidents admitted to felony drug use. And they talk about it half of Congress might make jokes about using marijuana. But in my community and communities of color and poor communities people are preyed

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upon. So you know the percentage of children coming from so-called broken homes that were broken by the government because they're arresting their family members casting them an apology. We're not even done this criminal justice system has done more harm literally a university came out that showed that you have 20 percent less poverty in the country. If we just had incarceration rates the same as our industrial peers. But let's not even stop there. You said economic injustice. People should know that cities and the poverty in cities was by design by the federal government through FHA policies through redlining packing poverty and making it impossible for people to lose to leave or get the kind of loans and opportunities other families got. But the question should go further than that. Newark Detroit I could go through the cities and the rural places. I just came back from Alabama just came back from Louisiana where the environment is so toxic. I came through politics in Newark when we had epidemic levels of lead poisoning epidemic levels of lead poisoning. But even elevated blood lead levels is correlated with poor performance in school learning disabilities. And so when you have thousands and thousands of children who have lead what's the number one reason why kids miss school. United States of America asthma all the asthma rates in inner cities or to thrive where times we literally have a city that's so toxic and it's not just my cities in Newark and Camden where kids have to get bring bottled water to school because they can't drink because there's lead in the water fountains. Everybody talks about Flint as they should. But Reuters just came out with a thousand localities around this country where kids have three times the lead levels in their blood. So let's go now back to these communities where kids are what they're really struggling with. They're struggling with economic dislocation. They're struggling with poor resources for education. I can take you to school buildings where I was coming up or the condition you wouldn't want those buildings should be condemned. They're they're struggling with environmental toxins at levels we have super funds in every state every single state. There was a good old days when Reagan Mitch McConnell reauthorized cleanup's for those those those days are gone and America is you know this in this day of like Grover Norquist no taxes. And so we actually have Superfund sites increasing in America. Well Superfund sites like the ones that are in Newark. If you go if you have a child born within three miles of a Superfund site your chances of autism are dramatically higher. Your chances of birth defects are dramatically high.

Axelrod: [00:30:58] Right.

Booker: [00:30:58] So the obstacles to children in this country are not just around the basics of education. It is their environment physical environment. I am in total agreement with you then.

Axelrod: [00:31:10] That was the point I was trying to make.

Booker: [00:31:11] And then there's one more one more area that we're not even talking about which is something we as a country should talk about which is just trauma just the ideas of emotional trauma. Fourth of July coming up right now in Newark. I used to always hurt me. This country's independence day so much pride I have so much love of America. But the reason why as mayor I would hurt is because when firecrackers would go off I get calls from parents because kids are so traumatized by gunshots in their neighborhood. It's like post-traumatic stress. They hear the firecrackers and they dive under there. Their their couches in their beds. I walked into a women's prison about three weeks ago and I turned to the attorney of the warden is a federal penitentiary. And I said how many of the women here were traumatized and they're in their youth have been sexually assaulted sexually abused face this kind of trauma. And she said ninety five percent. And so we don't talk about the psychological damages we don't talk about the environmental damages. We don't talk about the economic disadvantages and we don't talk enough about that whole equation and how it's working against the most valuable natural resource in our country not oil gas or coal is the genius of our kids.

Axelrod: [00:32:23] And I I agree with you completely senator. But let me return to your story. You you had this sort of as I said storybook life and you got elected as a city council member when you're 29 years

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old and you were a force for reform on a council that wasn't particularly receptive to it and then you ran for mayor the first time and you lost. What was that experience. What was the experience of losing like for a guy who in many ways had been winning all his life.

Booker: [00:33:00] You know we all say this it's almost become trite that we learn more from our failures and from our successes. And it was a really profoundly painful moment especially because I lived in a city. Again we have this power got powerful mayor who is one of the most deft at using his power to crush his enemies. And you know I had gone through a long period of my life from 1998 to 2002 race where I would have police pulled me aside warned me that I'm being followed. There was an incident that got a lot of publicity when my phones were being tapped by the local law enforcement where my windows on my car smash tire slash and that was just me. But the people who were supporting me I had people coming up to me saying I can't help you anymore I've been threatened I'll lose my job. And so after that loss it was an election that was so I had so much national attention I was getting job offers from Newark. In Norway let's say but the people who supported me I still remember one bar owner who allowed me to hold my meetings there. Suddenly the ABC Alcohol Beverage Control was rating his bar. There was a guy that drove me around that suddenly had code enforcement showing up. And what inspired me though in that and I think that often during the darkest times you know our lives are darkest times in our country. We often see the greatest moments of heroism whether it's a Muslim band were I I I was so moved when I was at Dulles Airport and seeing one of the best moments of America I've ever seen you know hundreds of people filling an airport cheering Muslim families coming off guys with keypads on cheering Muslims. Well this was one of those moments where Newark after Newark or after Newark her who had so much more on the line than I did even the building I was living in in Brick Towers it was taken which is I'm sorry the public housing. In

Axelrod: [00:34:51] Newark that it no longer exists.

Booker: [00:34:53] That's right the street from where I live now and the mayor took it over the Housing Authority took it over. So now it's public housing and ran it into the ground. So now my my I'm I'm literally running around buying space heaters for my residents because as I learn the art of heating your apartment with your oven which is just not the same thing in the world. Yeah. And so but new aircraft or Newark or grassroots leader of the rebel leader said Don't give up don't leave. You've got to stay in the fight. And I would do it all over again. You're going to win. You're going to be the mayor of this city. And so for me it was a power I felt like I let people down. I felt like I failed people. I felt like I was responsible for so many people who went from fragile economics to suddenly being jobless but it was an instructive moment to me that sometimes a loss is the precursor to a massive breakthrough and as you know and you did it the next time you went by 72 percent yes.

Axelrod: [00:35:55] Sharpe James went on to serve a different kind of term in a federal penitentiary after that. You know it's interesting you talked about the scene at the that inspiring scene at the airport and you said people were wearing keep us yarmulkes and it raises in my mind your interesting faith journey because your family was I think am me and you. You're a Baptist and yet you have a very close relationship with the Jewish community you formed in Yale they have these secret societies you formed one the L.A. Azariah society with Jewish students there. Why. And I'm told that you can you can recite Torah portions in Hebrew is that right.

Booker: [00:36:44] I know some Hebrew yeah. I've definitely been like.

Axelrod: [00:36:47] I've been barmitzvah I can't do that. I just want you to know, I mean my rabbi is long gone so I can make that I can make that statement. But my question to you is what drew you to that. Because it's striking.

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Booker: [00:37:05] Well DuBois says you know that the big tragedy of man is not that they're poor and no poverty and he goes through a list of the tragic as the real tragedy of man is that men know so little of man. And I had a faith journey where you know having a very strong grounding in Christianity I felt a yearning to know other faiths and I actually had this almost funny incidents where I stumbled into a cabal. And he's embraced by a rabbi who we did a challenge with each other where we basically said let's know each other but let's take time to read. And so we just it was just I'm mean Oxford I have tons of time trying to read different canons that I thought were important. I hadn't read in college. And he says I'll give you a book you know give me a book. We agreed on that deal and so the first book I gave him was Malcolm X's autobiography and I'm embarrassed that I was a Rhodes Scholar in Oxford the first book he gave me was night by Elie Wiesel. And I just devoured the books he was giving both powerful. Yes. And before I knew it I was studying the Torah which I found liberating in many ways. And it just started me on this odyssey. And since then I've studied Hinduism and Buddhism and had some great in some great Islamic teachers and I'm just I just love man's conception human human's conception of the divine and my life has been enriched by it. And I'm I think my struggle in my own life is just to live in accordance with my deepest beliefs and trying to create that kind of integrity is very hard. I have a saying where I say before you speak to me about your religion first show it to me and how you treat other people. At the end of the day who we are this tells our truth and we tell our truth by what we do not what we believe. And so that's always a struggle for me and how far to take that. You know my a lot of personal decisions I made on my life. I'm a vegan for for example.

Axelrod: [00:39:20] Yeah.

Booker: [00:39:21] And you know a lot of that has to do with health. But a lot of it has to do is can I simplify my life so that to the least extent possible I'm participating in things that don't fit with my values. And you know there's nothing wrong with eating meat and I haven't I'm not one of these vegans that looks down on folks. People have of trouble living in accordance my own values. And time to judge other people. But you know when I began to understand what's involved in the industrial animal agricultural industry I said that I think I can't condone that. And I want to fight to stop that as most Americans do. And that's why we have laws are beginning to change. But I'm trying to find ways as I get older every year that simplify my life to the extent that I'm living in better accordance to the values I have.

Axelrod: [00:40:06] We're going to take another short break and we'll be right back with Senator Cory Booker on that point about Judaism you know there was a historic alliance between the black community and the Jewish community during the civil rights movement. Many of the leaders of the civil rights movement are supporting the leaders of the civil rights movement were prominent members of the Jewish community a rift move developed over the years between the two communities. Why is that and is that a is that an unbreachable chasm.

Booker: [00:40:51] Well again I you know we often simplify things. But as the history is a lot more complex than that you mean I often say Well I think we do I think you do well help me understand. Yeah. So you know there's our black and Jewish alliances in this country that have been consistent and unyielding and I can tell you black Jewish leaders in New Jersey who have never had a rift they've always been working on issues of poverty injustice and yet there has been celebrated moments where there has been blacks and Jews that have had had those rifts. Know what happened in Crown Heights. But people talk about the kind of riots but they never talked about some of the amazing black and Jewish leaders there that held things together and kept dialogue and continue to work together. And so I I would I celebrate and what I choose to continue to focus on is as an African-American Christian is the great Jewish leaders that again live their faith every single day. There are synagogues in my state who do extraordinary things in disadvantaged communities of many different races and backgrounds. You know Judaism was one of the things I celebrate Judaism and like Christianity or Islam is it's not a conversion of religion. If you ask to be Jewish rabbi I suppose to turn you down three times. But Judaism is really about

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is some very powerful ideals. And so yes I was on the Capitol steps with John Lewis doing sort of a sit and sit out thing that was just beautiful around the health care. Yeah. And just a body organically in the night until hundreds of people came out to sit on the Capitol steps as we just discussed at one point a great young man who runs a homeless organization with a keeper with yarmulke on. And I'm have this again you euthanize of the pinch yourself you have these moments where I'm sitting on the Capitol steps and my hero is sitting next to me John Lewis and this beautiful Jew sitting next to me who's helping to run a homeless organization. And I find myself giving a dabar Torah to the two of them about what I think humanity is all about. One of my favorite moments in the Torah where Abraham. These are our three major faiths in this country are Abrahamic faiths. Abraham is sitting there having in pain having just circumcised himself. And he sees strangers complete strangers approaching him in the distance. And what the Torah says is really beautiful human just wave to them or invite them in which would have been epic in a level of kindness itself. It says he gets up. Remember he's in pain and enthusiastically runs to greet these folks bring them into his tent to give them food and water and wine and then they reveal themselves to be angels. I wish we all Emerson said that only which we have within. Can we see without if we see no angels because we harbor none. If only we could all see each other as angels specially those people of different political parties or think differently. So that's that. That would be the story as I said to the two great men on my left or right that alone that our faith is grounded first and foremost in this idea of goodness kindness the Hebrew word Cresset and Sadako that this is the one that I believe it's one of the fundamental reasons for life and goodness kindness decency. But then the story takes his turn. That doesn't make sense where these angels give him the blessing and then they say OK and this makes a major shudder. They say I'm going to go destroy the city now they're going to Sodom him are they going to destroy a city. Now I'm telling you right now is Guy faith that of angels appeared to me and told me they were going to do something I would probably be on my knees just in witness. But that's not what Abraham teaches us. He stands up and start arguing with angels fighting with angels. And to me this is a story of Judaism when when Moses sees people praying to a golden calf and it give you the Hebrew phrase he literally God says Look I'm going to destroy these people give me some other people lead and Moses now argues with God and says the Hebrews McKinnie nomics Africa. If you destroy these people. Erase me from your book. Here you have from Moses to Abraham people that are saying I don't care if it's God Himself. If you are committing an injustice in my midst I am morally obligated to fight against that injustice. And so those are the two pillars that I am imperfectly every day living my life in accordance to goodness kindness decency to others and an agent even if you have to fight God himself or herself and or acts of God you have an obligation to fight against injustice. And so this is what I love about people who live their faith. I am I am hurt. And again we off to have spent so much I'm judging people we forget to love them. And I don't like and this is why you know I don't know what if this is a successful formula and the kind of politics that that is winning these days about vilifying others vilifying so much that one of the moments I'll never forget watching the Republican National Convention Republican presidential debates and seeing my governor Chris Christie who I can write a dissertation on my disagreements but I can text them on a cell phone right now. A friend asked him about his family. I can't stand things he does. But I still see his divinity. Disgusting.

Axelrod: [00:46:15] Listen I that one of the reasons why I do this podcast is with people across the political spectrum. I think it's harder to hate each other when we know it right.

Booker: [00:46:25] And so you'll remember this moment Republican debate Chris Christie is being pilloried for hugging Barack Obama. And that to me of all the issues I wanted to bring a hurricane Sandy in the place I remember this hug. I watched this hug. The president of United States who by the way and I wish Barack Obama was known more for the person he is a guy who at times of personal trial for me this kind of guy calls you on the telephone himself to the United States you get a call. This is the kind of goodness that President Obama embodied. He flies in to a seat in crisis. Chris Christie has had moments public crying I lost people in Newark as mayor Mohamad descends from these steps and the two men hug. Now I'm a hugger First of all. Was even a great hug. It's one of those awkward male hugs. And now

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I'm watching that we have so vilified each other in this country that we are going to castigate two Americans for touching each other for extending human decency to fight an act of God to say this is unjust to a Republican or Democrat and we're going to do something about it. That's where we've come. And so it's hard for me even in my party. I saw Mitch McConnell coming up the steps right up the steps right before our way here. Coming up the escalator I think what they're trying to do is so discordant with Christian values that you're trying to rip health care Medicaid away from folks all to get a tax cut \$33 no tax cut for the wealthiest.

Axelrod: [00:47:56] And this this this this malign spirit is very much on display in Washington.

Booker: [00:48:04] But when I saw Mitch McConnell what did I do did I. Did I cuss at him. No. I looked him in his eyes and I said hello and he smiled and said hello to me. Now I had a moment with Chris Christie. I'll never forget it was a day marriage equality was coming out of the Senate and Christie was going to veto it. And I happened to have a meeting with him that day about a major development project I had poured my heart soul countless hours of my time into that we're going to give kids in Newark into apprenticeship programs so we're going to create a housing affordable housing for my community. Jobs everything I needed the governor to get this done. I happen to be going down to the Capitol the day that marriage equality is being done now. I am passionate advocate not just for equal marriage rights in this country we still live in a nation where most states who can get fired just for being gay and have no legal recourse. This is an issue I fought it in Newark often amongst some of my own residents who died in 2006 called me up cussed me out not anonymously told me who they were just for raising the price.

Axelrod: [00:49:02] You yourself have spoken as a young man and you spoke about your conversion on this issue.

Booker: [00:49:08] Yeah absolutely. So I go into meet with Chris Christie we come out from an hour meeting and the press is there. Did you give it to him. Marriage equality did you whatever. Just like I said absolutely not. I could use my one hour with the governor of the state of New Jersey to argue with him to condemn him for his blocking justice or I got to spend that hour working on my development project that's going to create jobs and opportunity for my community. And so I just wonder you know that the the thing I love about my country is that we're in love. I really think our best moments are despite our differences were we. And by the way we don't we don't hesitate or equivocate to fight injustice to stand up to power to condemn action. I'm not talking about in any way Martin Luther King condemned Gandhi fought and condemned the most powerful forces on the planet Earth. But what's beautiful about them. What's beautiful about our history is it never undermined our ability to see the divinity the dignity in others too big to express that goodness that decency. We need that in our country because I fear the rifts that we have are deep. And that we need to amongst all the issues that we're talking about in this country return to the ideals of our Declaration of Independence which by the way I condemn as being a document full of bigotry. Native Americans are referred to as savages in it. And so I'm not one of these people that wants to hail the founding documents. I want to speak them like they are. But the genius in them is that they said if this country is going to make it at the end of the Declaration of Independence was when the greatest declarations of interdependence. It was this incredible understanding that if we're going to make it as a country we have to have an unusual commitment to each other because we're not being found because we all are the same race are on other countries benefit from that that they all speak like this. They look alike and the like. This was a country they knew it was diverse. The only way we were going to hold together is if we had an unusual commitment and so they say at the end of the Declaration of Independence which you know that last sentence we must mutually pledge to each other our Lives our Fortunes and our sacred Honor. Never before in our country. In my opinion that's overly dramatic but I feel like the challenge of my generation now is to return to that ideal of sacred honor is to say I'm going to fight against you if you're doing something that's going to hurt people. But I'm not it's not going to stop me from seeing your truth and seeing who you are and understanding that that this country is going to make

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it. I actually need you that we are interwoven in this destiny that I can't escape you. I can't send you off someplace else and that the only way to get there is for me to find ways I can get there with you not just against you. That's that.

Axelrod: [00:51:48] That is a a great aspiration for the country at a time when we seem to be retreating into tribalism and there's all kinds of forces pushing us there including the media environment the way our politics is organized. What gives you hope.

Booker: [00:52:09] Well I think what gives me hope is that I see this on a daily and this one again reason why I love Newark is because I get to witness it often in the toughest conditions I get to witness things like that. Dulles Airport. That gave me hope. Sudden activism of people you know everybody is looking at the election in Georgia for us Democrats what a horrible defeat for the Republicans. I look at that. Wait a minute. A whole bunch of people that sat on the sidelines before are engaging. I mean the incredible voter turnout in a special election when you and I both know special kind of district that the Republicans have held for 40 years but this is what's beautiful about that because. You know Alice Walker said the most common way people give up their power is not realizing they have it in the first place. And you and I can condemn and I will continue to do the divisions in our country. But the reality is as you and I both have traveled this country enough to know the goodness of folks and so what worries me is not that we're not a good country. Not that we're not a loving country. It's that people allow their inability to do everything about a problem to undermine the determination to do something they don't understand what King said so eloquently that what we will have to repent for in this day and age is not that just a betrayal of words. And we turn on cable TV a lot of vitriolic words

Axelrod: [00:53:37] Or from --from the Twitter and the white hous

Booker: [00:53:40] Yeah. So when he says you have to repent for it's not just a vitriolic words and violent actions of the bad people but the appalling silence and inaction of the good people. You and I both know that in our politics. To me the bigger problem is a lack of participation. To me we I remember being at a animal rights event Humane Society event and someone coming up to me after event we're talking about compassion and humanity to all God's creatures and they show me that they just what the tweet they just sent to Paul Ryan literally vilifying him to the extent of not recognizing his humanity. We don't understand that those small actions that we make small actions of love resonate far more than we know but our silence our lack of action is actually creating the evils that we condemn.

Axelrod: [00:54:34] So the obvious question is given how passionately you feel about this. You've been mentioned relative to 2020 and the parties looking at the question I get more than any other when I travel as well who are the leaders of our party in the future who could emerge in and lead. Is that something that you would consider.

Booker: [00:54:56] So let me answer this to a guy who knows it. Well I think that politicians make a terrible mistake if they're thinking about aspirations for another office because I think it undermines their integrity where they are. Let's go with an a subject we've already talked about. I think our food systems in America are so broken and we don't understand the damage they're doing to communities the damage they are doing in terms of enforcing poverty. The damage in doing climate change. And so I'm a guy that's going to criticize policies that frankly in a lot of states are important for presidential elections would find that very much of a threat. And so my loyalty is to the position I'm in right now. And to the integrity I'm trying to live every day. And so if I start thinking about the future like that or engaging in that stuff I'm telling you right now it is. I've seen this. I think it I think it would make me a lesser of a senator. And so what I learned if you would come to me in fact the worst quote I've ever given to a reporter was when I was mayor and wasn't thinking about my future and somebody asked me Would you want to be a United States senator and I. I said if I ever talk about running for the United States Senate I said I should do

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some physical damage to my body. But I tell you me being a throw caution to the wind. 100 percent present Mayor fighting for my communities opened up opportunities for me in the future so I don't know what the future is going to bring. I'm not making predictions but I want to unleash the fullness of who I am right now and I want to call out injustice where I see it whether it's an industrial animal agriculture whether it's the toxic environmental issues in poor communities

Axelrod: [00:56:35] Justice reform presumably.

Booker: [00:56:36] Look at my pollsters told me when I was running for this seat that that's not even the top 15 or 20 issues that New Jerseyans care about. But I knew that this was my first time going all on in the States and I don't care if I'm in front of a Jewish audience a Latino audience wealthy white audience poor white audience I'm going to talk about this issue every single place I go because if you want to talk to me about the biggest cancer on this whole country it's it's our prison systems it's our criminal justice system and it's so hurting all Americans at a time that roads and bridges are crumbling in this country where we have compared to our competitors disinvested in our infrastructure. The one area and I've been to foreign countries where they're astonished at this where we built our infrastructure put trillions of dollars to build an infrastructure between the time I was in law school time I was mayor of my city we were building a new prison every 10 days. That's where our infrastructure dollars went to. And this is hurting all Americans. And so I don't care about the future. I'm here for a very short period time New Jersey's giving me till 2020 till I have to go before them to run for re-election. I want to just be a guy unleashed trying to do the best I can. And again we started this conversation talking about race. You know my mom was so she just so she's such an amazing woman. I wish she was here so you could ask her questions is more interesting than I am. My dad died six days before I was elected to this job in October of 20 13 and so on that.

Axelrod: [00:58:00] He had Parkinson's.

Booker: [00:58:01] He had Parkinson's and so on the day I was sworn in in October I was on the holiday of Halloween. They took took me my staff my everybody but my mom leading me to go sit down with John Lewis and she so wanted me to be grounded in the history that brought me to the Senate because she knew you're the fourth elected African-American to the United States Senate since Reconstruction. And I mean I wish I had a microphone to listen to from the time she left John Lewis when she got the gospel. You know she is now she was a woman loosed. And she's just preaching to me as I'm walking like boy don't you forget where you came from that title doesn't make the man. The man's got to make the title and the beauty. ARC beautiful history the way that God conspires nice to give you these moments where you're like holy crap is that I get to the Senate and as senators do I write a book. But I have really fact check my stories because I saw the story of my life and my experiences are so extreme that we already experience that in my past elections people just not believing that they were true. So we went back. I mean I tracked down guys that ran the drug trade in my building. Everybody couldn't make sure that we were sourcing everything that I said so I had to find the people that helped my family move in to Harrington Park and I went after those lawyers I said Who are these guys that set up these sting operations who coordinated all that who's got it took a punch from my family and so I found the head of the Fair Housing Council of 1960s she was easy to find because mostly Porter because she still had a fair housing council now she's in her 90s now and she tells me look for the here's a lawyer that's a lie that was the organizer I call him up. Arthur Lassman and this is what he says to me and this is the power of that of the love and individual actions. And this is what I said to John Lewis yesterday when we're sitting on the steps. I asked the guy why would you white guy starting his career struggling to make it put it just put a shingle out as a lawyer partnered up with another guy struggling to make it. And he says Cory I remember the day I decided to represent black families trying to move in the community. And I'm like the day. OK what was it December you know. I remember the day meeting. I remember it was a Monday that I decided you know like how do you know it was a Monday. And he goes Cory because that Sunday I was

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sitting in my office sitting at home on my couch comfortable watching some people on a bridge in Alabama the Edmund Pettus Bridge got beat down by Billy clubs and it's so shook me to my core. I knew I couldn't afford to go to Alabama. I knew I couldn't afford to close my offices for one day but I was going to use what time I had to call organizations in New Jersey he said who needs a lawyer to help represent black.

Axelrod: [01:00:36] I'm sure you share that story with John Lewis who was almost beaten to death on that.

Booker: [01:00:41] And he looked at me and I said John I said that's the that's the power of you and the other actors on the bridge. They had no clue that they are love in that moment would change the hearts of people in New Jersey who would then go on and change the outcomes for generations yet unborn. That's the power of love. Every individual every day I always say the biggest thing you can do in any day is most often going to be a small act of kindness decency and love. And it will radiate in ways that you probably will never even know somebody's watching you just pick up a piece of trash and it'll change what they do. And another person does. And that's the power of us as Americans we're here not just because our founding fathers were here because as my father taught me that conspiracy of love ordinary Americans who despite the politics of the day found something to do. A dollar and a church collection plate so kids can go to college taking in a boy whose mother was too sick to take care of him. That's what my hope is for this country. That's what's going to help us get through this time.

Axelrod: [01:01:35] I must say that you mentioned that and I know this business. I've asked this of are you thinking of running question to a lot of people have never heard anyone so artfully navigate or as you just did. But I enjoyed it. Thank you. I've enjoyed this conversation. Your book. I appreciate you.

Booker: [01:01:56] I know you. Please let me just have a moment. Yes. You what you've done for this country is amazing. And you've got I've read so much about you. You really sacrificed your family and your time and your energy for America and the difference you made. And again this is things we don't always know the impact we made change the lives of millions of people not just in our country but in other countries. And I just want to thank you.

Axelrod: [01:02:23] Well, I very much appreciate that. And as you know those journeys are what make life worth living in. So I feel privileged to have had the chance to play some small part. But you will continue to do that and we will watch with interest and I hope to have more conversations with you.

Booker: [01:02:46] I want to come on to Chicago. I want I want to be speak to you.

Axelrod: [01:02:49] I'd like to at The Institute of Politics at the University of Chicago.

Booker: [01:02:51] Yes.

Axelrod: [01:02:52] Senator Booker thank you.

Booker: [01:02:53] Thank you very much.