

Michael Poliakoff:

Professor Loury, I'm looking at my pre-publication copy of *Late Admissions: Confessions of a Black Conservative*. What prompted you to write this book? It's really quite extraordinary in its revelations about your political changes, the agility of your mind, the ability to say, "I was wrong, I'm doing it differently now." And even in your personal life. What was the motivation behind all of that?

Glenn Loury:

Oh, I suppose I needed something to do with my time. My cutting edge research agenda in technical economics had run its course. No, I'm only partly kidding. The year was 2015-16. I had a sabbatical leave from Brown. I was invited to join the scholars at the Center for Advanced Study and Behavioral Sciences at Stanford for the year, and I needed a project. And I'd been thinking, kicking around in my mind the idea of dealing with my evolution in political philosophy from left to right to left to right. That's the trajectory. I had a title, *Changing My Mind*, and I was going to reflect on what it means to be honest with oneself intellectual, who can admit that he's wrong about something, and can reevaluate. And what goes in train with that. Because people have brands, they're expecting things from you, and people are looking to you for support and solidarity, and you disappoint them and all of that. So that was the genesis for it, that I needed a project for that year, that I thought I wanted to write about my evolution in political positioning, and that I could make a short reflection on that work for me as a book. I got into it and I realized that there were depths of self-reflection that I had not anticipated that I would encounter as I started thinking about the politics.

And I realized that there was more to it than the politics of it, and it wasn't just about being a conservative or being a recovering conservative or whatever, that there were problems of coming to terms with the things that had happened in my life with drug addiction, with religious conversion and loss of faith, with marital infidelity and the struggle to live decently with my relationship with my children. I have five children, the youngest of whom is now in his early 30s. His name is Nehemiah, by the way, he has a Hebrew name.

Michael Poliakoff:

I like that name. Let us rise up and build.

Glenn Loury:

You got it, man. That's what it says right in the first few clauses of the book. And I was struck by these. He's in the service of a foreign potentate, but he hears that the walls are broken and the gates are burned with fire, and he wants to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the city and preside over a spiritual revival. And he does that, and that's kind of how I felt when Nehemiah was born in December of 1991. About what the Black community needed, a city without walls. That was my metaphor, Jerusalem without walls. So the marauding hordes that come by bringing every kind of pestilence and false idea and corruption, you don't have any protection from them. They just come in among you. And you want to rebuild the wall. You want to establish a structure, you want boundaries, you have a sense of who you are, this kind of thing. I thought my community needed this. So anyway, I realized it was more than just politics that I wanted to write about, and I changed my title. My title was going to be *Changing My Mind*, and I decided, no, we're going to call the book that doesn't exist yet *The Enemy Within*. And I was going to come to terms with some of this stuff. That was 2015-'16, and I left Stanford after a wonderful year in the sun with a box full of notes, but no book. And I actually have to thank Reihan Salam, President of the Manhattan Institute, for saying to me, because I have the podcast and I'm always

talking about what's going on in my intellectual life. And so I'd been talking with John McWhorter and others about my ideas about the book, and I'm going to write a book about my life.

And Reihan had been hearing this and he's like, "Where's the book? We need the book. Where's the book? How can I help? Where's the book?" So he basically helped me see that I need somebody to talk to about what I want to put into this book. And I get a guy that I talk to about what I want to put in the book. And we work together from transcripts and we produce a very, very crude skeletal draft of the book, which I can then take, and from 150 pages to 450 pages make it into something that I think is comprehensive, honest, and revealing, and hopefully of value to people struggling in life with some of the very kinds of problems that I had to confront. I'm in my 70s, I figured if I'm not going to do it now, I'm not going to do it. So that's my story.

Michael Poliakoff:

It is a gift. I have been reading it. There are passages that are lyrical, passages that I think it's fair to say make me cringe, as I know it must have made you cringe to write them. But candor, that candor that leads us to understand and to live better. And that's true in politics as well, to be able to look at changing circumstances and changing beliefs, one's own and others. But I actually want to turn to you, Paul, as well as to Professor Lowry. You write at the beginning about life in a, to say the least, less affluent part of Chicago, the South Side. Hardly bad, the house that you describe is a house that has, well, I think my wife might get mad at me for saying this, a bit more order than my own. But a real neighborhood.

Glenn Loury:

Yeah. I grew up in a working class/middle class residential neighborhood on the south side of Chicago. There were single family homes like the one that my aunt and uncle purchased in the mid-1950s. The neighborhood had been almost all white, and they were among the first of the African-Americans to move into that particular neighborhood. Big house, it would seem modest by my standards today, but at the time it seemed enormous. Six bedrooms and a big backyard, fruit trees, a fish pond and barbecue pit in the back, and a finished basement, and a little small apartment upstairs, entered from the rear of the house, which could have been a live-in maid's quarters. And my aunt offered it to my mother, who was a single parent at that time, she divorced with two children, me and my sister, who were, I don't know, seven, eight years old, as a refuge. Because my mother had been bouncing around and had a hard time getting a stable foundation under her life and therefore under ours.

It's going to sound like something a person says when they're trying to affect a certain posture. It was idyllic in my memory. I never heard a gunshot. I never picked up a crack vial. I never saw idle men standing on a corner with a brown paper bag taking drags on whatever was in the bag. Not in my neighborhood. If you drove five miles in this direction or that direction, you could see that kind of thing. These were people were employed, they were fathers, they were business people, there was entrepreneurs and things of this kind. As I talk about in the book, I say there's a line. People sometimes lived on both sides of the line. They might have done a little shady business here, a little bit below the counter over there. But by and large, it was a great environment to be a kid. The schools worked, as I've mentioned in earlier conversation with you, for me and my sister.

And people were concerned about respectability. They wanted to live decently. They cared what the neighbors thought. They didn't turn their music up too loud. The wayward kids could get confronted and disciplined by somebody who wasn't their parent. "What are you doing? Why are you acting like this?" There was a sense of respectability being valued that I don't know one finds in today's comparable African-American society. I'd like to be wrong about that. But it was a mixed neighborhood. There were

still some whites living around, although as the years went by, fewer and fewer. My best friend was a kid whose family were living in the neighborhood before Blacks started moving in and were taken to be "white." Even though both his mother and father had Negro, I'll use that word, it was the word that you would have used at the time, forebears, they had grandparents who were Negro.

They were light-skinned. They were so-called passing for white. And my friend Woody, the kid, he and his sister Wendy, they took a lot of flak from the other kids in the neighborhood as it got blacker and blacker for being kind of different. But Woody's mother, I overheard her one day saying, "The neighborhood changed, but we weren't going to run from our own kind." And in a way it was almost like she was apologizing for having lived as a white person in the neighborhood in the first place, which is I'm pretty sure what had been going on.

But Woody and I, we played stickball in the alley, and we would leave our bikes on the front lawn and go off to whatever we wanted to do. And this was the 1950s, early 1960s in Chicago, and that's how it was. Now, if you got on your bike and you rode in the wrong direction and you rode into the Polish neighborhoods and the Irish neighborhoods, it might not come out so well for you. So I didn't do that. It's a very segregated city, Chicago is very segregated, was in those years, I don't know about now. But certainly was then.

Paul Levy:

I find that really touching, because it's almost identically the way my neighborhood was. It was a mostly Jewish neighborhood, but it was definitely not middle class. It was probably lower middle class, whatever that meant. But it was the same sort of idyllic experience. Everything you said resonates really poignantly. Respectability, respect the rights of others, don't make noise in the building. I was in a Mitchell-Lama project. These were the projects that they used where they had federal money to finance the construction of apartment buildings when all the soldiers were coming back from the war. So it was built in 1949, 1950. And people were paying \$99 a month rent when my father left there. That was in 1950. When he left in 1975 or 1976, he was paying a grand total of about \$110 a month.

So this was basic lower middle class. But discipline from family, friends, people who knew us in the building. Everything that you said was there. And by the way, we had the Irish neighborhood we knew not to go to down by Broadway, because we could get in trouble there. So it was the same experience, and it was all virtue. It was beautiful. It was idyllic, as you said.

Michael Poliakoff:

The title, subtitle, *Confessions of a Black Conservative*, invites a conversation. I think Paul and I would most fairly call ourselves Jewish conservatives. You have been a Black liberal and a Black conservative, and you are now writing from the vantage point of a Black conservative. And it invites the question, what's a conservative? And in particular, what's a Black conservative? And maybe even we have time to get into, what's a Jewish conservative? Those labels can be very problematic. There's a lot of wiggle room in what those things mean. But I want to turn this over to you, Glenn.

Glenn Loury:

Oh, well, this came up in a conversation I had recently on my podcast with John McWhorter. And I offered the following schema for a Black conservative. I'd say there's three things going on that can get you called a conservative if you're Black. One of them is political economy. So I think capitalism's a pretty good system. I think it's the foundation of our prosperity. I think these people who run around talking about hitting on capitalism are mad. I think people were starving to death by the scores of

millions throughout this planet, and they're not doing it any more in South Asia and East Asia and elsewhere. And that's because of the market, people seeking profit, the resource being able to flow to their most valued end, not central planning, socialist state control. So I like capitalism. I'm an economist, maybe that shouldn't come as a surprise, but that's one thing that can get you called a conservative, if you don't follow the trendy current of opinion that thinks that there is a free lunch. Because there isn't any free lunch.

So I'm a conservative in terms of political conduct. I sometimes use the term neoliberal, and I'm not ashamed of that. People take that as an epithet, but I think, by which I mean markets work, prices guiding, resource allocation. Nothing wrong with private property. People seeking to do the best for themselves that they can. Adam Smith had his finger on something important, et cetera. So there's that. If that makes me a conservative, I can live with that. The other part is culture, second part in my schema. Tradition. What about the family? What about religion? And if not this or that religion, then the eternal quest for meaning, for a sense of purpose and significance in one's life, or being able to come to terms with the imponderables that are everywhere around us. The idea that we can't make it up every generation out of whole cloth how to live. That our ancestors who hand us down through the traditional norms and practices that a conservative would value, knew something.

And even if they couldn't write it out in a formula, they knew something about how to live in a kind of humility, a kind of respect for the things that we are inheriting from the past. This will sound Burkeian, I guess, and I suppose to a certain extent it is, it's another dimension of conservative, a kind of cultural respect for what we inherit from previous generations about how to live meaningfully. But then for a Black person, you get called a conservative if you take a heterodox position on certain ideas that the group is supposed to avoid taking. If you criticize affirmative action, if you call attention to the disaster which is seven in 10 babies born to a woman who is Black in America being born to a woman without a husband, and you call for reform. Not reform from the lawmaker, reform within the community in terms of how we understand what our responsibilities are to our children, to our forbears, and to our God. This kind of idea.

If you don't think that the relatively rare incidences in which a police officer shoots an unarmed Black man defines life for Black people in this country, and you rather think that the outsized homicide rate that is being manifest in urban areas occupied by Blacks, which are killing Black people in the thousands, is a catastrophe that needs to be confronted for what it is, that'll get you called a conservative. So if you break ranks, if you think the market's a good thing, and if you think traditional values warrant to be affirmed and lived up to, those are all things that get you called a conservative. And I am going to plead guilty on all fronts.

Michael Poliakoff:

Well, Paul, should we say something about what it means to be a Jewish conservative? Or looking at the time, maybe we should save that for another podcast.

Paul Levy:

I think another podcast, plus I'll need a couple of years to figure it out because I don't really know what that means. I do understand it in your context. Maybe I'm missing something. I don't think I understand it in mine. I think I'm conservative, but I don't know that Jewish informs that in any way. Maybe it does. I don't know.

Michael Poliakoff:

Higher Ed Now — Glenn Lowry Interview

Well, to be continued. I'm going to have to evoke the late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks for help in this, and I'll bring his book *To Heal a Fractured World*. But let me for this podcast, thank you so much. Author, scholar, teacher, public intellectual, professor Glenn Lowry. And I can now warmly recommend to the public, since this will be aired on May 14th, read this book. It's a book that will occasion personal growth.

Glenn Lowry:

Thanks so much, Michael and Paul.

Paul Levy:

You're welcome. Thank you.