

**New America
Resilience Audio Interview**

DARREN WALKER

The value of curiosity and saying, "maybe."

AMS: Darren Walker. It's always a pleasure to talk to you.

Darren Walker: It's great to be with you, Anne-Marie.

AMS: So we're talking about resilience, and your life experiences illustrate different kinds of resilience. I wanted to start with a quote about you from *The New Yorker* where it says you've always moved in many different circles. You've moved in gay circles, transplanted Southern circles, banking circles, African-American circles. So I want to start with the idea that resilience is about being a "We" rather than being an "I." Often we think about resilience as "hunker down like a rock and just endure." But as we thought about resilience, and as I think about resilience, I think of it more as having communities, having foundations. So I wondered if you would talk a little bit about all the different circles you are part of, and how that makes you a more resilient person or how that influences your thinking about resilient communities.

Darren: Well, I agree with you that a person is stronger by having a sense of "we" and a commitment to understanding why "we" as opposed to "I" will make "I" stronger. I am strengthened by my engagement in the broad world. I actually think that one of the reasons I have been relatively successful is because I have drawn on the broad experiences of people whose lives have touched me and whose lives I've touched. I have become stronger, more knowledgeable about the world, and I have witnessed challenges in different contexts and how to respond to them. And I just think if I were to look comprehensively, I'm a stronger person because I am in so many of these different communities, because I do have so many spheres to draw from as I think about my own resilience.

AMS: That's a wonderful advertisement for openness and resilience—the more open you are to different communities and experiences, that broadens you and strengthens you. I had never thought about it that way. It's a much broader notion of resilience than just endurance. Let's shift to talking about resilience and risk. On the one hand, if you're going to take risks you need resilience, but knowing that you're resilient can also make you more willing to take risks. But, I have to note that as I looked at your career —and you and I have had similar careers in a lot of ways —you've taken some big risks. So you went into law, you practiced international law, you went from law to investment-banking. That's all a sort of path. And then you actually left UBS to work as a full-time volunteer for a year at the Children's Storefront, which is in Harlem. I'm just imagining your mother's face when you told her you were going to do that. That was you getting off the track, doing something really different. And then you moved from there gradually into foundation work, rising to where you are now. Talk about that sense of plunging in and doing something completely different.

Darren: Well, there was no doubt that it was a risk to leave Wall Street and to go into the nonprofit sector. It was my grandmother who called me to say “Is what your mama told me right? You are going to work up in Harlem? Then boy, why did you get all that education? You didn't need all that education to go to do that work.” And I explained to her that actually the education that I received was going to be really valuable to me, and that I would be able to contribute to the community that I was moving to in some really significant ways because of that education and training, and I think I was right in that regard. But the risk was not as significant as one might think because I had resolved that staying on Wall Street was not going to be a long-term objective for me. So I think the risk was making sure I chose to do the right thing, that I would do the thing that was ultimately going to be the highest-value opportunity for me as I thought about how to make a contribution. So if I was going to do this, I wanted to make sure I was working for an NGO, a civil society organization, where I was going to have an impact.

AMS: Were you afraid that you were sort of just stepping off the track? It was a completely different kind of work and when we take risks, we're always worried we're going to fail at some level. But also you'd been driving down this very well-established track and you suddenly took a turn. Did that worry you?

Darren: There were days that I worried about it certainly, financially. Yes, there were days when I worried about it. I was living downtown in a pretty comfortable neighborhood in a very nice apartment, and Harlem in the early 90s was a very different place than it is today. There weren't a lot of nice apartments. There was a lot of burned-out housing and a lot of disinvestment that was just about everywhere you looked. So there were days when I questioned whether I had made the right decision, but I knew that my fate and my future lay in doing something that was more meaningful than selling mortgage-backed securities. I had to use that skill that I honed on Wall Street, but put it to better use.

AMS: I do think that sense of meaning and purpose gives us a way forward even in the toughest times. You've talked about your grandmother and your mother, and you have described often growing up poor and in the South, and African-American. Those three things are each tough and altogether very tough. Talk about the resilience of your home communities. You're right to say that when you're highly educated you know you can earn an income and you know how far you're going to fall. But you grew up in communities where losing an income or getting into an accident could make really existential differences. So talk to me about the resilience of those communities and what allows them to endure, and how you think about that as part of your life journey.

Darren: I think there was a lot of social capital. There wasn't a lot of financial capital. But within my community there were people who really were cheering me on. I have always felt that my country cheered me on in spite of the barriers, even the barriers that I saw in my own community, the barriers around race for example, and the barriers around class. And of course being a young gay boy in a southern town isn't an optimal scenario for any kid. But on the other hand, I was pretty resilient. Some of that I think was just my my own inner core, and my ambition. I think I've always had a sense of ambition and at a young age I became comfortable

with that ambition, and I think sometimes owning our ambition is something that people of color and women often struggle with.

AMS: Because we get lots of signals that it's not really okay.

Darren: Yes, lots of signals that it's not okay that it's not culturally normative to be ambitious in the way in which white men would be ambitious, where it would be a problem if they're not. I always knew I wanted to be successful, that I did not see my life in a small town in Texas, and that I wanted to build my own capability. So that really meant education for me. And in those towns where I lived, where it was not unusual to hear the N-word, where you were often seen as invisible, I endured a lot of that. But I also endured tremendous generosity from people, from white people, people who were committed to my success, who encouraged me, who acknowledged my success and my own progress. I think I was very lucky. Because while there were barriers, there were also people supporting me. While there were tailwinds, there were also headwinds, and so both of those together made my experience.

AMS: You've actually broadened that out to say that you had a country that cared about you and believed in your dreams, which is, to me, the very best of what America can be. That somebody coming from where you came from, ambitious, wanting to make it—that's the American dream. Talk a little bit about that sense that not just people in your life are cheering for you, but that your country is cheering for you and the support that gives you and then maybe we can unpack the ways in which that's changed or the ways in which that needs to change.

Darren: Well, I certainly think of, as I recall my boyhood, sitting on the front porch of a little shotgun house on a dirt road in rural East Liberty County, Texas, and the woman that approached our little house and told my mother that she wanted to enroll me in a new government program called Head Start that would be starting in 1965. Being in the first class that summer was my introduction to the idea that the United States government was making a commitment to support little boys and girls like me. I think I have had a trajectory of support from the United States government, whether it was strong public schools, which while supported locally also had Federal imperatives, or when I went into college and the Pell Grant made it possible for me to go to a strong state University that was basically underwritten by the state of Texas taxpayers. As I think about those years, there were clearly policy decisions that showed the people of the United States, through our government, were validating the worth and the aspiration of little, poor boys and girls like Darren Walker, who have dreams. And the government, whether that's federal, state or local, through the citizens was manifesting its belief in your potential. So the “cheering me on” metaphor was in part that. It was also private philanthropy because I was lucky enough to win scholarships that came from private philanthropy. So that was also an essential part of the “cheering me on,” to have Texas oilmen establishing an important endowment that allowed me to have a scholarship. Or in law school, when a prominent Texas lawyer established a scholarship that provided financial support for me. All of that was in the aggregate a huge cheering section that I think, in some ways, ensured that my dreams would be realized.

AMS: I love that because it's a vision of government support as a foundation to stand on, rather than a net that catches you when you fail and fall. The safety net idea is so often shameful—that government support is what happens when you fail. What you're describing is a very different concept of government being committed to your success, government giving you that foundation that allows you to do everything else, from education all the way up. I do often think that we need to rethink our social programs as a foundation rather than a net. I just worry, particularly now, you need so much more than the kind of Band-Aid things that happen when you fall through the cracks.

Darren: Well, I believe that the role of government should be about social and economic mobility. So what I described to you was the kind of public and private investment necessary to make mobility possible, to make it possible for someone like myself who's born in the bottom decile to move to the top 1 percent. I'm not saying that's realistic for everyone because it's not. But today we have so little mobility. And I do agree with you about the role of government. Yes, the safety-net matters, but mobility and having an escalator that continues to move up has to be the highest priority of government. That means that the government has to be engaged with the markets, with the economy in a way that reduces disparities and makes it possible for mobility to still be a reasonable aspiration.

AMS: Which is again that sense of hope, that sense of purpose, that sense of drive that sustains us when we get buffeted as we inevitably do. I want to shift gears a little bit and talk about diversity, because you are an enormous champion of diversity. You are an example of diversifying many closed circles over your lifetime. I've been thinking a lot about diversity and resilience. So one of the most interesting definitions of resilience actually came from Walmart and McKinsey together. They have this study of all the counties in the United States, every single one, and they rank them in terms of their resilience, which they define as capacity for change. And again, this is a dynamic vision of resilience, not a sort of static, hunker-down vision. But I wonder to what extent diversity has to be a part of that capacity for change, because we talk a lot about diversity and quality of decisions. I think you and I both believe the more diverse the group around the table, the better the decisions will be, the better the performance. Let's think about how what happens when it's a company or a foundation that's in trouble. Why does it matter then to have a diverse group of people? How can we think about the relationship between diversity and resilience?

Darren: Well, certainly for an organization that's in crisis, a diverse set of perspectives about how to respond is more critical than ever. I mean, one of the real challenges of crises and organization response is that the response is often informed by people who don't have direct knowledge of the crises or of the population affected, or of the region of the world. So, in my mind, this notion of diversity and how to ensure resilience in the face of adversity are an essential interplay. It's very important when I think, for example, about some of the responses of institutions to changes in the market, to public opposition. Sometimes that opposition is coming from a public who is not a part of governance of the organizations that are being targeted, for example. I see this with museums. I see this with companies who don't understand their consumers, or don't understand the demographic transformation that's happening in America.

And therefore their decision making is impaired because a more homogeneous group of people will look inward, rather than looking outward. When under pressure, when being criticized from the outside, if you are a more diverse organization you are able to respond to critics better. You are able to respond to the kind of urgency of a moment better. I often find that people dig their heels in and the sort of ideological rigidity wins the day, and then bad decisions are made.

AMS: Because we get rigid when we're scared.

Darren: We get rigid and we revert to what makes us most comfortable and what is our normative way, which may be why we're in trouble to begin with.

AMS: I think that's very important. You've written about different kinds of diversity though, too. Because so often when we talk about diversity, we mean more women, more people of color. You've written also that it's important to have class diversity. There was an op-ed this summer where you talked about your concerns about the current environment of anger toward wealthy people. So talk a little bit about the full range of diversity.

Darren: I think in the context of that piece I wrote for the *Times* about the anger towards wealthy people, it was about the role of wealthy donors in support of nonprofits, particularly museums and cultural organizations, where because of reductions in public support, the influence of private donors is growing. And the potential harm associated with that is if we aren't really vigilant in our governance practices and the compositions of our boards. For me, diversity is about race, class, gender, and the astute awareness of demography and place. But it is also about ideas and perspectives. In the context of the U.S. this can be fraught because we have identities, and when we think about identities, we have pride in our identity. So does this mean that the NAACP should have more whites on their Board? Does this mean that the Jewish Museum should have non-jews on their Board? The point here is that I am speaking to the complexities and contradictions, and how there isn't just a formulaic way to address this. It's why I wrote that piece last week about nuance.

AMS: I was just going to ask you about that, because that was really striking at a time when the echo chamber, and polarization, and demonization just get more and more intense. I thought of the still small voice of calm. Talk about what you meant by nuance and why it's important.

Darren: Well, thank you. What I meant by nuance in that piece really speaks to the moment we're in as a country. Where our leadership, our incentives, are moving us towards the kind of paradigm where everything is oppositional, where everything is put into simplistic black-and-white narratives. Something is good or bad, right or wrong, evil or virtuous. There is no gray area, when in fact what we know is in this complex world where we live, most things are in the gray area. To solve problems in a diverse democracy like America, you have to be willing to go into the gray area. You have to be willing to have the public commons be a place where the gray area is what you engage in, and that space is informed by nuance and by contradictions, and that we are able to hold those contradictions and use them. I quoted Jefferson in a piece a few years ago and I received criticism. People said, "Why would you open your annual letter with a quote from Jefferson? He was a racist." I said, yes, he was those things but he was also

brilliant. He also wrote words that I want to hold him accountable for. So I can hold both narratives about Jefferson, and I actually need to hold both narratives about him, because if I think that Jefferson was purely an evil person it is hard to imagine that there is any way to reconcile this country's history and its future. So I don't believe that America can be America without our being able to hold that history but to also use that history to inspire us to do better. Because in spite of the fact that the founding fathers were flawed men, they created the tools to allow us to solve the very problems they were unwilling or unable to solve. We have those tools and that was a part of their genius, even though they did not live up to the very words that they wrote in the Constitution or the Bill of Rights.

AMS: Exactly. I love that, and I think about that often. I grew up in Charlottesville and I think about going to Monticello. Going to Monticello now is infinitely better than when I was growing up because when I was growing up, Jefferson was an idol. He is absolutely idolized today, but he is an idol with not just feet of clay, he's probably about halfway up. Because you see this extraordinary house he created, you read his words, you have the sense of a cosmopolitan, universalist person who is just extraordinary, but of course you also see Mulberry row and that he fathered children with his wife's half-sister, whom he left enslaved. But that complexity is far better. Because if we believe our heroes are all perfect, we're bound to be disappointed, but we also can't take from them the need to push through complexity and deal with our own hypocrisies and our own flaws.

Darren: This is the part of it that I think I love engaging in when I think about our founding fathers. I think about the sort of idolatry that we have created around them and others and our need to do that. I am much more of a realist about that, but sometimes I understand why mythology is important. We all need to have a view of our families, our friends, departed people as, in some ways, idols, when in fact, they were human and they had flaws. I was speaking with a group of African Americans who were very upset about the film Selma and the representation of Dr. King's adultery. They thought that it was unnecessary in the film, when in fact his adultery was essential to telling the story of Martin Luther King. He was an amazing, and indeed one of the greatest leaders of American history. But he also was an adulterer, and he would have been the first person to say that as a Christian man he was willing to acknowledge where he had come up short. I don't need Martin Luther King to be god-like or a deity. He was a human being who led this country to reconcile some of its deepest wounds. And we're still doing that. And I'm comfortable holding both of those just as I am comfortable holding Jefferson.

AMS: I love that. And indeed if you think of Martin Luther King, he would have said, "Let he who is without sin cast the first stone." He was was a minister. He was steeped in the gospel, and his own Gospel said there there is no perfection on Earth. We have to grapple with our own flaws and we're stronger. If you think of it, even the Greek myths, the gods are full of human flaws and you have to wrestle with that as an archetype. I do think it makes us much stronger as people. Even as a child, there comes that day you realize your parents are people with all the flaws of people, but ideally you can work through that and also still see them as people that you look up to. So we've got time for one more question. I actually want to ask you just a more personal question about how you think about your own role. And how you how you deal with a very particular kind of FOMO (fear of missing out). You've written that people pitch you ideas all the

time. People say when you're the head of a foundation your jokes are funnier, everybody wants to talk to you. You wrote once that you remind yourself of a letter to Maya Angelou from somebody in the Ford Foundation who says, you know, you can basically forget about a grant from us because you don't have any talent worthy of the Ford Foundation. This is Maya Angelou. How do you deal with the fear that you're missing the next Maya Angelou? How do you reconcile that in your own head?

Darren: I think that that's a great question. For me, I think I have to approach my work with great humility, and with the belief that I am not always right, and that there is discovery every day, if I am willing to be curious and if I'm willing to listen and to hear. And so I am in a daily conversation in my head about having my blinders off and getting out of my own ideology and belief system to the extent that it impairs my ability to be fully open to what I see out in the world. That that has helped me a lot. A couple of weeks ago I received a research proposal and I thought this is a dry piece of research really and the prominent academic asked for a meeting and I thought "be open to hearing this." Part of my approach has been to say let's just have a short 15-minute phone call. And what I didn't have to discern is, can I, in that short period of time, structure the conversation so the kernel of this idea I am able to decipher and that I can make some judgment about that allows for a more fulsome conversation so that I'm not wasting their time, and I'm not wasting my time. In this instance, that's what happened. It was a short call, but in a short period of time the two researchers convinced me that there was more to it than what I had seen from an initial read of a two-page pitch document and that at least I ought to be open to it. It's turned out that we're going to fund the project, so it's an example of how, when I start by reading something or seeing something in my inbox and my immediate reaction is "no," I think "just be open to this. You may not be right. Be open, be curious, be willing to hear." Don't walk into the meeting saying "no," walk in saying "maybe." Or, "I'm here to learn." And that for me is helped me. I just think the curiosity is part of it. You can't fake curiosity, it's hard to learn curiosity.

AMS: You're right. Curiosity is the key to learning.

Darren: It is. When I was a boy I remember people would say, because I was so curious, that I was a nuisance and I remember people saying to my mother, what is wrong with your boy? I remember once my aunt saying to my mother "What's ailing him, he's so nosy." And it wasn't that I was nosy, but what was interpreted as nosy and something ailing me was just my insatiable questioning about all sorts of things around me and the impatience of adults, especially it with my just constant questioning in an Aristotle kind way.

AMS: Well, Darren Walker. It is such a pleasure to talk to you. I always learn, speaking of curiosity and openness to new things. You always teach me as much as anyone I know, so thank you.

Darren: I'm delighted to be with you Anne-Marie. It's always a treat for me.