

Wisdom for the Future

Susan David: A couple of episodes ago, we explored the idea of bothness. People die while the sun is shining, forests burn while the birds sing. Difficult emotions like anger, grief or anxiety can be tough to experience, and it's when we move to that discomfort that we most learn and grow. We can feel angry with our spouse, and while noticing that anger with compassion, we can reach out and give the person a hug, because the relationship matters. That bothness, the dialectic is, I think, at the core of wisdom. It is the recognition that life is simultaneously beautiful and fragile, that we are young and then we are not, that we are healthy until a diagnosis brings us to our knees. That we are both small and insignificant in the context of the universe and we have enormous power and agency to create change.

Today is our last episode of the season. I'm so excited to share it with you, and in the spirit of bothness, I'm so sad that our time together is nearly over. It's a season over which we've explored the journey that COVID has invited us into—or forced us into. And I think that there is no better close than to experience the wisdom that comes about through the dialectic—the appreciation—of bothness. This is Checking In with Susan David.

What's likely come through over our time together is that I love to bring in the arts—music, poetry—because these are perhaps the epitome of bothness. Listening to a gorgeous piece of music both grounds us in the moment and reminds us of how humans can transcend the moment through creativity, connection and contribution. It is fitting, then, to invite onto the show a special guest—friend Richard Kogan. Richard is a clinical professor of psychiatry at Weill Cornell Medical Center in New York City, and he is also a Juilliard-trained concert pianist. Richard will be exploring with us the bothness of one of the lives of the greatest composers in history, the complex personality of Frédéric Chopin. Richard, I'm so delighted to be with you today.

Richard Kogan: Thanks, Sue, for inviting me to join you.

Susan David: So Richard, one theme that we've explored on the podcast is how values are not abstract, how they are qualities of action, and that even when so much can seem out of our control, we can keep acting in ways that enable us to contribute. And you know, I know with Chopin's life, despite so many experiences of trauma, separation, and illness, he seemed to be able to keep hold of what was important to him. His creativity, his love for his home, Poland, and I'm wondering if you could explore what that looked like for him.

Richard Kogan: Okay, it's 1830. Chopin is 20 years old, an aspiring young musician. He leaves his home in Warsaw to go on an international concert tour. While he's away, a war breaks out. Polish patriots fight a war of independence—they want to liberate their country from rule by the Russian

czars. Chopin wants to return home and join the fighting, but he winds up living his entire adult life as an exile in Paris. When Chopin gets the news that the Polish rebellion was crushed by a massive Russian troop presence, he's devastated. So many of his friends died in the war and he feels intense survivor guilt, but he thinks to himself, "I'm a musician. How can I make a contribution?" Chopin decided that even though Poland had been obliterated politically and militarily, he was certain that the world would not forget Poland if it heard distinctly nationalistic Polish music. Now, polonaise is in mazurkas, or the Polish national dances. The polonaise is a dance with a characteristic rhythm that goes like this (taps rhythm). So Chopin took this rhythm, and he transformed the polonaise into a stirring tribute to the bravery of the Polish freedom fighters. Now, the mazurkas are of a different character. These are the folk dances and triple meters; this was the music that Chopin heard during trips to the countryside as a youngster. And the mazurkas that Chopin composed while in Paris, they convey an aching sense of longing for his homeland.

Susan David: That's so beautiful Richard. Just—you can hear the emotion as it comes through, and the longing and the grieving, and one of the things that I think of when I hear that piece is, you know, this idea that Chopin, you know, is experiencing such intense emotions. And he was in this context of having grown up in a really happy household and then went on to be separated from the people that he loved most in the world. I'm wondering if you might speak a little bit to that and how that shows through in his music.

Richard Kogan: You know, unlike so many creative artists who use their unhappy childhoods as sources of creative inspiration, Chopin had a blissfully happy home life. He was bathed in love by his nurturing parents, he was adored and indulged by his three sisters. Now after he was forced into exile, quarantined in lockdown, as it were, in Paris, he was desperately homesick—kept up a voluminous correspondence with his parents and siblings. But he noted that each time he got a letter from home, he missed them even more. Now, Chopin had a dramatic personality transformation after he became an exile in France. The sociable, engaging youngster growing up in Warsaw developed into a reserved, guarded, secretive young man in Paris. But this changed years later, when he met George Sand, a brilliant novelist who was determined to forge an intimate romantic relationship with a man that she considered to be her artistic soulmate. Chopin was initially reluctant; he explained to her the reason for his reticence and reserve. His health was poor; he had limited energy. He wanted to preserve all of it for his music making. George Sand persuaded him that the pursuit of an intimate relationship would lead not to depletion, but rather nourishment for his art. And she was right. Chopin became a greater, more productive composer during their years together. I'm going to play a prelude that he composed in her presence.

Susan David: Richard, thank you for sharing that with us; so beautiful.

Richard Kogan: Thank you, Sue.

Susan David: Over the past couple of months, it feels like there have been so many emotions: grief, loss, loneliness, depletion, anger. And of course, you know, in many parts of the world—and particularly in the US—the past couple of weeks in particular has been, for many, an experience

of anger. And we've explored on the show how growth comes not through denial or suppressing difficult emotions, but rather engaging with them, learning from them, and using them as a source of inspiration or even action in our own life. And it reminded me that even when he was in the shadow of death, Chopin seemed to be able to catalyze his emotional suffering. What was his experience and how did he convert the suffering to creative inspiration?

Richard Kogan: Chopin dealt with serious medical illness his entire life. He had chronic respiratory problems; he was diagnosed with tuberculosis while in exile. In his final years, he was unable to dress himself; he had to be carried up and down stairs. He described himself as more dead than alive. And he was terribly frustrated by his illness, but he refused to be defeated by it, and seemed almost to be inspired by it. I don't think it's a coincidence that a man who spent so many years being deathly ill would compose the most famous funeral march ever written.

Richard Kogan: Chopin died at age 39. He was buried at Père Lachaise Cemetery in Paris, but at his request, his heart was cut out of his body and brought back in an urn to Poland, where it remains to this day at the Church of the Holy Cross in Warsaw.

Susan David: Richard, it's such a, you know, incredible expression of this idea of bothness that we're talking about. This idea that in suffering, there is contribution, and, you know, in suffering, for so many, there's often the experience that coexists alongside of, of growth or insight that might come about. Richard, you are both a musician but you're also a psychiatrist. And I'm wondering if you could speak a little bit to what you've seen. You've seen people who have suffered and experience difficulty in so many forms. What are some insights that you can share as to what you think best enables people to continue to adapt and grow, even in the midst of struggle?

Richard Kogan: One is, I think they need to foster and nourish interpersonal connections, even within the constraints of quarantine and social distancing. I've consistently observed how nourishing it can be to reach out to others during times of struggle. I think another key, a sustained gauge—not only with people, but with activities that can confer a sense of meaning and purpose—is also useful to kind of emphasize the importance of routine even when much in life has been disrupted. I mean, for Chopin, for instance, all of the composing that he did, it didn't just happen because Chopin was inspired. He was adamant about keeping to a daily routine, hard to do because he was sickly and had fluctuations in his health, but he was really insistent on adhering to the same schedule of composing, practicing, teaching on a daily basis. But I think it is also important to keep in mind that some frustration is inevitable. Limitations are inevitable during this period, people should, I think, extend themselves some measure of self compassion. You know, I want to—if I can make one more point though, Sue—I just like to make a special case for the importance of artistic expression. During this pandemic, it really actually is impossible to overstate the value of the arts during times of stress. I think the importance—and what I just said about the art applies to all the arts, but I'll speak in particular about music; it's the art form that I know best. Music promotes social cohesion, really a sense of community and belonging, a sense of harmony. We just witnessed, for instance, the spontaneous singing from the balconies in Italy early in the coronavirus pandemic. Music has a universality which is so valuable in times of strife and societal

disunity. Everybody from every diverse culture will feel pretty much the same emotion when hearing, for instance, Chopin's funeral march sonata. And we're justifiably celebrating healthcare workers during this pandemic. I think it's imperative for everybody in the healthcare community not to lose sight of music's extraordinary capacity to soothe anxiety, to reduce pain, to lift spirits.

Susan David: Richard, you've previously described Chopin as being an example of the triumph of the human spirit. And certainly I think his music helps us to experience that sense of triumph: connection and contribution, creativity, the universality that you speak of. But I'm curious as to why you use that specific language of him being "an example of the triumph of the human spirit." Can you expand a little bit on that?

Richard Kogan: Sure. I'm going to answer that by focusing on one particular piece that he wrote, his Polonaise in A Flat, which has been nicknamed the Heroic Polonaise. Now, this glorious work, it fully embodies music's potential for communicating vibrancy, determination, and resilience in the context of adversity. This piece is a handful even for physically healthy pianists—unimaginably challenging for a frail, sickly man who, at his peak, weighed 95 pounds. Chopin may have targeted this piece to his fellow exiles. But I believe that it stands today as a compelling universal expression of the triumph of the human spirit.

Susan David: Richard that is absolutely beautiful, it just brings tears to my eyes. And I think it's such a gorgeous demonstration of, really of this idea of bothness. What you've conveyed in this music and in your language is this ability to have connection in loneliness, the ability to experience life even in the shadow of death, and the beauty and fragility that are interwoven. I can't thank you enough for being here today. It's just really, really gorgeous.

Richard Kogan: Thank Sue, I mean that's a perfect description of the juxtaposition of beauty and fragility. I think that actually, it's a perfect description of Chopin, actually: this frail, sickly man who created such extraordinary beauty.

Susan David: You know, bothness, when I think about it, it's this expansion, for all of us listening, for every single person: it's this expansion of our hearts and minds to internalize the reality that the only certainty is uncertainty, that tough emotions are part of our contract with life. And while this feels scary, in practice, it's the gentle acceptance of this bothness that allows us to be integrated and whole and healthy, and to move forward both individually, but also in our society, recognizing how we can step into the future that we want to create.

I look back at the first episode of the show—it was such a scary moment for all of us. A moment that life had invited us into, one with so many changes, emotions, and questions. I've so appreciated the opportunity to share these last 12 weeks with you. Some of my deepest values are those of community and connection, and I hope that these episodes have given you some comfort, a sense of togetherness, and maybe some practical emotional agility tools that you can use in your life. Emotional agility is the ability to be compassionate and curious with ourselves. And to be courageous, as we continue to bring the best of ourselves forward in how we love, live, care for

ourselves and others, and lead our communities. Tough emotions are part of our contract with life, and while the time ahead is still uncertain, it is my hope that these ideas will continue to be of value until we meet again.

I'm so sad to be saying goodbye for the season. But we'll be back for another season, so please stay subscribed. I'm so grateful that you've shared this with me - that we've been able to practice this experience together. And I think for all of us, life is asking us, who do you want to be? Who do you want to be in the moment, even in the context of a situation that can feel challenging, or a future that can feel uncertain? We all get to ask ourselves this question: Even in the context of challenge, who do I choose to be? Thank you and goodbye for now.