

# Conversations with Crosby Smithsonian Secretary Lonnie Bunch on American Heritage Culture and the Humanities

## September 15, 2021

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Welcome to everyone who's joining. Thank you so much for being here for our fifth Conversations with Crosby, welcoming a very special guest, Secretary Lonnie Bunch. And I'll do a brief housekeeping announcement as we let folks continue to join here. We're very fortunate to have an exciting discussion ahead of us. Just to let you know, this event is being recorded and it will be shared on the IMLS website and YouTube channel afterward. And, we also welcome you to ask questions of Crosby and Secretary Bunch via the question box at any point during the conversation. We'll be keeping an eye on that and will pose some to Crosby and Secretary Bunch for a Q & A discussion near the end of the hour. With that, welcome, we're glad to have you, and I'll hand it over to Crosby to do a proper introduction. Thank you.

1:05

Great. Thanks very much, Elizabeth. The purpose of these conversations is to look at the importance of the arts and humanities in the life of museums and libraries and particularly what will happen to them and them in the post pandemic world, which we hope is on the horizon.

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And today, my counselor and advisor is Lonnie Bunch III, who is the 14th Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, which means he is the CEO, Head Honcho, or as he has said in his book, *A Fool's Errand*, the Benign Dictator of the Smithsonian. Which is a pretty remarkable position, because it is not only the largest museum, it is a collection of nineteen museums, also twenty-one libraries. So, from an IMLS point of view, he is the ideal counselor. Nine, I think, research institutions, and Lonnie has his own zoo, as well, the Washington National Zoo. Everyone should have a zoo, but Lonnie does have a zoo. He is the founding director and the builder, the inspiration, the designer and creator of the last great Smithsonian Building, the last great building on the mall, the National Museum of African American History and Culture, an extraordinary building, an extraordinary site, an extraordinary collection. He was the director, before he became the director of the National Museum, of the Chicago Historical Society. And before that, he had a career inside the Smithsonian, both at the Air and Space Museum, and the American History Museum. But, most importantly, for our purposes today, he's been the most eloquent, indefatigable, and inspirational voice and advocate for the museum world in the most trying of times.

3:04

So, Lonnie, we've just gone through and we're still going through, one of the most trying times in recent American history, maybe all of American history, at least going back to the Civil War. Not only do we have a pandemic, but we've had the racial and economic protests. We have poor black and brown kids and poor white kids, kids of all color falling behind, because virtual schooling is not in person schooling. We have had an attack on our Capital and the constitutional process, and some museums have been in deep trouble throughout this. How bad is the situation for museums and what can we do? Is this an existential situation for museums? And what's going on at the Smithsonian in light of all this?

3:58

Well, I think that what's clear to all of us is that the nation is in crisis and when a nation is in crisis, it's incumbent upon cultural institutions, museums, libraries, to figure out how can they contribute to helping a nation be made better. And I would argue that what I'm seeing are museums and libraries trying to find different ways to connect with broad audiences, to basically, be the kind of glue that helps to hold the nation together. I think that what museums and libraries can do, that many other places can't, is they can bring together people of different political points of view who trust them and who engage with them. And hopefully, through that, create the kinds of dialogues and kinds of messaging that helps people realize that we're better when we cross racial and political lines for the greater good.

4:56

Well, and polarization is such a huge topic today that, you know the Gallup poll in 1960 showed that the biggest divides in America were race and religion. If you know the typical question, the great question, would you want your daughter to marry one? Whites and blacks would say, "no," from a racial point of view, massively. And, also, religiously. Jews, Christians, or Jews, Catholics, and Protestants wouldn't want their daughter or son to marry someone of another religion. Today, we've had a lot of progress, both on the religious and racial sides of that. And today, the Gallup poll shows that Republicans don't want their children to marry Democrats, and Democrats don't want their children to marry Republicans. We're so politically polarized. And it's not really, in a way, it's not even about issues. It's not about public issues. It's about some kind of cultural polarization. And so, how does a museum deal with that?

6:01

Well, in many ways, I would argue that as you framed it, that there are several layers. That the foundation is the great political divide. But I think that how that plays out is in amplifying other divides, racial divides, cultural divides. So that in a way, what I think museums can do is...I believe very strongly, that museums and libraries at their best help the public by defining reality and still giving hope. As a historian, it's clear to me that we've had these moments before. That doesn't mean that this is not a really horrible, challenging time. But, what it means is, that as a nation, we have had those moments when we were able to come together and cross these boundaries and incrementally move the nation forward. So, I think what our job is now, is to one, provide that context, so people understand sort of where we are and what's possible. And then, encouraging people to find ways to cross these divides, to basically help the nation live up to its stated ideals. And that, for me, is what's so crucial about museums and libraries, is they're about the greater good. If they're not about the greater good, if they're not about providing that reservoir of possibility, if they're not about contextualizing, helping people find understanding, then we've missed the opportunity of a lifetime.

7:32

I think you're absolutely right, and I love the word which you use frequently – contextualize. Which, it seems to me, for a historian, you are a historian by training, is the most important word. And I think about this, we have shared a project, the Smithsonian and the IMLS, called the Realm Project, the Re-Opening Archives Libraries, and Museums. Scott Miller, your Chief Scientist, has been a very important part of this project. And we just turned it into, from a serious research project about the virus on museum and library materials and spaces and whatnot, surfaces, to a vaccination education project. And the information side of this, the

misunderstanding. I think, George Washington and Benjamin Franklin vaccinated their families 250 years ago. Every state, every state, Republican and Democrat controlled states, have vaccination mandates on measles or polio or tetanus or whatever, they're there. There are lots of vaccinations and I think somehow, we've missed an opportunity, and I think the museum and library worlds are a little bit at fault in this, in that we haven't contextualized, exactly what you say, the vaccination issue. We need to reverse the trend of vaccinations being about libertarians versus centralized status or whatever in people's minds this is. To a question of basic public health. That from the founding of the Republic, we have believed in public health as a community activity.

9:28

And for many of us of a certain age, we remember polio and the scares, you know. I remember my mother saying, "Don't go into a swimming pool in August." And I remember the sort of confidence that came with standing in those long lines in our elementary schools to get our shots, and then a year later, to get the sort of sugar cube. But what it really meant to me, was that vaccinations really were seen as part of the greatness of American scientific creativity. And they were key to helping us feel we could live the lives we wanted. And so, I think the challenge for us has been how do we, as institutions of learning, help provide the data? And so, one of the things that I'm very proud of, is that the Smithsonian has worked with many museums and libraries to create Vaccines and Us, you know, basically saying, first and foremost, let's give you the data about this. Let's begin to counter the notion as somebody said to me the other day, they didn't want to get a vaccination because they felt that a chip would be inserted in them. They didn't want the government to follow them. And I said, well, you're using your phone, so we know more about you, than you really want to admit. And I think the notion really is, how do we provide information. How do we sort of make it clear that this is the right thing to do for the greater good of the country? How do we use history to show how vaccinations, how they're created and how they've really been transformative at various times. So, you know, the challenge is for many museums and libraries, there's a fear about getting involved in the contemporary issue, right? And you'll be pulled into the partisan times. I think you're going to be pulled in, no matter what. So, the key is, you should really, I think, do the best work you can to help the nation be made better. Yes. You're not going to say that we're Democrat or Republican. What you're saying is, for the greater good of a nation, here are some of the ways we can move forward.

11:36

Yeah, I mean we're a community. I think that's what we're trying to say. And I think there's no better demonstration of how important museums are and libraries too, this happened in libraries. But there's this moment when we thought the pandemic was going away in May and June and lots of museums opened up and there were lines around the block for, particularly for the newer exhibitions and whatnot, but people were desperate to get out, to get out of their houses, and their Zoom calls, et cetera. But they were desperate to get out and go someplace where they could be together and be together, sharing something and sharing some learning, sharing an experience that had to do with learning. It seems to me that there is a huge opportunity in all of that for all of us in the museum world.

12:35

There's a great opportunity as you've put Crosby, because on the one hand, there is the continued confidence that comes from dipping into a reservoir, that is, library or museums that the public has. That they trust us. But then there is that sort of social element,

right? That opportunity to sort of be made better by the kind of conversations that occur when you're in a museum or a library and when we have the confidence that we were on top of the pandemic, more and more people came out. I've always been struck, what I've loved about museums, especially, or at least my goal, was to try to replicate what happened when I was a little kid. I used to go, my family would have a barbecue in the backyard, right and one uncle would say something and then an aunt would say something, and the conversation would go in very different directions. And everybody was made better by that different interaction. And I wanted museums to be that place where I would see people stand in front of an artifact. And one person would say this, and one person would do that, and we'd create informal communities. Those informal communities gave confidence, they gave trust, but they allowed us to learn from each other. And I think that's what's been missing during this pandemic. It's wonderful to sort of see people via Zoom. But the kind of learning that occurs from the kind of informality of what often happens in a museum or library was missing.

14:03

You know, conversation is an important word in your in your work and in your view of the world. And it is in mine too. And creating communities around conversations. It used to be, when I was growing up, and you and I are not far away from the same age, so, I'll say when we were growing up. We would watch the same TV programs, to some extent, the news programs at night where the same. You'd have water cooler conversations or playground conversations about the same things. And that doesn't happen anymore. Where our information comes from is too many different places, our shared experience doesn't happen that often, in the end, which makes the museums and libraries, it seems to me, even more important, because that is the place that we are able to have community conversations these days.

14:57

Well, I think you've really put your finger on it. I want to emphasize this notion of what's our responsibility to try to help bring people together of different political points of view, of different levels of learning. I think that that's really important, as since everybody is now, sort of splinter, you know if you're certain political points, you watch certain television versus others. But you have to find those places that are reservoirs of possibility that are glues. That helps a nation move forward. And I think that if libraries and museums take that role on explicitly. They are not only sort of helping their own evolution, but they're really helping a country. And they're really helping us find what's the greater good that we that we can contribute to a society in crisis.

15:48

So, I want to ask you about a particular conversation here. I've talked a little bit about this before. And you've been in conversations about this conversation and have been an important player in the conversation, it seems to me. And that's, monuments in this country. As part of our racial issues, problems, discussion, the issue of monuments has become monumental, if you'll pardon the pun, and a lot of monuments are being torn down and I will stipulate that some deserve to be. I'll only mention, let's say Nathan Bedford Forrest, I'd help to tear his statute down anywhere. But one of the conversations, which you've been involved in, is in Washington, DC. and Lincoln Park about Lincoln, the statue of Lincoln and the enslaved man, who's rising off his knees, but he's on his knees and the sort of paternalistic view of that. Frederick Douglass was there when the statue was dedicated and he talked

about the ambiguous meanings. Ambiguity is also an important word for you. How do we preserve what was great in American history? And I think we would probably agree that Lincoln represents the best of us, but also understand the flaws and the problematics. What's your view of what we should do with that statute? We've done some things already, but....

17:19

I mean, I would think that first of all, what we have to do as a learning organization, is to help people understand that we've learned more over time and that statues are frozen moments in history and they reflect the moment they were created, and that there's really an opportunity to sort of build on that. So I, you've heard me say this many times, I believe in pruning of statues. I believe it's important that there are some statues. We agree very much on Forrest, and but you know, there's some statues that have to go, partly to make room for new statutes, for new issues that people are interested in, obviously more diverse. I'm always struck by how few statue's there are women in this country and how important it would be to sort of create that balance, But I think also, what I would argue is that statues and monuments are also wonderful learning opportunities. I think the notion of contextualizing some of these statues and especially the Lincoln statue, for me, I know there are people in DC who say, "take it down." But for me, I think it really gets at both an understanding of how attitudes of race were in 1865, how they've changed over time, but how you have to recognize that you have to give someone like, Lincoln, his due in terms of sort of helping to change a nation. But to help people understand that that change came was as a part because African Americans were demanding that change, running away from being enslaved, Frederick Douglass, talking to Lincoln. So, really helping people understand that it's much more complex than simply one statute. And I think that while it's hard to contextualize, because you see the big statute, what I've been struck by, as I look at these statues, is that people are looking both at the statue but looking to try to understand it. Because even though we think they do, they don't. And so, if we could offer contextualization, if we could offer alternative statues that juxtapose with Lincoln, then I think we're really helping people learn. And I think that you've used the word that I care a lot about. I think that the most important thing we can do, as cultural institutions, as learning institutions, is really help the public become more comfortable with ambiguity. As a nation, we really look for simple answers to complex questions, and you see where that's gotten us. I think that what you want to do is help people understand the shades of gray, the nuance to debates. I think if we could do that. Regardless of what history, what culture we're teaching people, what's important is, if you can get people to grapple with complexity, then we'd be a better nation.

20:08

I couldn't agree with you more. And I think within that context, it's still possible to have our heroes. I think, you know, preserve the statues of Lincoln, but let's build some new statutes, as you said, we can move on and add. There is change, there's always change. My theory of change, change is a big word in our world. And I have a theory of change, it happens. And it seems to me that you talked about women, not having many statues, which is so true. The mystifying thing to me is why there isn't a statue of Harriet Tubman, you know, in every city. You know, there's a woman who put her life on the line over and over and over again. Uneducated, poor, herself an escaped slave, et cetera, et cetera. And it's an extraordinary story, her story is so extraordinary. And it seems to me we can go out and find our heroes at

the local level, I mean, have conversations at the local level. America 250 is coming up, the celebration of the 250th anniversary of the declaration. It seems to me one of the things we could do, the IMLS and the Smithsonian and our national institutions, is work with local institutions to find their heroes and help build monuments, either verbally or physically, to the local heroes who deserve it.

21:41

You know I think as a historian I was made better by working with local communities, by working with living communities, right. So that I would argue that when we think about this upcoming celebration commemoration, it'd be really important to think about what was 1776 like in what was Spanish California? What was it like in Detroit with the French influence? What was it like in different parts of the country? So, you begin to see the changing notions of freedom. And you get a sense of the broadest diversity of this country. I think that to be able to say that part of what happens with the commemoration of the declaration of independence is really freeing all the stories we didn't tell before - allowing monuments of women and people of color. You know, this little town. I grew up in in New Jersey, we've discovered that there was a significant Chinese American population that came in the late 19th, early 20th century to work in one of the factories. Nobody knows about that. That should be celebrated somewhere in that local community. And so, I think that we could - we're not asking to forget, Paul Revere. We're not asking to forget the founding fathers. We are asking that you understand who they were, their strengths and their limitations, and what blind spots they had on issues of maybe race and gender. But we're also saying that we're a better country when we really make sure that we're celebrating a variety of people, a variety of issues, in a way that helps us better understand who we once were and who we can become.

23:27

Well, you're so right about the re-contextualization of our history. I mean, slavery didn't start in 1619 to begin with, it existed among Native American cultures. But also, the Spanish hit what is today the United States well in advance of the Anglo presence. And I love the story of Estevanico or Esteban, who was Moroccan, I believe originally, he was African, a slave, an enslaved man, who became an important part of the expedition. And man may have been the first person from a European, or more or less European background, who made it into the interior in New Mexico, maybe as conceivably (he probably died in Mexico), but conceivably, as far as Kansas. The whole idea of El Dorado essentially came from him and Coronado, et cetera. And that's all before what we typically, you know, 1607, 1619, et cetera...think of as the origins of the United States.

24:38

You know you put your finger on such an important point, because it seems to me, I remember when I first began to write about California history, and suddenly learned about, you know, I was taught history went east to west. Well, in California it went south to north, right. And so, it changes the way you think about things. And I would love for this 250th commemoration of the declaration to really say, how do you understand what it was like in French North-West? How do you understand what it meant in Spanish, Florida? How do you begin to understand how that all came together? And that, in essence, the great strength has not been a recent discovery of diversity. But a long history of diverse people grappling, trying to figure out how to get along with each other, sometimes trying to figure out how to

control each other. But ultimately, it's an amazing story that really deserves much greater attention.

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And if we can, if we can find ways to share this history, it becomes everybody's history. Once we have a conversation about it, once we talk about it and understand that how we got where we are today. You have a great story in *A Fool's Errand*, your great memoir of building the National Museum of African American History and Culture, about listening to your father and his friends talk and how you wanted to participate in that conversation. And ultimately, it was about baseball, which you weren't all that interested in, but it became something you wanted to be interested in, because they were talking about it. It seems to me that you know, that you throughout the book, *A Fool's Errand*, which is a great book, so everyone (you know I'm told by my staff, I can't highlight something, a commercial purchase), but I'd say if you can find *A Fool's Errand* one way, or another in a library, or bookstore, it's a great book. But you talk about a lot of subjects that we all have in common and their history. So, jazz, music, in general, food, you know, how important the cafe is at the National Museum of African American History and Culture, and we share those things. And it seems to me conversations about that, about their history, about where they come from. Great African American culture. What, you know, or the debates - who came first, Chuck Berry or Elvis. Well, both Elvis and Chuck Berry had a view of that and it was kind of complex and ambiguous too. The shared conversation that we're not having as often as we ought to have.

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I think that what I've felt strongly throughout my career, but also with my colleagues building the National Museum of African American History and Culture, was that it was important for us to build a place that, on the one hand, allowed you to dig deeply into African American culture, to understand those hidden stories, to understand the pain, but to understand the resiliency, and to understand the joy. But, on the other hand, it was, how do you make sure people understand that this is everybody's culture? That this is a story that has shaped us all. And so, that, to me, is the challenge, and it's the great challenge, but it's a great opportunity to help people say, you know, even though I never lived in the South, or my family never lived in the South, I realize that we were shaped by slavery. Although, I never lived in California, we were shaped by the Latino culture. And so, the goal here is that 30 or 40 years ago, we would be satisfied by saying that these individuals also existed. That you could embrace a Black community or Latino community. But now, I think the challenge is to say, these individuals, these communities, are also the communities that shaped us. They've shaped our notions of freedom, they've shaped our notions of culture. So that, in essence, what I hope people will say is that I am made better because I now better understand myself by embracing the diversity of this nation.

28:57

You know, growing up in Kansas City and both as a banker before I became a librarian, and as a librarian, very involved in 18th and Vine, and the Negro League's Baseball Museum, the Jazz Museum, American Jazz Museum, the Black Archives at Mid America. And I wanted to bring, when I was a librarian, I wanted to bring a guy named Tim Blanning, you might know him as a historian, a great 18th century historian in my view of Europe. And so, I sent him an e-mail, and I said, "If you're ever in the United States, would you come to Kansas City to speak in the library?"

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And he had written a book about music, the history of music, which I particularly like, which is about the rise of the concert as a democratic thing. And so, he said, I can't come because my doctors won't let me. He said, I've always wanted to come to Kansas City because I grew up listening to Charlie Parker and I know about 18th and Vine. And I thought, you know, that's so extraordinary. And, everybody in Kansas City ought to, everybody in the United States, ought to share that same joy in a music that started in Kansas City, started in the poor African American community in Kansas City. And it seems that sharing that culture is something that museums do, so well

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So, another example of this in my life, but he's also important in your life, is John Hope Franklin. And if you talk about how important his statement of seeking the unvarnished truth was, I think he chaired your scholarship advisory Committee, building the National Museum. And I've heard him, and we brought him to the library, and he had a conversation with me, but more importantly, with the audience, that was one of the most extraordinary moments in my life, because He talked about Tulsa. And his father had just moved to Tulsa, something like 2 or 3 days before the riots, before the massacre. And they were going to move, he was going to move with him, his mother and his brothers and sisters too, and couldn't and didn't know if his father was still alive for awhile. And later he became a part of the commission that looked at reparations for that, et cetera. But the most important thing about it to me was the amazing conversation he had. I asked him three questions in an hour-long conversation. And he just went and he told these incredible stories. But then the audience asked him questions and his engagement with the audience, and it was, I think, which was about half white, half black. And it was a transformational experience, having that conversation with someone you could relate to, And, who related to this important, terrible moment in American history in a personal way, and also, in a reparative way. He was an extraordinary man. I just think having a conversation with someone like John Hope Franklin changes your view of the world.

32:14

Absolutely, I mean, you know, he was the Chair of the Scholarly Advisory Body of the Museum, so I would sit next to him in these meetings sort of every quarter, And, you know, he would just whisper things in my ear about how important it was to tell the unvarnished truth because he felt the American public had a tolerance for it if it was done in a certain way that isn't about pointing fingers or guilt. It's about sort of understanding who you are. And what I used to love about him, is he used to say to me when you build this museum, what's important is to make sure that people are touched in a way that they can be changed. And so, I've always sort of loved those moments with John Hope, where he would sort of whisper about this historical moment or that. But what I think what was so powerful about John Hope was, he really was one of the first people to recognize that African American culture, that Latino culture, are really wonderful mirrors on America. That they tell us so much about who we are beyond the story of the individual community. And so, I just think that we were so fortunate to have someone like John Hope, both as a gifted scholar, but as somebody who, as his life evolved, was able to convey that history in a way that was moving, that was meaningful and candidly that could be transformed.

33:35



Right. Yeah. He was an incredibly empathetic man. But an empathetic man who never, ever abandoned the truth. The truth as he saw it. And, of course, he was a great historian. So now, I want to shift gears just a little bit, and I want to talk a little bit about the liberal arts, and your view of that in the museum and library world, and the life of American culture. At one point, you said, "let literature - we should let literature be the voice of history." And I want to ask you about that and ask you a little bit about the books that you think are important for us, and in the nation's life. The literature that you think is important in the nation's life.

34:21

Well, I am a firm believer, I'm the son of two teachers, so, obviously, the written word and spoken word were very important in my house. And what I realized is that literature and film, to be honest, were really wonderful ways to convey history, in a way that literature would allow you to sort of have, you know, conversations with unseen generations. Film would bring history and culture to life. They weren't all good films, but they would all bring history and culture to life. And so, for me, what I really believed in is the power of education, the power of words. And really, the power of our ability to grapple with our differences based on our ability to use different lenses whether it was literature or film. And I have to be honest. One of the things I'm proudest of in the African American Museum is the amount of literature, the amount of words, quotations that are on those walls that really counter the notion that people don't speak, that people don't convey these important issues. And that I really wanted, more than anything else, is to use museums and libraries to reduce great history to human scale. So that people will not be saying, we're looking at migration, or we're looking at work, but rather, how did that play out in the lives of a particular family or an individual. So, I wanted people to sort of not be able to walk away, but I wanted people to see themselves in these individual stories. And so that was why, for me, literature and film, allowed me to help me learn these things in a way that reduced it, so that I could understand it and see our common humanity.

36:16

So, and the visual is so important in your view of the world. And, at a number of points you've talked about the things in the collection at the Smithsonian that are important to you, things that, some of which you brought, such as the Greensboro, the Woolworth counter, from Greensboro, which has that human scale that, you know, we can all imagine ourselves sitting at that counter. I mean, I my father always took me to Shraps in New York when we went to New York. But I'd get the Woolworth experience along with that, when Shraps wasn't open, we went to Woolworth. And the scale of that, or the other object that is one of your favorite objects, is also one of my favorite objects in the world. I think it's one of the two or three great pieces of sculpture. And that's the Augustus Saint-Gaudens sculpture that he did for Henry Adams after Henry Adams' wife died, and essentially a memorial to Clover Adams. It didn't have a title and Adams at one point, I think you quote this, wrote to someone who wanted to know what the title was and said the sculptor Saint-Gaudens didn't want to give it a title because he wanted it to be a question, not an answer. Which, I think that's a fabulous way of describing what a museum can do, which is to give you a question about the world that you have to answer. You have to work through what the, what the answer is.

37:56

Well, in a way, one of the things that museums and libraries do that I love, is the best of these, ask you to work. You know, they asked you to grapple with questions and understand

this literature, because I think that, you know, we're made better when we work a bit. And when you go through the African American Museum, you work a bit. Because I thought it was important for you to engage. For me, the most important things that museums do, is, yes, they are places of wonder, they are places of inspiration, but they also should be a place where I find the opportunity to challenge myself, and to challenge the nation. And so, I love when a museum asks me to work hard. I love when I, you know, one of the things I miss, to be honest is, as we now, you know, type in what book we want to see, I miss, walking through the stacks of libraries. Right, and just sort of seeing a book and say, I would have never pulled this out, and here I am discovering. And, so, for me, that sense of discovery is something we have to protect at all costs.

39:07

Amen to that.

39:08

You know, one of the people, I think, is something of an inspiration hero to you, is to me, and anybody in the library world, and museum world, should be John Cotton Dana, who was the great defender of the idea of the open stack, who was a great defender of the idea that every community has got a history and objects from that history, tangible things that are important. He was in favor of every library having a museum which, of course, at the turn of the 19th to the 20th century, there were a lot of libraries, including the Kansas City Public Library, as an example, that created museums. And, it was usually about important objects that relate to who we are in community. One of the great objects that you talk about in the National Museum of African American History and Culture is the Tin Wallet.

40:02

Yeah.

40:04

And, that, you know, it's so tangible, it's small, it's so tangible. Anybody could have done this, but it also has so much larger, meaning.

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Well in some ways, my career has been shaped by John Cotton Dana, right. His notion was, fit the museum to the community needs, right? And so that led me to thinking, how do I find the stories that might seem small but are really large, like the tin wallet. This was a man named Joseph Trammel, who gained his freedom in the 1850s, and with his freedom came that Freedom Paper, that document. And he recognized that if he lost that or if it was destroyed, it could destroy his whole life, so he built this. He made what he called a hand-made tin wallet, a kind of ugly little box. But he would put it in that box and carry with him to make sure it wasn't destroyed by perspiration or anything, and then, every night, he would go back to his house. He would take it out of the tin wallet, according to the family, and he would talk about the power of freedom, the importance of freedom, the fragility of freedom. And for me, that small tin case really became emblematic of a nation's grappling with freedom. A community's desire to understand and embrace freedom. In a way it was always a reminder to me to never take freedom for granted.

41:35

You know, Dana was attacked for trying, for playing too small, that libraries or museums should be about Greece and Rome, the Renaissance, et cetera. And one of the things that he said was, but, you know, these objects in this community connect to that and they

connect to it through those important words, like freedom, or equality, work, or courage or justice. And it seems to me that that's the important thing that we can do as museum or library leaders is relate the day-to-day life in the community to those larger, most important things that we all agree on. The difference between America and many other countries, and you talk a little bit about this, is that we're really an idea. We're based on an idea, and we haven't lived up to the ideals behind those ideas all the time. But we have those ideals. And we share those ideals.

42:42

Isn't that the most powerful thing, right? That we can look at these words in a declaration, in the constitution, these founding documents. And yes, there are many stories that are not there. There are many words that aren't there, but they give us something to aspire to. And so, I've always argued one of the great strengths of the civil rights movement, for example, was simply saying, live up to your stated ideals. That's what we're really asking you to do. And, so, for me, that is really powerful to sort of say the country has always been a work in progress. And, so, therefore what's important is that we have to challenge, we have to prod, we have to push, we have to come together to help a country live up to its stated ideals. I think there is nothing wrong with aspiring to be the best of what America says it is.

43:34

Your aspiration is really important and you have a great story in your book, in your own family. It's about your mother that's about aspiration. And she, some of your friends, you're at home with some of your friends. And she goes around the table and asks each one of them what do they want to do, where do they want to go to college, et cetera. And they give their answers. And then she turns to you. And she asks you:

44:06

What are you going to do after graduate school?

44:09

After graduate school. And you know her expectations, you have another great phrase in the book that, seems to me, you know a tremendous reason, the power behind your success in the world, which is that your mother's expectations, you say, were both a gift and a burden. Which I think is just a fabulous phrase. And I think that's, you know, I look at our country, and I think our country is a gift and a burden. And if you want to play civic role in the world which you do, and I do, and many people do. It's a gift in this country to be able to do that. It's also a burden because of our history, and an opportunity, because of our history.

45:02

But that opportunity is what is I think so important. You know, I remember early on in my career people would say to me, you're too political, and I would say if helping to make a country better to help it live up to its ideals is political, that I'm political. But, boy, that's the kind of politics I want to see.

45:22

Well, we're about debate in this country. We've been about debate since the since the beginning. And you know true inclusion includes all voices in the debate. And if you do it face to face, you learn something about people's motivations, which are usually pretty close to your own motivation. They may have a different way to get there, but they're trying to get us get us to the next place, as a better place for all of us. I find. Well, before we turn to questions, I do want to ask you a little bit more about your family, because I think it's so

important in your history, and your view of the world, which I share and admire is about all of us as a family. And you're Lonnie Bunch, the third, and your father and your mother, your grandfather, there's a great picture of your grandmother in the book. Talk a little bit about the Bunch family, the bunch of Bunch's that you come from.

46:37

Well, you know, what I'm always struck by is how an individual or a couple can change the trajectory of the family. You know, my grandfather, Lonnie Bunch Senior, was a sharecropper and didn't want to be a sharecropper, and he and my grandmother found ways for him to go to college at night at Shaw College for almost 10 years. And then, for whatever reason, he wanted to be a dentist and he had no money. So, he went to New Jersey. And in those days, they had what they called rolling chairs and he pushed people around to make money. And he, you know, basically opened a dental practice and was a dentist for, you know, 40 years. And what I realize is that that changed the trajectory. But as my father used to say, we had no right as Lonnie Bunch junior and the third to complain, because this guy was, a sharecropper, took them 10 years ago through college. My father used to always say when he was a kid, he would say you know to his father, "well, I can't do this." And his father would say, "yes, you can. I worked so you wouldn't have to chop cotton." And so I've always lived with that desire to sort of make my grandparents smile, that their efforts, their sacrifice, really shaped who I am, and that I worked hard to help others have the lives that I know my grandparents wanted for me.

48:02

It's a great, in itself, an inspirational story. So, Elizabeth, do we have some questions from the audience before we go away?

48:12

We do. And I'll start by just noting that there's been lots of thanks for both of you in the chat.

48:19

Barbara Commentator puts forth that this is a conversation every American should witness. And, so, there's a comment from her, as well and a question. Secretary Bunch, you had spoken about how museums challenge visitors to think and reflect on issues through personal stories. And her question is about how to better engage people in spontaneous conversations and museums because on tours, sometimes there's only one person who asks a question and no one responds or joins in. How can we help museums encourage their communities to talk.

49:00

I think some of it has to do, when you're creating exhibition's, think of those spaces where you know that people will be able to engage and would want to engage. So that, whether it's, you know, a specific artifact in the African American Museum, that was putting some materials from Harriet Tubman, that really would get people to talk about not just her, but issues of gender, freedom. There was a spot that I would ask people to stop in front of - a cabin that housed the enslaved. And it tells a story that here was something that when it was the home of the enslaved, there was one door in. But, when freedom came, they immediately put a second door, so that having a second door is a concrete manifestation of freedom. Those moments then allowed people to engage and talk. And there were many times I've seen people, I guess the best example, is the Emmett Till casket that we have in the museum. I have seen people of all races ask each other, can they cry together, because

they want to share that pain and they want to build on that to help a country be made better. So, I think it's, intentionality is part of the way to do this.

50:16

That's great. We do have a couple more questions in our time remaining. Going back to the issue, Secretary Bunch, you mentioned this, the pruning of the Confederate statues that has been re-occurring in the news recently. A question asks, "What do you think should happen to the statues that have been taken down since there's been a lot of discussion about this? Where should they go and how and should they be interpreted?"

50:48

Well, you know, I've been really struck by what I saw in Budapest when they remove Russian statues or Soviet era statues and put them in a park and they were then interpreted because the notion was that if you simply erase all the statue's, you're erasing some of the history, but if you then interpret that so people understand that. So, when Mitch Landrieu, who is somebody, the former mayor of New Orleans, who I have great respect for, he, and I talked about it, and when he removed Confederate statues, he found a warehouse where people can go in, look at those and have it interpreted. So, I would argue that even with a pruning, I would love to see some of these preserved. I've always thought that in the African American Museum, we should have some statues, but they're awfully heavy, so I hadn't planned on those. But I just think that the notion is that give people an opportunity to see how these are part of the culture that has shaped them and help them understand what are the blind spots within that interpretation.

51:59

Another question, Elizabeth, Is there anything?

52:02

We do. A question from Daniel. Secretary Bunch, again you had spoke of trying to make the nation a better place and earlier museums and libraries roles on engaging with their communities. So how do we address community involvement in, you know, this polarizing time in our nation? How do we address individuals in our communities that, you know, may be willfully ignorant or, you know, unable to be swayed?

52:33

Well, I think first of all, the notion is you only sway people when you can engage them, when you can bring them into the debate. So that creating opportunities that intentionally bring people of different points of view together, because they trust the library, because they trust the museum. Is there a risk? Absolutely. But I was really struck by, there was a time when I remember being part of a project that brought in senior citizens of different political points of view to engage with young kids over literature. And it was amazing how people debated. But they came together as a group because they trusted what the library was able to do. So, I think that the key is that there are strategies to do this. It's not something one does without intentionality, recognizing what this means. But I would argue the reward is greater than risk. The risk is, oh, you might be identified as being political. But the reward is, there are very few places where people cross political, racial and gender lines. Museums and libraries are those places. So let us take advantage of that opportunity.

53:48

You mentioned Emmett Till before and we had in Kansas City, an example of what you're talking about that was built around Emmitt Till. So there's a man named Alvin Sykes in

Kansas City, who passed away this year, who was a community activist. He became involved, eighth grade education, a musician, African American. And he became involved in the Emmett Till bill and the campaign. He was a key part of the campaign, Simeon Wright was very close to him, to get the bill passed, that created the Cold Case section of the Civil Rights Division of the Justice Department that looked at all the older unprosecuted or failed prosecution cases, civil rights cases. And the key moment for him and for passage of the Bill was convincing Tom Coburn, who was a senator, who was probably the most conservative member of the Senate, to take away his fiscal block on funding, on funding the bill. And Alvin did that by sitting in his office for about six weeks. Until Coburn would talk to him. But we brought Coburn and Alvin to the library to have a conversation. They had a conversation about how this happened and basically, it came down to Tom Coburn, this incredibly conservative guy, used the word love about Alvin Sykes, this community activist. That he found love in Alvin Syke's soul. And I'll tell you, there was not a dry eye in an audience of about 300 people, mixed audience, in Kansas City, Missouri, listening to this. And it's that kind of conversation, which is about human beings being human, that museums and libraries can do, and it's very hard to find a place for those conversations today.

55:44

But that's our challenge. And that's our opportunity.

55:49

Elizabeth? We have another question?

55:53

We have one last question we can end on, and then we can go ahead and wrap up right in the hour. So, we'll end with this discussion about diverse cultures in our nation. There are so many different experiences and stories from communities in our nation, both now and throughout our history. And how do we embrace and uplift diverse cultures and stories without stepping into an area of cultural appropriation?

56:22

Well, you know, part of the challenge of cultural appropriation is not talking to the cultures that you really want to explore. And, so, I think the notion of finding the kind of collaborations, the kinds of partnerships, that would allow people to feel comfortable, that you're sharing their culture. You're sharing their story, in a way that's respectful. I was always struck, early in my career, I got to know a man named Tom McKay at the Wisconsin Historical Society who went around Wisconsin and worked with diverse communities and got them to engage with each other in a way that changed the way Wisconsin's history was explored. And so, I've always thought that is work. It's difficult, it's challenging. What it really means is for this to work, you've gotta have a long term, mutually reciprocal relationship. It's not one exhibit. It's not one public program. It's a really, it's a commitment to that being part of the lifeblood of a cultural institution, would be a museum or a library.

57:28

I think that's a great place to end.

57:31

So, Lonnie, I want to thank you so much for this conversation. It's inspirational. You are an inspirational leader in the cultural world of this of this country and I'll say to use your words about your mother, and transpose them a little bit, you're a gift, not a burden.

57:54

Thank you so much. I really appreciate this.

57:59

Thank you, everyone. And, as a reminder, this event will be recorded, and the chat and the transcript will be available for closed captioning as well. Thank you so much. At this time we will end the webinar. Take care, everyone.

58:15

Thank you. Thank you.

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