

Judith Kelley:

Frank Bruni, does his name sound familiar? Well, if you've ever opened the New York Times, odds are pretty good that it does. Frank had a regular column at the Times. He worked at the paper for 25 years. He was a Metro reporter, White House correspondent, a Rome bureau chief, and even the chief restaurant critic for a time. He was also the first openly gay op-ed columnist at the time. And now we've lured him here to the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University, where he is the Eugene C Patterson Professor of the Practice of Journalism and Public Policy. I'm Judith Kelley, dean of the Sanford School. Welcome to Duke Frank and welcome to Policy 360.

Frank Bruni:

Thank you. Thank you very much.

Judith Kelley:

So what interested you about making a change in moving to North Carolina?

Frank Bruni:

Well, North Carolina has many, many charms as does Duke. So I don't think it's such an unusual thing at all. You kind of hit on the main reason in the introduction. You said 25 years. I had for 25 years been at the Times. I still do maintain a kind of freelance contractual relationship with them. And I felt like I had played out my string there. I had done many different jobs. I had made what contribution I could as a columnist and as a writer and it felt like time to make a different kind of contribution. Maybe to take a few steps back and put myself in an environment, in a setting where I could be more reflective and where I could share what I've learned with the next generation, and being here at Duke enables me to do that.

Judith Kelley:

Well, we'll talk about some of that reflection later, but first, being a columnist, it's an awful lot of power in some ways, is there a time in your career when that became clear to you?

Frank Bruni:

Yes. I mean, you could make real differences of a concrete sort if you did certain kinds of columns. There were columns I did that spotlighted say a person in need or something like that. And because the Times has such enormous readership and thus any one of its columnists have enormous readership, you could see that having an effect. It's hard for me to judge the effects of what I've done because I don't want to kind of think in terms of my own power and I think outsiders have a better view of it, but I remember kind of to the point of your question at some point during the 2020 Democratic primary, the news site Politico did a whole story about me and Pete Buttigieg and how something I had written in, I can't remember whether it was 2016 or 2017, but I went to South Bend, Indiana, where Pete Buttigieg was mayor and I spent several days with him and it was really, really clear to me at the time that this was a phenomenally talented young person who had so many biographical aspects along with a just sort of eloquence and fluency.

Frank Bruni:

They were going to make him a formidable candidate in the future. And I wrote a column, longer than usual column, with the headline which I wrote and put on it; The First Gay President? And I'm told that

had real impact in terms of bringing donors' gaze his way in terms of giving him a much bigger national profile. That wasn't why I did it. And again, other people are better judges than I am, but that's the kind of thing that can happen when you're a columnist. And it's both daunting and exciting.

Judith Kelley:

Was it hard to give up that immediacy of being able to have that kind of impact, or do you feel like you have the best of both worlds now?

Frank Bruni:

I have a little bit of the best of the both worlds. I still write a weekly newsletter, which I'm very fortunate has a lot of subscribers, for the Times. And that newsletter has components in it that essentially allow me to do mini columns. So I still have that microphone. I still have something of a stage, without it commanding as much of my energy and taking up as much of my time. I did it for 10 plus years, or maybe it was exactly 10 years. I lose track of the timeline. So it wasn't that hard to give up because I had a really nice long go at it.

Judith Kelley:

So you mentioned that one of the reasons you came here was because you would like more of an opportunity to be reflective. And I think that in your last column, you reflected quite strikingly about ambivalence and ambiguity, do you mind reading an excerpt of that column for us?

Frank Bruni:

Thanks for asking, I'd be delighted to, and I'm very curious because I don't think you and I have ever discussed this, but after I read it, I would love to hear your thoughts on it, whether it's something that resonates with you or whether it's something you've ever worried about. But anyway, this is a section of that column about my departure from columnizing. I worried and continue to worry about the degree to which I and other journalists, opinion writers especially, have contributed to the dynamics we decry, the toxic tenor of American discourse, the furious pitch of American politics, the volume and vitriol of it all. I worry too about how frequently we shove ambivalence and ambiguity aside. Ambivalence and ambiguity aren't necessarily signs of weakness or sins of indecision, they can be apt responses to events that we don't yet understand with outcomes that we can't predict, but they don't make for bold sentences or tidy talking points. So we pundits are merchants of certitude in a world where much is in doubt and many questions don't have one right answer. As such, we may be encouraging arrogance and unyieldingness in our readers, viewers and listeners, and those attributes need no encouragement in America today.

Judith Kelley:

So my favorite word choice in that segment is "merchants of certitude," and I imagine that's not an entirely accidental word choice. I mean, merchants of death come to mind. Why did you choose those three words?

Frank Bruni:

Huge thanks for homing in on those because you're absolutely right. Those are the three words that stand out to me. And I think we're probably on the same page, but I'd love to hear your reaction. I chose those words because we are merchants. The news business is a business. It's funny, I talk a lot about this

in the class I'm teaching right now with my students. The class is The Media and LGBTQ+ Americans. And as I try to get the students to analyze more closely and understand better why they get the news they get, I continually come back to the point that the news is a business. I mean it does essential things for democracy, it performs a vital public service, but those missions are absolutely colored and sometimes warped by economic realities. And when you're in the opinion writing business in today's climate, when you are a pundit so to speak, part of what you are doing is selling certitude. Your best-read columns aren't the ones that say, "Wow, this is really confusing, there are many sides to this, this is a tough problem, what do we do?" Your best columns are the ones that say, "I have figured this out, and here's what you should think and do." And so we're selling certitude, don't you think?

Judith Kelley:

I think you're right, and it makes me think about the fact that we've just had this whistleblower come out from Facebook, who said Facebook is choosing profit over safety. I think it was some something similar, right? In that case, the accusation is around polarization and hatred, those types of things. It's a different merchant of death type of accusation, but it's still a profit over something. And I think what you said in your last column and what you're saying now is that the media and maybe pundits, in particular, are milder versions of that.

Frank Bruni:

I guess so. Yeah. No, I mean, I think that's a really interesting analogy. And as you were making it and talking about it, I was thinking, I'm a believer in capitalism, I feel about capitalism sort of like I do about democracy. It's the worst system in except for all the others or whatever that phrase is. But we're living in an interesting chapter of American life, of Western life, of global life, where we're seeing across a lot of different fronts of society, the downsides of capitalism, the dangers of capitalism. And I think you're really right to make that analogy of Facebook and the media, Facebook, of course, being its own kind of media. When you have the profit motive mixed in, public welfare often takes the backseat. And that was absolutely, as you said, a theme of those hearings. And I think it's something that the media wrestles with or should wrestle with, certainly something I wrestled with.

Judith Kelley:

It's interesting because we talk so much about polarization and what you are getting at here though, what I really liked about this is this emphasis on ambiguity and uncertainty and our unwillingness to acknowledge that because that's ultimately about the fact that we've gotten to a stage in society, not just where we're polarized, but that the cause of the polarization or one of the many cause is partly an increased sense that we all have that we're right.

Frank Bruni:

Yes, exactly. I agree with you 100%. What you said was so important and so right that each of us kind of has been encouraged. And I think social media does this because it's a very blunt, staccato announcement about self-form. Each of us has been encouraged to be definitive and sometimes defiant and to basically kind of say, "Here's what I know to be true and if you disagree, you're wrong." And it doesn't allow for human growth. It doesn't allow for human imperfection. And I remember being so troubled and I say this as a gay man who has written probably about nothing more consistently over time than the quest for LGBTQ+ equality. But I remember that people forget how recent it was that Barack Obama actually came out in favor of marriage equality. Ditto for Hillary Clinton. Hillary Clinton didn't take that position until early 2013. Now I'm not knocking her, but something happened because

of the nature of our discourse that by 2014, if you weren't pro-marriage equality, to someone who was, you were a Visigoth, you were a horrible human being. How can you say that to a 71-year-old Baptist in Alabama, if that man or woman is merely 12 months behind Hillary Clinton?

Judith Kelley:

Yeah, no, as a matter of fact, it's interesting because I grew up in a very conservative Christian home in Denmark, so different kind of conservative Christian than the conservative ideologically US political Christian, but still a very sort of a home based and very profound beliefs about what was right and wrong. And although I had an uncle who was gay and he had a partner and that was totally cool with me and my family, somehow I was able to have this complete, like still hold these opposite beliefs about what was right and wrong. It took me a long time to really change my mind on that. But I think that's a great example of a societal changing of mind. Are those still possible, do you think?

Frank Bruni:

I think they're becoming less and less possible. And they're becoming less and less possible I think because we are increasingly walled off from people who think differently. I'm guessing, and it's sort of a question to you. I'm guessing that your journey on that was influenced greatly by kind of heterogeneous socializing, by having conversations with and mixing with people who didn't fit your precise demographic profile, whether you're talking about the physical neighborhoods we live in these days, or whether you're talking about our neighborhoods on the internet. I think more and more people are surrounding themselves with or surrounded by like-minded, like-speaking individuals who become part of an echo chamber, and opinions aren't changed in an echo chamber.

Judith Kelley:

Do you think we're just also becoming less comfortable with ambiguity than we were in the past? And the reason I say that is because 50 years ago, access to information was just not what it is today. And so your average person would never claim to be an expert on vaccinations say because they would've to go to the library, get a library card, go look in the catalog and find a book about it and sit down and read about it, and who was going to do that. So you just kind of took wisdom and truth more... It was handed to you by experts and now you go find it where you want to find it.

Frank Bruni:

Yeah, I think we are becoming less comfortable with and less good at ambiguity because ambiguity's uncomfortable. I mean, one of the reasons we've had fascism in the world, one of the reasons we've had certain sorts of systems is because ambiguity is uncomfortable. Freedom is tough, right? Life is easier in a sense, much less rich in my opinion if right and wrong are delineated for you. That's the appeal of a lot of the most kind of stern religions. If right and wrong are decreed to you, a recipe for living is given to you, everything is certain, that's in a much easier emotional and psychological way to live than grappling all the time with indecision and ambiguity. And what the internet, to name the biggest force, what done has done, it has allowed people to travel, to speed themselves to plenty of evidence "that affirms" what they already believe and that cements their current beliefs so they can have the psychological and emotional comfort of being certain and being right. I think it was tougher in the past to marinate in your own confidence and perspective.

Judith Kelley:

So coming to an institution of higher education, I wonder how this fits in for you personally, but also into this narrative about the larger customs we're discussing because I think that one of the things we want to try to do in high education is to encourage folks to ask questions, encourage students to wonder, encourage students to push back against ideas that they're being presented with and to question. I often say to my students, the hard part is not necessarily getting the right answer, it's getting the right question.

Frank Bruni:

Yeah, no, very well said. I think it's interesting to me, it's challenging to me, it's important to me to have a certain kind of classroom discussion. And I hope that whatever I'm teaching, I am able to integrate those sorts of classroom discussions; discussions in which people can wonder about their own beliefs, have other people push back at them. I feel that learning, at the end of the day, is one of the humbles acts in human life. We talked about the retreat of ambiguity and ambivalence, along with those retreats is the retreat of humility. And I hope whatever I'm teaching, I hope that higher education as a whole becomes a sort of theater of humility, where we all get excited about how much we're learning, but never lose sight at the same time of how much we don't know. I think learning is in part about realizing how much you don't know. Does that make any sense?

Judith Kelley:

No, totally. I mean the older I get, the less I know. It feels like that a lot of times because as you mature, you come to appreciate the complexities. Actually, you're right, the more of the forest you see, the more you come to appreciate how complex of a system it is.

Frank Bruni:

The forest is a good metaphor. A lot of the stuff we're talking about is about people just kind of having two or three trees that draw the entirety of their [crosstalk 00:17:22].

Judith Kelley:

Right. And say, oh, that's a forest, well, yes, it's a forest and there are trees in it, but there are also amazingly complex anthill systems and many other things. So here you are teaching, has anything surprised you about going into the classroom here at Duke?

Frank Bruni:

In a sense, everything surprises me and this is not in positive or negative ways, but it is so easy to forget... Because I am a product of all of the forces that we have just talked about in terms of you can try to live a more diverse life, you can try to have kind of heterogeneous ideological influences in your life, and you can try to socialize with a broad spec of people, but we're all kind of prisoners of our own demographics and of our own generation. And one of the really exhilarating and fascinating things about the classroom, for me, and you spent more time in the classroom, so I would love to know if this is something that has drawn your attention to, is I become so aware in a great and humbling way of how much I am a product of my generational experiences and how different the world looks and how to people who have grown up and been exposed to things in a different time. I'm learning a lot about why the current generation sees the world the way it does because I'm becoming privy to the formative experiences in their lives, which are utterly different from the formative experiences in your or my life because it's a different historical moment. That's a kind of continually fascinating thing to me. Is that something you've experienced in the classroom?

Judith Kelley:

Yeah, absolutely, especially since I grew up in what was at that time at least, a very homogenous small country, Denmark. And so just even coming to the United States and then going into the classroom and establishing relationships with people who were so incredibly different from myself.

Frank Bruni:

You have such an interesting kind of perspective because of that. I am curious, I'm sure you get asked this all the time, but I guess I'll root it in this moment in time, from the perspective of someone who grew up elsewhere and sees the world perhaps in a broader sense than some of us who spent most of our lives in America do, what right now do you find most curious about America, most puzzling?

Judith Kelley:

I don't know. So most curious, that's just mind-blowing, just how we seem to have backed ourselves into a corner with the way we've structured our political system. So the past dependency, the way that and things have developed from the filibuster to gerrymandering, to the two party system and on and on, we've gotten ourselves to a place where we're almost trapped by the system we created and which was created so thoughtfully by a generation that wanted precisely to make sure it was going to function. And that's very different from what you experience in Danish or most European politics, multi-party systems and much less polarization in the sense that there just aren't two polls to begin with.

Frank Bruni:

Yeah. I think there are a bunch of different ones.

Judith Kelley:

Yeah.

Frank Bruni:

Yeah, our two-party system, which seems close to intractable, if not intractable, really at this point feels like a kind of death spiral.

Judith Kelley:

That somber. So let's change the subject. So I want to get back to ambiguity and young people because I asked you earlier whether you thought it was possible still to get to a place where people could change their mind about big shifts and things like that. The generation that we are teaching in the classroom, they're facing a lot of uncertainty all of a sudden. I've got kids who are college age and they've done surveys of this generation. Half of them say they have anxiety about climate change. Like literally, this is an issue for them in their personal lives. And surely they've got anxiety about what the world will look like in terms of future pandemics, et cetera. It seems like there's a lot that's up in the air, which is interesting because if you go back in time, say rewind 100 years, and people pretty much... They surely there were technologies that were developing and stuff, but not at the speed at which they're developed now. There was much more certainty about how your life was probably going to pan out. This generation now faces so much more uncertainty. So how do we help them live with ambiguity because they've got to get on with it somehow?

Frank Bruni:

That's a great question. And if either one of us could come up with the answer, everyone would want our services and our whatever. I don't know. I keep on thinking there are certain verities or certain values that transcend a moment in time, that transcend any confusion. And maybe it's important to keep young people's attentions focused on those. We will always have the strength and the solace of our families and by families, I mean, families of birth and biology, but also families of your own creation. A word that I hear so much more often today, and this is great than I ever heard growing up is empathy. If we can instill empathy in this generation and they actually brim with it, they have a lot of it, I think along with that comes a kind of civility that transcends challenges in moments in time.

Frank Bruni:

But you're right, I think they're living in a world where clearly the pace of change is exponentially fleeter than it was 20, 40, 60 years ago. And that is inherently scary because you can't plot a life with the same amount of certainty that you could before. But you will always have your intelligence. You can always refine that. You can hold onto your empathy and your bonds with other people and those are things that ultimately are going to have more to do with happiness than whether you've chosen the right career, whether you've been able to project into the future in terms of the political reality.

Judith Kelley:

So I want to take a step back to talking about your writing and sort of your mea culpa about contributing to this punted tree that had some harmful effects in your view. And I'm wondering, you said you can't write a column that says, oh, this is all so confusing and complex, and we don't understand it. And nobody wants to read a column like that. But why isn't a column that uncovers interesting questions, an interesting thing to read, is there not a way to do that? Are you going to try to do that?

Frank Bruni:

I don't know if there's a way to do that. I mean, when I say you can't write a column, I mean, you can write any column you want, but at the end of the day if your readership doesn't follow you, then you're going to find yourself out of business. And I use that phrase deliberately. One of the curiosities of our media era on top of stuff that we've already discussed is we live in a media era where you know what the audience for a given piece of writing is instantly and intimately and definitively. And I think I'm speaking for all opinion writers, all columnists, when I say that if you write columns or a substantial number of columns that merely questions and wrestle with uncertainty, you're going to realize or be told rather quickly that your readership has diminished.

Frank Bruni:

And unfortunately, you can let that happen only to an extent. Where I've kind of moved or segued, is in the newsletter I do, I talk quite a bit about emotional challenges and emotional realities, as well as political ones. And by moving into that sphere, I can play around with a whole lot more ambiguity, uncertainty, because people have a tolerance for that when you're talking about matters of friendship, matters of family, matters of love. For some reason, they have more tolerance for that than they do when you're being uncertain and saying, oh, so many questions, no answers if it's matters of politics.

Judith Kelley:

I had a thought, which was that in academia... So you're talking about, we write things, this is what we know, we want to be certain and firm about our knowledge when we write as a columnist, but in academia, it's actually, not in everything, obviously not in the natural sciences, but in a lot of the social

sciences if you do a piece of research and write a journal article and it basically says confirms common intuition, nobody's going to be particularly excited about that. Right. What we get excited about, is the counterintuitive findings. We thought X, but guess what; turns out that people do this when we do this. And that's much more interesting. And so that tends to get a lot more traction. I wonder whether if you hang around us long enough here in academia, there's an opportunity to highlight some of the counterintuitive because surely the counterintuitive is intriguing to people.

Frank Bruni:

The counterintuitive is intriguing to people sometimes so much so, I mean, this is where I worry about market forces again, when it comes to journalism. Sometimes the counterintuitive is so intriguing that people will themselves in that direction. They try a little too hard to get there because they know that kind of eureka, aha moment has appeal. But what I found in journalism is actually, and this is kind of intellectually sad, and I guess here, I'm talking about column writing, but just as appealing to people or as intriguing to them... Maybe intriguing isn't the right word as are they counterintuitive is what you think is correct, but it's even more correct than you think, and I'm going to state that with trumpet's blasting louder than you've ever heard that and that's where things get to me, really troublesome. It often feels to me like the reward in American life, and this goes well beyond journalism and is even truer in politics, that the spoils go to the person who tells you what you want to hear with the least nuance and with the greatest volume.

Judith Kelley:

Yeah. I liked what you said in your column about ambiguity and uncertainty, et cetera, not being a weakness because I think there's a tendency to portray it as such, but I've just generally found that learning is fun, learning is interesting. And I don't know why we wouldn't want to have a life where we think there's still something to be discovered.

Frank Bruni:

I agree with you. I mean, I'm a big enough fan of learning. When you at the beginning kind of went through what has been within the bounds of journalism, a very kind of scattered, dilettantish, polyglot attention in a gazillion directions career of mine, one of the reasons I've liked that is because I love learning new things. I loved going to Rome and suddenly being told, now you're covering the Vatican and having to kind of get up to speed on a whole new world. And I think as we're talking, one of the reasons I love that is I kind of find we talk so much these days for very important reason about diversity, what I have found the longer I live is we are more alike than we are different. When I say we, I mean, the Vatican is not so different from the White House. Rome is not so different from Washington. We're all people and the connections between us and the commonalities among us, to me, trump, a verb I still use, although now it's a complicated one, they trump the differences. And what I love about learning is I feel almost always what I'm learning is that things, institutions and people are much more connected than we realize.

Judith Kelley:

Speaking of discovery, putting yourself in new situations is a way of discovering. And you've recently made a big shift from New York to North Carolina. This is a drastic change of settings. And you've been sharing a little bit with your readers about that. Just tell us a little bit about what coming to North Carolina has been like for you and some of the experiences you've had since you came here.

Frank Bruni:

I haven't yet been able to range across the state to the degree I want to. And I'm not telling you anything, you don't know, one of the things that I think is so fascinating about North Carolina and makes it such a privileged perch is it is an extraordinarily diverse state politically. I mean, so is New York where I'm coming from because people forget that upstate New York and downstate New York are very different beasts. But I think North Carolina is about as revealing and predictive and fascinating a political laboratory as America has right now. And I'm looking forward to seeing more of that in my kind of personal travels in my daily life. I've been so absorbed in getting adjusted, fixing the things that needed fixing in my house, getting the raccoons out of the attic, getting the bats from under the eaves and that sort of thing. that I haven't been able to range as far beyond my neighborhood.

Frank Bruni:

But my neighborhood is one that has access immediate right there to many forests, many trails. And I mean, just before you and I began this conversation, I was out in the woods, maybe bad dog owner, letting my dog chase deer, and then we came home. Central Park is a wonder and I spent hours and hours and hours of time in it, but there's something right now for me that is beyond exhilarating and fun about being able to walk five houses, go into the forest, see a bunch of deer and watch my dogs elated reaction to this zoo we live in.

Judith Kelley:

Yeah. And you've also noticed that people just wave more around here and there's a different spirit.

Frank Bruni:

It is so friendly. I lived in the same apartment building on the Upper West Side, a co-op it's called, for I think almost 19 years. I changed apartments, but I was in this building and there were people on my floor or just a floor away, and there were only four apartments per floor, whom I barely knew after living there 18 years. I'm on this cul-de-sac in Chapel Hill. I mean, I know Patty to my left. I know Jay and Eleanor to my right. I know Sherry and Richard across the way. I've had drinks with Mary on the corner. And this is just two months in. There is a friendliness. Maybe this is just about suburban life, but I think it's also about a certain Southern and North Carolina spirit that is immensely charming to me. I mean, you've, you've lived in many places, what do you think is distinctive and special about this corner of the United States?

Judith Kelley:

Yeah, the friendliness really strikes me and I've noticed that when I go back home to Denmark, I'll start chatting with the teller or just wave at people. And people in Denmark are friendly enough, but it takes them a little bit by surprise. And I've just gotten so used to that here in North Carolina. I love that about North Carolina. It's been a really rich environment for me to learn or about diversity in a way that has made me reflect on some of Danish history in ways that I hadn't even thought about. I remember coming to North Carolina and when I walked up the driveway to my house that I had bought, we had just driven down from Boston, the first person I see was the painter coming out of the house.

Judith Kelley:

And he was a black man. He was wearing this white painter's outfit and he called me mam right away. And I just felt so awkward. It was so weird for me. Nobody calls me mam, and yet this feeling of

hierarchy and that was really strange for me. But I've also had the opportunity to get to know the stories of folks like Professor Jay Pearson on our faculty. I once asked him, what was the day in your life like when you were five years old? And it was just a world that I could have never imagined. And so just broadening my world and my horizon by coming here. And it's been a really rich experience again, it's about learning. Yeah. So I'm hoping that you're going to grow old here at the Sanford School.

Frank Bruni:

I feel like I'm already old.

Judith Kelley:

See, this is what I'm getting at because you're writing now a book on the topic of aging, which you've called *The Beauty of Dusk*, which is a beautiful title, but it has me somewhat concerned because I think we're kind of similar age and I'm thinking of myself as like early afternoon.

Frank Bruni:

Well, that's fair.

Judith Kelley:

But *The Beauty of Early Afternoon* is not such a good title.

Frank Bruni:

Well, I'm, I'm, I'm projecting forward a little bit, I'm looking forward. The title has a couple of layers of meaning. It's sort of *The Beauty of Dusk*, yeah, the book does contemplate and talk about the challenges and rewards of aging, but it talks about and contemplates that through the very particular prism of a medical incident that I went through about four years ago regarding my eyesight, and so dusk as a metaphor is not just about the stages of the day of life, but it's also about blur, about literally seeing less clearly. And so the title is meant to capture a number of different realities.

Judith Kelley:

So is that going to tie in back into ambiguity?

Frank Bruni:

I don't know. That's a great question. I mean, dusk [crosstalk 00:36:50].

Judith Kelley:

You said seeing less clearly.

Frank Bruni:

It's funny. I mean, one of the lines I think I used in the book is my world blurred, my world sharpened. And I think it's funny, I'm too close to the book to really know what it says and maybe reviewers, hopefully, they'll be kind and they'll tell me what it says, but I think there's a way in which the book is about living with ambiguity. I mean, I'll give you ambiguity on steroids. So almost exactly four years ago to the day today, I woke up and there was something funky about my vision. And within the next four days, I was told that I had had a stroke of sorts of my right optic nerve. And I was told initially,

erroneously, that there was a 40% chance it would happen in the other eye and I would be blind and then that was corrected to 20%.

Frank Bruni:

But I suddenly was living with and continue to live with the odds apparently of 20% that my left eye will go the same way as my right eye and that I will be blind. That's a hell of a lot of uncertainty and kind of ambiguity to live with. So some of the book really is about how do you live with that and it's about doing a sort of combination. And this is sort of common sense or conventional wisdom, but I think a lot of our lives are thrashing our way back to conventional wisdom and common sense from the detours we take. But I'm alert to and attuned to the pleasures of the moment in a way I never was before. But I also never forget that I cannot predict the future and that I need to kind of structure a life that takes that into account. There's obvious tension there, but I think our lives are always in that sort of tension, and part of growing old, to go back to that, is really about finessing that tension of living in the moment without disregarding the surprises around the bend.

Judith Kelley:

So maybe tying it all back into your column about ambiguity and uncertainty, not being a weakness is also the fact that living with uncertainty is also about not taking things for granted, which certainly the pandemic has underscored and jolted the world into realizing which then leads us to your point about the moment.

Frank Bruni:

You and I must time share the same brain because I mentioned the pandemic in exactly that way, right toward the beginning of the book, because I agree with you 100%. When the pandemic happened, I thought this is that personal lesson in never knowing what the next day will bring and in never taking things for granted and sort of being kind of nimble and adjustable. The pandemic was what happened to me personally writ large, writ societal. It's what I hope we all learn from this last, is it two years or is it a year and a half? I lose track of time. But everything does turn on a dime. We have no idea. We spend a lot of time talking about the challenges we can foresee and sometimes not doing enough to rise to them, climate change, being a fantastic example of that. But some of the biggest challenges are the ones that we have no idea of. And to bring it back to Duke, where you and I work and to what's happening here, I think if we're doing nothing else at Duke or in higher education, we are trying to kind of nurture a strength in these young individuals that will enable them to meet whatever challenges, especially the unpredictable ones are coming down the pike.

Judith Kelley:

Well, Frank, this has been a lovely conversation and whether we are in the late afternoon or in dusk, I am looking forward to riding into the sunset together.

Frank Bruni:

I am too. That's beautifully said. Thank you. I've really enjoyed this.

Judith Kelley:

Thank you so much for joining me today. Frank Bruni is a Eugene C. Patterson Professor of the Practice of Journalism and Public Policy here at Duke University's Sanford School of Public Policy. He's also a part

of the DeWitt Wallace Center for Media and Democracy, Duke's hub for journalism in the Sanford School. I'll be back in two weeks with another conversation. I'm Judith Kelley.