AMERICAN ENTERPRISE INSTITUTE

RIGHT QUESTIONS AND WRONG ANSWERS

INTRODUCTION:
RYAN STREETER, AEI

LECTURE:
CHARLES MURRAY, AEI

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RYAN STREETER: Good evening. Good evening, everyone, and welcome to the American Enterprise Institute. My name is Ryan Streeter. I’m the director of domestic policy studies here, and it’s great to have you all here. Not only is it an honor to welcome you to AEI. It’s just an honor to be here myself with you. I’m here not really just because of my role at AEI. I’m here, like a lot of you, because I’ve been influenced over the years by the works of Charles Murray. So it’s a real honor to be here and to have a chance to welcome you to this great event.

A common theme throughout Charles’ many works, and there’s a lot to learn from Charles Murray’s many books, is the theme of happiness, lasting and justified satisfaction with life as a whole — did I get that right, Charles? Very Aristotelian formation. If you want to know more about that, read “In Pursuit: Of Happiness and Government,” which I think is Charles’ best, best book. But this theme of happiness shows up throughout Charles’ work over the years, and a lot of us have learned from him in that regard.

And, tonight, we’re here to celebrate Charles’ happiness, a life well lived, a career well done. And there’s nobody that I can think of better suited to introduce Charles than AEI’s Karlyn Bowman, who has known and worked with Charles for many years as a colleague and a friend and knows him better than anybody perhaps here at AEI. And so I’d like to allow Karlyn the chance to introduce Charles tonight. So, Karlyn, if you could come on up, that would be great. (Applause.)

KARLYN BOWMAN: Thank you very much. And let me add my welcome to all of you who braved the elements of Washington to come out tonight. As Ryan said, Charles and I have worked together for a very long time. But let me begin tonight with just a quick preview of some coming attractions at AEI.

On February 13, AEI will hold a discussion of Leon Kass’ new collection of essays titled “A Worthy Life: Finding Meaning in Modern Times.” And then, on February 20, Amy Wax of the University of Pennsylvania Law School will lecture on dissent and disagreement in the academy, and she will discuss her experiences surrounding her now infamous op-ed on the importance of bourgeois culture. She will be discussing how the academy should deal with dissenting views on a range of topics. We look forward to these presentations and hope you will be able to join us. Watch our website for their postings.

Today, Charles Murray is becoming an emeritus scholar at AEI. Emeritus status can mean many different things at different think tanks, but I am happy to report that in Charles’ case, it means that he will still be very active in our work. We are all grateful for that because Charles is one of the most accomplished and most productive members of our community. Most of you are familiar with his work, but let me review a few titles just to give you a sense of the range, the depth, and the breadth of his work. You will also see a common thread running through them, and that is his use of hard data to understand some of the most profound issues facing society today.


Quite a career, I’d say, Charles. For 27 years I’ve been in awe of his ability to digest reams of social science data and write about it clearly and with style. Beyond his books, of course, there are hundreds of articles, five Bradley lectures, and many awards, including AEI’s highest one, the Irving Kristol Award, which Charles was given in 2009. He is, to my mind, the most influential social scientist of our time.

But I want to conclude by saying a few words about Charles as a colleague and a friend. Our work gives our lives meanings, as Arthur Brooks has so often said. And for those of us who have been privileged to be here for a long time, it is also the source of many deep friendships. You follow your colleagues’ work, but you also get to know their spouses, their children, and their grandchildren. We are especially grateful to Catherine Cox, Charles’ wife, occasional coauthor, and editor extraordinaire, as part of the AEI extended family. She has made Charles’ life and ours very full.

When you spend 27 years working together, you see many different sides of people’s personalities. I can honestly say I have never heard a cross or a disparaging word from Charles, and that’s clearly a rarity in today’s Washington. It’s also nothing short of amazing given the treatment that Charles has received over the years. He is generous with his time and supportive of his colleagues. He is a cherished friend.

Tonight’s lecture marks a transition for Charles, but it’s also a special day for another reason. Today is Charles’ 75th birthday and, he tells me, Elvis’. (Laughter.) After Charles’ lecture, I hope you’ll join us for cake and coffee in the gallery outside this room. Let’s hear from him now, “Right Questions, Wrong Answers.” Charles. (Applause.)

CHARLES MURRAY: Thank you very much.
I first met Karlyn on the phone. It must have been ’88, 1987, something like that, because I was getting help from her on — it probably was “In Pursuit.” And she gave me some valuable stuff that it became quite clear to me had been done by her. But she was crediting Ben Wattenberg with it. And I finally asked her directly, you know, “Karlyn, was that you?” But she steadfastly refused to admit. And that is Karlyn Bowman for you, that she has been enormously productive, extremely helpful, and she has been resolutely modest.

And, by the way, when she said we’d been colleagues for all these years, she’d been my boss for all those years. There’s somewhat of a difference in that. Steadfastly supportive and completely unfazed in the uglier times that I’ve gone through in the course of my work. Thank you so very much, Karlyn.

We all have interior life narratives about what has happened to us and what are the important landmarks in our lives. But describing that internal narrative is extremely self-indulgent, and it makes it sound as if your life has been especially fascinating and important. And I am very conscious of not wanting to sound that way tonight. So imagine that we’re sitting around a fireplace in the evening with a glass of wine. And since you all have your interior narratives and I have mine, we’ll just share them and compare notes. We’re not being self-indulgent. We’re just telling each other stories about our lives. And that’s what I’m going to do tonight except, in this case, I get to do all the talking, and you don’t. (Laughter.)

About the title, “Right Questions and Wrong Answers.” That does not mean that I have decided I had been wrong about everything, and I’m going to sign up with Elizabeth Warren’s campaign. (Laughs.) It refers to a couple of topics on which my thinking has changed since “Losing Ground” came out in 1984. I still think I was asking the right questions, but some of the answers weren’t quite right. I’m going to talk about those changes in thinking.

The title of the lecture also refers to a common theme in the reaction from the left about my work. They sometimes can see that I may be talking about real problems, but I keep coming up with the wrong answers. My whole career has been one wrong answer after another as far as the left is concerned.

Seen from the outside, I suppose that my career has three spikes to it, “Losing Ground,” “The Bell Curve,” and “Coming Apart.” Seen from the inside, from my point of view, the three spikes are “In Pursuit,” “Human Accomplishment,” and “By the People.” Plus I guess parts three and four of “Losing Ground” as well.

Why the difference between the visible spikes, the books that everybody — well, at least people in Washington — know about and as seen from inside? I’m reminded of something that Henry Kissinger said, that when you are in public office, you expend intellectual capital. You never build it. And, in a way, I have had a similar experience in that I found I do two kinds of writing. There’s the kind where I’m simply expending intellectual capital and the kind where I’m learning new things and I’m figuring out what I think.
The first kind of writing is easy. It takes long hours, but it’s easy in the sense that you know how to do it and you know where you’re going. The first two parts of “Losing Ground” were easy. “The Bell Curve,” 872 pages long, but oddly enough it was easy. It took four years of two people working very hard — nonetheless easy. “Coming Apart” was easy. The books that were really hard, the ones that had Catherine looking at me uneasily sometimes, were the ones in which I was building intellectual capital, and I’ll explain that, too.

But I shouldn’t ever pretend — no social scientist should ever pretend, though they routinely do, that they do their work in an intellectual vacuum. All social scientists without exception bring priors to their work. They bring a set of life experiences that informed values, and those values informed the way that they interpret the data. I’m not talking about fudging the data. Rather it is of the essence of social science done right that it ultimately involves the stuff of life and the changes that you see, that what you are trying to interpret are ultimately going to be informed by the way you have values that you bring to the work.

The most important of those values for me were formed long before I wrote “Losing Ground,” and I can pretty much label the source of them in two words: Iowa and Thailand. Catherine and I both came from the same town. We lived four blocks apart, Newton, Iowa. But I haven’t lived full time in Iowa since September 1961, which is a long time ago. And yet, I am still an Iowa boy to my bones. I’m not going to go into detail. I’m sure there are a lot of people in this room from towns or small cities who have had the same story.

In my case, I went off to Harvard at age 18, deliriously excited to be getting out of Newton. I loved my four years at Harvard, but even though I didn’t fully recognize it at the time, a part of me always felt like an outsider and still does. When you read my celebrations, which I write a lot of, about America’s traditional civic culture, the answers to why I’m doing so goes back to the people and the way of life in Newton, Iowa.

Now, I can cite you chapter and verse about good social science data that says large swaths of America have experienced the same kind of civic culture. I’m not trying to build a theory based on one town. But my passion for ordinary Americans making honest livings and America’s civic culture all goes back to Iowa. And so, by the way, does my anger, which I do not try to hide, at people who talk about flyover country.

Thailand was a much more self-consciously formative period. I went there in the fall of 1965, three months after graduation from college. Except for one two-week visit home, I was in Thailand continuously from September 1965 until August of 1970, plus another year doing dissertation research in 1972, ’73. In some important ways, I grew up in Thailand. Also the fact that I missed the ’60s — if you think about it, the ’60s really were 1965 to 1970. And I was away for all that, and I’ve often wondered how that has affected my work, how would I be writing differently if I had been here during that period.

I initially was a Peace Corps volunteer in the Thai Ministry of Village Health and Sanitation Project, which was supposed to provide villagers with privies, a very advanced form of privy, called the water-seal privy, which I can explain to you some other time. But it’s far superior to the privies you’ve used in Canadian fishing camps, I promise you. Anyway,
the reason that we were doing that and you entice the villagers to install these privies by promising the village a closed well with a pump if they did so.

Now, the idea that a 22-year-old American with a degree in Russian history could be given three months of training and have anything whatsoever that would be useful to experienced Thai health officials in rural Thailand was idiotic. That’s the way the whole Peace Corps was run then. I’m sure it’s better now. The only thing that I give myself credit for in this regard is that I realize it was idiotic, and I was accordingly very deferential and unobtrusive.

Apart from all the other influences that Thailand had on me — and they were profound — I had two specific epiphanies in Thailand that directly affected my subsequent work. “Epiphany” is probably too glamorous a word for what happened, but it is the same that I recognized at the time that I had acquired an insight. And neither of them had immediate transformative effects, but they lodged in my brain and they kept returning throughout the years.

The first of these happened maybe three or four months after I got to Lamphun, a provincial town in Northern Thailand. One morning, I’m sitting around in the regional headquarters of the Village Health and Sanitation Project, and just reflecting in the fact that nobody’s really doing much of anything. They are kind of busy. They are shuffling papers. That’s the way it is most days. People are busy, but not doing anything that makes any difference to anybody. And I had a sudden image of thousands of offices around the developing world just like this, all of them pushing the nation forward into the 20th century in terms of the rhetoric, in terms of what the programs were supposed to be doing, and actually they were doing next to nothing.

That image captured my imagination. Then, when I came back to the States in the 1970s, I realized this ain’t confined to the developing world. In the States I kept running into the same thing, whether it’s programs to help chronic delinquents or children with family problems or programs supposedly serving any other number of fine-sounding purposes, when I hung out in the offices of those programs, hardly anything was going on. It’s true of an extremely wide range of government offices in state and local government, as well as federal.

The dirty little secret about what happens when you have a government shutdown is how few affects it has on anything. I have come to believe and still do that some huge proportion of government offices could disappear tomorrow and it wouldn’t make a damn bit of difference to anything, short term or long term. What got me started on that line of thinking was a somnolent morning in Northern Thailand in 1965.

The second epiphany happened in 1968. I had finished Peace Corps and was doing village-level research in four villages along the Mekong River in Northeast Thailand, directing a small project that was assessing villagers’ attitudes toward the Thai government. My research assistants and I were just living in the villages. We weren’t using questionnaires. We were just engaging people in undirected conversations. And after a few weeks, I was
convinced this project was going to be a complete failure because we couldn’t entice the villagers to talk about the government. They just weren’t responsive as we tried to probe as to what had been going on.

Instead, whenever the villagers talked about anything that involved government, it had nothing to do with development programs. It was about the district officer. Thailand’s organized into provinces and districts, and you have one person that’s the Nai Amphoe, the local district office who runs things. And in all four villages, if you had a Nai Amphoe, if you had a district officer who caught water buffalo thieves, because water buffaloes are a big deal in Thailand — and as far as the villagers are concerned, water buffalo thieves should be put in a sack and thrown into the Mekong River. But if the Nai Amphoe did that, that was really good. And if the district officer also turned a blind eye to the moonshine they made for personal consumption, that was also really important. And the district officer that did both of those things meant they liked the Thai government. It had very little to do with anything else that Bangkok thought about.

And the even more important part of this epiphany is that what was really important to the life of the village was not even the district office. It was the headman for that village. A wise, effective headman equated to a happy village. An ineffectual or venal headman equated to an unhappy village. What mattered in good government was intensely local.

As for all those development projects that the government had tried to introduce a new cash crop or encourage fish farming or, for that matter, get them to use privies, was not just peripheral to the villagers’ interests but hardly even remembered. In other words, the priorities for good government as seen from Bangkok were utterly different from the priorities as seen from the village.

Let’s see now. Has anything like that ever happened in the United States? These insights about Thai villages also stuck with me as I spent the 1970s evaluating American social programs. I suppose if I’m going to talk about the priors that I bring to my research, I’d better respond to the question about my political priors because I had been told for years that I am a hired gun to serve the ideological interests of the far right.

I was actually pretty apolitical during those years. I had been devoted to JFK as an undergraduate, devastated by his assassination. I voted for LBJ unenthusiastically in 1964. Didn’t vote at all in ’68 or ’72. I was in Thailand for both elections. Didn’t bother to get an absentee ballot, but I didn’t like either one of the candidates. In 1972, I do have this memory of when I was at MIT that spring of donating $15 to George McGovern’s campaign during the primaries. I can’t remember why. (Laughter.) I hated Nixon during the Watergate period. To my eternal embarrassment, I voted for Carter in 1976. I was not a doctrinaire conservative. I wasn’t even a conservative at all.

What was building up over those years that had eventually political relevance was that I was getting very knowledgeable about how social programs work and don’t work in the United States of America. Not only was I evaluating programs myself, working for the American Institutes for Research. I was also reading thoroughly into the technical literature,
and the technical literature was incredibly consistent. Social programs simply were unable to show any significant effects, and I’m talking about a very wide range of social programs.

So by 1980, I was extremely critical of social policy but still didn’t consider myself to be politically engaged, let alone a conservative. In fact, I distinctly recall thinking about Bill Buckley. And the fact — I liked Bill Buckley. I admired his wit and so forth. But then I kept thinking that, you know, that poor guy, he has to hang out with conservatives. (Laughter.)

As I entered the 1980s, I had gotten good at my craft and received a certain amount of recognition for that. I was chief scientist at the Washington office of a respected research organization. Looked like I might become president of it if I stuck around. I was making a good salary, and I was miserable. My marriage was disintegrating. Professionally I felt was doing a high-class form of workfare, spending 60 hours a week and pointlessly writing reports. And like a zillion other people in that situation, I was struck by how little correlation there is between the outward signs of success and personal happiness.

Unlike a zillion other people, that realization made me want to write a brilliant social science treatise on the disjunction between happiness and personal success. So what did I do? I quit my job despite the fact that I now had both alimony and child support to come up with, thinking that I could support myself as a consultant to companies like the one I had just left while I wrote my masterpiece. It was a harebrained thing to do, which I blame on the fact that I was falling in love with Catherine and I wasn’t thinking straight. That harebrained thing to do changed my life.

It ended up that I wrote “Losing Ground” before I could work on the happiness book, and it was just as well. The thing I was genuinely an expert on as of 1981, ’82, was the empirical record of social programs, not happiness. Irving Kristol, the godfather, read a piece I wrote about how progress after World War II in lowering poverty had stopped just after the War on Poverty got going and that it was no coincidence. Irving asked me to write an article for The Public Interest, and that in turn eventually led Bill Hammett, who was running the Manhattan Institute, to offer a $30,000 advance against royalties to write a book.

It was in the process of writing “Losing Ground,” after breezing through the early chapters, that the nickels started to drop. Part three of “Losing Ground” developed the ways in which the War on Poverty changed incentives in ways that encouraged poor people and especially poor young people to do things that looked good in the short term but that were disastrous in the long term. Part four asked some basic questions about what we are really trying to accomplish with social programs. And then, I came to the final chapter, where every policy book is supposed to present the author’s solutions. And I couldn’t think of any that were both politically practicable and that I couldn’t shoot down based on my own experience evaluating social programs.

I ended up saying so and instead presented three solutions that couldn’t possibly be enacted, but that would work wonders if they were, thought experiments. The solution regarding racial issues in this country was to repeal or dismantle all laws, regulations, or programs that treat people of different races differently. The solution regarding education
was a combination of universal vouchers and tough love in public schools. The solution regarding welfare was to get rid of the entire system.

By the time I finished explaining why these solutions would actually work, even though they were politically impracticable, I realized I was a libertarian. (Laughs.) I hadn’t known that when I began. I still like “Losing Ground,” but I look at it as an essential preparation for the happiness book. I came away from “Losing Ground” with a confident framework for thinking about issues that previously I had addressed ad hoc. And the attention that “Losing Ground” attracted also got Simon & Schuster to give me an advance for doing the happiness book, along with a book on the Apollo program that Catherine and I were to write together.

Why was I doing a journalistic account of the Apollo program? Because when “Losing Ground” came out, I was unemployed. Catherine and I were married by that time, and we were looking for ways to support ourselves. And the Apollo book looked like it had to be — the potential to be a bestseller. The years from 1985 to ’89 were great. I was working on both books. The research was great fun. I now was bringing home a paycheck. I was the Bradley fellow at the Manhattan Institute. And so we come to the first real spike in my career from my internal point of view, the writing of “In Pursuit.”

I discovered the two great truths that would inform everything I wrote for the next 25 years. Actually, I didn’t discover them. Aristotle discovered them, but, you know. One was Aristotle’s conception of happiness, which Ryan got exactly right, and my conversion of it to a single phrase: lasting and justified satisfaction with life as a whole.

Conceiving of it in that way enabled me to concentrate on identifying the very limited set of domains in which lasting and justified human satisfaction occurs, which led to the characterization of those domains as family, community, vocation, and faith. I identified faith in “Pursuit.” I mentioned it very briefly, but I was kind of embarrassed about it so I didn’t focus on it at all. I subsequently think I underplayed its importance. But, anyway, that framework has been endlessly fruitful for me.

The other great truth was Aristotle’s concept of human enjoyment. The philosopher John Rawls, the godfather of the social justice philosophical left, actually had a lovely summation of Aristotle’s argument. Human beings enjoy the exercise of their realized capacities, and this enjoyment increases the more the capacity is realized. That’s not just a philosophical proposition. For me, it’s profoundly true about how I enjoy myself. If you think about it, I bet it’s profoundly true for a lot of you as well. I have found that truth to have enormous explanatory and diagnostic power when applied to topics as rarefied as the heights of human accomplishments in the arts and sciences and as pedestrian as the enjoyment one gets from fixing a broken toaster.

Writing “In Pursuit” was hard. At the time, I calculated that the chapter on little platoons alone went through 13 substantial revision. But it got done, and it was published in 1988, didn’t get much attention, nothing like “Losing Ground,” but I was happy with the result. And, hey, Milton Friedman and David Brooks both said in print that it was
terrific. How many people can say they have written a book that both Milton Friedman and David Brooks liked? Ever since, I have seen “In Pursuit” as the best thing I’ve ever done. Ryan, I was very happy with your judgment in the introduction. It was not only one of three spikes. It was the tallest.

“Apollo” came out a year later, in 1989. It didn’t sell, but it got terrific reviews. So at the end of 1989, life was good. I was married to my soulmate, a word I do not use lightly, and we had two wonderful little children. My two older children were very close to the younger ones and to Catherine. I’d just finished two books I was proud of. We had moved to a pretty little town called Burkittsville in rural Maryland. Everything was just about perfect.

Then I decided to write a book about IQ. (Laughs.) The great thing about “The Bell Curve” was writing it with Dick Herrnstein. It gave rise to a friendship with a man I still miss to this day. We had a private two-man computer network, me in Burkittsville and Dick in Cambridge, with state-of-the-art modems. This is before the internet that cost $1,000 each in 1990 dollars. They cost that much because they could transfer nine kilobytes of data per second.

The collaboration was close, fun, and entirely without friction. One afternoon, I recall finishing work. I go in the house, I’m telling Catherine about how Dick and I had been messaging back and forth about this and about that, and finally Catherine looked at me and said, “I’m glad that Dick Herrnstein is not an attractive young woman.” (Laughter.) And even though writing the book was easy in a technical sense, I was ready for easy at that point, and the substance of the work was fascinating.

I had been interviewed many times about the experience after “The Bell Curve” came out, so I’m not going to go into it here. You go on YouTube, and you can get hours and hours of me talking about the reaction to “The Bell Curve.” But I want to make sure that everybody understands how differently AEI, personified by Chris DeMuth, handled the situation compared to the way that people in charge of universities are handing similar situations today.

Facing an onslaught multiple times more intimidating than they faced, Chris and AEI’s board of trustees didn’t even break a sweat. They were proud of the book and supported me without the slightest caveat. So did my AEI colleagues — almost all of my AEI colleagues. (Laughs.) And while I’m on the subject, I find a lot of parallels between the adherence to principle of Chris DeMuth and AEI in 1995 and of Arthur Brooks and AEI in 2017.

The next spike as seen from my vantage point was “Human Accomplishment.” The daily log I keep tells me that I gave the proposal for it to Chris DeMuth and my agent, Binky Urban, on the 17th of November, 1997. I mailed the corrected galleys for the books to the publisher on August 5, 2003, almost six years, two years more than “The Bell Curve” took. And probably most of you never heard of it.
“Human Accomplishment” was a historiometric, quantitative study of great achievement in the arts and sciences worldwide from 800 B.C. to 1950. It was ambitious. (Laughter.) But, boy, was it fun. I spent just about three years just assembling the inventories of people and events, and I learned an enormous amount. At Harvard, I had done a rotten job of selecting courses that gave me a liberal education. And doing “Human Accomplishment” made up for it. Histories of music, art, literature, science, math, technology, philosophy, I wallowed in that kind of stuff for almost six years. Catherine likes to say — I think she’s being facetious — that for a few shining moments during work on “Human Accomplishment,” I knew everything. And then I forgot it all. (Laughs.)

By the way, I will also that the last five chapters of “Human Accomplishment,” writing them was even harder than “In Pursuit.” I’ve talked about Catherine glancing at me uneasily. She was worried during the last six months of “Human Accomplishment.”

Between the second and third spikes, I gave voice to the ways that my thinking had changed. And so it’s time for to talk about that.

When I wrote “Losing Ground,” I was still optimistic about the malleability of human beings. The social policy reforms of the 1960s had created disastrous short-term incentives for poor people, but I still thought that getting the incentives right could make a big difference. I grew steadily more pessimistic thereafter. I wasn’t becoming a genetic determinist, rather I was depressed by the evidence that who cares whether it’s nature or nurture, a lot of bad things are hardwired by the time a child reaches adolescence and probably long before that.

For example, the evidence forced me to accept that a young man who has never seen a father get up and get to work every day, even if he doesn’t feel like it, has a higher risk of reaching his late teens unable to hold a job for more than a few weeks. It seems to make little difference at that point whether jobs are available or the incentives are right or whether we give a guy a mentor or send him to job-readiness workshops.

And that led me to focus on the breakdown of the family as the root problem we needed to solve. But that produced another source of pessimism. I came to realize that once certain problems start, they take on a life of their own. The changes in economic incentives may have contributed to the beginning of the problem, but once — well, like take out-of-wedlock births as an example. Once the out-of-wedlock births started to increase, even if it was because of economic incentives, the social stigma eroded and soon went away. And without the stigma changing, the economic incentives wouldn’t revive the old norms. All of these evolving thoughts about social problems are reflected in articles I wrote for The Public Interest and Commentary during the last half of the ’80s.

By the end of the 1980s, I was also coming to grips with the role of IQ. I still believed then, as I believe today, that all human beings not clinically disabled have the capacity to be moral agents and are rightly held responsible for their actions, be they praiseworthy or destructive. But I also came to believe that while everyone has a moral compass, some of those compasses are more susceptible to magnetic storms than others.
By the way, that lovely simile is not mine. It’s Ed Crane’s, my buddy, who was president of the Cato Institute and founder of the Cato Institute. It’s exactly the right way to put it. Moral compasses, yes, more susceptible to magnetic storms, yes.

One of the practical advantages of having a good IQ, not a stratospheric IQ, just an OK one, is that it facilitates thinking ahead, seeing what the consequences are down the road. It’s as simple as saying to oneself, “I’d better not get in a fight with my supervisor because if I lose my job, then,” and thinking through the consequence versus not saying that to yourself. You can see this argument laid out in the concluding chapter of “The Bell Curve.”

The policy message of “The Bell Curve” came down to this. We are making life as difficult as possible for people who have a hard time thinking ahead and dealing with complications. Instead we have built up this intricate structure of ambiguous laws and situational ethics that are congenial to people who are good at dealing with ambiguity and complication. We need to simplify the rules for living a good life as indeed they were once simple. But I also had to accept that it wasn’t going to happen.

By the last half of the 1990s, I was also fully up to speed on the heritability of a wide variety of traits and social behaviors and the documentation of a revolutionary finding that was getting almost no publicity at all: the amazingly small role that the shared environment plays in shaping us. The shared environment is a term of art in social sciences referring to the things that siblings share as they grow up. They are also the same thing that policy analysts have in mind when they devise interventions to try to improve education or employability or reduce crime or encourage marriage. Talking about things like family income, equality of the neighborhoods, equality of the local schools, parenting styles, all that kind of stuff.

Through a method that is very powerful, that I won’t go into here, it is possible to disentangle the roles of heritability, the shared environment, and everything else. Everything else consists of measurement error, and also it consists of environmental influences that siblings do not share. I mean, just think — if you have siblings, think of all the things about growing up that were not the same for you and your sibling. By definition, those are the kinds of idiosyncratic things that neither parents nor public policy can systematically manipulate.

Now, it turns out that genes are far from everything. The environment plays a big role, but not the shared environment. The shared environment typically plays a very small role. Guess what? If you were targeting public policy interventions at a section of a person’s life that only explains about 5 percent of the variance, you’re probably not going to get a real big impact out of that.

This was finally publicized in 1999 through a book that sold well called “The Nurture Assumption” by Judith Harris. But I want to tell you, everything she said in that book has since 1999 been solidified and expanded upon and elaborated, and if anything, she understated the nature of the problem.
Now, by the way, I should say what I’ve just said, all sorts of people would rise up in rage and say, no, no, that’s been debunked, et cetera, et cetera, because — well, here’s Charles Murray’s law of perpetually unsettled social science, and it goes like this: Any social science finding that says human beings do not have limitless possibilities is never going to be accepted as settled. (Laughs.) It’s as if academics believe that Garrison Keilor was presenting test data from Lake Wobegon and that all the kids really were above average and all we have to do is scale up to the rest of the country.

You may have heard the phrase “fake news.” The social sciences have been swamped with fake controversy since the 1960s. What is securely known is wildly different from what the politically correct academics try to claim. But I digress.

The net of all these understandings that evolved during the years from the publication of “Losing Ground” through “In Pursuit,” “The Bell Curve” and “What It Means to Be a Libertarian” was that I became increasingly preoccupied with the role of luck and the ways in which we, the lucky ones — and every person in this room is one of the lucky ones that have been born into a world tailor made for the one particular skill set, high cognitive ability, that this era in human history rewards so lavishly.

I also became preoccupied with how one builds a good society in which the luck of the draw is so important. In my view, it is a society that generated myriad opportunities and has a civil society such that people with all levels of ability, especially those who have gotten the short end of the stick, can make satisfying lives for themselves occupying valued places. That’s the phrase Dick Herrnstein and I used in “The Bell Curve.”

Valued by a spouse, children, neighbors, and the community at large — I don’t think you do that by imitating the advanced democracies of Northern Europe, holding up egalitarianism as the highest goal. I’m not talking about equality of income. I’m not talking about telling people that they’re all equal and should all feel self-esteem. I’m talking about authentically valued places where if you weren’t in that community, there would be people who would miss you. A valued place must be grounded in family, community, vocation, and faith, and it must be done at an extremely local level, right down to the neighborhood.

I made my case for the minimal state as the best way to create those valued places in “What It Means to Be a Libertarian,” which appeared in 1997. But after “Human Accomplishment” was out of the way, I decided to write a book that in effect said since we’re never going to get my libertarian pipe dream, here’s the next best thing. The result was the book “In Our Hands” published in 2006, which advocated replacing the welfare state — not adding on to it, replacing the welfare state with the universal basic income.

The reaction to “In Our Hands” was a new experience for me. For years, I had been coming up with the wrong answers for people on the left. Now I had managed to come with the wrong answer for people on the right. Ed Crane, again, still calls it that whacky book you wrote. Every single one of my economist colleagues here at AEI, including Arthur Brooks, thinks the idea is bonkers. So, you know, I can’t win. It has turned out over the years to be true that there is no audience I can’t alienate. (Laughter.) I’m not sure where
this comes from. I truly have no internal sense of being a contrarian. I thought about it a lot, but the introspection hasn’t helped.

That brings me to the third spike as seen from the interior. You might say in this case, I managed to alienate myself. The book was “By the People,” published in 2015. It began as an attack on the regulatory state for the ways in which it prevents people from going about their lives, throwing up arbitrary, stupid barriers. I had what I consider to be a brilliant idea, the systematic civil disobedience. The regulatory state relies on individual citizens and small businesses caving in, and it could not possibly enforce these thousands of petty regulations in the face of massive noncompliance.

In researching the book, I unwittingly threw myself into a dark place. The legal system was far worse than I had imagined. The levels of complexity, subjectivity, prosecutorial discretion, and the abandonment of mens rea — a guilty mind as the test of criminal liability — was shocking.

Now, I wasn’t unaware that we had problems. As long ago as 1988 and “In Pursuit,” I had reformulated Arthur C. Clark’s famous statement about science — technology sufficiently advanced is indistinguishable from magic. And I said that a law that is sufficiently complex is indistinguishable from lawlessness. But in 1988, I hadn’t known the half of it. We have a terrible problem of de facto lawlessness.

The regulatory state was far worse than I had realized. It is indeed an extralegal state within the state, that in effect passes its own laws, enforces it with its own police, then acts as jury, judge, and appeals court, all completely within the powers given to it by Congress. The level of corruption in Washington was far worse than I thought, qualitatively and quantitatively more appalling than the situation prior to the mid-1970s. Moreover, in the years after Republicans won Congress in 1994, I had to accept that the hypocrisy and corruption among Republicans once they controlled Congress matched the worst that the Democrats had done during their decades of control.

Worst of all, I had to recognize that the underlying dynamics of the corruption were systemic. More principled congressional leaders weren’t going to fix them. I actually think we’ve had some quite principled congressional leaders from time to time, and they have made no progress whatsoever. The corruption is baked into a system in which the government has an endless array of valuable favors to sell to the private sector. That market is vibrant and vital and unstoppable.

Finally, I had to accept that America is in a state that looks very much like a terminal case of institutional sclerosis. By institutional sclerosis, I am referring to economist Mancur Olson’s analysis of what inevitably happens to advanced democracy. Their capacity for effective action grinds to a halt. Of course we’re never going to get a rational tax code or rational health care reform or any other coherent solution to a major policy problem. The clichés about the iron triangle of Congress and regulators and special interests are all true.
Put another way, what the Founders said about faction in the Federalist Papers has turned out to be disastrously true. Not just true. Mancur Olson argued that it is unreparably true. Well, he did come up with one way in which you can get rid of advanced institutional sclerosis, and that is to lose a total war. He used Japan and Germany as examples. It did work for them. It seems a little extreme.

“By the People” had a big effect on my mind-set. As those of you who have read “Coming Apart” are aware, I was already fed up with the new upper class before I began “By the People.” Add in all the additional stuff that I took on board in writing the book, and in 2015, you were looking at a very gloomy guy. And that was before the 2016 election cycle.

It was also before the election in late September 2016 that I told Arthur Brooks that I wanted to retire on my 75th birthday. Lots of reasons went into that decision, but one of them was my awareness that my own bleak view of where the United States is was coming to the surface too much. Arthur and my AEI colleagues are focusing on lighting candles instead of cursing the darkness, and this is as they should do.

Having a geezer like me acting out every stereotype of old age, writing op-eds that are public policy versions of “get these kids the hell off my lawn,” you know — (laughter) — didn’t really seem to be something that AEI needs. Shifting to emeritus status puts some useful distance between me and the ongoing positive work of an organization that is dear to my heart.

This doesn’t mean I’m going to stop cursing the darkness, you know. I’ve made a career out of that, and I’m sticking with it. But at least I will be doing it without getting in the way of my friends who are doing better. An old guy also can’t end any lecture without giving advice to the young ’uns. And so that’s how I’m going to end this one.

My colleagues are facing tough times and tough times that look like they might get worse. By my colleagues I mean not only other AEI scholars, but everyone who comes to problems of public policy with a belief that freedom, opportunity, and enterprise are central to a good society and that the definition of good government is one that enables people to live their lives as they see fit as individuals, families, and communities, as long as they accord the same freedom to everyone else, with government providing a peaceful setting for their endeavors, but otherwise interfering as little as possible.

You who hold these beliefs are working in an era that is tougher than the one I had to work in. The chief source of misbegotten ideas through the course of my career was the left. The misbegotten ideas you are now facing are coming from both left and right, and it’s hard to tell which is the greater threat. I had a cadre of exemplars who I had the privilege of knowing personally, scholars like Jim Wilson, Dick Herrnstein, Bea Himmelfarb, Michael Novak, Harvey Mansfield, Walter Berns, and many others. I had heroes like Milton Friedman, Irving Kristol, and Bill Buckley, who were at very different points ideologically but shared a sensibility and an ethos that I could try to emulate. I had the unbelievable good fortune of having two such heroes at AEI for the last 27 years, Chris DeMuth and Arthur Brooks. Among my contemporaries, I have so many like-minded friends and
colleagues that I dare not try to name them all. I not only never felt alone during my career; I felt cocooned in a community.

My sense is that those of you in your 50s and younger are, or soon will be, much more bereft of that kind of community than I was. Many people that we thought shared our principles and our aspirations for the United States have peeled away. Sometimes I’m sure because of a genuine change of heart, but too often betraying how superficial was their belief in the principles they once espoused. You and your allies I’m afraid are much more isolated than I was. You are, I fear, something akin to a remnant. It is up to you to keep the flame alive.

I have a guiding principle for you, a touchstone to offer. It is Jonah Goldberg’s famous dictum: Character is destiny. Some people tell me that someone else said that first, but I got it from Jonah and I’m sticking with him. Jonah and I were leaving an AEI reception in New York around Christmas of 2016. And someone asked him for his prognosis regarding the incoming administration. Jonah said that he hoped for the best, but that character is destiny so he could not be sanguine.

It struck me how especially true that is for the United States. One of the beliefs that all of the Founders proclaimed emphatically was that the Constitution could not work without a virtuous citizenry. John Adams said it most pungently. We have no government armed with power capable of contending with human passions unbridled by morality and religions. Avarice, ambition, revenge, or gallantry would break the strongest cords of our Constitution as a whale goes through a net. Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.

Now, we are told that character isn’t that important after all, that those of us who still fuss about things like character are wusses, that the country was going down the tubes and now it’s being saved because some people are willing to kick over the traces; winning is not only the most important thing, it is the only thing. One must cut a little slack for their position because in 2016 we did not have the option for voting for an exemplar of good character. I would be giving the same advice if the election had gone the other way because in either case it would be really important to remind everyone that the United States — character is destiny for the United States, not just in its elected leaders, but in we, the people.

If you give up on that, it would be worse than a sin. It will be an error in public policy analysis. (Laughs.) A free society cannot exist without self-government. That is the government of the self. It is intrinsic to freedom. Government of the self is essential to good character. If you give up on the indispensability of character, give up on instilling it in small children, give up on expounding upon it in our universities, give up in demanding it in the candidates we vote for, you abandon the mainspring of American democracy. Don’t do it.

Thank you for indulging me in this. It has been a pleasure, all of it. Thank you. (Applause.) Thank you.
Well, we have Q&A. And it’s a free for all. You want to ask — anything you want to ask. Tim Carney.

Q: Thank you. Thank you for the excellent speech and all the work you’ve done. And I didn’t realize how many more books I had to read until now. I literally just ordered one on Amazon.

Is there a conflict between your argument that shared environment is not that meaningful and your assertion that community on the local level is incredibly important? And if not, how do they go together?

DR. MURRAY: When you talk about the limited effects of the shared environment, you’re in effect talking about how much different can we make kids by the things that parents know how to do, extra tutors, being loving parents, following all the right rules? How much can the government do? And the answer to that question is — you know, you can pass down money to your kids so you can pass down a lifestyle. But you can’t make your kids a lot different in their personality or their abilities or in their social behavior than they would have been anyway. And that’s a very hard pill to swallow for parents.

The importance of community is not that it is the best way to solve these social problems, although I would say that can — certainly I can make that argument still even given what I’ve said about shared environment. The main thing that’s where the sources of satisfaction come from. So it’s in your day-to-day life as an adult and your long-term life as an adult that if you are embedded in a community, if you know that if you drop dead tomorrow, there are going to be people who really miss you. You will have left a hole that needs to be filled. That’s a source of satisfaction. So that’s I’d say the distinction. Yes.

Q: Hi. I’m Martin Wuster. I first had a book signed by you in 1985. I don’t know if I get a prize for this. (Laughs.) I also not only read “Human Accomplishment,” I reviewed it. I don’t know if I get a prize for that. My question is very simple: What advice do you have for libertarians, or is everything hopeless?

DR. MURRAY: You know, I literally meant the reference to “Remnant” because if you go back — this will show how much of a philistine I am in libertarian literature. It’s Nock, right? The remnant comes from Nock?

Ed Crane, you can tell me whether the remnant, was that Nock?

ED CRANE: (Off mic.) Yeah, that was Nock. Jay Nock.

DR. MURRAY: It was? OK. When he was writing, when you talk of the first half of the 20th century, libertarian ideas were virtually dead. There was just very little discussion of them at all. We lived through a renaissance in the 1950s, ’60s, ’70s, and ’80s that was quite extraordinary. The Remnant did keep alive those ideas during those fallow decades. And sooner or later, the wheel is going to come around.
Here’s my view. In the first place, I didn’t emphasize this during the speech. I am strategically optimistic, which is to say in “By the People” I talk about that 200 years from now, I find it impossible to believe that with all of the new technology, all of the increased wealth, people will still be saying, gee, the best way to run a government is to have thousands of laws minutely controlling the lives of other people. I just can’t believe that’s going to happen.

So, strategically, I’m optimistic, and that gets back to what libertarians should say to themselves, are we right? Are we right that a human life requires freedom and the chance to fulfill yourself, a cliché, but that’s what I’m getting at, to have a sense of human worth and dignity? Is that what it’s all about, or is it good enough if we just have enough income for everybody?

And if the answer is no, a human life consists of the kinds of things I’ve talked about, if that’s really true, then stick with it because we’re not talking about expediency. We’re talking about the way the world really works. I believe that’s the way the world really works. And I’m not going to budge on that, and there’s no reason for us to.

The back of the room, over that side, then I’ll move over here.

Q: I’d like to ask about what some would consider your greatest outrage as a scholar, and that is your ranking of Beethoven ahead of Bach. (Laughter.) And, in particular, given the perspective I suppose of 15 years, how do you think your rankings in “Human Accomplishment” and your methods hold up, and would you think you’d come out differently today if you were to launch that project again?

DR. MURRAY: You mean the “Human Accomplishment”?

Q: I’m sorry, “Human Accomplishment,” yes.

DR. MURRAY: Well, just quickly, the historiometric methods I was using weren’t made up by me. There was a large literature using them, and it’s been a very successful literature that has passed lots of tests of validity and reliability. So, yeah. I think I used a method that was sound when I used it, and I still consider it sound today.

I can’t resist telling those of you who haven’t heard it before, a story about Beethoven and Bach and the rankings. I had rankings based on how much space is expended in histories of music, for example, on various composers. And you get — you know, I had 17 or 18 different large histories of music and encyclopedias of composers and so forth that you used to reach that. And when I say reliable, those of you in the crowd who are social scientists, we’re talking about alpha reliability coefficients in the 0.9 rank, really reliable.

Anyway, after all of those sources, there was a dead tie between Mozart and Beethoven and Bach was third and Wagner was fourth, which I imagine surprises a lot of
people. What’s Wagner doing up there? And I’m sort of with Mark Twain, you know, Wagner is better than he sounds.

But we have a friend, Mike Kaufman, who is a professional violist, and so when I was describing to him the methodology and the list and so forth and asked him what he — how I thought it came out, his answer was, “Well, Beethoven and Mozart, one and two, I don’t know which is which. Who is third? Bach or Wagner?” So that was interesting to me because within the musical world, there is an ordering that I think is such that I can pull some people out of the wings and defend Beethoven over Bach in that regard. Yes.

Q: So you mentioned the John Adams quote about the dependency of free government on self government. I think about the free market, I think, well, greed and vanity in a free market are harnessed for the public interest. They don’t make a free market more fragile in a truly free market. So wouldn’t it be true that in the sense that if we are depending, given the fallen state of man, on a virtuous citizenry that freedom and limited government is too fragile, don’t we need a system in which vanity and greed and the vices and the sins are actually harnessable for public interest?

DR. MURRAY: I think that — I’ll tell you something else I came away from when I was doing “By the People.” All the things you just said were recognized by the Founders. And translating it in the kind of language that I used tonight, when the Founders were talking about faction, what they said is, this is human nature, you know. You give people access to the levers of power, and they will go wild with them. How do you deal with that? In effect, you don’t let the government have anything to sell.

And I’m stunned to realize how long for the national government that remained true. Corruption at the local and state levels was huge in the end of the 19th century. Corruption — federal corruption wasn’t — only that much there could be because except for a few defense contracts and some other things, the federal government wasn’t selling anything. And so it wasn’t that you had to rely on ethics and on a virtuous citizenry and so forth in term of keeping the government functioning well. You simply had to radically restrict what the government was permitted to do.

And another thing came out of “By the People” for that research. I had never realized the extent to which in the 1937 to ’41 era of Supreme Court decisions it was not a slippery slope. We didn’t sort of incrementally change the Constitution. We simply changed the restraints on what the government could do. And so you had the ineluctable result. I would say that the Founders had created a system which could deal with human nature as it really is. It dealt with it very effectively, and then we screwed it up in the 1930s. Yes.

Q: So I was also struck by — (off mic). Three quick questions. Why when you were writing the five last chapters, why was your wife afraid? Can you speak Thai fluently?

DR. MURRAY: I used to. Well, fluently no, but I could — I was pretty good and I’ve — just a little observation here. If you ask me to speak Thai now, I could barely come out with anything. When I land from the plane in Bangkok and get into a cab, all at once I
hear stuff coming out of my mouth and I’m saying to myself, “Does that word think what I think it means?” Because they just come out — the way in which context brings that back is interesting.

Well, with “Human Accomplishment,” I had been basically doing the easy parts for the first 15 chapters where I was describing trends and so — and, at some point I had to pull this all together and said this is the answer to the question you started out with, why are certain eras characterized by these wonderful levels of accomplishment and others are fallow. Why do some cultures produce and others don’t? Answering that question is really hard.

And so Catherine knows, I didn’t know what to say at that point, you know. I couldn’t figure it out. And over five or six months, seven months maybe, I figured out answers that I’m happy with.

And why was she concerned? Well, let’s see now. For the only time in my life, I was wearing contact lenses along with my regular glasses because my eyes had been going worse. I was — she could probably explain to you some of the other ticks that I had at that point, but I was obviously, one very stressed out guy. I mean, I wasn’t mean to you or anything like that, was I? No. I was just — I was intellectually unsure that I could do it. I thought I might have to publish that book without those chapters.

Yes. No, you. Sorry. Yeah. You’re right. That’s it. I’m sorry. The mic is coming.

Q: So one of the things I think you mentioned was it can be isolating now sometimes, and so I was wondering what recommendations you have for maybe getting a mentor in general or having kind of a group that kind of will go forward in the future, kind of like what you had more in the past, as you were saying.

DR. MURRAY: You mean, if you were a person who was at this point a libertarian in this current environment?

Q: Yeah. Or some people who think like you and — exactly.

DR. MURRAY: Well, you still have a few clusters of people doing this work. And if yourself are a social scientist, I would try to go to work for a place like AEI or Cato or several other free market think tanks that still exist out there. I think that they will continue to exist. They will not be as chic as they were in the 1980s when limited government was all the rage and classical liberal ideas were very sexy. But they will persist, a lot of them, and they can provide the same kind of home, I hope, that I’ve had here at AEI. They’re just going to be harder to find.

Mr. Wehner. Well, what a murderous row we have sitting over there. Ramesh Ponnuru, Pete Wehner, Yuval Levin, and Jonah Goldberg, all sitting side by side. Wow.
Q: Just a personal note, Charles. It was actually 1985 — the first time I heard you was an Ethics & Public Policy Center event, and you were speaking on “Losing Ground.” And I had just graduated from college. And I heard you, and I was struck not just by the arguments you were making, but the heart that it came from. And I’ve told a lot of people this over the years of how humane and decent you were. And I thought, you know, if this guy is representing conservatism, that’s something that I felt like that was a movement I could be part of. And I was right to have thought that.

And as to my question, you said early on in your remarks that when you wrote “Losing Ground,” of that cluster of things that were central to people’s lives and meaning, you mentioned faith, and I think you said I think I underplayed how important faith was then. And I’m curious as to what — how you view faith now, what you thought you missed then that you see now, and how you view it now from any perspective, either as a social scientist or just as a person?

DR. MURRAY: Let’s see now, how do I answer that in 35 seconds. It’s not — I’ve been an agnostic for a long time, but I’ve always been an agonistic who thought that atheism is one of the silliest of all positions, that the hubris associated with saying, we’re smart enough that we can figure this stuff out, that’s hubris of a huge source. So I was an agonistic, and I was sympathetic to religion.

A variety of things happened. At a personal level, Catherine became a quite committed Quaker. I don’t mean a social activist Quaker; I mean a religious Quaker. And in the course of that, both watching her and watching the people that she has been around, I have had an increasing sense of these people get something I don’t get.

There was Michael Novak saying to me when I began work on “Human Accomplishment,” he said, I think you find eventually that Christianity played a very central role in Western civilization and accomplishment in the arts and sciences. And, at that time, I thought to myself, nah, I think that the Greeks pretty much provided the foundation and would have happened that way. And as I — as a social scientist, as I kept trying to explain those last chapters I was talking about, the thing, one of the things that really made them easier to explain was the role of Christianity in all that.

So I had both — in a variety of ways, I had signals coming to me which were saying, look, you’ve got to pay more attention to this stuff. This is important, and that’s the way I continue to feel, while still struggling with all the questions that everybody struggles with as they try to formulate what they think about all this.

Yes, sir.

Q: Thank you so much, Dr. Murray. My question is: Do you think there’s a tension at all between maybe some of your unsettling insights that you discovered about cognitive ability and conservative optimism about the power of choice in education and health care reform?
DR. MURRAY: Yeah. There’s a big — there’s a big tension there. And I would argue it on two levels.

Let’s take something like school choice. I have written out my logic, and it’s still a logic I believe: that school choice will work fine, including with poor parents and parents who don’t have that high an IQ. Because, guess what? Schools will get reputations. And it’s not that you have to have everybody independently going out and evaluating all the schools in the neighborhood. If you have a market for schools, you will have schools that people don’t have to be very smart to realize that’s where they should send their kids. And I think the same thing is true of health care choice.

I’ll tell you the real tension that I have between the work I’ve done on IQ and some libertarians. There are some libertarians who really don’t want to come to grips with the fact that luck does play a big role. And particularly luck in the form of meeting the right person at some time, serendipity, that’s not what I’m talking — I’m talking about the luck of you come into the world and you have an IQ of 90 instead of an IQ of 130. And it’s not your fault — there’s nothing you can do about it. That kind of luck.

And I am happy to say there are lots of other libertarians who want to have a society in which the kid who is born with that kind of bad luck thrown his way will have a way to live a satisfying human life, and there are lots of ways he can do it.

One of the biggest misconceptions about high IQ is that there’s much of a correlation between IQ and happiness, you know. Unfortunately, there are too many people on the right, both conservatives and libertarians, who are I think unwilling to realize that they have tough questions to answer about how you deal with people who for reasons through no fault of their own have handicaps that cannot be compensated for by any social program, by any remedial education or anything else. Those are tough questions.

And the thing I want to say to libertarians that I have said in my writing ever since “In Pursuit” is that you’ve got to put your money where your mouth is. If you’re going to say that the private sector can deal with these problems better than the public sector can, which I believe, in your own life, you’d better make good at that. You’d better be engaged in that. Because if you can say, well, other people can do that, you’re being a free rider. And being a libertarian above all else — well, libertarians in general hate free riders, and not being a free rider as a libertarian is to be deeply engaged in the life of the people around you, including those who are less fortunate.

Somebody’s going to tell me some time that we have time for one more question, right? I mean, I’m OK, but —

Q: So recently there’s been a replication crisis in social psychology, but what’s kind of interesting is that a lot of the things that don’t replicate don’t really matter, like it doesn’t matter if you can walk down the street and you’ve read some textbook that says old people walk slower and so you’re walking slower, that doesn’t matter. But a lot of the social policy works that you reference also don’t seem to replicate, and yet we don’t have
this sociological phenomena of a replication crisis in social policy. Why do you think that is? Do you think that these ideas matter?

    DR. MURRAY: Give me an example of something I’ve relied upon that has not been replicated.

    Q: No. Not you. Everyone but you. And you actually — (laughter) — and you actually bring up cases which, you know, nowadays we’d be a bit more hostile. But you bring up the case of one study where, well, when we looked at the babies with low birth weight, then Head Start did really well, and, you know, if they are between, you know, six pounds and 6.5 pounds, then it worked really well. But they didn’t know that at the beginning of the study. It looks like they just, you know, cut the data up to do that. And that’s kind of one of these signatures of works that don’t replicate.

    But there’s no perception of social crisis having these credibility problems that you see in social psychology. And so I just thought that your comment on work that does replicate like some of the IQ/income/wealth linkages where you — you know, you can take the study again today and you’ll get the answers you did 20 years ago, more or less. And things like Head Start, where the effects seem to get smaller and smaller every 10 years. I just want to hear your comment on this kind of phenomena. Thank you.

    DR. MURRAY: Well, that brings up the next book I’m working on. By the way, thank you for reading so carefully. The thing that you just mentioned was published at not a very prominent place, and you read I think even the footnotes. We are going to see a revolution in the social sciences over the next 10, 15, 20 years because all of these social science experiments and a whole bunch of other stuff, this is really flaky data, you know, and the kinds of things that don’t replicate.

    Those are going to become so silly in the eyes of the world because we are making enormous advances, we, meaning the neuroscientists and the geneticists, that we are going to have all sorts of leverage — “we” meaning social scientists are going to have all sorts of leverage in understanding how the world works. And this is not going to lead to genetic determinism. It’s not going to lead to anything bad.

    It is simply going to be that, finally, the social sciences will be grounded in the same kinds of standards of rigor and causation and the rest of it that the harder sciences have enjoyed for the last couple centuries. And in the course of this, an awful lot of the people that make their living in the social science faculties of the nation’s universities are either going to have to retool or they’re just going to be irrelevant to a lot of the most important work that’s going on.

    If I were a young social scientist at this point, I would be really excited. This century is going to give the chance for social scientists to produce their Ampere and Faradays just like the hard sciences could produce them back in the beginning of the 19th century. It’s a fascinating time to be alive, but most of the social sciences faculties in today’s universities are scared stiff of what’s coming down the pike.
MS. BOWMAN: Thank you for coming today. Please join us for birthday cake. And once again thank Charles for a really nice — (inaudible).

DR. MURRAY: Thank you. (Applause.)

(END)