Krista Tippett

A public-radio interviewer, theological reader, and builder of institutions for conversation

Reporting, theology, family, and the work of building a public conversation

Krista Tippett is an American broadcaster and writer who created Speaking of Faith, the public-radio program later renamed On Being. She interviews scientists, theologians, poets, and people working in civic life, asking how their understanding of the world has developed through living and working in it. The national weekly program began in 2003 within Minnesota Public Radio and American Public Media. A decade later, she and her producers established independent nonprofit production in Minneapolis. Her occupation has included researching, interviewing, editing, managing people, and finding money for an institution whose public voice is unusually intimate.[1]

That intimacy took time to become a profession. Tippett had been a correspondent and a diplomatic aide before theological study changed the questions she wanted to pursue. Parenting and an uncertain interval after graduate school accompanied the change. She then had to make a speculative radio proposal audible to decision-makers and funders, and to turn the resulting conversations into a dependable production. Later, the very institution that gave the work room to grow acquired a scale she wanted to relinquish. The career's central changes concern both what listening can discover and what it takes to keep making it public.

[External image / 外部圖片] Krista Tippett at the Brookings Institution
Krista Tippett at the Brookings Institution, 9 October 2012. Ghz89med · CC BY-SA 4.0 · Image source

Oklahoma and the expectations of an intelligent child

Tippett grew up in Shawnee, Oklahoma, in a Southern Baptist family. Her grandfather was a preacher whose stern theology of sin and punishment coexisted with affection, humor, and an adventurous intelligence. He had little formal schooling, and she later recognized how much his circumstances had denied that intelligence room to develop. The person she loved was larger than the doctrine he taught. This is an early instance of a distinction that would matter to her interviews: understanding someone's ideas also involves encountering the life that carries them.[2]

Her parents emphasized accomplishment, accumulation, and success. As a young woman she expected the consequential problems of the world, and their solutions, to be political.

Education and public achievement offered an intelligible route out of her childhood world. Returning to theology later would challenge the sufficiency of that route without making politics irrelevant. Love, death, obligation, and meaning were experiences that the disciplines organizing public life could not entirely account for.[3]

Drama and debate gave her another horizon before she knew where it might lead. At a Northwestern University summer debate camp before her senior year, she met a girl who wanted to go to Brown. Tippett had not heard of the university. She applied and was admitted, while the friend was not; she became the student from her school who went there. The encounter and application matter as actual steps. An opportunity first imagined by another young person became something she could try to enter.[4]

Brown brought culture shock, adaptation, and historical training. She completed a history degree in 1983 and received a Fulbright to the University of Bonn in West Germany. Her first adult education therefore took her into the study of change over time and then into a divided society. It did not lead directly from a religious childhood to a mature language of spirituality. University, scholarship, and political geography intervened.[5]

Working near power and wanting more time to understand

In Germany, Tippett became a freelance correspondent for publications and broadcasters including The New York Times, Newsweek, the BBC, International Herald Tribune, and Die Zeit. She subsequently became special political assistant and chief Berlin aide to the United States ambassador to West Germany. Reporting and diplomatic work placed her in different relations to power: one required observation and publication, the other work inside an institution exercising it. She left Berlin in 1988 and lived for periods in Spain, England, and Scotland before graduate theology.[6]

She had known both sides of the divided city, obtaining different visas as a journalist, the partner of a British journalist living in East Berlin, and later through State Department work. In retrospect, the disappearance of the East Berlin she had known became a resource for thinking about hope. A world that appeared permanent could change beyond the imaginations of the people inhabiting it. The lesson concerned the limitations of historical expectation, without promising that every crisis would resolve well.[7]

She continued to value print journalism. What frustrated her was being required to leave a subject just as she was beginning to understand it. The sustained conversation would eventually offer another use of time, carrying a guest beyond the point at which a shorter news encounter might end. This was a change in editorial practice rather than a repudiation of the earlier profession. Reporting remained one of the foundations on which the later work depended.[8]

Nor was the patient broadcast voice simply her natural temperament made audible. She described herself as intense and formerly impatient. She also recalled having to fight for the program in its early years. Giving constructive and humane activity serious public

attention was an editorial commitment requiring persistence; it did not exempt her from selecting, arguing, or persuading. The space a listener would hear had first to be defended in a less spacious professional world.[9]

Theology entered through books and family

The turn toward theology passed through England and marriage. Her husband had studied the subject and owned a library that opened a world different from the church of her childhood. Both went to Yale Divinity School. Tippett soon knew she did not want ordination. She became pregnant while studying and completed a Master of Divinity in 1994. Intellectual change, marriage, and parenthood overlapped, rather than waiting for a secure new professional arrangement.[10]

The books and teachers did different work. In England, The Cloud of Unknowing introduced a contemplative relation to what could not be fully explained. At Yale, New Testament scholar Leander Keck helped make biblical interpretation an intellectually complex practice. Bonhoeffer, Niebuhr, and Kierkegaard connected Christian thought to historical responsibility, ambiguity, and difficult choices. Theology could engage the judgment of someone who had worked as a journalist; it did not have to reproduce an inherited demand for doctrinal certainty.[11]

The degree did not supply an immediate job for these new questions. Tippett remembered the years between graduation and the radio proposal as a less direct passage, supported in part by capacities developed through earlier journalistic and international work. She had acquired an intellectual vocabulary before acquiring a sustainable occupation in which to use it. That interval is important to the later institution: a good question was not already a program, and a theological reader was not already a public-radio host.[12]

She continued to identify as Christian while disputing the idea that a journalist becomes impartial only by having no commitments. Political reporters vote and business reporters have financial lives; a religiously formed journalist also has commitments to recognize and examine. Other traditions enlarged her own rooting without becoming interchangeable with it. She named motherhood as a vocation as important as paid work, locating professional inquiry within another set of continuing obligations.[13]

Her family did not retain its original form. In a 2008 interview she spoke about the pain of divorce and the friendship and active co-parenting she and her former husband had developed. The program showed her at Saint John’s Abbey with her children, Aly and Sebastian, wanting them to encounter the church’s sense of mystery. Passing on religion could mean providing an experience rather than requiring the child to repeat a conclusion. Parenting continued through a changed marriage, and spiritual life had to include circumstances that did not conform to an earlier expectation.[14]

Her public account of clinical depression likewise refused an easy consoling story. In a reflection first published in 2006, she distinguished its incapacitating absence of feeling

from ordinary sadness. Any insight came afterward, when vitality had returned enough for interpretation. Psalms and Rilke eventually gave her language for experiences that familiar expressions of hope had not reached. The account did not prescribe spiritual discovery to someone still inside illness. It placed a limit on what even generous words could offer at a particular moment.[15]

Making a theological question into an audible proposal

Work with the ecumenical institute associated with Saint John's Abbey and University at Collegeville, Minnesota, provided a practical bridge. Tippett recalled theologians from very different traditions answering a theological question by telling the stories of their lives across a five-day consultation. Their doctrines became more comprehensible through biography without losing intellectual seriousness. She began to imagine how radio could make something of that encounter available beyond the room.[16, 17]

A broadcast could not reproduce five days. The opening question she developed, about a guest's childhood religious or spiritual background, condensed the entrance into the relation between experience and conviction. It could give an Armenian Orthodox thinker, a Protestant theologian, or a physicist without religious belief a way to begin. Biography was a working method for approaching difference, not simply an intimate prelude before the serious subject arrived.[18]

BBC Radio 4 had shown her a society thinking aloud through radio. In the United States, however, she struggled to persuade public-radio decision-makers that religious voices could enter that space without making the result proselytism. Pilots turned the proposed category into something people could hear and judge. Fundraising was another part of making it possible, and remained her responsibility after the program became successful. She had never felt its survival sufficiently guaranteed to give that work away.[19]

The institutional experiment became occasional broadcasts in 2000 and a national weekly program in 2003. Collegeville supplied a setting for intellectual encounter; public radio supplied the production and distribution through which it could recur. The format developed through an interval of testing and persuasion. Tippett's earlier reporting, new theological questions, and biographical opening technique had to become a form an institution would repeatedly produce.[20]

On September 11, 2001, she was in Washington for a meeting with a potential funder that was cancelled. Religion's sudden prominence in public affairs gave new urgency to an interest the project had already identified. Pew support and public-radio institutions helped the work find a national place. The later National Humanities Medal, awarded for 2013, recognized the resulting invitation to difficult questions across religious and nonreligious commitments. Neither catastrophe nor recognition alone explains the profession: the proposal and its practical work preceded the first, and continued beyond the second.[21]

An early program, January 2003's The Soul in Depression, shows how her lived concerns

could become a produced encounter without determining its answer. Separate conversations with Andrew Solomon, Anita Barrows, and Parker Palmer addressed physiology, medication, identity, and spiritual interpretation. Tippett disclosed her own experience. Solomon resisted the idea that suffering necessarily has a purpose, and did not have to profess religion to take part. The theological question could remain open in the presence of a secular writer's account.[22]

That hour also acquired a later life. Its 2021 reissue added an introduction addressed to a changed moment. Tippett could return to a difficult experience through old audio without pretending the encounter had just taken place. The archive would become one of the institution's means of working across time: a conversation could outlive the urgency that originally occasioned it and be given another setting in which to be heard.[23]

The conversation and the labor around it

Tippett's preparation is extensive. She described immersing herself in a guest's work as intellectual hospitality: the guest should not first have to prove that a position has been understood. Research offers routes into the person's thinking, while the response in the room determines which route to follow. She has also become more attentive to the effects of her own presence and to the risk of speaking too much. Listening involves prepared knowledge and the possibility that an actual answer will upset its arrangement.[24]

Preparation extends to the culture around prospective guests. It also shares the working day with administration, personnel management, and raising money. In a 2016 account, she described brief morning meditation and yoga, alongside attention to children, friends, and colleagues. Six to ten minutes of meditation was a modest practice she could sustain, not evidence of a life made continuously contemplative by interviewing thoughtful people. The work could nourish her while its organization still required decisions about other people's labor.[25]

The broadcast's apparent spaciousness was tightly produced. The 2008 Eckhart Tolle interview lasted ninety minutes, and more than half was cut for the hour-long program. The complete exchange was downloadable. Mitch Hanley was senior producer; Colleen Scheck, Nancy Rosenbaum, and Marc Sanchez were producers; Kate Moos managed production; Trent Gilliss and Andrew Dayton handled the online work. Selection, timing, music, technical production, and management made the encounter audible. The patient interviewer was one part of a team and a schedule.[26]

The interview with Paul Collins and Jennifer Elder about their autistic son was especially difficult to edit because of the range of material. Stories about making contact with him and anecdotes about well-known personalities were omitted from the broadcast. The website and podcast supplied the two-hour uninterrupted conversation, while linked writing included Collins's account of the decision to use antidepressants. Publishing more than one form did not remove editorial authority. It let a listener encounter some of what the

hour’s structure had left outside.[27]

The website had become a substantial public form early. APM’s 2008 Webby announcement credited Gilliss with its creation and design, alongside the production staff. Unedited interviews, video, photography, and a staff blog accompanied a program then carried on more than two hundred stations. The broadcast gave an encounter a shape within a scheduled hour; digital publication let listeners hear more, examine materials, or follow a connection. The recognizable host’s voice occupied an institution whose other workers also selected and explained.[28]

Guests who change or refuse the frame

The 2015 Mary Oliver conversation demonstrates the work of preparation at close range. Tippett went to Florida to meet the private poet, moving between childhood, walking, notebooks, poverty, and the labor of poems. Reading a passage back to Oliver gave the writer an unexpected encounter with her own formulation. Oliver also adjusted the host’s language rather than accepting every spiritual term she offered. The interview could make an admired poet less abstract because it addressed how noticing and writing had actually occupied a life, while leaving the poet authority over its description.[29]

John O’Donohue’s conversation remained public after his death. Recorded before January 2008 and first broadcast afterward, it connected beauty to Irish landscape, language, relationships, and music. Performers and composers including Zoë Keating and Declan Masterson shaped the released hour’s transitions. Later introductions and reissues gave the same voice new occasions of listening. The dead guest’s continuing presence depended on the recorded thinking and on living editors deciding how to place it.[30]

Ta-Nehisi Coates tested a different expectation. At the 2017 Chicago Humanities Festival conversation, Tippett offered an attentive literary frame, while Coates resisted the demand that a journalist provide optimism. An audience question from a teacher sharpened the difference: understanding and tools for confronting what happens were valuable without assurance that history would end well. A guest could refuse the emotional destination associated with On Being, and the conversation could retain that refusal.[31]

This is a consequential limit for a practice organized partly around constructive possibilities. Hope cannot become an admission requirement for someone describing racist violence and its persistence. Tippett’s hospitality was useful here because it gave disagreement room to remain audible. The host’s preferred vocabulary was one participant in the encounter, not its final authority.

The 2020 investigation of Jean Vanier exposed a more serious problem. An independent inquiry documented the L’Arche founder’s sexual manipulation and abuse of women. Tippett had interviewed him in 2007 and long valued the communities associated with him. In her public response she condemned the abuse, acknowledged her disorientation, and distinguished the founder’s conduct from the work and dignity of community

members.[32, 33]

The case concerns a failure that generous listening alone cannot repair. An articulate account of care, and an audience's experience of moral recognition, do not establish a person's conduct in less visible relationships. The correction belongs beside the earlier admiration. The authority of an exemplary conversation could not stand in for verification of character. Coates could resist a frame within the recording. Vanier's hidden conduct required a different institution and form of inquiry to become public.

Finding an authorial voice in the accumulated encounters

Print changed the relation among conversations that had happened separately. Speaking of Faith appeared in 2007, Einstein's God in 2010, and Becoming Wise in 2016. The middle book brought encounters with scientists and physicians into an argument about questions shared by scientific and spiritual inquiry. Paul Davies, Freeman Dyson, and others complicated a simple contest between scientific knowledge and religious assertion; Einstein's language about God could not automatically be treated as endorsement of a creed. Tippett's connecting voice became more continuous than it was within a single interview.[34, 35]

That voice was difficult to find in Becoming Wise. She described false starts and repeated drafts after years spent drawing out other people. A friend's response to her writing about her father's adoption and the family's reluctance to discuss it helped her recognize the importance unspoken questions had acquired for her. The recognition came through writing and another reader. An interviewer became more visible as a formed person while learning how to organize the archive into a book.[36]

Her spiritual practice likewise continued to change. At Naropa in 2018, she discussed Pema Chödrön, meditation, and prayer's renewed place in her mornings. Christian communion-of-saints language and Buddhist lineages offered different ways to think about teachers accompanying a life, while Benedictine instruction informed listening. Openness did not make these histories interchangeable. It allowed a practice rooted in Christianity to be altered by contact with particular writers, teachers, and institutions.[37]

An independent institution with other voices

The 2010 change from Speaking of Faith to On Being gave a wider editorial range a more legible name. Tippett distinguished speaking from faith from simply reporting about religion. The work already reached science, creativity, ethical conduct, and experiences that guests did not describe as religious. Renaming loosened expectations about whom she could interview without erasing the theological education that helped her ask the questions.[38]

In July 2013, production moved into her own organization while APM continued

distribution. By September 2014, the enterprise occupied a four-thousand-square-foot Minneapolis studio and gathering space and reached 337 stations. Foundations supplied its principal support, including Henry Luce and Kalliopeia; a $600,000 Ford Foundation grant was reported that year. Tippett sought several funders so that one relationship would not determine survival. Gilliss, as executive editor and chief content officer, helped translate the expanded ambition into editorial and digital work. Independence moved initiative into a new organization while retaining extensive dependencies.[39]

Distribution changed without absorbing that production identity. PRX took over from APM in July 2016, with station marketing and digital collaboration, when more than four hundred stations carried the program. In July 2020, distribution moved to WNYC Studios; the contemporary announcement counted 347 stations. Carriage figures describe particular moments, not a stable audience total. The same independent producers and host could continue working while other organizations handled access, promotion, and delivery.[40, 41]

The institution also gave other people a base for work. Poetry Unbound, launched in 2020, supplied Pádraig Ó Tuama with a distinct hosting practice. His Corrymeela reconciliation experience joined attention to a poem to attention to language's capacity to change conflict. The repeated form reads a poem, reflects, then reads it again. In the production, Gautam Srikishan composed from images, moods, and constraints, while Kayla Edwards worked on pacing and structure. Digital presentation and audience correspondence added further labor, and a book extended the project. Tippett's institution offered production capacity for a distinct voice and form.[42, 43]

Civic work altered the purpose of the conversation in another direction. Fetzer partnered in the Better Conversations Guide and Grounding Virtues. In 2019, executive director Lucas Johnson described responding to local invitations and accompanying organizations using those resources. In Barrington, an affluent Chicago suburb, organizers built ten monthly conversations about inclusion and belonging, addressing questions that polite civic life could leave untouched. Here the institution supplied support and reusable materials, while local partners adapted the encounter to their own setting.[44]

The 2023–24 Social Healing Fellowship instead sustained people already working in organizing, mediation, health care, public memory, and religious leadership. Its year-long design offered reflection, restoration, and connections without requiring a new project. Trusted advisors nominated fellows rather than a public application selecting them. That choice supported existing work while making access dependent on a network's judgment. It was a particular institutional experiment, not a universal promise that every person doing such work could enter.[45]

The archive itself acquired another use through the Lab for the Art of Living. Foundations for Being Alive Now organizes short offerings around constructive stories, living with questions, a long view, and calling and wholeness. Listening becomes part of a repeated exercise rather than only selecting another interview. Calling includes friendship, family, neighbors, and citizenship as well as paid work. The accumulated material could now

support a program without requiring another new guest each week.[46]

The cost of keeping a public voice available

Fundraising never ceased to be part of Tippett's occupation. In April 2023, the project made its first direct appeal for patronage, describing a team of more than twenty maintaining two podcasts while developing courses, gatherings, and other ways to use the conversations. She promised that On Being and Poetry Unbound would stay freely available. Paying was offered as a way to sustain a resource others could use without paying at the point of access.[47]

The funding policy identifies individual donations, grants, and podcast underwriting as revenue sources, and states that journalistic editorial decisions are insulated from donor direction. This is the institution's stated arrangement. Its practical setting is a continuing dependence on people and organizations willing to support the work, rather than a financial independence automatically created by nonprofit status.[48]

For the fiscal year ending June 30, 2023, the project reported about $1.715 million in revenue, $5.444 million in expenses, and $6.438 million in net assets. Its filing counted twenty-six employees during calendar 2022. The record places current receipts beside expenditure and accumulated resources: that year's donations alone cannot describe what the organization had available to support its activity. Net assets are not necessarily unrestricted cash. The vocation had become a staffed nonprofit with substantial recurring commitments.[49]

Those commitments gave her questions a durable public form, but also gave her a working life far larger than interviewing. Staff, a place, distribution relationships, fundraising, and a program clock had to be maintained together. The later reduction of the institution's scale was therefore a change in how she could spend her attention, with consequences for colleagues and listeners as well as for her own freedom.

Relinquishing the clock and the studio

The last weekly radio program aired on June 23, 2022. Seasonal podcasting offered relief from an unrelenting deadline and the roughly fifty-one minutes available within the public-radio clock. It could give different conversations and work beyond the show more time. It also removed a familiar means of access for rural and incarcerated listeners dependent on broadcasting rather than an internet connection or podcast app. At the time, WNYC carriage reached 389 stations. Professional spaciousness for the producer and accessibility for the listener did not improve in the same direction.[50]

In November 2024, Tippett announced the closing of the Loring Park studio and office that had housed the project since 2013. A much smaller operation would begin in the new year. She would work more through partner organizations, live and quiet conversations, and

convenings, while audio, events, website, feeds, and newsletter continued. Ó Tuama and Johnson would retain the project as a base. With children no longer to raise and a full organization no longer to lead, she wanted more room for a public presence and long-developing writing.[51]

Closing the place was itself work. Minneapolis colleagues handled its winding down, including sending the library's books to prisons. A public archive and a smaller collaborative structure could continue after the physical institution contracted. Tippett's statement did not present the change as permanent retirement. It described a different relation between the work she wanted to do and the resources and responsibilities that had accumulated around it.[52]

Her next experiments also tested the profession's intellectual reach. After an Australian Wisdom & Action Forum convened by Berry Liberman and Danny Almagor, she wrote in July 2026 about AI, encounters with Tristan Harris and Anthropic's Chloe Lubinski, and humanity's need to behave like responsible parents toward its technological creations. Claims about AI agency and the effects of human stories were her interpretations. An encounter could enlarge her imagination without independently establishing what a system could do.[53]

The question echoes an unresolved difficulty within the interviewing work. Humane attention may bring a possibility into view, but the felt persuasiveness of a conversation cannot settle its technical or moral adequacy. Listening has to admit questions that a compelling interlocutor or a hopeful metaphor may not answer. The distinction matters especially when the subject is a system being developed and deployed by powerful institutions.

In September 2026, Tippett reported a base at Union Theological Seminary for the autumn and following spring, contributing to a project reimagining public theology and Christianity's contemporary story. She was finishing a book, unsure about an autumn On Being season, and intending another in the new year. She also described an AI experiment concerned with wisdom and discernment and acknowledged distress among some readers of her summer letter. A Social Healing Guild brought Ó Tuama, Johnson, and John Paul Lederach into the smaller project's continuing collaborative life. These were developing commitments with a public archive behind them, not settled results.[54]

A profession that remains open to revision

Tippett once wanted political knowledge and public achievement to explain what mattered. Reporting gave her ways to investigate, but also a frustration with departing too soon. Theology supplied other questions; parenting and an imperfect adult life prevented them from remaining purely intellectual. The radio profession emerged only when those resources met an experiment, a production institution, and people willing to support it. Listening became sustainable through work she did outside the conversation as well as

through what happened within it.

The institution then made other forms of work possible: another host's poetry practice, local partners' conversations, reflective use of an archive, and support for people already doing difficult civic work. It also brought a weekly deadline, managerial labor, and a financial scale she eventually reduced. The recent move toward writing, public theology, and smaller partnerships returns her to a question that the original transition had not solved once and for all: which working form can give an inquiry enough time without losing the people it is meant to reach?

Her strongest conversations leave room for the answer to come from someone else, including an answer she would not have chosen. Oliver can revise a spiritual term; Coates can refuse consolation. Vanier shows why conversation cannot verify everything a listener may be tempted to believe about a person. Tippett's occupation depends on sustaining that openness while retaining the responsibility to edit, select, finance, and judge. It is an achievement made through institutions and relationships, and a practice whose authority must remain answerable to what those encounters reveal or fail to reveal.

Research cutoff: October 4, 2026, with a focused rereading of the cited 2024 and 2026 institutional letters on October 5. Current commitments are distinguished from completed work; source-specific access and chronology qualifications remain in the notes.

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