



## DISCUSSION GUIDE

### Can poets and storytellers bridge our divides?

Laurie Patton

#### In This Episode...

Laurie Patton collects stories. A scholar of Indian religions and the president of Middlebury College in Middlebury, Vermont, Patton looks for narratives that show people building lasting relationships with others. “I think about what stories change people’s minds,” Patton says, particularly stories about shelter, human movement and home.

#### Episode Guest: Laurie Patton

Dr. Laurie L. Patton is the 17th president of Middlebury College and the first woman to lead the institution in its 222-year history. Patton is an authority on South Asian history, culture, and religion, and religion in the public square. She is the author and editor of ten scholarly books and three books of poems, and has translated the classical Sanskrit text, The Bhagavad Gita. She was president of the American Academy of Religion in 2019 and elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2018 in two categories, philosophy/religion and education.

#### Suggested Discussion Questions

- Laurie describes how Judaism felt like “home” to her, even though it was not the tradition in which she was raised. Have you ever felt drawn to something in another tradition? What was it? Why do you think it resonated with you?
- Laurie also says that there are “yucky” things about any home, including her religious home. Are there things in your ethical or spiritual tradition that you find “yucky”? How do you approach those aspects?
- Laurie characterizes her relationship with Eboo as one in which they disagree frequently but are always certain that their underlying friendship will endure. What deep relationships do you have with someone with whom you frequently disagree? What are its challenges and benefits?
- Laurie talks about the importance of common myths, and brings up an example of Jews and Muslims helping each other in Victory, Texas. Have you witnessed or experienced a hyper-local event that helped bind a community together as a common myth? (Think: people coming together to save a beloved building or program, helping someone in need, etc.)
- Laurie discusses her appreciation for creating and building things in her life and says that maintaining relationships within the Middlebury community is sustaining and fulfilling to her in a creative way. She shares that a poet friend of hers has described Laurie’s relational work as her “poem”. What’s your poem? Or, what would you like it to be?