

Ruth Candler (intro)

Welcome to W&L After Class, the Lifelong Learning podcast. I'm your host, Ruth Candler. Today, we're diving into a conversation about a life shaped by ideas. Ideas about identity, technology, belonging and the ever-evolving journey of becoming. Our guest is Professor Stu Gray, Associate Professor of Politics at W&L. His path to the classroom wasn't a straight line, it was full of detours, risks and moments of deep reflection, and it's those twists and turns that have shaped both his teaching and his thinking. In this episode, we talk about taking meaningful risks, navigating shifting intellectual landscapes, and what happens when students and their professor put down their smartphones, curb their technology uses, and look inward instead. And if you've ever been curious about how a spring term course inspired by the Netflix program Black Mirror might change your relationship with technology, this episode is for you.

Ruth Candler

Stu, welcome to W&L After Class.

Stu Gray

Thank you for having me.

Ruth Candler

Let's begin our conversation by looking back. Would you walk us through how you became a professor of political thought? I'm especially curious to hear if teaching was part of that natural trajectory.

Stu Gray

Yeah, it very much was. I think it really began when I was an undergrad at University of California, Davis, and I had a mentor that taught Political Philosophy History of Western Political Philosophy. And he was, he was just simply amazing. And I saw what teaching could do, especially with this sort of material, for at least myself, and I know he was able to get through to a lot of others as well. And yeah, it really began there as an undergraduate and courses on the History of Western Political Thought, that was the core. And then my final semester, I took an introduction to Eastern Religions class, and that's where I was introduced to Hinduism, Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. And that was kind of a light shift, you know, lightning moment where I thought, well, there's a whole world out there that I haven't been exposed to. Like, I know all this stuff about the history of my own traditions, but I don't know anything about all these major traditions lying outside the proverbial West and so that kind of threw me for a bit of a loop. And after that, yeah, I had, I took three years between graduating undergrad and going back to grad school. I was a high school teacher for three years. So I was definitely teaching five days a week, six hours a day, very much in the teaching trenches. Then from there, it was UC Santa Barbara for graduate school, and that's kind of where I homed in on my particular interests. And then I was off to the East Coast, a post-doctoral fellowship, Johns Hopkins, for two years, and then a lecturer there for a year. And then I ended up here.

Ruth Candler

So, you mentioned that you taught high school, and it was after you were introduced to Eastern traditions. During that time, were you all, were you thinking, still thinking of Eastern traditions? And so that continued?

Stu Gray

Absolutely, absolutely. That was most of what I was reading, outside of what I needed to do for my teaching purposes. I was just getting my hands on anything I could because the conundrum was, okay, I'm fascinated by these traditions, Taoism, Buddhism and Hinduism, I think, were the three and but I had to decide, I couldn't just say Political Theory. We have to specialize in something. So had to spend those years reading as much as I could and figuring out, okay, what was the best, best professional path forward, and Hinduism, you know, won the day for a particular variety of reasons. But on the flip side, I also realized I could teach some of those other things, that even if that was my research specialization, I could still teach Taoism so that and I do in my Introduction to Political Philosophy class, here we do Confucian material, Taoism and, of course, Hindu tradition. So, it's not like I had to leave it behind. It's still very much a part of my life, just in a different sense.

Ruth Candler

In a recent episode, I spoke with Jay Margalus, who's the Director of the Entrepreneurship Center here at W&L, and we, we talked about the role of risk in shaping success. When you reflect on your own journey, what meaningful risk did you take that proved pivotal in your growth or your of your career path?

Stu Gray

So, three main ones come to mind. The first was, I kind of had a false start at my initial undergrad institution, which was West Point, United States Military Academy.

Ruth Candler

That's a shift.

Stu Gray

And making the decision I made it relatively quickly that this was not going to be the place for me in terms of what I wanted for my undergraduate education. So, I made the decision to leave, which was difficult because my family was very proud that I got in and I was there and it was kind of a big switch for me, because I also hadn't applied to any other undergrad institution. I put all my eggs in that basket. So, leaving meant, what do I where do I go? Do I go to community college? Do I start up? And my mother, on a whim, sent my application materials to a bunch of schools, and UC Davis was the only school that was even willing to look at my material, and this was a month or two before school started, and they said no guarantees and that, you know, luckily, they ended up admitting me. And so that's where-

Ruth Candler

Thank you, mom!

Stu Gray

Thanks to all of the moms out there, yeah, well, amazing work on her part. And so, yeah, that was, that was the first big risk, because it felt like a failure. I was made to think if I left that I was somehow undoing everything that I'd worked so hard to do up to that point in my life, which, as an 18-year-old, you know, you feel like, oh my gosh.

Ruth Candler

That's powerful.

Stu Gray

It's really heavy stuff. But it showed me that I could do it, that I was strong enough to take a risk and make a choice that I knew for me, was the best thing, regardless of what other people around me thought, including loved ones. And then the second was when I final year, last semester of undergrad, I thought I was going to law school. That was the plan. And then I had a conversation with a smoke jumper in my part time job, the people who jump out of planes into forest fires and do all this crazy stuff, and he was super passionate about it. And just talking to him, I immediately realized I feel none of this passion for the legal profession. Life is short, and I need to do something that I'm passionate about. And I knew political theory was going to be part of the answer to that and teaching. But then I was like, I don't know exactly how to proceed on that front. So hence the three-year hiatus. And then the final one is choosing political theory in the first place. There's not many jobs in my field, and it's very, very competitive. And so, choosing something that was, professionally speaking, a long shot was a huge risk. Law school was a much, much safer bet, and I chose against that.

Ruth Candler

There's a great message in there for our students, and that one you know, risk, risk pays off, and it's better to maybe live with a little bit of failure than the regret of not pursuing a passion.

Stu Gray

Absolutely, absolutely.

Ruth Candler

While at UC Davis, you began exploring political thought, starting with Western traditions and later expanding to Eastern philosophies. Would you break down the core ideas of each and how they compare?

Stu Gray

Yeah, so I would initially say that these traditions west and east, this is kind of a- even that division is kind of a social construction that we use to just as a heuristic, to kind of Hive off certain traditions into areas. But I would say when it comes to quote, unquote, "Eastern Thought", or maybe I should begin with the Western the core Western Thought, Political Metaphysics, fancy, fancy philosophical term for this basic idea that we're all innately familiar with in the West, which is, there's a higher truth, a capital T truth out there somewhere, and the cosmos has a sort of moral orientation or structure to it. And either through reason for the philosophers, or faith, through Christian into medieval Christian traditions, you get the right medium to access that truth, and then you live accordingly. That's the basic idea that there's a moral reality out there. You get in touch with that reality, and it tells you how to live in concert with others. Whereas in a lot of Eastern traditions, they don't have that assumption that there's a core kind of metaphysical reality with a moral component to it, that once you understand, it tells you how to live. So, this leaves living personal identity, what it means to be a human being and live a good life, much more open and that really, really appealed to me. That's always appealed to me. I kind of have an issue with authority and people telling me exactly how I should live, I think philosophically, that's a big difference being versus becoming a world of is-ness versus one that's always changing and rather chaotic and has no inherent structure to it. And so, we just have to find ways to construct little pockets of peace and orientation when we when, how we can find it.

Ruth Candler

Yeah, I think, I think what you just said, “Being versus becoming” is going to stick with me for a little while to think it through well as you explored both traditions, I imagine certain ideas resonated with you on a more personal level. What aspects of Western Political Thought helped you better understand your personal foundations, and then what elements of Eastern thought challenged or expanded your perspective, perhaps even giving you a deeper sense of that belonging.

Stu Gray

Yeah, so I think here ideas about what it what it means to be a person – individualism - in the West. So going all the way back to as early as Homer, there's this idea that human beings are self-possessed, demarcated individuals who don't have any fundamental, fundamental relation to anything outside themselves. And then you move into modern, Western thought, and that idea is becomes a basic assumption. You would you wouldn't really challenge that. And then you have ideas freedom, what it means to be free, this emphasis on rights, natural rights, freedom, equality, are all centered on understandings of what it means this strong individualism and that that taught me a lot about myself and what I had been taught to assume about what it meant to be a person, just basically speaking, I was an individual. And then we go on from there, whereas in a lot of Western traditions, again, to go back to this idea of becoming what it means to be a person is literally a process of becoming. We're always in the product. I tell my students when we're doing Confucius, for example, that we're walking construction sites. There is no core self to discover that's authentic. And then once you get in touch with that, you know how to live. Who you are is always fundamentally under construction, and it's fundamentally relational, for example, through the roles that you inhabit and you play in day to day life, teacher, brother, sister, mother, father, that those are the big things that orient us, but then also with this idea of identity being constructible and always constructed, it's, I think it's very liberating, and I've always found a lot of solace in this idea that I can change who I am and whom I'm becoming any day, at any given moment, moving forward in my life, and I don't have to be enslaved to a particular conception of myself as the One True Self that once I find it okay now I live accordingly, and it's much more restricting.

Ruth Candler

That's so interesting, because I feel like this generation is so focused on finding their authentic self.

Stu Gray

Yes.

Ruth Candler

You hear that term over and over and over again. I mean, especially in social media, right? And so, you know, what an impact that must have on our students.

Stu Gray

And in one of the books I teach, they talk about that's one of the what they call pure and grow slow. It's this book called *The Path: What Chinese Philosophers Have to Teach Us About Life*, and I use this sort of intro book to teach Taoism and Confucianism because it's very accessible. I mean, anyone can pick it up and read it off the shelves, and it's, it's very enlightening. But one of the myths is the myth of the authentic self, and that, one of their central ideas is that when you think this is the case, it limits you, and it inherently limits you. And then people become like, oh, I have this personality. I'm by nature this, or I'm by nature this, and so I just kind of, I'm locked in, like, that's not something I can change. And various Eastern thinkers, Chinese thinkers, especially, have a very different understanding of that.

Ruth Candler

Yeah, and you said that the name of that book was *The Path*?

Stu Gray

The Path. Dao. So, it's an interpretation of the DAO.

Ruth Candler

Okay.

Stu Gray

D-A[-O] or T-A O, which is a core concept in a lot of Chinese traditions.

Ruth Candler

I will, I'll include a link to that in our Show Notes for readers who are interested.

Stu Gray

Oh, please do. Please do. It's one of my highest recommendations of books.

Ruth Candler

This poll toward the idea of becoming seems to have continued shaping your scholarship. I'd love to hear more about that, how that theme shows up in your first book, and how it evolves or deepens in your recently published second one.

Stu Gray

So, the first book, *A Defensive Rule*, is a comparative analysis of the earliest, or what I call origins, of Greek and Indian political thought. The motivation for that book was partly environmental, ecological sort of strain of thinking. Going back to what I said earlier, I was just generally interested in what's the core, one of the earliest ideas in my own tradition, in terms of this question of identity, and how do we get here? And Homer the and then this other archaic poet, Hesiod. You see these assumptions being kind of baked into our political philosophical DNA in the West from the earliest stages and ruling that's a central concept in politics, means distinction, distinguishing yourself from and above others in pursuit of honor, glory and reputation, that that was, that's what it meant to rule, and that filter down to you see it now on social media. You know, everyone Hobbs talks. You know, everyone is vainglorious. Everyone now wants to be. You know, fame, and glory some sense.

Ruth Candler

"Influencers."

Stu Gray

Yes, yes! Beautiful. Yep. Perfect example. But in the Indian tradition, their core and earliest tradition, understanding of rule, ruling was stewardship. So, what it meant to rule was fundamentally connected to non-human nature and non-human entities and taking their interests into consideration in. Relations of rule. And so, I use this theoretically to kind of reconceive how we should think about this core concept of politics and ruling in order to account for the interests and wellbeing of non-human nature, and just get outside of our sort of human centered or anthropocentric orientation to life in general, but also politics.

Ruth Candler

You mentioned in our production meeting that both books are open access, and this was a term that I hadn't just before.

Stu Gray

Just the second.

Ruth Candler

Just the second okay, but I'm curious if you could share with those, with the listeners that haven't also heard of "open access", what that what that is, exactly, and why? Why did you choose to make your second book open access?

Stu Gray

Yeah. So, the second book on *the Political Theory of the Bhagavad Gita*, which is a core Hindu text. It's the first book to look at it as a work of political theory and also political ideology. But it's very much centered. It's kind of pivoting to Indian political thought more wholeheartedly, and a lot of my readership scholars even down to just people who are interested in Indian texts and take these texts very seriously, much more seriously than we do in the West. When I mentioned the title of that text, everyone kind of looks at me. They're like, "Yeah, I don't know what that is" like, well, there's over a billion people who know what that text is and take it extremely seriously across the globe. And so open access makes this text available for free. Anyone who has access to the internet can access it online for free and read it. And this is huge because academic texts are traditionally very expensive. They're very costly to produce, and low production rates because we're not, you know, we're not selling millions of you know, no one. Oprah is not going to be taking up my book for her book club anytime soon, so to speak. So, because they're expensive, it makes it prohibitive, cost prohibitive to a lot of people who can't afford \$100 to \$150 books, especially in India. And I had academic friends when I visited India who told me, yeah, you know, your book is really expensive. I brought some extra copies and distributed as many as I could, but found out that if, if I could have something like open access, there would just be a lot more so, many more people that can actually access it and read it that wanted to read it but weren't now, you know, prohibited because they couldn't afford it.

Ruth Candler

Yeah, it's a great thing. Given the direction of your scholarship, I'm interested in how that path brought you to W&. You went from an R1 institution, where the institution is at the forefront of research and development with substantial funding and a high volume of research output, to W&L a small liberal arts community. What was that transition like?

Stu Gray

It's definitely a bit of a gestalt switch, because I would say the biggest thing is it's a lifestyle difference. Really, at the end of the day, R1's teaching is not really incentivized, at least at the undergraduate level. So, you're advising grad students, and you're supposed to be writing, producing, publishing, constantly. So, in your head, it's a kind of seven day a week. You're always on, you're okay, you're so you're living but you know, some call the extreme life of the mind, whereas at a liberal arts college and shifting here, it's clear, it becomes much more about the people, the students what's going on in the classroom. And of course, we, you know, we still write and publish here as faculty, but that's not the primary focus. We're, you know, when we come in, we're told, you know, the teaching kind of comes first. And I welcome that. I thought it's a beautiful thing because the students know it, and hopefully most of them are here because they're looking for that sort of environment, as opposed to R1, where they just get washed out in anonymity amongst a crowd.

Ruth Candler

There are a number.

Stu Gray

100, 200 300 500 sometimes, yep, just a number.

Ruth Candler

Yes, very large class sizes and when and with the class sizes at W&L substantially lower, how has that enriched your life as an educator and allowed you to cultivate relationships with students?

Stu Gray

Yeah, it the smaller class size really allows us, has allowed me to get to know my students as individuals, as the people they are, in a one-to-one kind of basis. And a lot of this happens office hours, getting to know them personally, which enriches our relationship. And I think one of the biggest upshots for me is in getting to know them more personally, is I get to let them in, not just only to my research and you know what, what we're talking about in the class, but they come, oftentimes become a part of what I do as a teacher, and so far as, like, sometimes call them, like, teaching consultants, you know, we'll have conversations about particular class, and I'll be like, wow, you know, what did you think about this? You know, I don't know if it went as well as I wanted to. And, you know, I picked their brains. And I've had so many students over the years that actively help give me feedback on classes and the material I teach and change. Changes that can be made to make them better, to improve the courses. And so it's, it's very interactive. It's not like I just come in and dump information in their heads. It's all my classes are discussion intensive, and it's so it's a two way street, and then the two way street continues in office hours, and then it, if they're so interested in helping me on those ways, then-

Ruth Candler

yeah, it sounds like it ends-

Stu Gray

Collaboratively.

Ruth Candler

Yeah, collaboratively. That's the word I was looking for. I always enjoy hearing about the creative courses that professors design for spring term. And I'd like to talk about one of yours, *Black Mirror*. Could you share what inspired you to create this class? And for those who might not be familiar, what the show is all about?

Stu Gray

The show is essentially, kind of a new age, *Twilight Zone*, tech oriented. So, it's a sort of, largely, not all dystopic, but kind of a look at where technology and our various aspects of the technologies that we're developing, where it's taking us, socially, politically, ethically. So, it provides wonderful platforms for thinking about what's going on has been going on in our lives, and where we're headed. And the idea, again, came actually from a student, and it was in a class, and it was Classical Political Philosophy of all places, and we were talking about Plato and the Republic, which is nowhere near, you know, social media. I mean, this is over 2000 years old. And she said, "You know, Professor Gray, have you seen this show, *Black Mirror*?" And I was like, "No". And she's like, "Oh, we know that. You're kind of-", I'm very quite eidetic in orientation. I'm very skeptical about where some of our tech and is taking us. And she's like, "I think you would really like it, you know. And there's this one episode you should check it out." And, you know, I trust their judgment. So, I said, "Okay", I went home and watched it immediately, I think that that evening, and I jumped out of my seat afterwards, and point started, you know, pointing at the television. And, you know, my wife and I watched it with me, and I was like, "Yes, yes, exactly.! That's it! That's it! They nailed it", yeah. So, so it articulated a lot of what I had been thinking about, kind of an in-choke fashion, about where things were at and where things were headed. And it just did this esthetically beautiful job. Acting, you know, is fantastic, but it's just very creative. And-

Ruth Candler

Where can you watch *Black Mirror*?

Stu Gray

Netflix. Netflix took over. It was originally a British company that started so and some of the original seasons are really brilliant, and some of my favorite are on Netflix, yeah.

Ruth Candler

I will include a link to that in our show notes as well. So, in your black mirror class, students keep a technology journal where they track their screen time on their phones, starting with a baseline in the first week and then gradually reducing it by at least 25% each week. Which sounds challenging and wonderful at the same time. What kinds of reactions have you seen from students as they go through this process and what insights would you say has this experiment revealed to the class as a whole?

Stu Gray

I've gotten reactions of all sorts. It's all over the map. I think one common theme is they, they know. They realize how connected they are to their devices and lit screens in general, right? And we all know this, this idea of dopamine addiction that is pervasive in our society and culture due to our tethered lives, lit screen wise, and they start to realize, generally, almost across the board, how dependent they are on these devices to entertain them, to connect them to other human beings, to basically live their lives so much of it is face first in a lit screen in some form. So, the scaling back gives them an idea of how intense, how much that was, because it easily starts to go not for even forgotten. It just is assumed. It's taken for granted. And so consistently they'll say, like, I didn't realize that I was spending in the amounts of hours that I hear in some of these journals. I mean, it's, it's staggering. Even to them, it's staggering. They're like, it's in the hundreds, right? I mean, it's...

Ruth Candler

Hundreds per week?

Stu Gray

I'm not very good at math, but no, it's like, it's percentage wise. There are sometimes students who are on it for two thirds of every day, wow, seven days a week. So again, my math isn't that great, but I believe, I mean, I've seen some astronomical numbers.

Ruth Candler

So, for clarity's sake, though, that would include any time spent on their phones, their computers, playing computer games, right? Even, even class work on a computer?

Stu Gray

Not classwork, not writing or reading for the class so this is mostly messaging, social media. That's, that's-

Ruth Candler

Wow.

Stu Gray

-like a big bulk of it. And so that's where, in scaling back, I think that's where they really, you know, the challenge kicks in. It's like they have to. They've gotten very inventive and creative on how they train themselves to get off, you know, black and white screen. There're new apps that, you know, force you to do things that make it difficult to get into certain apps, or timers and things like that. And-

Ruth Candler

It's kind of funny that there are apps now created to keep-

Stu Gray

To defeat.

Ruth Candler

-to defeat what they're there for. So, I love this concept. I'm curious how is teaching it influenced you personally or intellectually, and why does it hold such meaning for you?

Stu Gray

So, for me, this class and this, this whole process, I to go back to something we were talking about earlier. I think human beings are what, in human nature itself, is a very constructible thing. It's an open-ended thing. There's no Telos or end toward which we are oriented. So, it's open ended. So, technology, I feel it, and this is one of the reasons I'm skeptical in my everyday life, sometimes it's, actively doing things to me, and it's altering how I view what it means to be human and what constitutes a good life. Famously, Thomas Hobbes and this Leviathan sets this in motion in modernity, and I think we're very much in the throw of it, which is Felicity, what is essentially happiness. For him, he says it's the successful attainment of desire after desire which only ends in death. And I think now we, oftentimes, we understand happiness to be a form of the consumption, right? We live in this overly consumptive society, the consumption of the things that give us pleasure, and physical pleasure, predominantly, and as much of that as possible is good. And I'm profoundly skeptical of that vision of a good life and what it is to be a person, but I see the tech kind of pulling us further and further down that rabbit hole and then simultaneously also bringing us to and sorry, blame it on the day job. But another political philosopher, Jean Jacques Rousseau, in one of his essays, talks about living a life entirely outside of one yourself. When you only start to see yourself through the eyes of others, you lose autonomy. And I think that's another danger why this course is important to me, because it shows students like look, you know, with social media, especially how easy it is to get drawn outside of yourself and only start seeing pictures, images your Instagram, all this kind of stuff yourself through the eyes of others, and you lose your autonomy. And so, these are just two examples of, I think, where tech is taking us. *Black Mirror* does a great job of putting its finger on that. And then we read, I have wine and cheese pairings the, you know, the episodes, or the wine and the cheese or the readings that I pair with each episode, to kind of pull out some of these deeper philosophical or ethical themes that are there in the episode. But I want them to think not just about the TV, but okay, like people have been talking about some of these issues for a long time, sometimes even going back to the Greeks, to get them to think creatively, and then finally, to get route to what you were asking. And this is why I like and what it does for me is it shows forces me to think creatively, about how to resist, or how to think more critically about what's going on when it comes to, you know, a technologized society and thinking openly with them, like, how do we how do we think about this, and how do we move forward in a more fruitful way and not fall prey to this paradigm, which, you know is, I think for some people, kind of crushing and inevitable. Feels inevitable to them, like, Well, how do we get out and good question, let's just think about this, because there are ways to resist, but sometimes they're just micro ways. But the micro builds into the macro.

Ruth Candler

And we haven't even touched on what AI, so we won't, we won't go down that rabbit hole.

Stu Gray

That's a whole other podcast there.

Ruth Candler

Well, let's shift gears a bit and explore how your courses connect to your life beyond campus, your Black Mirror class was a favorite of many students, and I understand that you're creating a new spring term class that will probably be equally as popular. Will you give us a sneak preview of what that is?

Stu Gray

Yeah, so the idea is the class is essentially on the concept of awe. A-W-E. And it's kind of the flip side the Black Mirror class. And if *Black Mirror* is the kind of dystopic, critical side of the coin, this is a class that says, "Okay, well, starting with the question, where do we find our awe in life?" Because technology takes us into a way of living where I think we're constantly entertained or constantly consuming, but I think we've lost our grip on being. The Greeks were all about this. They were in awe of the world. Sometimes they were surprised by things and pleasantly surprised, and they got inspiration, especially from non-human nature and the world around them, things that weren't constructions of the human hand. And I think that's a very help healthy orientation, a way to combat our this sort of technology society that we're in is finding ways to locate sources of awe in the world around us, in non-human nature, non-human entities, into other human beings, even, but not mediated through that lit screen. And so, this course is going to be an exploration into how and where do we find that. And so, we're going to plan this to get outside, to see new places, and to get students into seeing things in the natural environment, in and around Lexington and Rockbridge county that they might not have known were there beforehand, just to kind of stimulate a potential source of-

Ruth Candler

So, what are some of the things that bring you awe?

Stu Gray

Oh, gosh, I'm into hiking. I love hiking, and I love being in the natural world. Of course, that's curated. Of course, the trail is already there. I'm not there bushwhacking, as it were, but like in the spring, we love to do hikes. You know, Rhododendron forests, mountain laurel you know, hiking in these, these areas that just, there's a tremendous amount of physical beauty, and it has nothing to do with human beings. It's there, it's there to be discovered. And if that doesn't do it for you, I also love water. So, like bodies of water, Goshen Pass, we- Douthat State Park. It's a wonderful state park, and it's not that far. It's 40-minute drive, you know, West of- and there's a reservoir, lake, and trails, and there's all of these things that kind of can get you out and active. And I just try to pay attention. I love birds. I'm not an official bird watcher, but I love, yeah, I just think they're, they're amazing.

Ruth Candler

Okay, so this is, I mean, you're a bird lover as am I. There's this fabulous app on your phone called "Merlin", which you need a smartphone. I know, I know it's, secular. It's secular. Do you have a favorite hike so that the next time our alumni are back on campus, they could...?

Stu Gray

I so I'd have to give co-favorites, I think, in the spring. And I did this one with three students. I took out my wife and I took three students on this for the first time, and they I think we might have instilled a little bit of awe in them. Maybe Apple Orchard Falls is a really pretty one, especially when the water at the falls, recent rain has come. That's great. And then in the fall Cove mountain outside of Bucha, and just when the leaves are turning or they've fallen down, there's some great sight lines through these, these ridges, and you... Oh, and actually, I will say a slide in a third one, beards gap. It's a linkage of trails that I'm happy to send anyone if they inquire. I've got an email that I've been systematically sending out to students, especially when it comes to spring term. And I'm like, if you got time, should check this out. You should check this out. A lot of them have.

Ruth Candler

If you send that to me, I'll include it in our show notes too. So that would be great. Have you have you done the Henry Lanham trail up by the whole mountain?

Stu Gray

No, no.

Ruth Candler

Okay, it's beautiful if you wanted to try.

Stu Gray

Thank you.

Ruth Candler

So moving away from campus life for just a sec, I've heard that you're quite the cook. What are some of your favorite dishes to prepare?

Stu Gray

Oh, so it really just depends on our guest's palette. I mean, for ourselves, we love curries of various sorts, Thai curries with any sort of protein whatsoever. I think that, oh, geez, this is sometimes it's some of the basics. It's the comfort food that take a lot of work. A gnocchi chicken soup that we make in the fall, in winter that is happy to send along.

Ruth Candler

Yeah, we need that link as well. That sounds really good.

Stu Gray

It takes, yeah, so, and it's much more complex, and you can make it as complex as you want, but it's one. It looks simple, but it's, it's, it's really not it's, it's wonderful. And I know I'm gonna, I'm I should have made a list in my own head of things I could... Um, so we've got a base that we use, and then we just tweak that base in various ways, and then depending on the protein, and what were that in the vegetables that you know, you put in. And I've got, actually, again, it's, it's all kind of dependent on the palate. But a pork chop recipe actually, that I think is, is really good. And-

Ruth Candler

Okay, send that one along as well. Yeah, that sounds really good. Well, you're an explorer, and I know you've traveled quite a bit. If you could recommend one destination that offers a deeper understanding of Eastern thought, where would you suggest?

Stu Gray

So, for this one, I my answer would has to be, you know, centered in India, probably just given what I'm interested in. And like the Golden Triangle in northern India, which is a series of kind of major cities and sites that has a lot of amazing architecture, from Mughal architecture and Delhi to all sorts of non-Mughal and other genres of architecture in the north, a lot of forts, you know, and kind of landscapes that are like high desert and a lot of Canyon rock, but a lot of kind of sacred sites that you can you can see as well. So, I think for India, that's definitely a go to, but I think there are a lot of places in Southeast Asia and China, depending on one's it really depends on one's interests. And I think once you start reading texts in these various traditions. I think there is research you can do to kind of look and say, okay, you know, do I want to go see amazing temple structures and, you know, Cambodia Buddhist stupas or, you know, it really just kind of depends. I think you can be inspired at so many different places in South and Southeast East Asia that I that golden triangle is my, I guess my India answer, but I would encourage people to explore it.

Ruth Candler

Yeah, well, you, you've given us a lot to think about, and I'm curious, with all of your experience, if you had one piece of advice to give to our students, what would it be?

Stu Gray

Simple question, but so much packed in there, I guess I would have to ask life in general, or just kind of a more academic oriented...?

Ruth Candler

Let's go with life in general.

Stu Gray

Life in general. One thing I tell my students, thinking deeply, loving intensely, and finding worthy friends, or is sort of a triumvirate that I've always hung my hat on, and then when you unpack what it means to think deeply, I would encourage people to kind of explore, even if they can't physically explore and travel the world, to read things, books, poems, stories, whatever it is that challenges them and gets them outside of the comfort zone, the familiar. Because I think that's something that is, especially speaking of social media. We're so attracted to the familiar and the comfortable. And I think disrupting that and exploring, even if it's just in one's own mind, and then loving intensely. That's something I think, in our day and age, you know, putting oneself on the line to speaking of risk, to get hurt, risk and risking losing things that that you love, taking chances. That's something that we sometimes stray from. It's not natural for us to want to do that. And I try to, you know, tell them do it, because it's, you know... I met my wife on a blind date. So, so, you know...

Ruth Candler

Great reward!

Stu Gray

There's, there's a chance taken there.

It's a fantastic way to end our conversation today. Thanks so much for joining us, Stu.

Stu Gray

All right. Thank you so much, Ruth. I appreciate it.

Ruth Candler (outro)

And thanks to you our listeners for joining us as well before we sign off, I'd like to remind you to visit our website, wlu.edu/lifelong, for other lifelong learning opportunities. You can join us on campus, around the world, or even from the comfort of your very own home. Make sure to explore our show notes for today's episode with Professor Stu Gray. And while you're there, take a minute to meet our great team behind the podcast. Until next time, let's remain together, not unmindful of the future.