

## Festival of Ideas

### Michael Ignatieff: How Can We Find Consolation in Dark Times? In conversation with Andrew Kelly

**Andrew Kelly:** Michael Ignatieff is a writer, former head of Canada's Liberal Party, an academic and President of the Central European University, where he's now a professor in Vienna. His latest book is *On Consolation: Finding Solace in Dark Times*. Michael, thank you for joining us today.

**Michael Ignatieff:** Great to be here, Andrew, thank you.

**Andrew:** You've addressed some elements of this work in previous books, *The Needs of Strangers* and *The Russian Album*. In *On Consolation*, you write about the state of desolation you found due to the death of your parents within three years of each other, but also other failings you've experienced and which you've sought consolation for. This is a book, isn't it, about how we deal not only with death and tragedy, but also with those other failures of life we encounter?

**Michael:** Absolutely. I mean, I should say, it's not an autobiography, and you're not going to be dragged through my dreary life. But I think there's no question that you don't write a book about consolation unless you've had a few knocks, and my knocks are perfectly standard, you know, the death of parents. And it was a great blow simply because I loved them dearly. It can also be a blow if you don't love them. But in my case, I loved them dearly. And it took a couple of years for me to recover the point of doing anything, really. And then I've had some other failures, most spectacularly losing an election in Canada about ten years ago. I'm living proof that there's a great life to be had after politics. But at the time it was a bit rough. I think there's that and I think the final element that went into the making of the book was just COVID. The way the whole globe was plunged into isolation and fear and loneliness and uncertainty.

And I think that some of the book was written during the lockdown, and I think those are the dark times I'm talking to. So it's dark times both kind of historically for everybody, but also the dark times that are strictly personal.

**Andrew:** And when you talk about consolation, you talk about conscious and deeply unconscious consolation. Could you explain those for us?

**Michael:** Well, if you go back to the death of my parents, I noticed that I just felt ill all the time, I just felt sick. And nothing I could think about it made any difference. I actually had some therapy, and I want to salute hardworking therapists all over the world who do help to, as Freud said, take hysterical misery and turn it into common unhappiness, and common unhappiness is a victory when you're hysterically miserable. The unconscious part, I think, is simply time. There certainly came a point, three or four or five years later, when suddenly things didn't hurt as much. And I think people may recognise that feeling. You just wake up one morning, and you can't quite understand why you feel better, but you do. In my case, it was because I was lucky enough to meet a wonderful woman who's now my wife. I think love – it's not too complicated – being loved makes a huge difference. And re-establishing a great connection with my children made a difference. But there's an unconscious process of consolation. And that's very hard to understand *because* it's unconscious. In this book, I'm talking mostly about conscious attempts to find consolation, through writing, through music, through great art.

**Andrew:** And we'll come on to some of those in a moment. I just wanted to talk about a couple of other things before we move on to the people you write about and the work that you cover. And the first is, this is something none of us can escape, isn't it? I always remember – and I thought about this a lot when I was reading your book – the work of Joan Didion, who of course, died recently and

who went through great grief. And I read her books that followed the death of her husband and the death of their daughter. And I saw the stage play that was produced about this and at one point - Vanessa Redgrave was playing Joan Didion - she looked at the audience and she said, 'One day, this will happen to you.' None of us can escape this can we?

**Michael:** I can just see Vanessa doing that. I wish I'd seen that. Yeah, I think it does... You can't escape it. A book about consolation is not about wallowing in sorrow, it's just this is an unavoidable part of the journey, in two senses. First of all, we have to console others. The book, in fact, begins with me going to console an old friend of mine who was in his 90s when he lost his wife of 50 years. And I realised that I just had nothing to say that was honest. I mean, how do you console a man who has lost a wife he adored, and who I loved too, I thought she was a fantastic person. We just sat there. I mean, there's nothing you can do. So consoling others can be almost the hardest thing we ever have to do. And I'm interested in consolation precisely because it's the place where words sometimes fail. They fail us. We just lapse into silence. And it's the very outer limits of empathy. And then consoling ourselves can be, as I said earlier, a kind of conscious process where we struggle to give meaning to what we've been through. And I think that's the key thing about consolation, it's a struggle to give meaning to suffering and loss and failure and grief. But sometimes, let's be honest, no meaning can be given to things. I mean, there may be people watching this who – I hate to mention this kind of thing – have lost a child, you know. I'm not sure there's any meaning to be given to this. And what then becomes very important, is to treat those kinds of experiences of being inconsolable with the greatest possible respect, because they are just part of life. These people aren't being irrationally sad, they are experiencing the inconsolable. There is nothing that you can... make this any better. And so this is at the outer limits of human experience. And I just think it's also part of the extraordinary, wonderful, but often very tragic business of being alive.

**Andrew:** The second contextual point I wanted to just talk about was you write about consolation being lost both in philosophy, but also in institutions, in places of worship, and so on. And this is really important, isn't it? You're a non-believer, but you were greatly moved by the experience you had in Utrecht, when you went to speak about the Book of Psalms?

**Michael:** Yes, I think there are two points there. First of all, we've had, for millennia, institutions whose business was to console us. They were called churches, or synagogues, or mosques, or temples, and they're still there. And, you know, secular people end up in church pretty often when they have to bury someone, because there's nowhere else to go. But the institutions which used to provide consolation are, I think, weaker than they were before. So consolation is something we do alone or with our friends, and we invent rituals and practices to get through it. And we're pretty inventive about that. I don't feel despairing about the future of consolation, simply because it's just such an essential part of our lives together. In my case, I happen not to be a believer, but I've increasingly come to think that's less and less important. Because the religious traditions of consolation, and the only ones that I really know are from the Hebrew Bible and then from Christian faith, but the other world religions are enormously wealthy reservoirs of consolation. But in my case, the book began because I went to a concert in the Netherlands, in Utrecht, where four choirs gathered for a weekend and they sang 150 settings of all the Psalms. Well, it was just an overwhelming experience and I found myself astonished at how moved and engaged and often weepy I got, just listening to the beauty of the words and the music. And that then set me off on a journey to understand why I was so touched by the Psalms, and that's how the book actually started. But the conclusion was we don't have to pass some test of faith to open the Bible. The Bible is an unbelievable source of human wisdom, whatever you think of its relationship to the divine. So just open the book and read it. Make of

it what you can. And I found the thing about the Psalms is that they seem to speak very directly to me. The psalmists know what it is to be lonely, to be despairing, to be frightened. And that's the connection, that is in itself consoling.

**Andrew:** In the book – and it's a very moving book – you go through the centuries looking at how people have written about consolation, how they've dealt with tragedy, how they've looked to the future. And I just want to go through some of them now. And I want to start with Paul's epistles, because you talk there about that language of Christian consolation, and you've just been talking about it in terms of the Bible as well, which underpins all modern humanist, secular, revolutionary, socialist, ideas that followed.

**Michael:** Yes, it's in Galatians, Paul's epistle to the Galatians when he says, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, there is neither circumcised nor uncircumcised, for you are all one in Jesus Christ. It's a revolutionary imagining of whom consolation is for, it's for everyone, and the promise of consolation is in Christian salvation. The thing that interested me tremendously about Paul was that he spent 35 years being persecuted, arrested, pushed around, shipwrecked, knocked about, chained. He suffers terribly as he tries to build Christian communities through the eastern Mediterranean in the decades after Christ's crucifixion. And he does it believing that Christ is going to come, the world is going to end, that time is going to stop and we're all going to be saved. And gradually, it dawns on him, he's getting in his late 50s, he suddenly begins to realise that maybe Christ is not coming in my lifetime. And some of his support, some of the congregation is beginning to ask, hey, Paul, you promised us salvation in our lifetimes, what's happening? And I think a lot of what he begins to understand is that he has to produce a doctrine of consolation for people who are waiting for salvation, but it's not necessarily going to come in their lifetime. And I think one of the most moving parts of Saint Paul, and I think many secular people know it, are the incredible verses he wrote about love. And I think

that's him saying, look, in the life here and now, it may be all we can do is love each other. This is the consolation that will really matter. And what's remarkable about the Acts of the Apostles and his epistles, are these shoutouts to the people he works with. They're incredibly touching to me. There's a woman called Priscilla in some town, like Thessalonica. And he remembers Priscilla. And then there's Timothy somewhere else. He remembers these people, because they've been with him, they've suffered with him, they've struggled with him to build a church. And he remembers all of them. And I think it's their love that gives him the only reliable image he has of what God's love might be. I think those verses on love are some of the greatest things ever said by human beings about what it is to love someone else. But I think there's a tragic element to them because they are consoling him for the love that he's never actually going to know which is the love of God.

**Andrew:** Moving on to the Stoics and Cicero and the need to be manly, and the way that Cicero was challenged by the death of his daughter.

**Michael:** Cicero has had a huge effect on our culture. He's one of the shapers of the doctrine of stoicism. He's one of the shapers of the upright, courageous defender of the republic. It's a very male version of political virtue. And I think it's been taught to young men for 1,000 years and it all comes out of Cicero. There's a trope in Roman letters called the letter of consolation. You write these letters, and he was a master of it. And then, suddenly, his daughter dies and his whole world falls apart. So I'm especially interested in these moments when consolation rhetoric falls apart. It meets real raw, savage grief, and Cicero falls apart and all his male friends are saying, come on, Cicero, could you please become Cicero again, people are beginning to whisper and talk, you've just got to stop crying. And I think he then recreates this vision of stoic restraint. You know, real men don't cry. And I think that's had an enormous effect on men's approach to consolation ever since and has exacted a rather high price.

Consolation is, in other words, very gendered. And the male side of it is not necessarily very easy on men. And I think it's a liberation in fact that men no longer see consolation in this gendered way.

**Andrew:** The next one I want to talk about is someone who was in the very depths and who tried to find meaning in the suffering that he was going through, and that's Boethius.

**Michael:** Boethius is a kind of Roman senator from the late Roman Empire, who ends up serving a Barbarian king, Theodoric, in Ravenna in northern Italy in 520 AD, and he falls foul of Theodoric and Theodoric slams him in prison and condemns him to death. And in that period, when he's in prison, he writes this famous book called *The Consolation of Philosophy*. He is one of the most learned men of his time and he uses Plato, Socrates, Aristotle, he summons up all the philosophical learning of his time to try and confront what's about to happen to him, which is he's about to be executed. What's wonderful about the book, and it has consoled people for millennia, is he kind of invents somebody to talk to. Lady Philosophy, he invents this wonderful character. She's clad in kind of rags, and she's kind of sharp with him, and funny and tries to jolt him out of his despair, and says to him, come on, put those books of poetry aside, they're never going to work, you've got to talk to me because I'm Lady Philosophy and I know everything. It's fascinating. He's essentially, in his solitude, created an imaginary character. He kind of splits himself in two. There's that shaky, quaky, fearful Boethius. And then there's this kind of masterful, sardonic, wonderful character with whom he dialogues. And she says, you've got to get some mastery over yourself, you've got to use the philosophy that you've learned all your life to overcome your fear of death. And what's wonderful is that Boethius says, Lady, I'm trying, but it's really hard, they're about to cut my head off. And that makes the book so real to me. It's not this sort of sublime, assured, you know, let's pull ourselves together. It's a desperate struggle. And I think that's one of the reasons why the book has been in print for 2,000 years, because it's realistic to

the sheer raw fear of imminent execution. And then he was executed. And my wife and I have been to the little church in northern Italy where he is buried, and you see little bones that are supposed to be Boethius. And so he's a very touching figure. I loved writing about him.

**Andrew:** I thought that was one of the most remarkable chapters in this brilliant book, Michael, I must say. Moving to finding consolation in the ordinary and you write about de Montaigne.

**Michael:** There are, I think, 18 essays in the book, and if you had to ask me who I wish I could spend time with, I think me and a whole lot of other people like to spend time with Michel de Montaigne. Because he's so wise, because he's so funny, because he's so alive to the ironies of life. But he's also a man who is living through a plague which is scything through the south of France in the 1580s when he's alive, so frightening that he has to evacuate his own home and take to the roads for six months to escape the plague. Secondly, he is in the middle of the 30th or 35th year of a brutal religious war in which people are slaughtering each other right outside his own castle. He's writing at the end of his life. And again what I find so interesting about Montaigne in the final essays - he's the most learned man of his time, he has a famous library in a tower and he sits with his books in front of him, but by the end of his life, he says, I haven't really cracked a book in a long time, because what I'm beginning to realise as I get to my 50s is that you're either consoled by life itself, by the common ordinary routines of everyday, you know, making your bed, going for a ride on a horse, making sure that the saddle strap is done so you don't slip, taking pleasure in a glass of wine... You either take consolation from life itself, its rhythms, or you're not going to get through this. And there's something deeply wise about that. And so I commend that to people, to take some Montaigne off the shelf. He's just a wonderful, wonderful writer.



**Andrew:** And moving forward, in the book you write about the great movements to create heaven on earth, particularly Karl Marx and communism. But there's huge danger here as well, as we found out in the twentieth century, isn't there?

**Michael:** I think my take on Marx is that the Marx that I find fascinating is the young Marx who's in love with Jenny von Westphalen, his wife, they're in their 20s, they go to Paris for the first time in the 1840s. Paris is the capital of world revolution. They fall in with a circle of mostly German artisans, they're just intoxicated by the hope of revolutionary change, which does burst out in 1848. But the thing that's so interesting about Marx is that a lot of his thinking about what a revolution would be comes out of his thinking about religion. He concludes that one of the deepest obstacles for social change is people's belief that there is consolation in the afterlife, which means that they don't seek to build justice in the here and now, they defer all their hopes, their longings, for the afterlife. Now, that had been said before, but I think no one is more sympathetic in a way, more understanding of the yearnings for consolation that are contained in religion, than Karl Marx, which is ironic. And he really does believe that a science of revolution, which he will create, will create the means by which people will no longer need divine consolation. They will find consolation in building justice here on earth. And yes, what happened to these dreams is pretty awful. Stalin, Lenin, terror, murder, destruction of human beings. But it's important to return to the original dream because it is the most serious attempt to create heaven on earth that we've ever tried. And the most damaging and the most destructive, but we need to remember what it started with, which was an attempt to get us beyond consolation in the afterlife and find justice here on earth. So we're the heirs, Andrew, both of millennia of religious consolation, but we're also the heirs of a revolt against it. And a lot of the twentieth and twenty-first century movements for social justice are a desire to get us to stop thinking about the afterlife and start thinking

about justice here on earth. And you have to be, you know, I'm an old liberal, it's not my church, but it's to be respected.

**Andrew:** Those early manuscripts of Marx, the economic and philosophical manuscripts from when he was much younger, are incredibly eye-opening, I find, on these issues.

**Michael:** He's one of the most profound thinkers of all time and there is a human sympathy for religious faith. He calls religion the heart of a heartless world. Well, you can't say that unless you understand the deep claims, the longings, the yearnings that religion tries to express.

**Andrew:** I want to ask about Abraham Lincoln briefly because here you brought in the issue of consolation and reconciliation. And I wondered what you thought about role of things like the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission in the context of seeking and finding consolation?

**Michael:** Well, I think consolation can be a political act and it is connected, as you say, to reconciliation. I watched the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings in South Africa and they were an extraordinary attempt, I think, unique attempt, for a society to say, look, we've got white people here, we've got Black people, we've got people who are guilty of crimes under apartheid, and we've got a newly liberated majority. How do we live together? How do we ensure that we don't kill each other? How do we find enough mutual reconciliation to continue? And how do we do justice for the crimes that were committed? And the South African Truth and Reconciliation Committee, presided over Bishop Tutu, who we've just lost, was an extraordinary attempt to do that. And it's very important not to sentimentalise it, because it's incredibly tough to forget and forgive people who've, you know, taken away your son, bundled him into a car, murdered him and then burned his body, which was the case I particularly watched when I was there. And the

mother who'd gone through that was like a kind of avenging figure from a Greek tragedy, she wanted justice. But the society was asking her to say, don't put this cop in prison. You don't have to forgive him, but you have to understand that we can't imprison everybody if we're going to have peace between whites and Blacks. And so there's a tremendously complicated politics here. You mentioned this essay I wrote about Lincoln in the book. I wrote about Lincoln precisely to talk about the politics of consolation and reconciliation. Lincoln inherited a country torn apart by a civil war – 800,000 people killed in four years of slaughter. And as he takes office for a second time, his political problem is overwhelming. How do you get two people who fought each other to the death to together in a national community once again? And we know that he gave this great speech, which I analysed, we know that he was assassinated three weeks later, and we know, in the year of our lord 2022, the civil war is not over. We know that in fact the process of being reconciled and building a national community in the United States is still not done, and some of the polarisation that is now dividing America so bitterly is still a heritage of the Civil War, and the fact that the curse of slavery is still not lifted. So this is a very un-consoling thought, that these wounds are very deep and take an awfully long, longer time to get over than we can possibly imagine. And that's something we have to understand. Even in our own life, being consoled can take us a lifetime. None of this is quick, none of this is magic. My book is not engaging in happy talk because this stuff takes an awfully long time, both for countries, but also for individuals.

**Andrew:** Moving into the twentieth century, and perhaps the most difficult area that you cover, in terms of consolation, is those horrors of the twentieth century that you talked about, the horrors of Stalinism and the Soviet Union and the Holocaust. How is consolation possible here?

**Michael:** Well, this is the challenge for all of us, to retain some hope about the human race, given what we've done to each other in the

twentieth century. And I focus on three figures. One of them is Anna Akhmatova, the greatest Russian poet of the twentieth century, a titanic woman who was barred from publishing from the 1920s onwards and then saw her son imprisoned by Stalin and queued outside prison gates for 18 months and then wrote this immortal poem called 'Requiem', trying to just remember the women who stood trying to find out news of their husbands and sons. And so that's one figure. The other figure obviously is Primo Levi, the young Italian chemist who went to Auschwitz in '44, and barely survived it and then spent the rest of his life writing about Auschwitz. Both Akhmatova and Primo Levi are witnesses of these crimes. And the consolation they took from witness was the belief that if they could testify as to the reality of these crimes, they would outlive their persecutors, and the world would draw the right conclusion, which was never again. In other words, what's interesting here is that we, the generations who came after, were their consolation. They wrote, believing that we would get the message. And the disturbing reality about all this is just, have we? Have we? There's a great deal of Holocaust denial out there. We've got a ruler of Russia who thinks that Stalin was the apogee of Russian achievement in the twentieth century. And Stalin was a genocidal murderer. We're in a world that I don't think either Akhmatova or Primo Levi ever anticipated, which is that a lot of these lessons have not been learned. There is consolation from their example only to the degree that we listen to what the hell they had to tell us. And we're not sure that they did. But they are titanic figures because of their absolutely indomitable courage. And I think we can take consolation from their heroic example. But we need to get the message and pass it on to our children, because otherwise we could repeat these catastrophic mistakes again.

**Andrew:** Someone who became very important to me during the pandemic was Albert Camus, and particularly the book *The Plague*, which just about everyone was reading, I think, during this awful time. And there are a number of points here, I think, but one of the

key points that came across for me, and something I wanted to ask you to explore, was to distinguish between comfort and consolation, which I think is done incredibly well in *The Plague*. Tell us about that.

**Michael:** Yes, I think comfort is... we talk about comfort food, we know what comfort is, you don't have to say a word to comfort someone, you just give them a hug or hand them a beer or sit beside them or divert them. We're pretty good at comfort, I think. A hot cup of tea in Britain is *the* comfort gesture, and these things are very significant. I don't want to belittle comfort at all. We all stand in need of comfort, but consolation is more demanding because it does involve some words, you have to sort of say, this is what has happened to you, this is what it means. When we console someone, you say, you did your very best, there's nothing else you could have done. That's an attempt to console. We can be comforted without being consoled. And we can be consoled without being comforted. And the distinction between the two is pretty important to understanding our duties to other people. In Camus' *The Plague*, which is such a wonderful, wonderful book, he says, there really isn't any consolation for the plague. You can't give this a meaning. You can't say this is God's work. I mean, there's a character in the book who says this is God's work and one of Camus' characters just explodes and says, what are you talking about? This thing is carrying off perfectly innocent people, are you're nuts? There's no image of God that can give us an account of this being God's work. So there's no consolation in *The Plague* and there's no consolation under the current pandemic. It's just a very, very nasty global fact but it doesn't have any meaning as such. But there is comfort and the comfort that Camus notices, and he slips it into the book, and a lot of people don't see it, is an elderly woman sitting beside someone at night just comforting them so that they don't die alone. It's a very, very moving image to me and in Camus' case it connects to his memory of his mother. His mother was a silent woman, partially deaf, I think illiterate, who he adored and provided this kind of silent comfort of a mother for a son that I think was the model for his idea of comfort

ever after. And this is why I find it such a tremendously moving book because it says we do live in an absurd world in the literal sense that there is no meaning for some of these big catastrophes, but that doesn't mean we don't have duties here. And now one of the duties is to comfort each other. And he shows how.

**Andrew:** I found it particularly moving because when I was reading it my mother died. And she was in hospital for a month during one of the worst periods of the lockdown. We were not allowed to visit her. But we were comforted a great deal by the fact that the nurses were acting like the woman you talked about in *The Plague*. And then afterwards, the funeral was a very miserable affair as you'd expect...we were only allowed a very small number of people to come. She was much loved in the place that she lived in, volunteered for decades. And as the whole hearse drove through the village, the villagers lined, socially distanced, to applaud the hearse as it went through. And I found that both incredibly moving but also incredibly consoling as well.

**Michael:** I've got nothing to add, Andrew. It's a beautiful story.

**Andrew:** The final two I want to talk about just very briefly is Václav Havel, who... living in truth was critical for him, wasn't it? And how consoling is that?

**Michael:** Well, truth isn't very consoling at all. But I guess the thought here is that you can't console yourself with lies. When I suffered political defeat, I kind of told myself, well, I did my best. Well, really? My best wasn't nearly good enough. So what makes Havel an inspiring figure to me is that in prison, he faced up to some very, very deep failings and betrayals. And I think that enabled him to come out of prison and six years later have the strength to become the president of his country and lead his country through the transformation from communism. But I think it shows that consolation has to have some connection to truth. You can't console

somebody by telling them a happy little fairy story. You have to hew to the truth. And so the relationship with consolation and truth is why consolation is so difficult. That's what I learned from Václav Havel.

**Andrew:** And the final one, which I thought about a great deal, particularly in the context of my mother's death, is Cicely Saunders and palliative care, and how we try to achieve a good death and do all the things we can and want to do before that happens.

**Michael:** I was lucky enough to meet Cicely Saunders, who is just an extraordinary woman. Funny, commanding, formidable. But she'd been a nurse and she'd sat by the side of people who were dying in London hospitals after the Second World War. And she thought, this is a terrible place to die. There are no curtains separating the patients, it's noisy, these people are going through the most important thing in their lives and there's no one to kind of give... And she began to get the idea of creating a hospice, where people for whom no further medical treatment was possible, could make peace with their lives and make peace with their loved ones. She discovered this from one of her patients, she asked this patient, where does it hurt? And the woman said all of me is wrong. Meaning it's not just my physical being, it's not just dying, it's the fact that I haven't worked it out with my family, I'm worried about my family. So she wanted to create a place where people could be free of pain and make peace with their lives and make peace with their loved ones. And in that sense she created an institution in which consolation could be possible. Most of the people in my book are writing about consolation. What makes Cicely Saunders so unique was that she created an institutional structure that would make consolation possible, relieving people of pain, and giving them the time to sort these things out. And that's why she's an essential figure in this story. And there's one other thing that she certainly taught me, and I would say it's the most important thing I learned from writing the book, was that she taught me to think of dying not as the

end of my life, but as something where I could still do something for someone else, which is, to the best of my ability, if I'm free enough of pain and calm enough, I could teach those around me not to fear death so much. And that's enormously difficult, and I have no idea whether I'll be capable of it, but I certainly know what my death is for now, in a way that I didn't before I learned from Cicely Saunders. What a great woman.

**Andrew:** And we should add that we've talked a lot about writers today, but you've also found fantastic examples in music and in art in the book, which we won't have time to cover. I want to ask you just two final questions. There's been a lot of talk lately, a lot of books published, writing about nature as a potential cure for tragedy, for depression, for failure in certain aspects of life. Do you see any merit in that?

**Michael:** Oh, certainly. Although it's a kind of chilly consolation, there is this kind of heartless beauty to nature. You go out into nature, and you're weeping, you're sorrowful, and the beauty is just out there, and the beauty doesn't seem to care about you. And you're reminded, needless to say, that you're not exactly the centre of the universe. And that can help you kind of get a little context. This book makes no pretence of being complete. It doesn't say, look, here are the authoritative texts that all sensible persons must read in order to be consoled. Forget about it. My musical examples will not resonate with some people, they will choose rhythm and blues or some wonderful song they heard as a kid or whatever. Ditto with nature. I have very little to say about the natural world. And that may well be to many viewers, or readers, a shortcoming. But the point is to encourage them to think of their own sources of consolation and nature is certainly one of them.

**Andrew:** And the other question is about how to encourage thinking, particularly about the future. We are going through a number of crises at the moment, whether that's fears about... an actuality about



the future of democracy, through to the kind of existential threats of climate change and ecological crisis and so on. And I was trying to think about how you console yourself or reconcile yourself with these issues in the future, some of which you will not experience yourselves. We've been doing a lot of work around the theme of being a good ancestor now, you know, putting in place now what hopefully people will look back at in the future as you having contributed to a better society in whatever way that is.

**Michael:** What a wonderful thought. Being a good ancestor. Boy, you guys are doing interesting things there in Bristol. No, I'm serious. I think that's a fantastic idea. And it allows me to say what I would say in answer to this – who the hell knows what's going happen with the future? We have no possession of the future. There is no question that one of the things that is making life harder at the moment is the sense that the future is just a great big black cloud over all our heads. This is what it means to live in dark times. The only thing I have to say about this is connected to ancestors, is to remember to go back into the past, to just feel how many people have been through darker times than our own with no sense that the future would deliver them from anything. Plague, violence, hatred, extermination, and we're still standing. It's the only thing I can say, really. I don't believe that history has a meaning. I don't believe that history has a shape necessarily. I do believe it can be understood. I don't believe it's just one damn thing after another. But we have no grip on the future whatever. We can extrapolate from current trends, but what we've understood from the twentieth century is that the extrapolation can be meaningless. So that requires a deep humility towards the future. But secondly, this practice of thinking of yourself as an ancestor, what do I hand off to my children and grandchildren so that they will look back on me and think, they did their best. But above all, the thing that I find most consoling in my own life is a sense of the deep continuity of the human experience over time, back to the Psalms, and back to the beginning of recorded speech and language. We are the same human race, we have been

struggling with the same issues from the very beginning. And that sense of contact and continuity and what I call solidarity in time is I think the only thing we can do to face an uncertain future.

**Andrew:** Well, thank you very much, Michael. As I said during our discussion, this is a moving book. It's also an inspirational book. *On Consolation* is published by Picador. Thank you for joining us today, Michael. Thank you.

**Michael:** My pleasure, Andrew, great to talk to you.

*This interview has been lightly edited for length and clarity. The full version of the interview is in the recording.*