

Krista Tippett honored by White House for engaging listeners on what it means to be human

by [Sarah Pulliam Bailey](#)

July 31, 2014

(RNS) On September 11, 2001, Krista Tippett was in Washington on her way to meet with potential funders to create a radio show focused on faith. As the day unfolded with attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the meeting was canceled.

“Unfortunately, the case for religion as a force in the world was made for me,” Tippett said.

Eventually, with help from the Pew Charitable Trusts and Minnesota Public Radio/American Public Media, Tippett launched *Speaking of Faith* in 2003, which eventually became *On Being*, a one-hour broadcast that airs on 334 radio stations across the country.

This week, President Obama honored the show’s host with a 2013 National Humanities Medal. In its citation, the White House said Tippett’s show “avoids easy answers, embracing complexity and inviting people of all faiths, no faith, and every background to join the conversation.”

The Peabody Award-winning broadcaster and *New York Times* best-selling author leads interviews that focus on spirituality and meaning, hosting a conversation instead of a sermon.

Her guests have ranged from retired Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Mormon blogger Joanna Brooks to Focus on the Family President Jim Daly.

After a recent interview with Jonathan Haidt, author of *The Righteous Mind*, Haidt tweeted that Tippett’s interview was one of his best.

Haidt said that while most interviewers skim a book or get talking points from a producer, Tippett read his books closely.

“She understood how I thought, and so her questions got beyond the superficial more quickly,” he said, noting her knowledge of both religion and politics. “She also made it a bit more personal than usual, asking more questions about my childhood, and how I came to hold the views that I hold about religion and politics.”

Maureen Fiedler, host of the public radio show *Interfaith Voices*, said she and Tippett had to both find their place in the public radio landscape.

“The idea of doing stories on religion that were not favoring a particular faith tradition was outside the imagination of a lot of the gurus in public radio,” Fiedler said.

“She does a long in-depth interview with somebody who is usually quite interesting. You can cover religion in depth and do it in a way that’s suitable for a public audience.”

Before creating the show, Tippett was a journalist and also special assistant to the U.S. ambassador to West Germany before the Berlin Wall fell. She studied history at Brown University before going to Bonn in 1983 on a Fulbright Scholarship to study the politics of Cold War Europe.

She had grown up in a Southern Baptist family but lost interest in religion during college. While living in Europe she returned to religion, joining an Anglican church. She then pursued a master of divinity degree from Yale University and is now an Episcopalian.

A number of changes were taking place in the late 1990s and early 2000s in the media landscape that created space for someone like Tippett, said Debra Mason, executive director of the Religion Newswriters Association. Many newspapers were expanding their religion coverage, the Internet was opening up more time slots than radio had experienced in the past as podcasts became more popular, and money from places such as the Pew Charitable Trusts was becoming available.

“You had a talented individual who was a driving force to see all of this through,” Mason said of Tippett. “She appeals to a highly intellectual crowd and has helped bring some of these complex conversations to the forefront.”

Her 2007 memoir, *Speaking of Faith*, addresses why religion matters and how to talk about it. She is informed by the theology of historical figures such as Dietrich

Bonhoeffer, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Charles Darwin; writers such as Annie Dillard; and people she has interviewed, such as Elie Wiesel and Karen Armstrong.

Tippett's show has broadened since its conception to *On Being*, an independent production that aims to address questions such as: What does it mean to be human? How do we want to live? The interviews are focused less on religion news or theological topics and more on a spiritual discussion. Recent topics, for instance, included mindfulness, mysticism, and the inner life. "We have a scary amount of silence," Tippett said about the show. "We can create something that has a contemplative space to it."

Radio, said the 53-year-old mother of two, is both individual and communal.

"There is an amazing intimacy about radio that lends itself to talking about intimate things, talking about spiritual things or talking about what it means to be human," Tippett said. "The medium of radio creates space for the spiritual and religious life, tapping into the reflective part of us."

*A version of this article originally appeared on the National Endowment for the Humanities [website](#).*