An edited transcript of a lecture held November 29, 2011 at The Writers Guild Theater in Beverly Hills, CA.
THE NORMAN LEAR CENTER

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Writers Bloc Presents is an independent literary and cultural series; a premier reading and conversation initiative based in Los Angeles, which hosts monthly lectures featuring the country's leading thinkers, commentators and entertainers.

Its mission is:
• to foster the significance and importance of literature and the written word as an art form;
• to enrich the general public's knowledge and awareness of the contemporary writers and thinkers who have made a significant impact on the cultural and literary landscape;
• to enhance the general public's exposure and access to literary and cultural work, thoughts and ideas as represented in and by modern works of fiction and nonfiction;
• to expand the general public's access to and understanding of literature through community-based programs featuring writers, thinkers, public figures and others in conversation on fictional and nonfictional work;
• and to create and foster opportunities for dialogue and interaction between the general public and writers, thinkers, public figures or others about reading, writing, literature, the literary process, the role and relationship of literature to music, film and other media, and the relevance and impact of literature on modern society.

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MARTY KAPLAN, is the Lear Center founding director, a former associate dean of the USC Annenberg School, and holds the Norman Lear Chair in Entertainment, Media and Society. A summa cum laude graduate of Harvard in molecular biology, a Marshall Scholar in English at Cambridge University, and a Stanford PhD in modern thought and literature, he was Vice President Walter Mondale's chief speechwriter and deputy presidential campaign manager. He has been a Disney Studios vice president of motion picture production, a film and television writer and producer, a radio host, print columnist and blogger.

TOM BROKAW, one of the most trusted and respected figures in broadcast journalism, is a special correspondent for NBC News. In this role, he reports and produces long-form documentaries and provides expertise during election coverage and breaking news events for NBC News. In 2004, Brokaw stepped down after 21 years as the anchor and managing editor of NBC Nightly News. He has received numerous honors, including the Edward R. Murrow Lifetime Achievement Award, the Emmy Award for Lifetime Achievement, and he was inducted as a fellow into the prestigious American Academy of Arts and Sciences. In addition, Brokaw has received the Records of Achievement Award from The Foundation for the National Archives; the Association of the U.S. Army honored him with their highest award, the George Catlett Marshall Medal, first ever to a journalist; and he was the recipient of the West Point Sylvanus Thayer Award, in recognition of devoted service to bringing exclusive interviews and stories to public attention. His insight, ability and integrity have earned him a dozen Emmys and two Peabody and duPont awards for his journalistic achievements. In 2003, NBC Nightly News was honored with the prestigious Edward R. Murrow Award for Best Newscast, representing the program’s fourth consecutive win in this category.
Andrea Grossman: Thank you for coming to tonight’s program featuring Tom Brokaw and Marty Kaplan. I’m Andrea Grossman, Founder of WritersBloc and we so appreciate your being here with us tonight. You could, after all, be home watching NBC News. But only here do you get Tom Brokaw, the dean of network news. More about Marty and Tom in a moment.

The promise of any campaign season is that we as a nation examine and sometimes redefine our identity and our goals. What we can all agree on is that so far it’s been entertaining for many, frustrating for some and not a lot of soul searching in evidence. Amid the clatter of the pending election, Tom Brokaw has given us a book that can start the conversation in earnest. And who is in a better position to do that than one of the most respected men in contemporary American broadcast journalism, someone who’s covered the most significant events of the past several decades, here and around the world.

In his new book, The Time of Our Lives: A Conversation About America, Tom asks us to take a step back and to engage with ourselves and with each other about how we as individuals can change our communities and our country. If all politics is local, then it makes sense that change starts right here in our own local communities and builds to a national level. The Time of Our Lives really is a conversation about our country and our value system between Tom and us, the readers. He presents us with a question at each chapter and explores the question in the most personal and engaging way. Questions that challenge us to rethink our lifestyles, our personal spending, our commitment to our neighborhood, the value of education.

In essence, Tom asks us to reflect on how we relate to our community and our country because to reclaim the greatness and the progress that we’ve taken for granted, we need to do some serious thinking and take action. It’s a book for all generations and he recognizes the power and energy of grandparents and the different kinds of power and energy in students and young people. In Tom’s unbreakable and unshakeable optimism and in his forthright voice, his observations and questions lead to promise and good.

Marty Kaplan is someone who knows how to ask the right questions, too. Marty has sat in the interviewer’s seat for WritersBloc on several great occasions; perhaps some of you were fortunate enough to attend one notable evening when he interviewed Peter Jennings for us. Marty pays attention to the news and comes at it from so many perspectives. He’s been a White House speech writer, a studio executive and a journalist and as the Norman Lear Professor of Entertainment Media and Society at USC’s Annenberg School, he’s the go-to guy when reporters need clarity and cultural context. When we the public seek clarity and context, we turn to Tom Brokaw and his colleagues, then the colleagues turn to Marty.

So, here’s what will happen tonight. Tom and Marty will talk, and feel free to ask questions from the two mics in the audience when they’re through. Afterwards, Tom will sign copies of The Time of Our Lives. Remember folks, Christmas is right upon us. Hanukkah is even closer, I think. They’re all dangerously close. Skylight Books is here with tons, literally tons of books, in anticipation of your Christmas and Hanukkah needs and Tom will sign them. And we’ll even help you out to your cars, you know, with the stacks you’re gonna get. He’s already signed a whole batch of them in the green room, so many of them are just ready to go, if you don’t want to wait for him to sign in line for you. This is his only public appearance in Los Angeles. Take advantage of him and have him sign his terrific book. Thank you. Tom Brokaw, Marty Kaplan.

Marty Kaplan: Tom, you have a lot of fans here tonight and, full disclosure, I’m a fan too. So that’s where I’m coming from, but we
are in the Writers Guild Theater and as a member of the Writers Guild, I quickly learned the expression “no conflict, no drama.” And so from time to time, if I prod and provoke and try to object, it’s in order to keep things lively, not because I think you’re all wet.

I’m going to start by getting right to this. I couldn’t resist. I’m quoting from a review of Tom’s book in Reason magazine, the Libertarian magazine, just a few weeks ago. It says Mr. Brokaw will be 72 in 2012, the same age as John McCain was in 2008, and a year younger than Ronald Reagan was when he was reelected in 1984. But if the political media establishment or the electorate are hungering for a candidate in 2012, who isn’t Barak Obama, Rick Perry, Herman Cain or Mitt Romney and if Michael Bloomberg isn’t going to run, well let’s just say that the debates could be livelier next year if Mr. Brokaw participates not as a moderator, but as a candidate.

So are you ruling this out, Mr. Brokaw?

**Tom Brokaw:** The only thing I’m running for is for the border, actually, if things continue the way they are. No, the more serious response is that I’m a journalist; that’s all I’ve ever been, that’s all I’ve ever wanted to be. I think that we have an important role in the public discourse in an election year. I hope that my voice, especially as it’s embodied in this book and what I have to say in the course of the next year will help expand and advance the dialog that we all need to be having with each other.

I don’t remember a time, Marty, and I reflect this in The Time of Our Lives — and I’m curious to know whether you agree with this — when we have had the kind of acute polarization that we do now. We’ve had it pretty seriously in the past on a number of occasions, but I don’t remember a time when people just simply refused to talk to each other, when they’ve gone to the far corners of the room and they don’t want to listen, they only want to shout. Some of that is exacerbated obviously by talk radio and cable television, but especially by the blogosphere, in which you can unleash a jihad against a candidate if they don’t meet your specifications, based on your very narrow interests. What I try to do in this book is not to recruit candidates, but to change the tone of the dialog.

**Marty Kaplan:** That takes us right into something I want to spend a chunk of tonight talking about, which is the argument, the case you make in the book. For those of you who have not read it yet, it’s more than one book. The two are integrated. One book is about this and the other is very personal. You learn a whole lot about who Tom is and where he comes from, and so I also want to make sure we leave some time to talk about that as well.

But to start with what you just said, your book starts with a premise that we are adrift, we’ve lost our way. That’s something you’ve picked up as you’ve travelled, yes?

**Tom Brokaw:** It is. I’ve been doing this for almost 50 years now and you know, starting in the precincts of Omaha, Nebraska, of Atlanta, Los Angeles, all through the 1960s out here, as some of you know, and then to Washington for Watergate, through The Today Show, Nightly News and then Around the World.

**Marty Kaplan:** I’m exhausted already.

**Tom Brokaw:** So am I. But as I indicated earlier, first I thought maybe I’m just an old fogey and I’m looking at the past through rose-colored glasses. But I’ve actually gone and checked the data, looked at things objectively, talked to a lot of people around for as long as I’ve been, and everyone agrees. What I think is most distressing is that for the first time, I’m seeing a country that really has kind of lost its confidence in terms of where we’re gonna go and how we’re gonna get there.

The central question that I keep hearing, especially from my generation and the Boomers, up and down the Boomer scale, is “I...
don’t think my children will have the kind of life that I’ve had.” That gets to the heart of the American dream. So I’ve been trying to retool the answer to that and say, maybe we should recalibrate that question. It’s always had a kind of quantitative underpinning to it. Will they make more money than I do? Will they have a larger house? Will they travel more? Will they have a bigger job than I’ve had? Will they have more toys? I say, “You know there’s a finite capacity for all that.” We’ve also learned there’s a price that comes with it during the course of this economic downturn.

So let’s try to retool that question in this country to make it a qualitative question. Will we have more economic justice in America? Will we create the same opportunities in terms of demands in the new workplace for those at the lower end of the socioeconomic class as we do for those who get an education in the white suburbs of America? Are we going to be able to use these new tools that are truly transformative, the tools of information technology and cyber technology, are we going to use those for instruments that will enhance and expand wisdom, or will we use those as weapons against people that don’t agree with our particular point of view? Or as young people now, in too many instances, use technology in anonymous bullying tactics.

Those are the kinds of conversations that I would like to see emerge now, because our country, once you get outside the Beltway, is up on its toes and leaning forward and saying we’ve got to take stock of who we are and find a process in which we can initiate these conversations.

**Marty Kaplan:** To pick up on the word “conversation,” your subtitle is *A Conversation About America,* and in the book you talk about what you just said: that we need a dialog in this America that we live in right now. So, what does it look like to have a national conversation? Where does that happen? How does that work?

**Tom Brokaw:** Well, I had one this morning. I was on NPR in Pasadena and both Larry Mantle and I had a wonderful conversation with him about this. He wasn’t in my face the entire time and as I told you earlier, I was on *Fox News* this morning and all three of the anchors asked important questions with real context to them. That’s not routine on the morning talk shows and it’s not just on Fox, it’s across the board. I think that there is a hunger for it.

One of the qualities that I’ve always cherished as a journalist is that I grew up in working class America in small towns and spent a lot of time on Main Street. As a result of that, I can land almost anywhere in this country on Main Street and within 20 minutes tell you where the Republicans are having coffee in the morning and where the Democrats are having coffee — and what they’re talking about. So these conversations do go on all day in this country. What we need to do is to expand the megaphone.

I’ve even suggested that what we require at the moment is a kind of coalition for the higher ground that would encompass more people, not just one party or the other, but all people who have real anxieties about where we’re going.

Let me say something that may surprise you. The Tea Party — and by the way, I shared what I thought was the DNA of the country before the Tea Party became the institution that it’s become, with people at the White House and on Capitol Hill after going across America in 2009 on Highway 50, and I said that half this country is ticked off in a halfcocked position. I didn’t use the phrase ticked off. I used the more vivid phrase.

**Marty Kaplan:** Did you say halfcocked?

**Tom Brokaw:** Right. I did say halfcocked. They don’t believe in anything anymore. The Tea Party grew out of that. Here’s the deal with the Tea Party: They played by the rules. They got angry. They got organized. They got to Washington. They stayed on message and they’ve stayed disciplined. Now most of the country, in fact the vast majority of the country doesn’t believe in the goals of the
Tea Party, but the Tea Party is having an impact, especially on the Republican presidential nomination races, way out of proportion to their numbers. But it’s because they organized. It’s because they used all of the tools that were available to them to stay organized.

There are some Tea Party members — I heard from one of them today — who have real intellectual firepower. These are true Libertarians who believe in what they’re doing and they get up every morning committed to it. It takes that kind of intellectual discipline and that kind of organizational energy to begin to move things. And think of the impact that they’ve had.

If you’ll just permit me two other examples that I use in the book. People say “I’m just one person, I can’t do it. The problems are too big.” In the book I cite two very popular examples of organizational strength in America. One is a woman from Maryland who had a daughter who was killed by a drunk driver and said this is outrageous what we have going on in this country. Her name is Candace Lightner, a lot of you know who she is. She founded Mothers Against Drunk Driving. She had a profound effect in this country on social behavior, on drinking and driving, on laws.

I remember in Los Angeles when, if you got stopped after having a few pops, you often got let go. Now you go to jail. And it shows up on your record and your license can be taken away from you. Bars and restaurants have to have a different attitude about it. Thousands of lives have been changed as a result of that one mother’s outrage.

Two years ago, I went back to my home state of South Dakota as a favor to a friend who was a breast cancer survivor; she was the chair of the Susan B. Komen Race for the Cure. I kind of vaguely knew what the Race for the Cure was. When I got back there on a Saturday morning during pheasant hunting season — which is a religious holiday in South Dakota — there were 4,000 people who showed up to Race for the Cure. The next day I was back in New York at a football game and everybody came onto the field with pink chin straps and pink shoelaces. And that was Nancy Brinker, who made a pledge to her sister to organize something that could advance the race for the cure for breast cancer. Those are just two examples of how the country was moved and people gravitated to those movements because they believed in them.

Marty Kaplan: Those latter two are private individuals in the nonprofit sector. You started by talking about the Tea Party and its impact. I’m wondering, do you think that an election season in America now is a place in which we can have an intelligent conversation?

Tom Brokaw: It’s tougher, there’s no question about that, because the megaphone is so expanded and it has so many parts now. I mean, it’s kind of a lot of people yelling at you either from cable television or talk radio or the blogosphere and some of the stuff is pretty vitriolic, and that’s across the political spectrum. But unless we begin to have that conversation we’re going to defeat ourselves.

The fact is, if I took you to Iowa for the caucuses or to New Hampshire, the first two states, these are states that take great pride in their important role in the beginning of the process. And as a result, they do have these conversations, Marty, up and down the main streets of little towns in Iowa. In Carroll, Iowa or Riceville or Osage, there are folks who are gathering and they’re talking about who could be the best candidate for them, who they’d like to see in the White House and they kick it around.

In New Hampshire, and this is not just a cliché, I’ve asked residents who have you settled on and they’ll say, I don’t know, I’ve only met him three times, so I haven’t made up my mind yet. It’s a very personal connection and they take it very seriously, as you know, having been up there. They have very sophisticated attitudes about what’s going on.

I had a wonderful personal experience there in 2000, when John
McCain was running what turned out to be an upset victory over George Bush 43. Meredith went with me because we’d heard that McCain had kind of caught fire and we were in an American Legion Hall and John McCain was standing up in front of the American Legion Hall and he was taking questions from everyone about everything and responding to them directly. He opened his remarks by saying that Tom Brokaw wrote a book called The about how much we owe that generation and how we’re the beneficiaries of that and we have to think about what they did and now we have to apply those lessons to where we are now.

He has all these conversations. Then an Air Force guy got up and said, “Senator, I think the only thing you’ve done wrong in your life is that you were in the Navy; I’m an Air Force man.” And he pointed out that I was in the back of the hall and then asked a question about Medicare. And Senator McCain looked at him and said, about that Air Force/Navy business, “I wanted to go in the Air Force but I couldn’t because my parents were married.”

Nowhere else but in New Hampshire could you get away with that kind of a line. If that happened today, you know, frankly, it would be the fodder of all cable and would go viral immediately. But it broke up the hall and it was John McCain. And then he said, “I did know Brokaw was here. He’s the leading member of the Trotskyite press in America and he’s standing there at the back of the hall!”

It’s that kind of dialog that we need to have again, because politics should be engaging and people should be able to say those kinds of things and pull everyone in. They walked out of there having a pretty good feeling about John McCain. And we’ve lost that. Because every word now is measured.

Eight years later when John McCain was the candidate against Barak Obama, one of his principle aides told me that they just couldn’t connect to the younger journalists. It was a different generation. He’d call them up to the front of the airplane, they’re all Tweeters and they’re just waiting for the Senator to make a small mistake or to be slightly inconsistent so they can go back and Tweet that or file it on their blog. He felt that we just didn’t have the freedom to have the conversation that we’d had eight years ago in the country and I think that’s a loss, frankly.

**Marty Kaplan:** I want to turn to some of the specific problems you talk about and some of the potential solutions, but before I do, just one more line of inquiry about what you’ve been talking about. You mentioned vitriol across the political spectrum and how we are polarized and about the not particularly attractive role the blogosphere, from your point of view, has. It’s my sense that one of the points that at least the Left blogosphere makes and the Right in its own way, is that there is a false equivalence that says that both sides are equally culpable, that the polarization, the extremism is as much the fault of your side as it is of my side. You hear that from the Left in its way; you hear that from the Right in its way. Do you think that it’s fair to say that both sides are equally culpable?

**Tom Brokaw:** No. Well, I don’t think culpable is the phrase I would use. Are they equally weighted? No. But I want to remind you about the kind of target that George Bush 43 was for the Left when he was in office and the books that were written about him and the things that were said about him in the blogosphere. An incumbent president becomes a target — and this president is a target for the Right, because they really want to recapture the White House next time, so they’re coming after him with money, marbles and chalk. There’s just no question about it.

There’s a blog called RedState.org and the subheading is “Knee-capping the President at Every Opportunity.” That’s the phrase they use. It’s there on a permanent basis. And it’s that kind of language that is incendiary in a lot of ways and it seems to empower other people then to use that kind of language.

Now, having said all of that, anybody who’s just a casual student of American history knows that this has been a rich tradition in
this country for a long, long time. I’m not a serious Lincoln buff, but I’m enough of a student of Lincoln that I just can’t stop reading about how he became who he was and how he became the president that he became. And I was reading one of the better biographies of him, in fact, I think the best single volume biography of him, and it jumped out at me that he was an early blogger. When he was getting active in Illinois State politics as a young man, a lawyer with some political aspirations, he was writing articles in the partisan press at the time about one of his political opponents under a pseudonym. And it was very tough stuff that he was writing, not necessarily true. And his opponent knew who was writing this, so he challenged Lincoln to a duel. And because Lincoln was the challenged man, he got to choose the weapons and he chose broadswords because he’s a long rangy guy. They actually met in Missouri at dawn, but cooler heads prevailed. And Lincoln for the rest of his life regretted having done what he did. But that was going on at that time and it was vitriol from arguably our greatest president, who had the power of eloquence to pull this country together. But at that point in his life, he was just pulling the trigger, as it were and hiding behind someone else’s name.

Marty Kaplan: A sock puppet, we would call it now online. Tom Brokaw: Right.

Marty Kaplan: So let’s turn to some of the problems that you focus on and one that appropriately gets a lot of attention is the Great Recession. You call it a cautionary tale about easy credit, the folly of the boom and big government spending. So talk a little bit about that.

Tom Brokaw: Well, people who are a lot smarter than I am should have seen this coming. I actually have a notebook that I’ve kept and in the fall of 2007, I was in Omaha to do a story with Warren Buffet about the inequity of payroll taxes, because that was when he was beginning his crusade. And I asked him, what do you think about what’s going on in the economy? Fall 2007. He said, “I’m really worried about the housing crisis being overheated and the stock market just can’t continue on the plane that it’s on now.” I wrote all that down.

I found the notebook a year ago and I called him up and said, “Warren, I’m reading what you said in 2007, before all hell broke loose. I’m such a dummy, I came back to New York and I did say that Warren seems to be concerned about it, but I didn’t act on it.” He said, “You think you’re a dummy? Neither did I.” So there is this kind of myopia that occurs when things are going well. It seems like they will go well forever.

We have a negative savings rate in this country. We’ve got 20 million homes with people who are either being foreclosed or they’re in peril of being foreclosed. These are systemic and real issues in our economy and it’s not going to be easy to work our way out of it. There are 6 million people who are unemployed in America; 4 million have been out of a job for a year. Now think if you’re one of those people; you haven’t had a job for a year.

I was just in the Southeast in Alabama and Tennessee and Georgia and two years ago an international forecasting firm said that that part of America will recover its prerecession job levels by the year 2013. They’ve just revamped it and now they say it’s gonna be 2015 or 2016. We’ve got a ways to go to get out of this. We can’t bury our heads in the sand. It’s gonna take a systematic approach to pull the place back together again, and that’s the job that I don’t think we’ve stepped up to entirely yet.

Marty Kaplan: So, when you talk about the causes of it, you just mentioned some of them like debt and the lack of a savings and the housing bubble and so on—.

Tom Brokaw: I can give you some specific examples on the gov-
ernment side. On the government side we went to war on a credit card. We were told by Paul Wolfowitz, among others, that if we went to war in Iraq, that within nine months we would be sharing oil revenue with Iraq and that we would recover at least $70 billion—.

Marty Kaplan: That’s after they welcomed us with flowers.

Tom Brokaw: Right. That’s right. We’ve spent over a trillion dollars in Afghanistan and Iraq. We had no concomitant way of paying for that out of additional taxes on all of us. Quite the contrary; taxes were cut. We didn’t pay anything extra in gasoline taxes, for example. There were no sacrifices required whatsoever at home; no sacrifices emotionally, mentally or financially.

We sent less than one percent of our population to fight those wars. They paid a terrible price. They’ve come home in body bags, they’ve come home greatly damaged physically or emotionally. Their families live in a state of terror while they’re over there. The rest of us can put those wars out of our mind. We don’t even have to think about them if we choose not to, and most people don’t at this stage. Because they’ve been going on for so long.

President Bush, getting ready for reelection, added something called a prescription drug benefit to Medicare, but forgot to add funding for it. It’s now a trillion dollar deficit on top of all of that. Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, some of your friends were involved in those agencies. They promoted home ownership across the country, in a very clever way, a big crusade to get people into houses and as a result, a lot of people who became mortgage owners were not prepared for it, and that helped crater the housing industry in this country.

So my argument has been, during this time, it was all-in. We were all participating in this. There was a lot of consumerism that went on and now we’re paying a price for it and we’re only going to get out of it by managing more skillfully our way out of it than we did managing our way into it.

Marty Kaplan: What struck me, though, is that your account of what got us to where we are is missing one big thing, the gorilla, and that is the culpability of Wall Street. Today, a federal judge, the New York Times reported —

Tom Brokaw: Citibank, right.

Marty Kaplan: — that Citibank had created a billion-dollar fund packed with mortgages they knew were junk, sold them and their customers lost $700 million and Citibank bet against them and made money, and the SEC was trying to settle the case and the judge said no. And it’s one of example after example of what Wall Street was up to in the derivatives market, that feeling which has given rise to what we now call —

Tom Brokaw: Occupy, right.

Marty Kaplan: So why isn’t that part of your case?

Tom Brokaw: Well, part of the case is there, in fact. I talk at the end of the book about failure being an option; about no one from Wall Street stepping up and admitting how gravely they had failed and continuing to take money out of Wall Street even as they were leaving Wall Street. The reason I didn’t do more of it is because there’s been so much attention paid to that and I was trying to get at some of the other tertiary issues that are around. But in fact, in the section called “Failure is an Option,” I cover Wall Street not taking responsibility for what it did and I actually quote at great length Elizabeth Warren —

Marty Kaplan: Yes.

Tom Brokaw: — who said, you know, Wall Street gets bailed out and nobody’s held responsible for that. The middle class gets clocked during all of that time. What I was trying to do was get
at other issues beyond those which are written about so often. I didn’t want to write a book about Wall Street, because there had been so many of those: *Reckless Endangerment* had been written about the housing crisis, *The Big Short* had been written by Michael Lewis, and I was trying to get at other issues. But I did touch on it along the way.

But I also happen to think this has been going on for some time. It’s not just in the last four or five years, We had children who were going into the housing market back around 2000. One of our daughters called and said, “My God, I can’t believe the kinds of deals that they want us to sign up for, interest-only for 15 years on these huge balloon payments.” I had never seen anything like that.

When Meredith and I lived in California — I cite this as an example to show you how much times have changed — we were buying our first house up in the Valley, above Studio City and it was $42,500 and we could afford that. I was making good money at NBC.

**Marty Kaplan:** Which was 40,000.

**Tom Brokaw:** Yes, that’s right. Exactly. It was $40,000 and then I had a chance to buy a house with a friend on the beach in Venice that would be $110,000. And I went to the bank and I had a very good contract at NBC in those days and it showed how much I would be making for the next three years, and the bank wouldn’t give me a loan. They said, well, you’re a young person and credit is tight and we’re not gonna make the loan to you. Move the clock forward 30-some years, there would have been people crawling all over me trying to make that loan and making it interest-only for a long, long time.

Then you go to states like Nevada and see stuff that was sold for these inflated prices. I was in a housing development outside of Reno with a family that was going through foreclosure. They had bought a modular home for $185,000 and they were losing it and the value of it had dropped to about $75,000. That’s really what the house was worth under any circumstances. It was worth about $75,000. But they’re stuck and the banks are stuck and then we’re all stuck. And that’s the kind of craziness that went on.

**Marty Kaplan:** So, let’s move to another area you talk about, which is both part of our problem and will be part of our solution, which is education. You describe vividly how wrong things have gotten. How did they get there? What went wrong?

**Tom Brokaw:** I think a couple of things went wrong. I covered education a lot here in Los Angeles and this is almost a template for what went wrong —

**Marty Kaplan:** That’s when you were at KNBC.

**Tom Brokaw:** When I was at KNBC. The glory days! But what happened is that you had the middle class rising in prosperity and moving out to the suburbs and it was largely a white population. And they were building and demanding better schools for their children. There was an abandonment of the inner city and the lower socioeconomic classes were left to their own devices.

And what also happened is that teachers got organized and they moved in and they got bought off by school boards around the country, and they got contracts that were extraordinarily beneficial to the teachers but not necessarily to the system. That has to get sorted out. A lot of people in Manhattan, present company included, said I’d like to send my kids to public school but I can’t take a chance; I’m going to send them to private school. And we ended up with two societies, separate and unequal in our education system.

I’ve done three documentaries on education in America and the one that was the most telling was in the Milwaukee area. Right outside the Milwaukee school district is a very prosperous subur-
ban school district, Springdale. It’s where everybody would like to send their kids. It’s one of the best school districts in America. Two blocks away you’re in the Milwaukee inner city school district and they have no money and they have overcrowded classrooms and they have one parent at home or both parents working. It was straddling the line between two Americas. We can’t go forward as a society unless we raise the education level of everyone, because it’s gonna take everybody, quite honestly.

We have 10 to 20 percent of our high school graduates across America now going to college having to take remedial courses in math and reading. I cite one statistic in the book that in China, every eighth grader takes math, physics and biology. In America, 18% of our high school students take those courses.

In 1996 — a long time ago relatively speaking — I was in Seoul, South Korea for the Olympics. I tell this story in the book about being on a roof overlooking a courtyard and it wasn’t clear what the courtyard was because we were broadcasting in the middle of the night to deal with the time difference. And before dawn, the lights began to flicker on in the courtyard and I went down after we got off the air at about 5:30, and the courtyard was filled with junior high Korean students doing their homework by flashlight, waiting for the doors to open an hour and a half later.

President Obama had the president of Korea in his office last year and Arne Duncan tells the story about the president saying to the president of Korea as an opening gambit in conversation, tell me about your challenges in education. He says my challenge is always that the parents are demanding more from us, not less. We don’t have that going on here. I don’t mean to go on at great length here. I’m not going to filibuster, but what I do find encouraging is that it is now on the agenda and a lot of different things are being tried.

Marty Kaplan: You make a couple of suggestions, some of which I suspect will be controversial. One is for an 11-month school year, and another, just to add to it, is that the higher education systems, state colleges and universities are overbuilt and maybe they should be regional rather than individual.

Tom Brokaw: Well, for instance, in rural America, there were a lot of state-supported institutions established in the beginning of the 20th Century, because farm kids didn’t want to go too far from home. That’s all changed. South Dakota and North Dakota have between them about 1.5 million people. They have 20 institutions of higher learning. Twenty of them. They can at least centralize the administration and purchasing power and close down and consolidate some of them and have better institutions. They have four very good institutions at the higher level; South Dakota State, North Dakota State and the two universities are very good but they then drain a lot of their state resources off to these other places.

Almost every educator that I know says that we’ve got to extend the school year, because so much is lost in those three months that they’re away. It takes teachers six weeks to get kids kind of kick-started again back in the fall term. One of the proposals that I make is that for children who have to work, then you try to make public/private deals with employers who can give them a job in the morning or in the afternoon and they go to school during the day and then the employers get some tax credits for that and they get real skill sets as work.

It’s no longer about reading, writing and arithmetic. You know, we’ve had this kind of one size fits all attitude for far too long in this country.

Marty Kaplan: I want to turn to the personal side, but one last question at least for now on the policy side. You mentioned teachers and teachers’ unions and the impact of their bargaining agreements on budgets. There have been moves in Wisconsin and Ohio

“
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Tom Brokaw
to deal with that in part by eliminating the right to collective bargaining. Do you think that is a step too far?

**Tom Brokaw:** I think it’s a step too far. I think the teachers have a right to collective bargaining and organizing. But what has astonished me, is that the teachers’ union just kind of got behind the barricade and said here we take a stand. What they should be willing to do is two things, really — and I get crazy about the teachers’ union. One is tenure. After three years you get tenure and it’s whether you can teach or not. And the second thing is this resistance to merit pay. It’s one of the few places in America where we have absolute uniform salary levels, when we know that there are teachers that are —

**Marty Kaplan:** Congress.

**Tom Brokaw:** — worth more than other teachers. Right. There are teachers worth more than other teachers, there’s no question about that. And then other things make me – look, University of Mississippi has had a terrible football record with a coach that they had high expectations for so they fired him. University of Mississippi is in the poorest state in the country. They spend less on education at the elementary and secondary level than any other state in the country. It’s going to cost them $6 million in a buyout to get rid of this football coach at Ole Miss. There’s something out of whack about that.

So, we need to make the school year longer, we need to give kids the option of that. Mike Bloomberg has come up with a cooperative agreement with IBM to create a new technology school in New York City and it’ll be grade 8 through 14. So that they can continue on through their high school years for two more years and then they’ll go off to someplace like MIT or Stanford or one of the other technological institutes. It’s that kind of imaginative thinking that we need to bring to the school system.

I don’t know what you do in Los Angeles. I spent a lot of time looking at that. It’s a huge school district. And it’s so uneven in its demographics across the board. But there’s a lot of heroic work being done in this city and every city in America and by public school teachers, by the way. But they’re sailing against a very stiff headwind.

**Marty Kaplan:** Toward the end of the book, you say something which made my head jerk; it was so stunning and you didn’t talk about it after having said it. You said that one week before starting as anchor for the *NBC Nightly News*, your dad passed away. What was that like?

**Tom Brokaw:** It was a bittersweet experience because it was a terrible loss and it was unexpected. He was one of those males of his generation who grew up smoking and having not the best dietary habits in the world. My father dropped out of school at the age of 10. He was really sent out of the family to go fend for himself at that age in a small town in northern South Dakota. He had a very hard, hard childhood.

But he had this idea — that we didn’t know about until he later did his oral history — that he could succeed at something and what he became extraordinarily successful at was a working man. He was a master operator of heavy equipment, construction equipment and he could fix or build anything. And he often had me at this side and I can tell you it wasn’t genetic. I knew what the tools were, but that’s as far as my interest went, quite honestly.

At any rate, he had this enormous pride in what I did. We had this wonderful relationship but we could not have been more different in how we went through life. My father was a man of his hands and these mechanical skills that he had and his hobby was working. He really didn’t play sports. He didn’t have that opportunity. He didn’t go hunting. On Saturdays he would get up and overhaul a car; nothing would make him happier.

My mother stopped saying that she needed something because he
would go down to the basement and make it for her. She finally said, “I want to be able to go buy an ironing board; I don’t want you to have to make it for me.” That’s the household in which I lived.

So now I achieve a certain status in the field that I’m in, and this is completely contrary to my father’s way of life, but he was enormously proud and we had this wonderful, wonderful ability to communicate with each other. And I got named to the NBC Nightly News anchor job and it came just at a time when the salaries for these jobs took a quantum leap for all of us across the board. So my father called me when it was announced I’d be the anchor of Nightly News and there was a lot of speculation about how much money I was going to make. Called me from California, where Meredith and I had bought them a small retirement place down in Leisure World. And he said, “So I’m reading the paper here about your new job and how much money you’re going to make.” And I said, “You know dad, we’ve never talked about money before, why would we start now?”  And he said, “Well I was just curious.” I said, “Okay, but let’s not talk about it.”

So about 10 days later, Time magazine published something in much greater detail and it had the real aura of authenticity about it. So he calls me right back. “Well, I’ve got Time magazine here and I’m reading about your salary.” I said, “Dad, we’ve never talked — why do you keep bringing this up?”  “Well, I’ll tell you why we keep bringing it up: for as long as your mother and I have known you, you’ve always run a little short at the end of the year. We need to know how much to put aside this year.”

That was one of my last conversations with him. He died about five days later and it was heartbreaking. But, he had the satisfaction of knowing that his son had been named the anchor of NBC Nightly News. He had come from a very troubled background in this desperate little town in northern South Dakota. He was living in a condominium in southern California where he loved to walk out on a balcony, look around at the bougainvillea and the leafi-ness in the middle of February, and look at me and — my father was very red-haired and he’d break into a big grin — and say, if the boys back in Bristol could see me now. And that helped get me through those difficult times.

And I’ve said to other people who have lost a parent recently: In ways that you do not yet understand, they’re going to be with you the rest of your life. You talk to them constantly. In my case, when the wiring doesn’t work in the house or the plumbing goes out, I’m standing with two tools in my hand and say, “Red, what in the hell do I do now?”  And I don’t get the kind of clarity that I need from him.

He would love to come to California, walk through our house, wherever we lived, just get out of the car and walk through the house, come back and say, okay, in the back bedroom, Tom, you’ve got some wiring back there that needs to be worked on and your car, by the way, it seems to me that the brakes are not doing as well as they need to do. That was his love of life. And it’s helpful in my own work ethic.

Marty Kaplan: You lost your mother just a few weeks ago.

Tom Brokaw: I did, here in California, and the line that has been comforting to me is that she had the best of both worlds. She had a South Dakota upbringing and a California lifestyle. My mother was a pure child of the Depression. She graduated from high school at the age of 16, college cost $100 a year, and she couldn’t possibly afford that. The family farm was taken over by the bank. And she met my dad. They were, they really could not have been more unalike in so many ways. Mother was bookish, had a wonderful sense of humor, not particularly athletic. My dad was racing motorcycles, doing all this other stuff. But, it was a great, great union.

And Mother, when Father died, went back to South Dakota, sold everything they had there and said South Dakota does not need
one more widow and came here. And just loved the last part of her life, because of the range of friends that she had that she would not have had in South Dakota, the activities that she could do.

Huge Lakers fan. Huge. I got her tickets for the playoffs; she sat with the wives one year; and then I got her an autographed picture of Kobe Bryant. She had that on the wall of her bedroom until he got in trouble in Colorado. She took it down and put it under her bed. When they began to win again, she took it out and put it back up in the bedroom. And I said Mother, there’s some kind of situational ethics going on here that we’re dealing with.

At any rate, we were blessed to have her in our life as long as we did. She had a wide circle of friends. And you know, when I thought about the arc of her life, she really began life in a little house on the prairie and reading by kerosene lamp, no indoor plumbing. She lived long enough to log on and go to Europe on jet planes and go on luxury cruises. She couldn’t afford to go to college but she saw her granddaughters graduate from Dartmouth Medical School and from Berkley and from Duke. And she had a full realization of all that. And about the bad old days, never a whine or a whimper. Never ever heard her complain about how difficult things were. And that helped give all of us a kind of perspective. Her granddaughters adored her, because she was so strong and quite free with her advice and most of it was spot on.

Marty Kaplan: There’s another woman in your life, your wife of 50 years now, Meredith, who is here. Meredith, where are you? There she is. So, in the book you say about Meredith that you’re not dependent, you’re complimentary. What do you mean by that?

Tom Brokaw: Well, we have different skill sets. I say in the book, there’s a thing at NBC called Team Brokaw and almost all the members of Team Brokaw are women, who work for me as producers and editors and really help me with my professional life. And there’s no more important member of Team Brokaw than Meredith Brokaw and we’re both on the same team.

Meredith is an expert bridge player. She is also a very skilled cook and she is also wonderful at knitting. She’s at the finer arts, as I like to say and she’s cool and calm about everything. I am this gregarious guy and when I took some bridge lessons from one of her instructors, he just looked at me and looked at Meredith and said, “Cowboy, there’s not much we can do with this guy.” So we complement each other over the 50 years — it’ll be 50 years in August that we have been married. One of the things that we have discovered and we did this almost intuitively, is that we have so many shared interests and we care so deeply about each other, but we’ve always kind of gone through life on our own separate tracks.

I’ve been on the book tour a lot and Meredith’s just been in the Middle East with a friend of hers from California, Kathleen Brown and they’ve been in Abu Dhabi and Dubai and in Jordan visiting antiquities. Here’s the perfect example of how our lives have been lived. We were scheduled to go on a big trek to Northern Pakistan - this is some time ago - in the Hunza Valley. In the summer of 1989, Tiananmen Square blew up. I came home and said, “I can’t go.”

Meredith said, “I’m on my way.” And she took one of our daughters and left the next day and off they went, picked up another daughter of ours who was working in Peshawar, Pakistan and they went on this glacier trek. These women with Shiite guides, in which Meredith was really in charge. I was in China. They had a wonderful time. I had a very rewarding time. We all got back together when we got home. So it’s that kind of working it out so that you’re not as dependent on each other but you support each other’s interest and you draw strength from one another. The big thing is, she still laughs at my jokes. Whether she thinks they’re funny or not, she still laughs at them, so that helps.

Marty Kaplan: There’s a sentence in the book: “Meredith is mar-

It’s that kind of working it out so that you’re not as dependent on each other but you support each other’s interest and you draw strength from one another.”

Tom Brokaw
ried to a man who has spent their married life in one corner of the
vanity business, not immune to the trappings of celebrity.” What
do you mean?

Tom Brokaw: Well, you know, if there’s an oxymoron in American
life it is “humble anchorman.” We just don’t exist, quite honestly.
And you do get accustomed to getting the good table at the res-

taurant or getting invited to opening nights or getting the tickets
for the World Series or getting to go to the Super Bowl. The Olym-
pics are coming up and I’ll be able to be there in the front row.

But when people have asked what it’s like to have grown up where
I did and then gain a certain amount of recognition, I say frankly,
when I get home at night and Meredith remembers what it is I do
for a living, I’m always relieved, because she’s got her own inter-
est. She’s been a successful business woman and author. She has
a whole circle of admirers who think of me, not as Tom Brokaw
the anchorman, but the guy who’s lucky enough to be married to
Meredith. And we share those feelings.

Just this morning, we were at the hotel here in Beverly Hills and
we both looked at each other and remembered our days here and
said, “You know, what a great life we’ve had. How lucky we’ve
been.” We’ve never lost the sense of awe about the good fortune
that we’ve inherited from our family and from our friends, and
we’ve never lost our sense of discovery. I think about that and our
enormous sense of curiosity. We’re going to an eco-resort in Costa
Rica with our kids, because that’s the kind of thing that we really
like to do.

If you give me 20 seconds, I’ll just tell you one story about how this
works both ways. We’re both active outdoors people and we love
backpacking, starting in California and then we did it all over the
West and so when we began to have grandchildren, we couldn’t
wait to take them into the back country. And when our San Fran-
cisco granddaughters were 7 and 5, they came to our Montana
ranch and we said we’re gonna take you on your first overnight
camping trip. And they could tell there was a little anxiety about
that.

And it was about three and a half miles up into the back country
to a small cowboy cabin. And it was off trail and there was a little
kvetching about the bugs and getting through the woods and
everything. But they made it and it was a little stiffer than we
thought it was gonna be. And we got down, we cooked out. And
then we said to the girls, you’re gonna sleep in the cabin, this little
cowboy cabin and we’ll be right outside in our sleeping bags. So,
we tucked them in. It gets very dark when it gets dark in Montana.

And we were no sooner in our sleeping bags than Meredith and
I could hear kind of a buzz from in the cabin. The girls were chat-
tering with each other. About 30 seconds later, one of them hits
the floor from the bunk and comes running out onto the porch,
and we’re down deep in our sleeping bag and we can hear her in
a very commanding voice say — they call Meredith, Nan — Nan,
we need an adult in here now. I think that’s kind of a metaphor for
the country, quite honestly.

Marty Kaplan: You actually speak quite a bit, not only about
your own grandchildren, but about the fact that grandparents and
grandchildren are an important part of our country. I’m gonna
quote something you said and after you talk about it, we’ll have a
few minutes for questions, so if anyone would like to ask, please
line up at those mics that are in the aisle.

So, here’s what you say when you’re encouraging a dialog be-
tween grandparents and grandchildren, not just yours but for the
sake of the country. You’re imagining what such a conversation
would be like. What the grandparents might say: “Tell me about
your purple hair. Is it only me, or do others wonder what the
grandparents of the randy exhibitionist cast of Jersey Shore think
when they watch Snooki and Pauly and their antics. For that mat-
ter, how would you like Paris Hilton as a granddaughter or Charlie
Sheen as a grandson?” Curious minds want to know.
Tom Brokaw: Well, you know, for my generation and for the Boomers, I think we were not as prepared for being grandparents as the preceding generations were, because we thought we’d be forever young. And as I’ve said, and this is anecdotal on my part, the separation between the taste of my grandchildren and my generation is narrower than previously. For example, I never dress the same way my granddad did.

I wear running shoes and jeans and when I’m with my grandchildren we have shared interests in movies and we know about the music and we watch baseball games together and we talk about literature in ways that has nothing to do with our ages. Part of it was that when you started to be a grandparent, you had to decide what you were going to be called. And Meredith very quickly said, “Well, I’ll be called Nan, they’ll call you Grandpa, like I’m Wilford Brimley or something.” And I said, “No, I want to work that out if I can.” Well, it worked out that they saw me a lot on television, so they called me Tom. It catches everybody off track.

And then I went around among my friends and surveyed what they were called. I asked Peter Osnos, who’s a publisher in New York, what do your grandchildren call you? He said, “I have them call me Elvis. What do they know?” My favorite story comes from the father of a friend of our daughter’s, who’s a big New York real estate developer and a guy who went through a midlife crisis and got divorced from his wife of many years, took on a trophy wife, and when his daughter became pregnant he went to her and he said, “I’m gonna be a great grandfather, I don’t want to be called grandpa. I’m Ben, I’m gonna be a great grandpa, but my name is Ben and that’s what I want to be called.”

So the grandson is born. And, in fact, Ben measures up to being a great grandparent and they become very close. Then when the little boy’s about three and a half, he’s in preschool and it’s Grandparents Day. So the kid is playing over in the corner and he looks up and here comes Ben through the door and the kid says, “Ben, what are you doing here? And Ben says to the kid, “It’s Grandparents Day, I’m your grandfather.” And the kids looks at him and said, “You are?” So I think that’s the conflict.

Marty Kaplan: Well, in the absence of folks at the mic, how about a lightening round of just the kind of quick answers which journalism should not indulge in, but nevertheless?

Tom Brokaw: Okay.

Marty Kaplan: All right, Occupy Wall Street?

Tom Brokaw: Pudding without a theme at this point. I think it doesn’t have enough definition. I think the best thing that they’ve come up with is 1 in 99. That’s a very smart phrase and it also has the added virtue of being true. I was talking to Meredith about this today, that we’ve just done some in-depth polling and there’s much more sympathy for Occupy Wall Street than there is for the Tea Party across a lot of lines in America, the class lines and the economic lines and partisan lines for that matter.

I did an audience today in Los Angeles, very Republican and I was very surprised by how many of them came up to me and said if we don’t do something about economic and income inequity in this country, we’re going to have big, big prices to pay downstream. So people are beginning to be concerned about it.

Marty Kaplan: Third party?

Tom Brokaw: You need a horse. No one knows that better than you do, Marty. There’s an effort underway called Elect USA, it’s an online convention, which they’ve got a number of phases that they’ll go through. But in the end, you need somebody that you can rally behind and that you believe in. Ross Perot is a perfect example. Ralph Nader had his own constituency before he decided to run. So you need to invest in someone and I don’t know who’s out there who could kind of be the rallying point for a third party in ‘12. There’s a lot of appetite for it as you go around the country,
but no one knows better than you, these two parties are built in across America. Secretaries of States run the elections and they control the Congress and they’re deeply rooted in America. It’s tough to uproot that.

Marty Kaplan: The Penn State scandal?

Tom Brokaw: It’s a perfect example of how we’ve allowed the football culture in America to take over so many of these great academic institutions. Having said that, I am an unalloyed college football fan. I love college football. I’ve gone to two games this year; one at Ole Miss and one at the University of Iowa. I watch on Saturdays whether I know the teams or not. But they’ve lost control in the academy about the culture of college football, and they live in a bubble and they think the rules that they live by are the ones that they create and the other rules have no application to them.

Here’s a perfect small example. When the recession hit, it hit Florida very hard. I was at Florida State and the president of Florida State was a former football player at the school and a former speaker for Florida legislature. Suddenly they had all their funding greatly reduced and he went to the football program, to Bobby Bowden, famous coach and he said, “We have to change. We can’t travel as many people, we’re gonna cut down on the number of people we’re flying, we’ve got to figure out ways to save a lot of money.” And the coaching staff looked at him and said, “Why?” He said, “Because we have a recession.” And they said, “So.” He said, “Don’t you read the papers?” They said, “We read the sports pages.” And then he said, “We all have to make cutbacks.” And they said, “We never have before, we’re not gonna do it now.” That’s what you have across the country.

The new coach at Ohio State, Urban Meyer, got a $4 million signing bonus with a lot of things built in. You know, you can still have college football. You can still have great games, you can have school spirit. But we really have lost something in terms of values at these universities. And you look at other departments that are just scrapping for money and it’s tough.

Marty Kaplan: Newt?

Tom Brokaw: I’m surprised frankly that he’s doing as well in the polls. I thought when the Tiffany’s bill showed up and everybody left him, that would be the end of it. I think it is a commentary on how this is a party in search of a date for the prom. They’re kind of week to week as they go. The other piece of it is, Newt is a well-known name and name recognition is a big part of it now. And a lot of the junkies are involved in the process at the moment. This will begin to change when you get to the first of the year. Iowans and New Hampshire residents will start to think, okay, who do I want as my nominee, who can I see in the Oval Office? And we’ll see who holds up.

Four years ago at about this time, Rudy Giuliani was the leading candidate on the Republican side and so was Fred Thompson, who’s now doing reverse mortgages on television, so there can be a very swift change.

Marty Kaplan: Climate change?

Tom Brokaw: I think that that’s the right phrase: climate change. I think global warming got a lot of people a little confused and it opened up opportunities for challengers. I think it’s real. I’ve done two documentaries on it. I believe that the vast majority of the climate scientists in the world know what they’re talking about.

And if you stand back and think just about the amount of CO2 that is emitted into the atmosphere on a Sunday night on the 405 between 6:00 and midnight as people are pouring up the freeway, of course it’s gonna have an impact. Now, I travel a lot to the wilderness areas of Northern Canada and other places and here’s a perfect example of climate change: we were fishing in British Columbia a couple of years ago and I asked the guy something about
big game hunting and he said, “Well, we now have an elk popula-

That’s happening in a lot of places, not just the polar bear busi-
tion.” And I said, “What do you mean you now have one?” He
ness. We’re having profound changes. Look at our weather pat-
said, “We didn’t have one before.” They were in the Lower 48, but
terns, not just in this country but around the world. It’s a big issue
warmer temperatures in the Lower 48 have begun to change their
and the second big issue right there with it obviously is water.
foraging and their migratory patterns, they’re all moving up here.
What are we gonna do about water and how are we gonna have

Marty Kaplan: Germany’s attitude toward the rest of Europe?

Tom Brokaw: I don’t blame them. Think about this: Here is this
country in 1989, they’d been defeated in the greatest war in his-
tory not even 45 years before, and they were trying to live down
the shame of Nazism and Fascism. West Germany had put itself
back together and it had a stable political system. And when the
wall came down, they suddenly had to take in their cousins from
the East. They stepped up and they did it.

They still have real issues there, with very high unemployment in
the East and still kind of looking down their noses at East Ger-
mans. Angela Merkel, the Chancellor in Germany, walked across
the wall the night it came down. She was a laboratory technician
in East Germany, a 20 year old laboratory technician and think of
where she’s come from. That country has put itself back together
again and it is the economic engine of Central Europe.

I think what’s really in play here is whether the Eurozone can sur-
vive. When you look at what’s going on in Greece and Portugal
and Spain and the Germans are saying to themselves, we worked
this hard to put our country back together and then we have to go
over there and bail them out? Then in this country, if you’re out in
Emporia, Kansas and you’re looking at the big financial institutions
in the East and you’re told Greece got the flu and we’re getting
pneumonia, how does that work? See, these are the issues that
we have to have on the table.

Marty Kaplan: Pakistan?

Tom Brokaw: It’s the damndest place I’ve ever been, in so many
ways. It’s not reliable as an ally. It’s very tribal. I’ve always felt that
the army was more sympathetic to Islamic rage than the Pakistani
leaders were going to acknowledge. I’ve been all over Pakistan. It’s
just very hard for me to describe to you how forbidding the border
region is between Pakistan and Afghanistan. I’ve both flown over
it and I’ve been on the ground there three different times. The
mountains there and the valleys there make the most severe part
of the Rockies or the Sierra Nevada look like foothills.

It’s just unbelievable how remote this area is and you can see peo-
ple coming for hundreds of miles and there are very strong tribes
up and down that region and they don’t feel any loyalty to the
national state of Pakistan; they feel loyalty to their tribes and their
nuclear power and that’s really scary to me about what they are.
We’ve got big issues in the subcontinent.

We can’t live with them and we can’t live without them and we
never quite know who’s going to be in charge there. The ambas-
sador from Pakistan, Haqqani, has been forced to resign because
he asked the United States for more help in controlling the Paki-
stani military. Think about that. Actually, Meredith and I were at
a conference in which he was saying this off the record earlier in the
summer, because they were being asked about these reports of
the Pakistani military being more pro-Islamic radical than anyone
would like them to be. It’s a very tough piece. It’s the most explo-
sive part of the world right now.

Marty Kaplan: China?

Tom Brokaw: We are really witnessing something of epic propor-
tions with changes in China. I didn’t go on Nixon’s first trip; I went in 1974 with President Ford, and it was like entering a mid-19th Century country. In Beijing, I would go out in the morning and I was living in a hotel that had been built in 1928, it was the most modern hotel in Beijing. I’d go out in the morning for a run and I’d run through the Hutongs, which are the communal villages and they looked very much like something that you would have expected to see in about 1860. They had communal water taps and communal bathrooms and they had outdoor kitchens. This is in the heart of the capitol. China was just emerging from the cultural revolution. It had been roiled in ways it’s very hard for us to imagine in this country.

It’s now the second largest economy in the world. It has problems. I think the Chinese still don’t know what they don’t know in many ways. 400 million people will be moving from the countryside into the cities. They’re all gonna want houses, cars, modern appliances and I believe from a political point of view, the big, big issue is I don’t see how China keeps the lid on, especially when it comes to sharing information and social media when it comes to the internet and information technology. Right now as we’re sitting here, there’s some Chinese kid who’s hacking in. You just know that. And if that becomes in a way kind of viral in China, how do they keep the lid on?

Marty Kaplan: And can you ask your question as well. I don’t know how many more we’re gonna be able to do.

Audience Member: Well, I don’t have a question. I want to thank you, because I watched you as a teenager on Channel 4 News and I watched the little clock go tick tick tick. But more importantly, I want to thank you for writing *The Greatest Generation*. Because of you, my father, who never talked about his trials during World War II and how he almost died, opened up. And he shared his life and he now talks to high-schoolers about what he went through as a teenager to make this country safe for all of us. If it hadn’t been for you, my dad would have never started talking about it. So thank you.

Tom Brokaw: Thank you. And Marty, in a way, that statement is not disconnected from the question about Wall Street, because the people who came home from that war and created a modern Wall Street were statesmen of finance and they had proportion. They made a lot of money, there’s no question about that. But they felt an obligation to the financial underpinning of this country and to having a responsible financial services industry in America.

And somewhere in the closing days of the 20th Century, the beginning of the 21st Century, things went wildly out of control. Then the Street was taken over not by people who were just financiers, but traders for the most part. And with the advent of the new technology they could create one instrument after another and technology took over. And we never caught up to it. Then the numbers got to be so big in terms of how much money they could make. Now 40% of our GDP is made up of financial services. We don’t make things; we trade money.

I’ve said to a number of people on Wall Street — and we’re not going to eliminate Wall Street; we still need a financial services industry; they provide capital for businesses that are starting, they help communities and states underwrite their bonds and that’s going to go on — if Wall Street doesn’t begin to reform itself from
within, Dodd and Frank, that’s just the beginning in terms of the
regulations that will come after them and they’ll become pariahs.

Yet they’re very reluctant to step up and do this for reasons I still
don’t completely understand. I thought a number of the Wall Street
firms that had took the big TARP payments, with very wealthy se-
nior management, should have said we’re a dollar a year until we
pay all this back. That would have been a statement that I think
would have resonated across the country. But they didn’t do that.
We had all those bonuses being paid.

One of my neighbors in New York was running Merrill Lynch. He
almost destroyed the company and he walked out with a $132
million payout. I just don’t know how you explain that.

Marty Kaplan: One of the wonderful things about talking to Tom
Brokaw is that there’s literally no topic on which Tom doesn’t have
something thoughtful to offer, as well as real personal experience
to contributes, not just book learning.

Tom Brokaw: Don’t ask me to do any physics.

Marty Kaplan: Just as important as this conversation, is what
comes after it, which is a chance to buy Toms’ book, The Time of
Our Lives, from Skylight Bookstore. It’s holiday season, as Andrea
said. Now please join me in thanking Tom Brokaw.

[Applause.]