

Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness & Mary O'Hara

JVN [00:00:03] Welcome to "Getting Curious." I'm Jonathan Van Ness. And every week I sit down for a 40-minute conversation with a brilliant expert to learn all about something that makes me curious. On today's episode, I'm joined by my cats and also joined on Zoom by the journalist and author, Mary O'Hara, where I ask her, when did we start to demonize poverty? Welcome to "Getting Curious." This is Jonathan Van Ness. And I'm so excited to introduce our guest this week, Mary O'Hara, returning writer, star, activist, advocate, extraordinaire. You really are just an incredible genius. If you are someone who has been listening to "Getting Curious" for some time, you will recognize this voice because she was our expert and updater on Brexit, which we had you on "Getting Curious," like, days before the Brexit vote? So welcome back.

MARY O'HARA [00:00:57] It's great to be here again, Jonathan.

JVN [00:01:00] So Matilda is at her first "Getting Curious" recording and she's really excited about it.

MARY O'HARA [00:01:06] OK.

JVN [00:01:07] So that's kind of fun. So. Well, first of all, I definitely want to talk about how Brexit relates to your book and all of your incredible work, you know, outside of Brexit. That is what you're here to talk about, which is, you know, our overlying question is, what is poverty? How do people come out of it? What causes poverty? And so that's really what we're here to talk about and all of your work around that. But just really quickly, Brexit three years later, in a nutshell.

MARY O'HARA [00:01:40] Yeah, in a nutshell, three years later, I think everyone thought 2020 was going to be completely dominated by it. But of course, it's vanished from sight. It's still a problem because apparently it's still going to get done by the end of the year. But I don't think many people see that truly happening. It's crazy.

JVN [00:01:57] Oh, my god. Because I actually did even occur to me that like the U.K. having to, like, rewrite all of their own new non-EU laws and all that other stuff is going to, it's in thick of COVID now.

MARY O'HARA [00:02:09] It was already a hell of a tight deadline. Nevermind now. So you imagine all those civil servants who are beaver away in the background, trying to get this done already up against the wall on this and we're in the middle of a global pandemic. So really, it's probably not going to happen in the way that they thought it would.

JVN [00:02:25] Nothing like contracting COVID-19 to make you gain sympathy for someone. Like I feel like Boris Johnson, prime minister, got COVID. Like, it has, it has made me feel very, I don't want him to die. And I am shocked the amount of stress and sympathy I have. But maybe that's just cause they don't really understand him as much. I don't know.

MARY O'HARA [00:02:54] Maybe it's because you're just a human being and you're allowed to have some empathy. It's OK. It's all right.

JVN [00:03:02] Oh my God, Mary. OK. You're so right. OK, so anyway, you're an author. You write for the gorgeous *Guardian*. And you also, your book is called-. Your book is called?

MARY O'HARA [00:03:13] It's called "The Shame Game: Overturning the Toxic Poverty Narrative."

JVN [00:03:19] And your organization is called Project Twist-It.

MARY O'HARA [00:03:22] Yes. So that's a project that I set up. It's an anti-poverty initiative all about changing the narrative around the way poor people are talked about.

JVN [00:03:31] And you are someone who has a personal connection to this story, because it's the experience of living through poverty is something that you have lived through.

MARY O'HARA [00:03:45] Yeah, that's right. So I've written about poverty and inequality for wait, oh god, 15 years. And my interest in it first start, kind of stemmed from spending a childhood and adolescence, either in poverty or on the cusp of it. So it has a very profound effect on you, I think of your kid who is experiencing poverty. It stays with you your whole life. No denying it. No matter what else you do, it stays with you. So I've always sort of tried to bring that kind of insight to the writing that I do, into the interviewing that I do around the subject. So it's a very, very personal but also deeply professional motivation to keep putting this topic out into the world and understanding it a bit better.

JVN [00:04:29] I just think that's so beautiful and interesting that, you know, the idea of taking something that caused you pain or suffering and taking that experience and turning it into your life's work of understanding it and trying to help others, I think is just that really is what life is about, is about like taking what has, you know, hurt us and turning it into something to help fuel us, to help others.

MARY O'HARA [00:04:55] Yeah, I couldn't agree more. I think there are so many topics in the world that we don't truly understand or that get neglected that cause a lot of harm. And I think poverty is one of those, without a doubt. It affects millions and millions of people. And it can, you know, its impact can last throughout your life. But to try and understand it and to understand what it's like for the people who experience it might help us, you know, come up with better policies, might help us come up with better solutions so that future generations don't have to live through the same terrible trauma that comes with hardship, financial hardship.

JVN [00:05:33] So basically, you have been writing and researching about poverty for your whole career.

MARY O'HARA [00:05:41] Yeah, for a whole, for, certainly for a sizable chunk of my career, this has been a topic, but also all the issues that relate to poverty. So things like mass incarceration, which is related to poverty, wealth inequality, all of these issues are all connected. So I've tried to sort of do the intersection of that through the work and show how poverty can lead to, say, dire health outcomes for people. And we're certainly seeing that right now because poorer people in the middle of this pandemic are on the frontlines, as in, they're usually in the jobs that mean that they have to be working and be exposed to the virus. They're more likely to be suffering and dying from it. And it's kind of put a spotlight on the degree to which our society is really divided between the people who have and the people who don't have.

JVN [00:06:30] And also, it's like, you know, you have as I can hear and because I've known you for a long time, you have a gorgeous Irish accent. And so-

MARY O'HARA [00:06:40] I do.

JVN [00:06:40] You know, I think it's, so you come from North Ireland.

MARY O'HARA [00:06:46] That's right.

JVN [00:06:46] And North Ireland is still a part of the United Kingdom. Right?

MARY O'HARA [00:06:53] Uh huh. Mmhmm.

JVN [00:06:53] Then Ireland does its own thing. And then, but, I'm getting to a point, which is, you know, the idea like socialized healthcare and how a country with socialized healthcare would respond to something like COVID-19 versus another country whose healthcare is based or rooted in capitalism, which is, you know, what our healthcare system is based in.

MARY O'HARA [00:07:13] Yeah.

JVN [00:07:14] So, you know, it's like, it's not a government. You know, it hasn't historically been a government-mandated thing until the Affordable Care Act, you know, made it more so. But now, you know, the Trump administration's been trying to dismantle that. You know, very hardcore for the last four years. So it's like, how does something like COVID-19 affect countries that have socialized healthcare differently than others?

MARY O'HARA [00:07:35] Yeah. So, I mean, it's a really interesting point. And I think it's something that people, especially in America right now, are trying to understand. It's one of the points that I brought up in the book. Was that a fundamental difference between the U.K. and the US is the health system and that relates to poverty very closely as well. So if you are in a country that has a nationalized health service that's centrally kind of run, that isn't reliant on you having insurance, then it means that when you get sick, either during a pandemic or not, you never have to pay for anything when you turn up and ask for help, you go to the emergency room. No one asks for paperwork, no one asks for proof of insurance. You will get treated on the basis of your health needs, not on your status in society or your income, whether you're in employment, whether you have insurance, that is the fundamental difference. You know, you're not going to be thrust into poverty because you're suddenly going to get a lot of health bills. Now, in Britain, I think you certainly know this, Jonathan, but in Britain, when the health service fails, it's usually because it's not being properly funded. It's not because the system itself doesn't work. It's because it's not resourced properly. So I think a lot of times for Americans who are told that this kind of provision is not right, it's, you know, it's inferior. They get one side of the story. And that side of the story is that it doesn't work. But it only doesn't work if we don't fund it. And we're seeing that at the moment where there's a shortage of equipment for doctors and nurses and hospital staff. But fundamentally, it's built on the principle that every human life has the same worth and therefore, you should be treated when you fall sick. It's that simple.

JVN [00:09:12] But, so, so you're saying that right now, during COVID, the United Kingdom is facing some sort of shortages for healthcare workers around having supplies?

MARY O'HARA [00:09:21] Yeah. And they're struggling on a number of levels. So, for instance, during the last 10 years when austerity cuts were coming and in Britain, the health service lost 40,000 nurses through these cuts. So automatically your staffing levels aren't what they should be even under normal circumstances. So imagine reacting to the kind of unforeseeable and incredible challenge that we currently face without your normal staff levels. So that's that. Then you've got the equipment thing, and America has the same problem with that, you know, access to ventilators to protective equipment, et cetera. All the health services around the world, to be honest, didn't have what they should have had ready. But I think in the U.K., it was even more of an issue because the health service had been cut and undermined over the previous 10 years.

JVN [00:10:08] The other thing I was going to highlight and you kind of did there for a second is just that, like even with how our healthcare system is set up, we didn't have what we should have had and needed. So-

MARY O'HARA [00:10:16] All health services were struggling. Yeah, they were.

JVN [00:10:19] But South Korea, I believe, has socialized healthcare and they got ahead of this so quickly because it's like the question of, like, who is going to pay for these tests wasn't a question because it was just, like, they did it. They got ahead of it. And I follow hairdressers from South Korea that are like back in the salon. Like it's-

MARY O'HARA [00:10:38] Yeah.

JVN [00:10:38] And so I think that, you know, the idea that society is only as strong as your weakest link, it's like we have to help everyone.

MARY O'HARA [00:10:47] But I think what you're saying highlights a really important point. Right? Which it's about the political response to any given situation. So the political systems have it within their power to react in a particular way to a particular set of circumstances, whether that's inequality, poverty, health challenges, whatever. It shows that when we act and we act quickly, we can stop a problem becoming worse. We can stop people ending up on the streets. We can stop people being destitute. We can stop them being sick and dying, if we're, you know, we make the right decisions.

JVN [00:11:23] So I remember the thing I was gonna ask, this kind of non-sequitur, but it's sequitur. You know how it's, like, the whole idea, like, the false narrative of, like, what Americans get on socialized healthcare. And, you know, not only in the United Kingdom, but Canada, wherever.

MARY O'HARA [00:11:37] Yeah.

JVN [00:11:38] It's that. Isn't there still in the United Kingdom, is, don't they? Isn't there still private health insurance?

MARY O'HARA [00:11:46] Yeah, I mean, it is, it's one of the bizarre-est parts of this argument, like the idea that if you have a generalized provision for everybody, somehow precludes private insurance. I mean, that's nonsense, because you can always have private insurance alongside it. And the U.K. has that. Other countries have that.

JVN [00:12:03] So that I think I mean, I could go flip the table of writing that as part of what was so controversial about Bernie Sanders and Medicare for All in America. Is that because the Medicare for All bill that was written by Bernie Sanders would even-, would make private insurance illegal?

MARY O'HARA [00:12:21] Yeah.

JVN [00:12:21] Like it would make it not, so it's like I think that, you know, so all I'm saying is like when you, because there's, this is a little off the point. But I'm just saying there's on the American left, like on our very left, I'm so down for my people on the left, obviously, like I endorse Elizabeth Warren. But it's, like, just this idea that like having Medicare for all is amazing. But that doesn't mean that you can't have private insurance if you so choose. Like other countries that have socialized medicine also have private insurance. So that was one thing that Pete Buttigieg, I think

he had said that somewhere. And I was like, oh, really? That's the case. And it is the case. And I didn't ever know that.

MARY O'HARA [00:13:00] Yeah, it is the case. But I think what it fundamentally comes down to is can you fund and support a strong health system that treats everybody equally in terms of access, in terms of cost. And that is your central drive. That is what you want because you want, you want the people in your country to have this. That's an important thing to have. You know, a lot of people, including people like Bernie, talk about this as a human right. And, you know, in the same way that it should be a human right to have a roof over your head for your family and food on your table for your family. And healthcare, when it's discussed in that way, is part of this bigger topic of how we support our communities, how we support our, our families and people going about their business.

JVN [00:13:47] Mary O'Hara, author, writer, your book, "The Shame Game" just came out. We're gonna be right back with more from you. And more on this incredible topic. And I love you so much. And we'll be right back with more after this. This cat is so goddamn cute. Welcome back to "Getting Curious" this is Jonathan Van Ness, we have Mary O'Hara, writer, author, advocate, incredible person, who is also someone who I'm honored to call, you know, my friend. So and ew, I didn't even, with the, you know, I love a title, honey. International Columnist of the year 2017 and 2018 from the Southern California Journalism Awards. Girl. These are so many credits. You're winning awards left and right. You can't help it, it's not your fault.

MARY O'HARA [00:14:44] Oh, yeah, obviously.

JVN [00:14:47] So in your book, "The Shame Game," you talk about the, the byline is: "Overturning the Toxic Narrative Around Poverty." Did I miss a word?

MARY O'HARA [00:14:58] Yeah. So just "Overturning the Toxic Poverty Narrative," that's us.

JVN [00:15:01] Yes. I just inverted it. Yes.

MARY O'HARA [00:15:03] Yeah.

JVN [00:15:04] "Overturning the Toxic Poverty Narrative." So I, intro to question, what is the toxic poverty narrative? I mean, I feel like I know this, but because, you know, I read your things. But people listening need to know, what is the toxic poverty narrative?

MARY O'HARA [00:15:18] Yeah. So I think there's an American scholar called Chuck Collins, who I think sums it up perfectly, which is that everyone is economically where they deserve to be. Right? And the keyword there is "deserve" because what that implies is that if you're poor, it's your fault, you're lazy. You know, you've made some bad life decisions. This is on you as an individual. Whereas if you're successful, it's entirely down to your own efforts rather than maybe the structural advantages that you had around you. From education to family background to all of that. So basically what it says is that to be poor is your own fault. Even though we know that there are massive structural reasons for poverty and why it persists and why people find it really, really hard to get over it. So, like, low wages, for instance, precarious work, you know, de-unionization, lack of job security, all of that keeps people poor. But this narrative, which is repeated ad nauseum, usually by certain politicians, by media, implies that we need to fix the individual, not the system. So it's a really restrictive and demeaning way of talking about a whole group of people who are struggling.

JVN [00:16:33] Break that down for me a little bit more. When politicians talk about this, they talk about fixing the individual, not the system.

MARY O'HARA [00:16:42] Yeah. So I'll give an example from the U.K., for instance. So when austerity was rolled out, there was this whole narrative that was constructed around that, that if you were out of work, you were a skiver or you were a scrounger. Anybody who was in work was part of a hard working family, that gets kind of drummed home by politicians, by pundits. And it creates the impression of people either as victims or as to blame for their circumstances. And in America, you'll often get again, and usually in the media, on the right, you know, you'll get vilification of people who are out of work. You know, they'll be dismissed as, "Oh, look at these people sitting on the sofa just eating giant bites of popcorn, getting diabetes." You know what I mean? It's like, and the more that you put that message out into the world, the more people believe that that's why people are poor. And that, in turn, sort of diminishes a demand for better policies. You know, for a better social safety net, for higher wages for people, for more job security, it's all stitched together. But it's propagated by certain corners of the political classes and certain corners of the media. And then the public absorb it and they internalize it.

JVN [00:18:01] So in your research that you've done over the years, who are those, who are those corners in the political spheres that exacerbate this and really push that narrative that like people who are in poverty are, you know, milking the system or taking too much or taking advantage of the system?

MARY O'HARA [00:18:18] Yeah. So, you know, the pundit class in, on talk radio, for instance, are past masters at this. In the U.K., you've got, you know, the rise of television poverty porn, where producers will chase ideas for television that pin people in poverty as charlatans, you know, as spongers, as people who just take, take, take. What you don't have is the corollary of that, which is actually, you know, in real terms, it's the very wealthy who are take, take, taking through, say, tax cuts or putting their money offshore and things like that. So you'll find that it gets repeated over and over again throughout the culture. It's like there's a whole cultural stew where these notions are pushed and propagated.

JVN [00:19:03] Yeah, I think that's really interesting because I think if you're someone who has, you know, either due to, you know, privilege or structural advantages, or if you're someone who has worked really, really hard and come out of poverty and like worked really hard to like-

MARY O'HARA [00:19:20] Yeah.

JVN [00:19:20] You know, get themselves into, you know, whatever the middle class, because basically I don't want to, like, devalue the idea of like, you know, a dollar, how much a dollar is worth. But it's, like, what anyone would be able to, you know, take advantage of or take from the system who is in poverty. It's, like, if you're talking about food stamps or you're talking about benefits for like, you know, where you live or like-

MARY O'HARA [00:19:44] Yeah, housing, housing benefits. Yeah.

JVN [00:19:46] Yeah, housing benefits or food benefits.

MARY O'HARA [00:19:48] Yeah.

JVN [00:19:48] That money, even if you took it by, you know, times it by 100,000, like, that's like what, \$900 a month? \$1200 a month. \$1500 a month by like 100,000 people or whatever. That still pales in comparison if you put on a scale to how much money the elite people and super duper rich people are stashing away, not paying taxes because they're buying real estate, for instance. And that's another thing I thought was really interesting. I don't know if you saw a couple weeks ago when Nancy Pelosi had talked about like, "Oh, we should get rid of this SALT

deduction" and like 'cause like that was a tax for like people that were homeowners could write off the interest on their mortgage. Right?

MARY O'HARA [00:20:29] Yeah.

JVN [00:20:29] And ta-, and in Trump's thing, he reduced that and capped it at \$10,000. So you can only write off \$10,000 of the interest. Whereas before I think it was essentially unlimited. Which would benefit people that are like, you know, homeowners like me and people that like, you know, make a cute amount of money. But what? And so that's why Republican senators were like, "We would never do that," like millionaires don't need another tax break. But what's so funny is, is that, like, I'm super lucky and have been, like, benefited by all sorts of structural stuff. But still, like in the last two years, I've paid half of everything I've made, which is like, you know, probably the most money I'm ever going to make. Half of it has gone to the government. People, half, like 50 percent. So the people that are like the Trumps of the world and like the McConnells, like the people who have like not like have done well, people who have like tens of millions, like fifty millions, like a hundred millions, billions even, like the, like the really, those 1 percent like the people that like Bernie and Elizabeth talk about, those people can literally pay nothing in taxes by buying stuff. Like they can-.

MARY O'HARA [00:21:33] Yeah, and also, it's the same with corporations. So you have, you know, the system is built in a way that benefits the very, very wealthy. There's absolutely no doubt about that. It's also built in a way that benefits the upper middle classes versus the lower middle class and the most poor people in society. That's the way it's structured. But one of the things that people often forget, it's, like, if you go, you go way back to the early 80s when Ronald Reagan came into power, you know, the marginal tax rate for the most wealthy was much higher than it is now. So the story that we're told at the moment is, you know, we can't, people are already paying too much tax, they're already paying a lot of their income in tax. But actually, these very, very wealthy people proportionally are paying less than their equivalents were 40 years ago. So the other thing that comes out with that is America was a much more equal society 40 years ago. The average worker wasn't struggling in the way that the average worker is struggling in America today. Just to make ends meet. And those things aren't unrelated. They're absolutely related. You can structure a tax system and a society in a way that benefits many, many more people and enhances the life chances of people from lower income backgrounds. I mean, you've got like 140 million Americans, right? Are either in poverty or in a situation where they could end up in poverty very quickly because there's so low income. It really, really doesn't have to be that way.

JVN [00:22:58] So, yes, so what is, how do we define poverty and how do different countries define it differently?

MARY O'HARA [00:23:04] Well, there are lots of different definitions, and this is often part of the problem. I mean, on the whole, it's defined as sort of being below a certain level of median income. But over the years, there's been a growing awareness that it's not just about the exact amount of cash that you would have, but what kind of life you can live in that society. So do you have access to what would be deemed a normal life? You know, there's a growing recognition that the way we perceive poverty as a purely financial thing is really quite narrow because it's about things like lost opportunities and all of that matters in a million little ways, because let's say you're a kid in poverty and you have ambitions and you want to do things, but you know your held back, you're held back because you can't access the same education opportunities that other people can. So it's a much bigger and broader thing than we ever give it credit for. But it's all tied up in the conception of poverty.

JVN [00:24:04] We're going to take a really quick break. We'll be right back with more Mary O'Hara after this. Welcome back to "Getting Curious," this is Jonathan Van Ness. Yeah, so that is

just so incredibly true. I mean, I think, I think we a lot of times, you know, relate things to things that, you know, we have been through ourselves. And I know for me, I grew up super duper comfortable, but there was a long point there when, like, my family was like, "Girl, you're on your own," because I was making a lot of my own life decisions. And then, you know, I think the thing that all led to, which was through, you know, addiction and other things, I end up contracting HIV. And I was, you know, really like medication, food, shelter, like all of that was really up in the air. And, and if I hadn't gone back to California to get some of those, you know, some of those state given benefits, which was namely like a doctor and medication, which they did not have in Missouri where I was, it was like, I mean it saved my life.

MARY O'HARA [00:25:12] Yeah.

JVN [00:25:12] But I will tell you that like a lot of the places and the things that I had to do to get that stuff, it's like, you know, I was made to feel like this is, like it, there's so much shame that went along with like having to go to like the certain like parts of town. Like, for instance, or just like, you know, just like not kept up, like, you know, just not, I mean, and granted it was better than what I had where I was. But it's like people would say, like, "Well, then you shouldn't have gone and had unprotected sex" or "You shouldn't have, you know, gone and done this. You knew it was gonna happen if this and that." But it's like, yeah, but that that's what privilege and classism is, is it's like for me, I was like a queer young non-binary person in a place where like that was not accepted. And so that created like a whole bunch of trauma. And that also is even more compounded for people who are like, you know, like people of color. Like there's-

MARY O'HARA [00:26:02] Exactly. And it's, this whole idea of asking for help, being something to be ashamed of. And so you look at the language and I looked a lot at the language around all of this. So if it's a person who's either poor or has ended up in poverty just because of life circumstances, they're told that they're asking for handouts. And that has a really negative connotation in it. No, you're not asking for a handout. You're asking for some help to get to the next point to get back on your feet. Now, that's an entirely different conversation if you're saying, "I'm asking for some help to get me from A to B," as opposed to "We are giving you handouts and you know, you should feel grateful for that." And, you know, and therefore, you can have to come through this, like, labyrinth welfare system just to get, like, a few food stamps. You met at every step of that process. You are made to feel like you're begging for something that really should be the foundation of a good society. The foundation of a good society should be that if for whatever reason you fall down that we can help pick you back up again. And everybody benefits from that. Everybody benefits from that. None of us benefit from so many homeless people being on the streets. It just, you know, why not? And like you said earlier, we spend so little money actually on these systems. They cost very little. We also know that the level of fraud is almost nonexistent. You know, when you look at it, it's people don't defraud the system. Who has the energy to defraud the system, you know?

JVN [00:27:37] Yeah, because that's what I was trying to say. It's, like, it's not, it doesn't end up being that much money when you compare it to other, other things. I mean, it's really not where a lot of the money goes. And so one of the things that I know that you've written about and that you've studied is like, where did this stigma of poverty come from? Like this idea that, you know, people are wanting handouts and like, where did this demonization of poverty come from?

MARY O'HARA [00:28:02] Well, that's a really good question, because there's a long and global history to this. You know, if you look at Victorian England, the poor were talked about as though they were indolent. You know, you had the workhouses. Poor people were shipped off into these awful like buildings and left to deteriorate. Right? But you've got that in every country at every point in history, almost. But in the U.K. and the U.S., over the past 40 years, what I, what I'm arguing is that this, this story about poor people has been turbo charged. So it has become the

dominant idea that we have of impoverishment. Now part of the reason that was driven. It goes right back to the the dawn of this sort of neo-liberal thinking in the 60s and 70s that produced Margaret Thatcher, that produced Ronald Reagan, and built the foundations for this narrative. And they-

JVN [00:28:54] What is neo-liberalism? People are, people, angry people call me that on Twitter. They're like "Your neo-liberal bullshit". What does it mean?

MARY O'HARA [00:29:03] Well, I mean, the thing is, there's a lot of people that would say that the term neo-liberal is, like, so broad that it's kind of useless. Don't even use it, but ostensibly, there's a philosophy that is, you know, the state is bad. So government is bad and business is good and the way to run a society is with minimal government intervention because that is bad. I mean in a nutshell, that's probably what it is, but it's got a whole lot of other things going on.

JVN [00:29:31] I'm so not that.

MARY O'HARA [00:29:33] No, you're not. Jonathan. It's like, you're totally, totally not that. So you can bat that one aside at any point. But here's what, here's what happened. So the U.K. and the U.S., unlike a lot of other rich countries. They have a lot of think tanks. They put a lot of money into think tanks that publish reports and put out these stories about, you know, the lazy poor person, et cetera, that makes them sort of unique among the rich countries. And that helps to deepen and perpetuate this narrative about, about poverty and that helps create policies that hurt poor people. So, you know, the federal minimum wage hasn't been increased in a decade. In a whole decade. And by the time you factor in inflation, it's worth so much less than it was 10 years ago, and it's already paltry. But you'll have had things in cities, where cities have introduced higher minimum wages. And guess what? Capitalism hasn't collapsed, even though the story we would have been told is that if you raise people's wages, then the economy will collapse. Well, it turns out if you pay people more, they spend more in their local economy and keep their local businesses up and running. That's how it works.

JVN [00:30:39] And also, like, one thing I was just thinking about, not to keep talking about myself, but it's like the help that I got from the state of California and the government when I needed it for healthcare. It resulted in me getting to where I am now. Like, I employ, like, tons of people, like I like, it's like so when you invest in people, they turn out to be people that can help other people.

MARY O'HARA [00:30:59] Exactly. And that's the whole thing about what is a person worth and when we give people opportunities. You know what? The vast majority of people take those opportunities and they run with them. So for myself, you know, that's why I put my personal story in this book as well, because I wanted to show that, yeah, you know, I've done ok for myself, but that isn't all on me. I had a lot of help. I had a good education. You know, I had a welfare state that meant that we didn't starve when my father was out of work. You know, things like that make a difference and you can take that as a springboard. So rather than it being painted as you just sponge and sponge and sponge and are freeloading, no, it's a springboard. It helps you get somewhere else and help, like you say, it helps you do the things that help other people.

JVN [00:31:46] Well, in addition, like we're taught to, and in childhood, and also in recovery, we're taught to ask for help.

MARY O'HARA [00:31:53] Yeah.

JVN [00:31:53] Like, when you need help, you're taught to ask for it. So why?

MARY O'HARA [00:31:57] Yeah, and it's a good thing. You know, it shouldn't be seen as a weakness, but it's painted that way. And also, you know, let's, let's be real about this. The help that people are given is minimal. You know, it's really not generous. So why do we insist on painting it as throwing money at people if we're not?

JVN [00:32:18] Yeah. And I think another thing I was trying to say earlier about, like, just, you know, my taxes and I think what I was trying to, it's like when you think about people who you would think of as, like, rich or really successful. Yes. There are, like I am, like by my own terms, like five years ago, shocked and appalled that I am where I am, that I am even a homeowner. Like I was hoping by like 45, potentially, like I feel like I've said that to you before.

MARY O'HARA [00:32:43] Yeah. Yeah.

JVN [00:32:44] Like, but it's so that, it's like I am in a percentage that is probably a really cute percentage. But that's not the people who are really effing the system over. Like when you're paying half of everything that you get, honey, that's a lot. It's but that's, it's the Amazon. It's the Jeff Bezos, it's the people who are like, it's that top one percent like the wealth tax people, like the 50 million and above people that are really not paying their share. And it is causing this insane inequality because-

MARY O'HARA [00:33:18] Yeah.

JVN [00:33:18] Like it's, it's not like the top 50 percent that aren't paying their, their fair share or even the top 40 percent or top 30 percent or top 20 percent, even though, it's like what you were saying, like, I know now, like there are benefits that I get because of where I am that I wouldn't have gotten from where I was like four and five years ago. So it's, like, a cone, like that whole trickle down thing. Like, it's like the higher you get, the more benefits you have. But it's still, like, that, that, it's like there's this-

MARY O'HARA [00:33:44] But that's-

JVN [00:33:45] Tell me.

MARY O'HARA [00:33:46] Yeah, you're right. One of the biggest myths is like when in the 80s that the term "trickle down economics" became the sort of flavor of the month. And there's never been any evidence that if you hoard wealth at the top, that suddenly everybody, everybody else, by everybody else, you're right. It is like the vast majority of the population aren't suddenly going to be like, "Yay, we're all doing better." They're not doing better because the wealth is hoarded.

JVN [00:34:10] Yeah. It's like, well, it's like an icicle. It's like, it's like the wealth is hoarded at the top and it's getting harder for everyone else to climb up the icicle because it's like melting.

MARY O'HARA [00:34:18] Well, that's right. So you had like when the UN rapporteur on extreme poverty did an analysis of America and he said something that really struck home with me. And it was that the American dream is fast becoming the American illusion. So it's almost like a double blow for Americans because they have this national sort of dream, this incredible philosophy that has always been problematic. But right now, it's, it's barely attainable for the majority of people to get even close to it. And that's a real shame.

JVN [00:34:55] And when you think of in terms of like entertainment, like, while, you know, 2019 and 2020, you know, more 2019 was like, and '18, was like a breakout year for I think of, like, Lil Nas X, I think of Lizzo. I think of, like, myself and my sphere like I mean, obviously I'm not a

musician and they're like super duper, duper successful. But I'm just saying like, but that amount of like upward mobility of wealth attainment for young people is not common and it doesn't-.

MARY O'HARA [00:35:23] No.

JVN [00:35:23] And in other industries, like, whether it's science, healthcare, hospitality, you know, corporate America, like those opportunities are getting squeezed and squeezed. So it's like the ability to upwardly move is harder and harder.

MARY O'HARA [00:35:37] It is.

JVN [00:35:38] And I also, like, had so much help, like just with my upbringing and opportunity, because I was brought up, you know, with a lot of opportunity and privilege, I was able to get an education that helped me. And, and it enabled me, even though I didn't at that point, didn't have access to that, you know, to the monetary, to the financial stuff, the benefits that I got from when I did have it as a child, helped me navigate it.

MARY O'HARA [00:36:01] Well, this is a really good point because I mean, it's a really boring term, but it's a really important one, "social capital." Right? So what else have you got that isn't just material that helps you navigate the world? You know, that's a really good word, actually, to, to navigate the world. And Chuck Collins, who I referred to earlier, he wrote a book called "Born on Third Base," which is a wonderful book, where he, I mean, the title implies it, but he talks about how that social capital and those advantages make a difference right down to just feeling more confident, to have, you know, to have met two people from different walks of life. If you're poor, you tend to just meet with other poor people. That's the way it is. So therefore, you don't have the opportunities to find the people who might help you get from A to F. And that is a real, that's something that never gets talked about. It's not just about money. It's about opportunity.

JVN [00:36:53] And I also think, it's like do you think that it's just like the super, super, duper elite or like or just operating under the law of scarcity and not abundance, that if like everyone else gets more that like they won't have-? It's like, you know, it's like they see it as like a threat of other people getting? So like, how is that squeeze happened over the last 40 years of like those really elite people like paying like, you know, less and less and less?

MARY O'HARA [00:37:15] Well, a lot of that is just very practical politics. So people and politics will have created tax breaks for those people. And because the way the political system works means that that money gets pumped into the political system. So basically they pay for politicians to, you know, do the things that they want them to do. It's absolutely critical because when big money determines who's in Congress, then that determines what gets written into law. So all of that over a long period of time, we'll create a system that is very hostile to people trying to get on or trying to get out of a difficult situation. And that's what we've got. That's exactly what we've got.

JVN [00:37:57] So with "The Shame Game" and Project Twist-It it's like, and you know and all of your advocacy on, you know, on poverty is like, what is your goal to, you know, to change this narrative?

MARY O'HARA [00:38:12] Yeah. So the first thing I wanted to do was get people talking about it because it matters. It's a big part of why poverty exists and why it persists. That's the first goal. The second goal is to highlight where we can challenge it and talk about the things that really matter like structural inequities. And thirdly, what I've tried to do through both is to amplify the voices of people with lived experience of poverty, because it doesn't matter what topic you're talking about. If you don't have people directly affected by it, talking about it and being heard. It

gets lost. It gets lost. You know, it, this is, this is really important. So I have, so Project Twist-It, has people from across the U.S., across the U.K. with lived experience telling their stories. And we've also got allies across the music industry and the arts and literature who really want to tell different kinds of stories and say, "Hey, you know what? The one that we've been told for the past 40 years is bullshit. Like that's a fact. Let's find as many ways as possible to challenge this narrative and to say no more. We're not going to stand for it anymore."

JVN [00:39:20] And how would you, this'll be the last question before Yogi recess. And you can, we can hit whatever we need to hit that we maybe haven't hit. But how would you encourage people to change their own narrative about how they talk about people living or impoverished people about, just about their own narratives around, you know, how to question themselves internally, about how they think about people that don't have what they have?

MARY O'HARA [00:39:45] Yeah, it's a really good point. And it's a really interesting one that I think right now has got an even greater spotlight on it, because unfortunately, millions of people are losing their jobs in this current crisis. And a lot of people are realizing very fast and in terrible circumstances that this can happen to anybody. So we have to understand that it isn't a them and us scenario. Like we literally are in this together and any of us could be one paycheck away from destitution under certain circumstances. That's not anyone's fault. That's the way stuff is. And I think the more that we can emphasize that, the more people can come to understand that we have much more in common than we have that divides us, then we have a chance of beginning the journey of changing this 'cause, like anything, it's a, you know, it really is a journey. It doesn't happen overnight, but we have to start somewhere. And that's kind of what I'm trying to do.

JVN [00:40:41] So if people want to get involved with Project Twist-It or just involved with, you know, working with you, how could, well, obviously, we'll include the links for everyone to be able to follow you in and read your work and get involved on the episode description here. But you know what? What have we missed? You know, you have been a guest on this episode or on this podcast before, so you know, it's like when we get to this part of the episode, it's like, you know what, what, what do we, also I feel like we could do 80 more episodes about this. And you really should probably turn Project Twist-It into its own podcasts because this is just an episode that really does us, the idea of poverty and how to navigate it and the stigma attached to it is so pervasive and it's so huge and it's way more than 40 minutes with me could ever give it justice.

JVN [00:41:30] Yeah, but I think I think your point really matters that it is, the big issue is that it's become normalized to talk about it that way. And that's a choice. And we have a choice to talk about it in a different way. And then hopefully by doing that, it creates an appetite for better policies. It educates people about what really works and the fact that it's to all of our benefits to do this. And we need all the voices we can possibly get talking about this from academics to grassroots organizers to, you know, mothers and schools. It doesn't matter where you are. You can talk about this and question it and tell your story if you've got one to tell. And that's what we do with Project Twist-It. People tell their stories.

JVN [00:42:15] Mary O'Hara, thank you so much. Thank you so much for coming back to "Getting Curious."

MARY O'HARA [00:42:19] It's great, Jonathan.

JVN [00:42:19] We love to have you. Thank you so much.

MARY O'HARA [00:42:21] Thank you.

JVN [00:42:29] You've been listening to "Getting Curious" with me, Jonathan Van Ness. My guest this week was the journalist and author Mary O'Hara, whose writing you can find in The Guardian and in her new book, "The Shame Game: Overturning the Toxic Poverty Narrative." You'll find links to her work in the episode description of whatever you're listening to the show on. Our theme music is "Freak" by Quin. Thank you so much to her for letting us use it. If you enjoyed our show, introduce a friend and show them how to subscribe if you please, honey. Follow us on Instagram and Twitter at CuriousWithJVN. And our socials are running curated by Emily Bossak. "Getting Curious" is produced by me, Erica Getto, Julie Carrillo, Emily Bossak, Rae Ellis, Chelsea Jacobson and Colin Anderson.