Ben Kahn: Welcome to the UP Tech-talk podcast, special series on the future of education.

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guests for this series include both UP faculty, guest academics and futurists from

across the United States.

Ben Kahn: Look out for new episodes in this series on the first Friday of every month during

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for our regularly scheduled UP Tech Talk episodes where we explore the use of technology in the classroom, one conversation at a time. Welcome to another special episode of the UP Tech-talk podcast. This has been Kahn, from the academic technology services department at the University of Portland. Today I'm joined by

my co-host, Maria Erb. Hello Maria.

Maria Erb: Hey, Ben.

Ben Kahn: Today we're so happy to have with us here in the studio live, in the flesh, Professor

David Turnbloom who is a professor of theology here at the university, and specializing in an area called liturgical sacramental theology. In so many words, someone who is an expert in studies ethics as a field. David, thank you for joining

us today.

David Turnbloom: Thank you very much for having me. I'm happy to be here.

Maria Erb: David, we're so glad to have you. As I mentioned before, we're doing this series on

the future of learning and we've been talking with futurists and people that are really thinking pretty deeply about what we might encounter in the next, say, 30 to 50 years. What keeps coming up for us is this central question: what does it mean to be human? Especially in the face of what looks to be an inevitable change in what we currently think of as what a human being is. We're really glad that you can

join us today and we can really probe that question a little bit more.

As we started off mentioning that you were an ethics scholar and that's certainly something you think really deeply about. why should we teach ethics to begin

with?

David Turnbloom: That's a really good question and a difficult one, I think. Especially when it comes to

try and understand when people go, "What's the value that you're going to be teaching?" Clearly when people think you're teaching ethics, well it must be that you're going in and espousing particular values if you teach ethics at a Roman

Catholic university. Clearly, there must be a set of values you're teaching. The way that I approach it, I want to step back when it comes to education about ethics and it's very much, for me, an opportunity to get students to think about the genesis of their values.

In other words, where did they come from? Rather than trying to begin with saying, "Which one's better than the other? Which one do I need to be a crusader for and which one do I need to be vilifying it with every breath I have. Well, stop and think, "Where do these beliefs come from? Why do we have them?" For me, that's the interesting question when it comes to ethics because it's rather than trying to say, "Well, my education, the education that I have needs to be so clearly connected to my next action that the education is only helpful so far as it's instantly usable." You step back and say, "Well let's think for minute." Just about where these come from. Don't worry about acting. Ethics is always about acting, acting, acting. No, let's think about where the values come from. Let's analyze that carefully and do this deconstruction of our own value systems.

From the standpoint of liturgical sacramental theology when I'm studying rituals, that's very much what it is. What are the practices, the behaviors that we embody on a daily basis that slowly give us these values we have. It's so important for me to say that we need to teach ethics. Not just because we need to have answers to the difficult questions that are coming up, absolutely that is something we want to do, but also so we can patiently analyze where our values are coming from. Be more aware and be able to describe what it means to be a human being. As a way of then helping us understand, well how do I go about living out that identity as a human being? For me, that's an important part of the ethics education.

It's not just, well let's jump into a class and we're going to talk about all of the hot button issues that are going to be exciting for everybody. It's why is freedom good? Let's go ahead and just think about why it is you like that. Where could you have gotten that value from, and have students analyze their own past and history, and think where did my tastes come from? That's an incredibly different thing to do. That's why I like teaching ethics, it challenges people to really turn inward, which is not a place you think when you think ethics first. Especially from a theological ethics standpoint, it is turn inward, figure that out because that's where your actions are going to come from.

Maria Erb:

Do you get a wide variance in your students as they start thinking a little more deeply about where their particular beliefs come from?

David Turnbloom:

Yeah. I try to drive home that point that I couldn't really get anything but a wide variance in where they're coming from. If the goal is really to pay attention to the uniqueness of your history, your context, anytime it was, "Oh yeah, I completely agree with that person." Or "I completely agree with that person." I kind of lose it in the classroom. I'm like, "Don't ever say the words completely agree, that's never actually happened before between two people." You can have agreements but there's differences and let's pay attention to what they are, and why your

experience is different from that persons experience. Why your values then are different and why you think, "Oh I love freedom." "Sure I love freedom too." Yet they mean two completely different things, and they get at their histories and why they mean different things. It's wonderful.

Especially in my intro classes, I end up having most students at the end of the semester answering the question, "Who am I? Who am I becoming?" With, "Oh man, I don't know. I thought I did." Now, it's this state of being very curious about who they are. That's really what I want to get to is less give me a positive answer, and more give me an awareness of your limits. Give me an awareness of the fact that you are a question that's being worked out slowly. That to me is the beginning of being an ethical person. It's less solid convictions and more cautious curiosity I guess.

Ben Kahn:

I think that's interesting because you study these kinds of ancient traditions or rituals. To think about the sense of permanence that those represent to us as human beings. You'll see things like that sprinkled into sci-fi or something. Someones on a battleship in outer space but they have something that seems like an anachronism that they're clinging to. That really grounds them and makes us understand that they're still a human character. I guess I'm just curious, do you think about what these kind of rituals you study will look like in 25 and 100 years?

David Turnbloom:

Oh absolutely. Especially the liturgical theology. The people that do liturgical theology are focusing on the history of these prayers and rituals. The more you study the history of ritual, the more you realize the plurality and evolution that has shot through all of them. There's really nothing that Christians have been doing forever in the same way. There are things we share in common, bread and wine tend to get used quite a bit. Certainly not in the same way over and over again. The research that I do now is very much focused on how should we be paying attention to the ways that these do change, and the ways they must change, depending on what culture you're in, depending on the particular ethical dilemmas that are of importance in that particular place. That's going to change the way in which we need to form our rituals. Within theology there's the term, to reform the liturgy, the 1960s second Vatican council changed a lot of the ways rituals were done. That's reform, and was trying to meet a particular need. It's absolutely a matter of, well how are these rituals technologies in many ways. They're types of tools that are literally teaching people how to be people. The way that we do them means a lot, and they have to change.

Maria Erb:

A lot of the rituals have to do with becoming an adult in a society and culture. Obviously the big sacraments of getting married, things like that. The need for those probably won't change. We're always going to need rituals around those big events. Are you saying more like the ... the sort of what you use in the ritual or just the context of the ritual, and things like that will continue to change and evolve?

David Turnbloom:

Yeah, it will. In the way in which people understand initiation rituals. The stages at which those should occur, what that should involve are always being connected to

other cultural rituals that we have. If you are a religion teacher in an Italian neighborhood in Boston, in North End, the way in which those people are concerned about how that ritual of confirmation of Baptism should play out is just going to be different, in many small ways, but in some significant ways than if you were teaching that same population in another place with a very different culture. Peoples expectations come, not just from the rituals, but from all aspects of their culture. They're trying to work them out for themselves within a particular ritual behavior. So many people want to say, "Well we need to make sure we have uniformity to these rituals. We want to control them in particular ways." Because they are so powerful, but to me the beauty is the diversity. It's the little intricate differences that we can overlook and think, "Oh that's ornamental, it doesn't really mean much." It can have so much influence on the way I see the entire world. That little action that meant so much to me growing up can completely change the way in which I view my relationship to my family, or my friends. We don't look at them enough and that's my ethical project, to go describe your rituals to me, where did you come from.

I have students write essays like that and describe how they've influenced and changed those rituals as they go on. They'll describe Sunday night family meal that they were forced to do, and they were so angry that happened to them and hated it so much. They just wanted to go out with their friends. Now everybody writes this. Now looking back I'm so thankful I was made to do that because now that's who I am. It taught me to value certain things. They chronicle how they've changed it as they've gone along, and how they've added their own flavor to it. Not just them describing what tradition is, what ethics is. It's great to get to learn from them about their values. I learn a lot about just listening to them chronicle it themselves. That to me is the beginning of that question, who are you, and how are you going to behave in this world?

Ben Kahn:

Yeah, it's so interesting. A lot of people think about these kind of rituals as being ancient and unchanging. It's interesting to think about, given enough time or enough distance, even someone doing the same thing, even having some of the same core themes that it might also strike you as being uncanny or valley. It's just different and strange enough that it's unfamiliar or feel strange?

David Turnbloom:

Yeah, definitely. Right now I'm teaching a course on the theology of Christian worship. It started off with one of the students describing having gone to a non-denominational Christian church. That's all this person knew. Then they went to a Roman Catholic and they were standing there like, "This is so odd. Everything is so strange and feels so weird." I feel that too when I go. Recently I went to a Parish I had never been to before, a Roman Catholic Parish. Even during the hallelujah they did certain motions with their hands I had never seen before. It immediately struck me as this is a little silly and weird. Then I watched as they did it, and certain were clearly very connected with this. This action meant something to them. Unless you experience it you're never going to be able to understand it. I explained that. If you don't speak Spanish and you sit down at a table where people are just speaking Spanish, you're going to be very acutely aware of the fact that you're an outsider.

The more you sit there and dedicate yourself to that thing, that way of seeing the world and speaking, the more you'll understand it. It will shape the way you relate to those people and the world around you.

The changes, not only are they okay, they're ultimately inevitable. It's a matter of learning to go, "That strange thing, that's new. Let me just sit with it for a minute." Rather than making the ethical judgment immediately, let me embody it, let me feel that, let me listen to it and see what experience comes out of that. See what relationship comes out of it, then we can talk about making some type of ethical judgment or evaluation of it. Let me at least know what I'm talking about literally, first.

Maria Erb:

Yeah, I kind of feel this way of looking at things is at odds with the quick snap judgment that we almost demand in so many situations. We want somebody to step up and know that this is clearly a right course of action, or this is clearly not a course we want to take. We kind of want that, but to even get to that point, even if that is a desirable thing, doesn't happen very quickly.

Ben Kahn:

Go on Facebook anytime, you know what I mean. In terms of people making grandiose, empirical, moral proclamations. There doesn't seem to be a lot of room for nuance in the online world. It's there, but there's just so much stuff out there. It's so easy for someone to just jump online and put whatever soundbite they want out there.

David Turnbloom:

This is why I think certain religious traditions and philosophical traditions lend so much to the ethical project, because of the project of ethics and understanding it. It's about slowing down and turning inward, paying attention to experiences, and knowing that being aware of your humanity will help make you aware of other peoples humanity. It allows you to pay attention to, "Well what's going on in them that's being worked out slowly."

Maria Erb:

Right.

David Turnbloom:

There's this slowing of the pace of judgment that happens. Again, as you pointed out, there are moments from our day to day lives where I have to do something now. I have to stand up and say something, I have to speak. I think that in me, there's always a sense of I could be wrong with what I'm doing. At this very moment, because I've paid attention to what's going on inside me, because I've made this habit out of ethical reflection. This is the examination of conscience that religious people have done for centuries, at the beginning and ending of every day. Examining your motivations, examining your feelings. That's going to make you into the person who knows how to do ethics, who can think and make decisions more clearly. It doesn't feel like some purely reactive instinctual decision every time you need to make something. You will have formed yourself into the type of person who makes good decisions. You have to worry less about how to make good decisions. I think different spiritual practices give us that gift of learning how to become the person who makes good decisions. Then in the everyday moments

where it's, "Well I got to make a decision." You can trust more-so that you're going to be acting out of motivations that you trust.

Maria Erb:

Yeah, that's a really hopeful thing. It makes me feel really uplifted to think we could create a whole batch of people doing this, and moving forward to make decisions in those contexts would be wonderful. Especially given, probably, the very difficult decisions that are going to be coming up on the horizon.

David Turnbloom:

Yeah. That's the other part of the theological background. The theological approach to ethics that I think is so important, that I learned from my study of ritual, is the importance of asking for help, the importance of acknowledging ones imminent failure, because you're going to keep failing as a human person. It seems a lot of Christians can get made fun of for, "Oh I'm just go guilt ridden. I'm so self critical." Just let go of your guilt. There's absolutely something to be said about that, it can be overdone. At the same time, when it comes to these ethical decisions, I think we can learn from it. It's wonderful as a group of people that get together and talk about how they're very against racism, and that should be done. Unless that same group of people can start off that conversation by saying that they are embodying racism, that they are failing. That there's a way that white supremacy cuts through their society in a way that they're perpetuating. Even if they're not wanting to, but they do it. Unless they can say that out loud, well, how is it that you're going to actually move forward going that way?

For me, the theological ethical approach is so helpful because it starts off with some of those insights. Let's be honest about who we are. Let's be patient and look at ourselves, not just project some ideals we wish were the case. That whole introspective, patient, inward looking approach allows people to say, "Well, yeah I don't always do so well, so let's figure out where do I go from here."

Ben Kahn:

I think that's an interesting transition. You've really talked about ethics as coming from within. In less of an absolute, prescribed kind of way. Almost a continuum of understanding, based on humanity and embracing your faults and humanity. We want to move into that futuristic kind of landscape where, how do we know who is human and who isn't when we have implants, artificial intelligence and all of these things that sound like science fiction now, but are increasingly coming closer and closer into focus.

David Turnbloom: So what's the question?

Ben Kahn: What does it mean to be a human I guess?

David Turnbloom: These are the questions that's one of the core questions of our core curriculum for

theology is, who am I and who am I becoming? The other one is, who or what is god and how do I relate to god? These are the questions that we build, especially our introduction to theology 105 course around. Implicit in those questions is the impossibility of offering the perfect answer. For me this idea of what is a human being, I can offer examples of how I experience it. It very much is this idea of being

a question. I experience myself as a question that is oriented out towards the universe. This is coming very much from the theology of Karl Rahner amongst others. That to me is what drives how you're going to approach the future, what am I going to be doing as I go forward. All of these questions of what is a person, get more and more complicated. It can seem for so many people incredibly overwhelming. If I can't answer that question, what is the arguing point on which I stand to act, and this point of turning to the subject, saying let's just stop. Rather than trying to define all people, let me sit down and look at my own experiences, and try to understand that as my beginning point.

What is a person going for? What am I going to look like? Once I get to that point tomorrow I'm going to answer myself again. Whatever changes have happened I will go ahead and reassess them. The next week and once I get my first few chips that will get implanted into my brain, that allow me to access certain data. I don't know what that's going to do to my experiences or what it's going to be like. Once it happens, the next day I'll be sure to take a half an hour to sit down and think about it. Just to set aside some time to go, well these are the questions for me, it is that turn inward and make sure you have to intentionally carve out time to sit and think about these things. To put it frank, they're not going to be worked out in philosophical journals. The philosophical and theological journals will continue to write and continue to think about it. That's a huge important part of discovery what a human person is. To be a human person is really to be living out that everyday experience and trying to pay attention to it as you go forward, and trying to pay attention to others.

Everything I've been saying, like you pointed out, was very much that ethics comes from this inward turn. It does, but it comes from expressing that and sharing it with others, then listening to other peoples as well to what their experiences are like. Noticing just how different they are, so that limits our own experiences, we have to be aware of the limits. You can't just go, "Well this is what I feel, therefore it's universal and I'm going to act out of it." You know, absolute conviction, no let me listen to other peoples experiences as well. Yeah, I don't know where I was going with that.

Ben Kahn:

No, I think that was definitely in key with what you've been talking about so far. Ethics not being an easier, fast kind of process.

Maria Erb:

I feel with this, like you said, the emphasis on turning inward, slowing down and the reflective introspective format that we almost associate with life in a monastery, or life definitely in a religious community. Teaching college students how to do that is a great thing. I'm wondering, moving forward with all of the complex landscape, and also the time pressures and increasing competition that's going to be a part of life. It seems you would have to lay an awfully strong foundation to resist a lot of the pressures.

David Turnbloom:

Yeah, I think those types of pressures have always been there for people. I think there's a certain pace to life that perhaps compounds them now. I have to think

more about that. Yeah, you do have to lay a strong foundation. This is fresh in my head because I was just teaching this. The end of the sermon in the mountain, the gospel of Matthew, Jesus says everybody that does these things lives these ways, and embodies these habits. It will be like a house that is build on a strong foundation. It's cultivating a habit, a way of being that allows you to have that foundation. When all of these changes come, when all of these tragedies occur around us, it's not like they're not going to affect us or not shake us to our core in certain ways, or really challenge who we are. There is a sense that we will have a foundation out of which we can then act and slowly change. That foundation provides us with a real sense of conviction, hopefully a sense of community from which this fascinating and terrifying future comes. As we face that future it's a matter of keeping up that foundation. That's the thing about that sermon, it's pointing out habits that you need to do. Do these particular things, treat other people this way, focus on your interior motivations. The more you do these things, well that's who you've become.

Thing will continue to get more and more complicated. You can't look at Facebook or turn on the news without being inundated with impossible questions. I personally am one of those people who are very prone to getting close to that despair. Where you think to yourself, "What can I possibly do?" This is why, especially virtue ethics for me, the tradition of Christian virtue ethics is so important because it is the little things you do on a day to day basis. It's not these great, grand scale, self sacrificial, huge actions that make one an ethical person. It's the little things that you can will yourself into on a daily basis that create that foundation. When I look forward to the future and see the impossibility of the tasks that lie ahead of us, it's well, bit by bit.

Ben Kahn:

I think we talk a lot, especially Maria, because she's a big pessimist, about the challenges that are coming from- Sorry Maria. About the challenges and how it seems so overwhelming and so crazy. I think technology acts in both ways. At the same time as we're under the yolk of globalization, what it means for the future of our country, our economy and our citizens. It also lets people kind of act in these hyper local ways that weren't really possible 20 years ago. In the wake of the horrible stuff that's been going on, this podcast is going to air probably a little bit down the line from our recording date, but just in the wake of some of this horrible- I'm sure in two months they'll have new horrible stuff to [crosstalk 00:29:07].

I sent some friends to get together on Facebook, send a group message out kind of connecting this web of people that were connected through a couple of different friends, and organize a trip to volunteer at a soup kitchen on a weekend. I think it's important to note all the good stuff that does come out of it. All the people that are able to be like, "Hey, I have a Facebook group for people who like football or whatever, and someone here who has cancer. Let's get a Gofundme setup to help them cover their medical bills." All sorts of good things that can come out of it, and the good that people can show.

David Turnbloom:

For me personally, my mother has multiple sclerosis, and she's in a wheelchair. It gets increasingly harder for her to get to a church to embody these rituals with people. Just talking about using technology to help people find these places, these communities where they're going to be able to support one another through facing these difficult times. There are entire communities of churches that exist in virtual reality. People make up their own avatars and they go through worship services that are just in this virtual space. For people who have certain disabilities and can't get to those communities, worshiping in these areas, is absolutely no less real than me going to a chapel on Sunday and sitting next to people. It's absolutely different and does different things, but technology provides that space in a way that's wonderful. It does a lot of positive things, but I also think one of the positive things it does rather than the nicer things that you listed of creating community, doing these things.

Without the Facebook live stream, you can have horrific things broadcast to people. The violence in our world, especially some of the racially motivated violence we have is not new. It feels new, but it's the technology that's new. It's the phones and the cameras everywhere that allows us to see these horrific things. I think that's an incredibly good thing. It doesn't make anybody feel good, but to begin having these conversations, to begin accurately getting a picture of what society looks like. These technologies are allowing us to do that. That goes back to my point earlier about how do we start mass at the Christian church? One of the first things we do is talk about our failure. I confess to almighty god, me, my brothers and sisters that I have sinned. There is a real way in which our technology is helping us see the ways in which we sin. Putting it in front of our faces. Making us feel uncomfortable. That is part of being human. The more we create societies that try to allow us not to feel uncomfortable, that to me is a real problem because we're forgetting who we actually are.

Another reason I have a big problem with Facebook is because I can self select for whose going to make me feel comfortable and who's going to make me feel like I'm a saint. Get rid of that voice because it doesn't affirm who I am, even if perhaps the way I've been behaving doesn't deserve affirming. I still don't want to hear that, so it can cut both ways I think. It gives me pause, but absolutely the technology is allowing us to understand ourselves in ways that I think we've never understood ourselves, and to grow in ways in which we have had trouble growing in the past.

Maria Erb:

That's an excellent point. I must say in a moment of self defense, I do not consider myself a pessimist.

Ben Kahn:

You're a realist.

Maria Erb:

I may have a vision of the future that is somewhat darker than yours Ben. Part of the reason I wanted to do this series was I wanted to hear some very convincing arguments for how we can create a future that's different from the past. I'm starting to hear things that really resonate with me that are making me feel hopeful. I'm very grateful to you for bringing up some of those things. I desperately

want to be convinced otherwise.

Ben Kahn: I'm having a moment of reflection and I now feel sorry for what I said to you.

Maria Erb: Thank you Ben.

David Turnbloom: Apologize. Ask forgiveness.

Maria Erb: Well, lets see. Did we ask most of the big questions we wanted to ask? I just want

to make sure we did because he's really given us a lot of-

Ben Kahn: Yeah, we've got a lot of good stuff.

Maria Erb: Wonderful, wonderful points.

Ben Kahn: I tend to drag on and on, so hopefully.

Maria Erb: Oh yeah, here's the one question I wanted to ask. I do feel, and we've talked about

this with some our guests, that people tend to want to be smarter, stronger and better than they are. I think they would willingly swap out body parts or pieces of them if it would give them this sort of end. I wonder, are we just planting the seeds of our own self destruction for this desire in the first place, just better than human?

David Turnbloom: Yeah, I think that term desire is the important one there. The way you just

described it, the thing that comes crashing into my mind is the second creation story in Genesis two through three. Some people, father Michael Himes at Boston College particularly taught me this, one way of looking at the original sin that happens in this story of Adam and Eve seeing this forbidden fruit that they're not supposed to have, and this serpent coming up to them saying, "No you're not going to die, you will be like God if you have that." And they go, "That looks good." And they take that. One way of looking at that is, what's the desire that's happening there? Sure, perhaps it's to be like God, perhaps there's disobedience that's happening. Another way of looking at it is, they didn't believe that they were good enough. That to me is one of the things. Right before that we have in the story, God creates human beings in God's image. God sees that it's good. God creates things in the way that God wanted them and their good. Even if we look at ourselves and think, no that's not good. I need to be stronger, smarter and better. Whatever we think that stronger or better might be. Whether that's somehow being able to recall information faster, because faster is somehow better, or stronger is able to move something more easily by myself without help.

The thing that I worry about is not so much what do I want, but why do I want it. Where does the desire come from. If it comes from this belief that I'm not good enough to begin with, that's really the problem. I think that's going to then drive a thirst that is never going to be satisfied. Some people go, "That's right, that's what it should be. This unending progress of just it's always getting better and better." Any close look at history will show, no it doesn't just get better and better.

The point is pay attention to what it is that drives the desire. If it's the desire for you to somehow be better because you're not good enough yet, stop. Think about the ways in which you are good enough. The things that you want to improve upon, well what is it that you want to actually improve in the world. Is it perhaps somebody else's suffering? That their being dehumanized. The dignity that they have is being denied to them. Absolutely, let's come up with some ways to make that better. Let's come up with some ways to improve that persons situation, but if the Genesis is just, "This isn't good enough, I want to be better, just because." I would say, spiritually speaking, from a theological ethics standpoint, what you need to do is start by appreciating. Step back, look at what is good about you. Learn to see the beauty of what is around you. Then learn how to perpetuate that beauty all the more. If technology is there to fill the lack in God's creation, I think we're going to end up building our idols, if technology is there to magnify the beauty in creation, then I think we're doing a human thing. That's how I would respond to that.

Maria Erb: Unbelievable. Cannot top that. Thank you, that was great.

Ben Kahn: Should we wrap up there?

Maria Erb: Yeah.

Ben Kahn: Anything else you want to-

Maria Erb: I'm just speechless now, seriously, it's really good.

David Turnbloom: I'm glad.

Ben Kahn: Yeah, it's hard to follow that up without something shallow.

Maria Erb: Yeah. I mean thank you for those parting words.

Ben Kahn: So let's plug your book.

Maria Erb: Yeah, let's do, let's talk about your book.

David Turnbloom: Sure, I have a book coming out in the Spring of next year, I think around March,

called "Speaking with a Coyness." A conversation about grace, virtue and the Eucharist. That's kind of the subtitle, they're still working that out a little bit. "Speaking with a Coyness" is definitely the title. The liturgical press is going to be publishing that, and it looks at the theology of St. Thomas the Coyness and how he understands the relationship between the Eucharist and how we live our lives. The virtues we want to embody and how that connects to the way in which we worship. That will be coming out in the Spring, if you're interested in Eucharistic theology,

hopefully it will be something that is thought provoking.

Maria Erb: It sounds thought provoking, yes. Well thank you again for being our guest. We

really appreciate it.

David Turnbloom: Thank you so much, it was a lot of fun.

Ben Kahn: Yeah, thanks David.

Maria Erb: Thanks for joining us for this special episode on UP Tech-talk special series on the

future of education.

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