



Joanna Meyer:

You're listening to the Faith and Work Podcast where we explore what it means to serve God, neighbor, and society through our daily work.

Joanna Meyer:

Welcome to the Faith and Work Podcast. I'm your host Joanna Meyer, and I'm joined today by Abby Worland, a member of the Denver Institute team.

Hi Abby. What have you been up to?

Abby Worland:

We're recording this on the very snowy day in March, and so I'm sitting cozy at home and looking forward to this interview.

Joanna Meyer:

Yeah, it's really fun. Schools across the Denver metro area are canceled today, and it's fascinating because we're talking to an educator. We'll hear from Dr. Mordecai Brownlee in just a second, but his school is canceled today too. But I have been busy making connections in the community looking for stories of how God is at work through people's work, and sometimes you have some delightful surprises, which is how I found today's guest for the podcast.

I was randomly sitting down at a large banquet dinner here in the Denver metro area and started conversation with the people sitting next to me, and I very quickly realized that I was sitting next to some of the top leaders in higher education in the state of Colorado. I was sitting next to Amy Parsons, who's the president of Colorado State University, and Mordecai Brownlee, today's guest, who's the president of the Community College of Aurora, and I got humbled really fast. I just shut up and listened, but it was amazing. As Mordecai was sharing, I just had that Holy Spirit inkling where I was like, I think this is a man of faith and someone that I need to know. And so it's been fun to get to know him a little bit better.



In his role as the president of the Community College of Aurora, he is positioned to have a critical role in addressing issues facing our local economy and local employers. He's a critical in-between spot in the school-to-jobs pipeline, and is also becoming an entry point for many first-generation college students to begin to access higher education. So what he has learned in this role has implications both for the economy of our state and also for us as leaders and followers of Christ. So I think it's a fascinating conversation. Abby, tell us a little bit more about Dr. Brownlee.

Abby Worland:

Absolutely. Dr. Mordecai Ian Brownlee serves as the sixth president of the Community College of Aurora, or CCA. Before his time in Colorado, he served as a faculty member at the University of Charleston, Morgan State University, and St. Philip's College, which is a historically Black community college in San Antonio. Dr. Mordecai was named one of Denver's Top 40 under 40 by the Denver Business Journal. He was named Community Leader of the Year by the Aurora Chamber of Commerce, and is a champion of the US Department of Education's Unlocking Career Success Initiative. And as someone who worked in public education for a long time, I'm thrilled to talk with him today.

Dr. Mordecai, welcome to the Faith and Work Podcast.

Dr. Mordecai Brownlee:

Thank you so much for having me. I've been looking forward to this.

Abby Worland:

We have too. Well, let's start and just find out a little bit more about you. Tell us about your younger years, your family life, your educational journey. Give us a quick autobiography, if you would.

Dr. Mordecai Brownlee:

Yeah. A very quick version of this would be I was born in Toledo, Ohio, and I was raised by a single mother who was a K-12 educator. Mom taught special education for a number of years. We moved around a whole lot. She was a union teacher, and it took us from Michigan to Georgia. We ended up landing in Galveston, Texas, and very quickly after that landing. We ended up selling in Humble, Texas, which is north of Houston, and so that's where essentially I was raised was in Humble, Texas.



Fast-forward, mom's health began to decline while I was in high school, and so going off to college was not going to be an option for me. I decided to take some overnight shifts working at the local airport, working the 10:00 PM to 6:00 AM, breaking down trucks but attempting to be a community college student in the mornings and what groom myself at 8:00, be there for class, and pass out by 1:00, but did that.

But the beautiful thing was is that I ended up finding myself during that period, and the beauty is that in this podcast I can say that it really gave me an opportunity to solidify my relationship with Jesus Christ and to really ask the questions of what is it that I should be doing in terms of service, not only for the kingdom of God, but also to society as a whole, and ended up finding that higher education was going to be my pathway and begin working at the college. And from there, transferred, moved on to Houston Baptist University, now known as Houston Christian University, but that's who gave me my first full time my opportunity to serve and was able to serve throughout Hurricane Ike, which was very significant down in that area at that time, and really fell in love, I would say at that point, following the hurricane with higher ed.

Fast-forward, this is my seventh institution that I've had the pleasure of serving, but my first as college president and have now been here almost three years, and it's been an absolute blessing.

Joanna Meyer:

I wanted to ask a little bit more about those early educational experiences because my impression is that you maybe weren't a great student early on, and yet over time you're now a university president. It reflects often how we think about calling around here, that it's something that God forms in us over time, that sometimes it means looking in the rear view mirror and saying, "Wow, look at how God has made me for what I do now through the experiences I've passed through." And so I'm wondering what your early educational journey was like and how that path has led you into being able to say, hey, being a higher ed administrator is an expression of how God has made me to be.

Dr. Mordecai Brownlee:

Absolutely. I will tell you that the light bulb for me didn't really go off until that freshman year of community college, just based off of some folks that God had put in my life at that time that began to mentor me. But before then, I would say that the connection between education, my pursuit of education, and what I was seeking to do in service, it wasn't clicking. There wasn't alignment, and so I think the why for me was a disconnect. So I found myself being very challenged in mathematics at that particular time. I remember them



telling me, "You've got to solve and find X," and I says, "I never lost X, so why do I have to look for it?" I didn't lose it.

And so I tested at developmental levels in math and I failed developmental math in college. I didn't know that there's a difference between graduating high school and being college ready. Going through that experience of understanding from a testing standpoint, I was not testing at college levels. So I would say that a lot of sacrifice, a lot of dedication, a lot of tutorial. I'm very grateful that I didn't give up because at the moment that I failed developmental math, I truly could have gave up and just allow for that voice in the back of my head to tell me that maybe I was not college material.

And so I will tell anyone that's listening to this podcast that you'll be surprised how God will use you. And it just took a little bit of tutoring, it took a little bit of sacrifice to understand how this all really worked in the real world of what my application of math would be, but very grateful that I stuck through it.

Abby Worland:

Let's take a little bit actually going into the higher education in general. That's where you spent the majority of your career, and it's so interesting to hear your personal experience and now to see you working in that field as well. Many of the people that are going to listen to this podcast have never walked the halls at the Community College of Aurora, and so tell us a little bit more about the community College of Aurora. Tell us about your student body. Who are they, and what are some of the challenges they're facing as they make this transition to college?

Dr. Mordecai Brownlee:

Well, I will tell you what resonated with me as I was considering where to serve as president, CCA, some of the founding fathers and mothers of the Community College of Aurora are still alive, and I remember having an opportunity to meet them. We're the youngest community college in the state of Colorado. We've just turned 40 this year, and I will tell you, several of those individuals are faith believers, and it was an amazing opportunity for me to sit down and have a conversation about what did it take to make CCA a reality?

CCA, the creation of it goes back even to the 60s and 70s. We now call it the Colorado Sentinel newspaper. Before that, it was the Aurora Sentinel newspaper, but before that, it used to be called the Aurora Advocate. And the publisher of that newspaper used his platform to promote within the community that one day Aurora is



going to grow up and it's going to need its own community college. Fast-forward, they took a gentleman, he's since passed, by the name of Dr. Chang. Dr. Chang was a staff member at the Community College of Denver. From there, he bought into the vision that Aurora would need its own community college. They did a pilot called the Aurora Educational Center that grew beyond any walls that they could ever declare for it, and it proved the concept.

1983, May 20th, it was decided within Colorado that it would have its own community college in Aurora, but there was a catch. They would not give them any money to start this community college. The founding fathers and mothers told me that essentially it was this belief that they didn't think that the college would make it so they didn't want to put any money towards the college, and that's how it became known as the College Without Walls. But they didn't let that stop them.

What they did was is they began to teach in daycare centers, community centers, open parks. I've got photos in my office of the original admissions team with a 20-foot rotary cord in their living room, in their kitchen, calling and recruiting and making things happening, and going to the local grocery stores and letting folks know that education was going to be a pathway for them. So many of those folks around the community at that time, things have been named after them. That lady, her home, a middle school was named after her. She's since passed.

But fast-forward, that's been the trajectory. And me being the sixth president, this college has done an outstanding job of choosing its presidents, the people that have that original heart of what it means to be the college without walls, and what does it mean to make sure that no matter what is in our way, we've got to figure out how to provide service to the community as a whole. Who we serve, just a south of 9,000 students currently on two campuses. But I'll tell you as of right now, we're about 90 days away from signing paperwork on what will be our third campus, so stay tuned for that. But we continue to grow and evolve.

Over 69% of our students are students of color. We are the most diverse college in all of Colorado. Over 55% of our students are first generation, and I will tell you, right now, over 60% of our students are concurrent enrollment. We're the number one provider in the Colorado community college system for high school concurrent enrollment education. So we've got a unique base, Hispanic serving institution, minority serving institution, over 70 countries represented. We do some very good work.



Abby Worland:

I love the hustle of those founders of CCA. I think that speaks volumes. Sorry, Joanna. Go ahead.

Joanna Meyer:

Hosting classes in the park. You just think about that and it really is the classroom without walls.

I had heard a statistic the other day or a comment about education levels in Colorado because we're a highly educated state, but we're also a state of transplants. And so the person making this comment had said, we don't realize that even though we're highly educated, our native residents of the state may often have some real struggles in accessing the education system. And I'm wondering if you could tell us a little bit more about the lived of the students. What are some of the challenges they face? I also would love to know if you think there are some myths or stereotypes people have about the community college experience.

Dr. Mordecai Brownlee:

Yeah, I'll start with the latter first, and I would just say that there is absolutely a stigma that is present. I think that throughout time it continues to improve, but there has been the stigma over community college that it is for those that don't have what it takes to make it into the university setting. I would say that from a research standpoint, that has proven to be, nationally speaking, farther from the truth. And so I think that it has been a need to dispel that myth, and I think that that's where it takes folks like myself who are a product of community college to say that there's some good work happening. And it proves to be the front lines for many individuals given their backgrounds, their realities, where they are, where they're coming from, to be a welcoming space where they can begin to discover, find, prepare themselves for what God has for them next. So that's what I'll say certainly about that.

In terms of the realities around who we're serving, it is very true. It's very true that Colorado is a highly educated state. However, it is a state of, as you say Joanne, transplants. And from a statistical standpoint, it truly impacts and it skews the data to then on surface appear as though we are tracking extremely well with educating and credentialing our native student population. However, that has been a challenge in the state, and so we have a lot of work ahead of us. I will tell you that the Colorado Department of Education has worked with the Colorado Workforce Council. They've just recently published what they call Top Jobs in the State. So these are jobs that



are going to lead to higher degrees of economic mobility. That 76% of top jobs in the state will require post-secondary education.

But the gap. The gap, given the particular community, you may have a 30 percentile attainment of education. Next thing you know, poverty is only growing. Crime is only growing in those particular communities that are challenged. So there's a lot of work. We are right on the front lines. Many of our students may be like myself, tested at developmental levels. Many of our students may be working moms and dads. You already heard the percentage of the amount of students that are first generation. So in many cases, I love to tell faith believers this. What we're doing at CCA is ministry work. It is creating a space for folks that have not had an opportunity to have a welcoming, inclusive environment that's really going to care for them, bring them and make them whole, and then help them to discover their purpose.

Joanna Meyer:

Yeah, you think about what it takes to flourish in life in Colorado today and just those core work skills are essential. I mean, it's amazing to think that your school offers 55 different two-year degrees. I mean, the diversity and the access points for people that are just trying to get into the workforce is huge.

Dr. Mordecai Brownlee:

It is massive. And I'll tell you, I think right now, according to US World Reports, Colorado is ranked third in economy. And I really believe this and it's the reason why I've relocated my family here from Texas, because I believe that Colorado is prime, at this particular point in time, to discover some new realities legislatively and operationally when it comes to workforce preparedness and how it fights and addresses poverty through economic mobility opportunities. And I give it over the next certainly five years, but as we figure this out, what that can do not only for Colorado's economy I think it's going to be historic, but the opportunities that it will create for the native communities to realize for themselves true economic mobility, I think are just endless.

Abby Worland:

Let's go into that because I think that is really interesting, and I'd just be curious to see the role you see community colleges playing in terms of strengthening the workforce and developing that schools to jobs, school to employment pipeline. Talk a little bit about how you see community colleges playing a role in that larger development of Colorado's workforce.



Dr. Mordecai Brownlee:

Well, you've got what originally the idea of what community colleges were providing. I don't want to use the word originally. I will say what has evolved over time and what has become a bread and butter, and that is comprehensive transfer credit programs that lead to four-year pathways. I think that that work, liberal arts, I've been educated, I have a liberal arts degrees, believe in the power of that. We've got to figure out though how to educate the general public to understand it's not an either or.

Liberal arts education is powerful and should continue to be central and focused. The comprehensive transfer pathway should continue to remain its focus and keep that going. But we also, especially community college, have a responsibility towards workforce preparedness. And you don't have to choose one or the other. It's a responsibility to keep them both going because if we don't provide that, then where as a state and a country will we be left with if you don't have community colleges doing that work?

So I do believe that the work is vast in terms of creating transfer pathways. What we're watching happening in the market, not only in Colorado but nationally speaking, is these various demographic shifts. The 2020 census really has shown this, and it's now projected for 2030 that there's going to be some significant shifts around the country about where people will be migrating to due to the cost of living and workforce opportunities. The situation that this puts many universities now in is that they're finding themselves to have to cannibalize and do scope creep into areas that they normally would not have been recruiting in that space or those students because they have a responsibility to remain as sustainable as possible. And as you look around the country, you look at some of these universities, they are the number one employer in that particular community, the amount of real estate that they're covering, and so you begin to think about enrollment declines.

I remember working with the US Census Bureau when we were in DC, and they told us at one point out of the pandemic, they says, "When you go back to your states, don't say enrollment declines." He said, "Actually, use the term enrollment shifts," because the demographic shifts, you're reaching a point to where you can't even recapture that growth anymore due to what has been demographic declines. That has impacted higher education. But I will say for workforce development, what we've got to figure out here in Colorado is how the technical education system, the Emily Griffiths, the Pickens Techs, these technical bodies, how we're going to find deeper partnerships with them and the community college space because career and technical education in this state, legislatively speaking, I think we're going to have to realize a new reality for itself.



Joanna Meyer:

One thing I'm wondering is what our employers, folks that might be listening to this podcast, what can they be doing to better support community college graduates or constituents? They'll say, "I have jobs at my company that I can't fill. I can't find qualified people," so what would an employer need to know about coming alongside your students and helping them make that jump from a community college into the workforce?

Dr. Mordecai Brownlee:

The two things that come to mind... And I think these are opportunities that can be addressed today, and to any of your listeners, they can reach out I'll be willing to partner with them. And if I'm not the right partner for them, I'll them connected to where they need to be.

Number one, it is so important in the workforce that we take a look at these job descriptions and the requirements of some of these job descriptions. We have found in the industry that many of these JDs were written way back when and have not been retouched, and so some of the qualifications are no longer even viable programs that are being taught and they don't have viable pathways to today's student. We're talking Gen Z. My children are Gen Alpha. We're not even talking millennials. I'm a millennial. I'm an early millennial, so when folks talk about millennials don't work hard, I'm like, "Can I tell you something for a moment?" So it's just these myths out there.

So these pathways, we have to let the data tell us where we should be focusing our efforts, and I will tell you that many employers are building their JDs, their job descriptions off of dated pathways. There are transferable skills that are available to them in the workforce, but if the student has never been told that what they are now obtaining is a transferable skill set, they won't even know that they qualify to be able to pursue that particular job. This in itself creates a very interesting gap that we've got to put a concentrated effort behind addressing.

The second part of that I will tell you is that as America continues to diversify its populations, we've got to remember from a cultural standpoint, there are some individuals in that home that have never done a job like that. So that child or that young adult has never had anyone to help educate them even on what that job is. So they automatically, especially if they're coming from a deficit mindset, wouldn't even think that that's something that even applies to them. And it does, and it can be transformative for them, their family and future generations to come. So we've got to do a better job of tying in for these first generation students.



That job is attainable, but let's do more of what we would call old school. Let's get back to doing some of these field trips. Let's get back to doing some of these more immersive experiences and take you and show you what this means and what it looks like, and determine what your interests are. I think it's going to be a very transformative experience as we figure out how to bring intentionality more into the educational system and space to truly evolve these students and to direct them into what are going to be brand new, disruptive, innovative career pathways.

Parker Inabnet:

Hi, my name is Parker Inabnet. As a financial advisor with I.M Financial, I'm enriched by Denver Institute's programming and content, including this podcast. I love Denver Institute's mission to prepare people to serve God and others in their daily work so that workplaces and cities are transformed. I know my monthly donation gives the organization I love reliable support, plus I get great benefits like free or reduced admission to events and access to digital content. To become a monthly partner, please visit the Give page at denverinstitute.org.

Abby Worland:

Something you've mentioned and hit on a couple times now is this idea of collaboration or partnering, thinking about how community colleges can collaborate with technical institutions, how the community college can collaborate with employers in different industries. Something we hope to do in our work at Denver Institute is to mobilize Christian leaders to collaborate with other leaders, because great change happens through collaboration. And I'm just curious, how do you collaborate effectively? Do you have principles or mindsets that you follow to make sure that the collaboration is effective?

Dr. Mordecai Brownlee:

That's a great question, Abby. I will tell you, God has wired me to get to the point guy, meaning that we don't have time to waste. We're here to transform lives, and so what do you have? What we have? Can we figure this out? Let's cut the fat on it. I am not one of those folks. I pretty much fell in the posturing department, acting presidential. Listen, God didn't bless me to be in this situation for me to sit up and be a gatekeeper. We've got to figure out, how do we take these opportunities and these responsibilities we've been granted and be able to transform other folks' lives?



I have a personal mission statement, and that mission statement is that Mordecai Ian Brownlee builds others and design systems that empower others. And so this idea of purpose, when I walk into a room and it's time to collaborate, it's time to build something, it's this idea that this is what God has put me here to do. So if it's not with this opportunity, it'll be with the next opportunity or it'll be with the next opportunity, but understanding how to create win-win synergies that will lead towards the advancement of other folks' lives. And so I just let that lead me, and quickly I can kind of pick up on if this is going to be something that's going to be worthwhile, I'll do it. If not, God bless you. We're going to move on to the next thing.

Joanna Meyer:

Okay. Dr. Mordecai, I have a funny question. Just in talking to you, I think of the charisma and the great voice you have. We talked before we hit record that one of your first jobs was in radio and TV, so you have an amazing presence. I could see somebody saying, "You should be a preacher," just knowing that if you come from the Black church tradition, somebody would be like, "Oh, Dr. Mordecai, you were called to preach," and yet you're in public education.

I want to know, what is it that makes this work in higher ed? Such an expression of the faith. How is this a more meaningful investment of your time than going inside a church door to preach?

Dr. Mordecai Brownlee:

You bring up a very good point. I'll tell you, I was raised in the Pentecostal church, and so I remember dating my wife. I was raised in what was a sect of Assemblies of God known as Church of God in Christ, strong African-American historical ties. And so I remember dating my wife who was raised in the United Methodist Church, and I remember us dating one another and having these different church experiences, and I'm looking, I'm like, "Why is nobody running around? Y'all don't know about Jesus. Y'all ain't took a lap yet for Jesus, and so y'all don't know nothing about the Lord." Very different than I show up in her setting and I'm like, "A hymnal? What's this? Y'all don't know the words?" It's just interesting to go through these experiences. But I was raised in a Pentecostal church where you either play an instrument, which I played instruments, or you're going to end up being a preacher. Everybody end up being a preacher.

And I remember having to reach this point in my journey where it vexed me in my faith walk because I really wanted to pursue some other pathways. But it was almost as though we were pre-directed into, you do this, you do this or you do this. I'm very grateful for mentorship that is upcoming into my life to help me understand



and be at peace, because I can be a disciple of the Lord, but work in another facet and it doesn't have to lead to these pre-directed, predetermined pathways. And so I'm very appreciative. I don't know, probably if it wasn't for that, and there was nothing wrong with being a preacher, there's nothing wrong with being a pastor or a minister or a person of the cloth, but I probably, if it wasn't for those integrations, would've led myself down those paths. I think I would've been all right at it, but I don't think that that's really what God had for me.

And so education, historically speaking now, I've worked at two historical Black colleges and universities. I will tell you now we get into what has been the historical ties, especially in the African-American communities where you had university presidents who were also the pastors of... And now we understand historically where the churches were funding these historical Black colleges and the connections there. And so I even think about Dr. Mordecai Johnson. These are people that were people of the cloth that came through and were then put in position for university executiveship. And so we don't have a church at the Community College of Aurora, but sometimes in certain faith communities, I'll tell them we're the Greater New Community College of Aurora, but we're doing some good work. We're doing some good work.

Joanna Meyer:

Yeah, yeah, yeah. You're helping people become all that God has made them to be, and that's deeply, deeply spiritual work.

But we'd like to explore also the inner life of leaders. And I'm wondering how has God shaped you through this work?

Dr. Mordecai Brownlee:

I'll pick that back up. I'll tell you that it is an amazing, beautiful opportunity to serve others. And I think it's very important that all of us, that no matter what our role is to society, that we understand that we have a grave opportunity to serve others, but the opportunity is as well to interject our own faith into those journeys. And I will tell you that as a college president, I don't know what God even has on the horizon for me moving forward five years from now, 10 years from now, 15 years from now. But it is amazing when you just trust God and you allow for faith and purpose to really lead the paths. And it's amazing to me how God has put certain people in my path that I wasn't even looking for. I was just seeking to be obedient. I was just seeking to do his will, that how these opportunities continue to make themselves known.



And so I do my best at anyone that asks me that, especially that are, again, they're faith believers, just embracing the power of following the path that God has you on, still doing the work. Just because you may be waiting on the voice of God to unveil himself to you doesn't mean that you're supposed to be sitting on your hands. There's work to do, and as you continue to do that work and you remain diligent and you make sure and do your best, none of us are perfect, but to do our best to align our lives, our brands, our actions with that that will be pleased with God, what God will do for us and through us.

Abby Worland:

I love that. When I think about education, education is about change fundamentally. And sometimes in education, the change can be really quick and you see it in front of you, you see a student learn something, you can see a single student's lives change. But sometimes in education, the change takes a really long time and it can feel discouraging because it can be really difficult to see the impact of your work. And I'm just curious, what are the spiritual practices for you that help sustain your commitment to this work over that long game and press on towards change even when it feels like nothing's happening?

Dr. Mordecai Brownlee:

I think back to some of my favorite stories in the Bible. It amazes me how you have these moments of what I call disruption, and these moments of disruption, how it is a very pivotal point where choice presents itself, and the choices that are then made, the paths that it now takes an entire bloodline or the impact that it makes in history.

So prime example would be even in the community college space, one of the reasons why I love to serve in this particular space is because we have a very fast, punchy approach to either workforce preparedness or the transfer pathway. We only get sometimes six weeks with a student, sometimes three years with a student, especially if they're working full-time and seeking to really do some things, sometimes four years. But whatever that path, many times it's a short window to be able to create these moments of disruption, reflection, and to either help them unlearn what they have previously learned or to learn something new.

And I would say then, that's not to say that that's not happening in the four-year space, but the time window for what we do is a bit short. And then plus you have folks that are going to walk through our doors as an open access institution that would never even get the opportunity to walk through other doors. And so that also means then that our classrooms in themselves become these social experiments where you have folks from all



over, no matter their story, all coming into one space. And I'll use civil discourse as another example. These different cultures now come into a space and we've got to teach them how you can understand and respect various viewpoints and perspectives, yet keep the person whole, showcase respect.

You may not agree, but what can we do today to help you understand how to be a productive citizen and to have civil discourse? Because they're not even teaching civil discourse in the K-12 school system. It's really up to the guardians and those raising these children to even have that conversation. So to back out of this, I would then just say that back to the beginning of the question, it is a beautiful opportunity to be able to create these moments of inflection and the pathways of either realizing something in themselves that they never would've seen and thought before.

That takes faith. That takes, from a spiritual standpoint and leading with the love of Christ, a heart of grace because just because that individual may have had an outburst or not done what was the right thing to do, I have to now lead with grace because they are unlearning what they previously understood something to be and creating these continuous moments of disruption to help them discover the truth and the truth for themselves. And it is beautiful when you watch that light bulb begin to come off for that individual, and you realize that you now are on your way to being made whole and you've been transformed in the short amount of time that we've had with you.

Joanna Meyer:

What encouragement would you have from our listeners who might be in jobs where they're having to play the long game? Where it's like, "I'm slow and steady, I'm investing in people or trying to make change, but it's not dramatic." How would you encourage them not to give up in the work that they're doing?

Dr. Mordecai Brownlee:

I think it's important to remember the power of seed sowing. And I remember when my wife and I bought our first home, we had a home... I should have never sold this home. We had a home right across the street from Blue Bill Ice Cream in Brenham, Texas, and I remember we bought the home and we were renovating it. This is what happens when you watch too much HGTV and you just get a bright new idea, and we put too much money into that home. But I remember one of the things I did when I went to Lowes and I bought everything you're supposed to buy to trim the trees and to cut the grass and to blow the weeds, do all this stuff, and I had bought this packet of flowers and I planted them.



I didn't read the back of the package. I just planted them, and I show up after work and I water them and I would water them, and I would water them, and I'm like, "They aren't growing. What the heck is happening? It isn't working," until one day I went to Lowes and I had the conversation and I had to understand that I was planting a seed that was out of season. And I would just tell anybody that is listening to this to understand that there are going to be moments where you're planting a seed in someone's life and you're playing the long game or you're making an investment into what will be an ultimate transformation. You may not see immediately that flower grow. It may have just been your job to be a seed planter.

Somebody else has got to come along and do the grooming and the watering. Somebody else, when it begins to grow, is going to be charged with doing the pruning. But if everybody is in purpose and doing their job, you're going to see something beautiful happen. So I think understanding that if you're playing the long game, it may not be your role to see the full growth of something, but if you wouldn't have planted the seed, if you wouldn't have continued to water it, it would not lead towards the true blooming that I think is on the horizon. So it's just important to remain encouraged.

Joanna Meyer:

So fun. I'm wondering if we could ask you for a final word for our guests. We often ask our leaders that we interview on the podcast just to offer a final word of encouragement or a charge, and I'm wondering if you'd have a word for our audience. It could be it challenge for them to be trusting God in their work. It could be a challenge for them to consider the type of students that you serve. I'm just wondering what your final word would be for our guests.

Dr. Mordecai Brownlee:

My favorite story in the Bible is the Parable of the Talent because I continue to find myself for a number of years in that story. And I would just charge the listeners in closing of this episode to understand what happens sometimes when you play it too safe. There's a charge, there's a gift that's been placed in you, and we owe it to the Lord to make good on that investment that he's made in us and be willing to lean into and utilize faith to lean into spaces in places where you can't physically see the end, but by leaning deeply into God and where he will take you.

This is going to be a beautiful, transformative experience, and so we shouldn't hide our talents into the ground, understanding that what we've been given, we are to multiply it, we are to serve, we are to plant seeds, we are



to be good neighbors and continue to advance the love and the message of Jesus Christ. And don't play it safe. Don't play it safe. Go out there and do some good work.

Joanna Meyer:

Beautiful closing thought. Thanks for your time, Dr. Mordecai. Thanks for your leadership and for opening our eyes to the transformation that's happening in a million small ways out at the Community College of Aurora.

Dr. Mordecai Brownlee:

Thank you so much for having me.

Joanna Meyer:

Well, what a fun conversation with Dr. Mordecai. Abby, I'm wondering, was there a takeaway that really stood out to you, a call to action for our listeners?

Abby Worland:

There were many, but I think what I felt challenged by in the conversation and what I would encourage our listeners to think about is how we can begin to see community college in a new light, and how can we think about points of collaboration that we could have with community colleges in our area, whether that might be hiring graduates or supporting them in a different way. I would really encourage our listeners to think about community colleges as a place where God is at work in our communities.

Joanna Meyer:

Yeah, the takeaway for me was just thinking about the founders of the Community College of Aurora and how they had a good idea. They saw a need in their community and felt that they could respond to it. But what it asked of them 40 years ago, they were leading classes in parks where they were lobbying on the phone after work to try and get people to take this idea of a school in Aurora seriously. It gives me hope that small efforts now can bear tremendous fruit later. I think of a very established institution serving 9,000 students a year, and I think, what beautiful fruit of the vision and the moxie of the people that led in the early days.



As a resource for our listeners, we will link to a video from one of our Early Denver Institute events where we talked about education with Dr. Mary Poplin, and let me quick pull up the name of it. She talked about the soul of education and how we begin to bring a Christian perspective to the process of educating students. So if this topic intrigues you, click the link in our show notes and you can hear this conversation with Dr. Mary Poplin. Otherwise, thanks for joining us today. I look forward to more conversations with you about the intersection of faith, work and community.

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