POPE FRANCIS
and his
FOUR AMERICAN HEROES

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For five days in September of 2015 Pope Francis made an extraordinary visit to America. I was there, on the ground, in all the major cities: Washington DC, New York, and Philadelphia, covering the Pope’s visit for NBC. The highlight of the trip for many was Pope Francis’ address to congress, during which he held up four individuals as ideal representatives of the American dream.

The first one he mentioned was Martin Luther King Jr. and the second was Abraham Lincoln. Those two, probably, aren’t surprising for most Americans but he also mentioned two lesser-known but equally fascinating people, namely, Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton.

I was delighted by the speech, as I have greatly admired these men and women over the course of my life. In fact, I have alluded to each of them in various videos, homilies, and lectures that can be found on WordOnFire.org. After reflecting on the pope’s message, I decided to devote a whole episode of my podcast, “The Word on Fire Show,” to these four American heroes.

Below you’ll find an edited transcript of the show so you can read it slowly, at your own pace, and consider how you can grow spiritually by the witness of their great lives.

Peace,

+ Robert Barron
POPE FRANCIS and his FOUR AMERICAN HEROES

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QUESTION: Bishop Barron, I know these figures are of great importance to you. You’ve written and spoken about each of them quite extensively over the years, so let’s discuss their significance not only for Americans but particularly for Catholics. Why don’t we start with Martin Luther King Jr.? What does he mean to you and what’s his legacy for us today?

BISHOP BARRON: I think of King on the steps of Lincoln’s Memorial in 1963 and his famous “I Have a Dream”speech. Not only was it a great act of eloquence but it was showing how religious people can enter the public sphere precisely as religious. King gave not a sermon that day, it was a political speech, but nevertheless he brought to bear all sorts of ideas, concepts, and language from the biblical tradition.

There he was in our national capital on the steps of Lincoln Memorial talking about divine providence, God’s will, justice and injustice. He talked about God’s purpose vis-a-vis America and we’ve
forgotten how to do that. We’ve interpreted the church/state separation really as a divorce that says we religious people arguing religiously have no place in the public arena and King proves decisively otherwise. I think, that’s a huge value in what he did.

The thing about King, now speaking as a Catholic, I’m always moved when I read his Letter from the Birmingham City Jail. When King was literally in jail in Birmingham, Alabama he writes this letter to fellow preachers, many of whom had said to him things like, “You’re going too fast. You’re pressing the country too much. Back off. We’re with you but slow down a bit.” King refers explicitly to Thomas Aquinas in that letter when he writes:

“A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law. To put it in the terms of Saint Thomas Aquinas, an unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal and natural law. Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust.”
That’s another example of how to bring the religious tradition right into the heart of our political arena. Not aggressively, not in a proselytizing spirit but in a way that’s very creative.

I think we’ve forgotten how to do that. Or we’ve gotten hamstrung on that issue. I think King is a really really good example of someone who very deftly entered the public arena precisely as religious, without abandoning his religious values, and without becoming overbearing or proselytizing. That’s what I find deeply appealing about King and where he’s a prophetic figure for our time.

**QUESTION:** I find it interesting that of the four figures that Pope Francis mentioned, three were quite renowned for their stance on non-violence (Lincoln, of course, was involved in the Civil War). Talk a little about Martin Luther King’s use of non-violence to bring about greater justice.

**BISHOP BARRON:** Yes, it’s a great theme and one that, I think, we’ve not talked about
enough. It’s too easy to write non-violence off as this fringy point of view but let’s face it, it’s right at the very heart of Jesus’ gospel. In fact, some have argued that enemy love is the decisive difference when it comes to Christian ethics. A particularly Christian approach to morality is grounded in the love of enemy.

I think some of the great practitioners of non-violence including King, Gandhi as well, John Paul II in Poland in the 1970s and ‘80s show that it’s not just this wild, fringy, idealistic conviction but that non-violence (properly employed) has a cataclysmic social impact. I think cultural influencers like King, Day, and Merton were hyperaware of the power of non-violence as means to promote change. Although Merton always said, “I’m not a pacifistic in the strict sense,” he also argued that we underplay dramatically the effectiveness of non-violence.

I really do think St. John Paul II is the very best example in the last forty years of how to use it. He effectively helped dismantle one of the most powerful empires in human history. I was a kid in
the 1970s during the height of the Cold War and there was always a fear of nuclear war. If you had told us at that point that the Soviet Empire would collapse, and there wouldn’t be a war involved and that the Pope would be a major player, nobody would’ve believed it! That’s what happened and that’s because John Paul knew how to use non-violence in a very creative way.

Personally, and I’ve said this publicly, I’m not a pacifist. Like Merton, I think that can be too ideological a position. I think there are times in our fallen conflictual world that the only response we can muster in justice to great evil is force. I understand the Church’s just war tradition and subscribe to it wholeheartedly. However, I do think we grossly underplay the power and effectiveness of the non-violent approach, which as all of those great figures: Day, Merton, Gandhi, King, and others have pointed out is not passivity. It’s not running away and burying your head in the sand. It’s a very creative engagement of evil. Not using the weapons of the world but these spiritual weapons which are far more powerful.
So yes, I agree with you. I think that non-violence is a very important theme and one that we don’t emphasize enough.

QUESTION: Let’s switch gears now to the second figure that Pope Francis looked at, Abraham Lincoln. When he discusses each of these four figures, he identifies a key trait that they symbolize. The pope associated Lincoln with liberty. Also, when he gave his speech at Independence Hall he delivered it from the same lectern that Lincoln delivered the Gettysburg Address, so there was clearly some intentional connection he made to Lincoln. Why do you think Pope Francis lifted him up as a symbol of what we should become as Americans?

BISHOP BARRON: I’ve loved Lincoln since I was about seven years old. I got a biography of Lincoln when I was a kid and I’ve loved his story ever since then. I’ve probably read twenty-five biographies of Lincoln, most recently a year ago. So whenever a new one comes out, I usually read it. He’s a beguiling figure, there’s something saintly about Lincoln. I don’t want to over dramatize it but that comes through in
almost all biographies. His contemporaries saw it, there was something that was so deeply decent about Lincoln.

I think he was religious but skeptical of the standard denominational offerings of his time. As he got older especially when he became president and moved through the Civil War his spirituality deepened enormously and it became a very powerful awareness of divine providence, I would say. It seems he became keenly aware that history is in the hands of a Power greater than the forces that we unleash.

While guiding these massive armies, Abraham Lincoln becomes one of the most powerful people on the planet in the mid-19th century. In many ways America’s military power begins at the Civil War, that’s when we emerge as this great military force. Lincoln, as he ascends into greater political power also becomes increasingly aware that everything is ultimately in the hands of God. Now read his second inaugural speech, which Lincoln delivers just weeks before his death. Compare it to King, because here’s Lincoln giving not a sermon but an inaugural address
on the steps of the Capitol but yet it’s redolent of the prophets, and filled with biblical language, and biblical sensibility, and a keen awareness that God has something to do with this great Civil War.

I think, our time which is so characterized now by secularism has a lot to learn from Lincoln’s perspective. His liberty, as the Pope points out, and obviously the freeing of the slaves was born of a deep moral sensibility, which Lincoln acquired as a young man. When he first saw slaves being sold and traded, it so deeply offended him that his moral position on liberty stayed true his whole life long.

Although, he was a canny, prudent, politico too. He was not an abolitionist, because he felt that was an imprudent approach to it. But then, once the Civil War broke out, the worst case scenario had already happened so he was able to press the issue. His freeing the slaves was undoubtedly born of a very deep moral sensibility and an ever-growing awareness of God’s involvement in life. That’s what I suggest we need in our political life today. We’ve privatized religion now so severely that the pro-religion position today tolerates the private practice of religion but forbids it
from entering the public square. Lincoln, King— they did not privatize their practice of religion. They gave a very bold assertion of it on the public stage and that is what I think is so important about those two figures.

**QUESTION:** The third figure that Pope Francis alluded to was Dorothy Day. Now, you and I both share a huge affection for Dorothy. She was a 20th century activist Catholic in New York. Day is probably best remembered for co-founding, along with Peter Maurin, the Catholic Worker Movement which became a newspaper and a series of houses and communities throughout the country. She’s also a controversial figure in just about any Catholic sub-group you can imagine. She’s disliked for various reasons by people all across the religious and political spectrum. I found it very intriguing that Pope Francis would focus in on her. To me, she symbolizes, much like Pope Francis does, this bridge, this “both and” quality of Catholicism that brings together all that’s great about every sphere and angle of the Catholic world.
In his speech, Pope Francis, assigned her the traits of social justice and rights and responsibilities, two great themes in Catholic social teaching. Talk a little about what Dorothy Day has meant to you and why you think she’s a figure worth holding up for Catholics.

**BISHOP BARRON:** Yes, you’re right about her being a bridge. Of course, Brandon Vogt (interviewer), you’re one of the great experts now on Dorothy Day and the research you’ve done on her has been very good. You’ve brought her to a new generation of readers, so I appreciate that. I love many things about Dorothy Day, but one is the way she brings together her intense devotion to the poor and her fight for social justice with her deep personal piety and spirituality. Moreover, I love that the first was born very much of the second: Her immersion in Christ is the ground for her social activism. One of the really negative things we’ve seen in the Church since Vatican II has been the wedge that is driven between those two great qualities of our faith. Left and right have split largely along those lines. Today we would...
say that right-wing people are more into personal piety, prayer, the mass, benediction, and retreats. Whereas left-wing people are into social justice. Of course, Dorothy Day would’ve seen them as absolutely mutually implicative and would’ve bemoaned the divorce of the two.

I love the story about the priest that came to say mass for the Catholic Workers and thought he was being very hip, and very cool, and used a coffee cup for the chalice. She piously went through the mass and everything and when the mass was over she said, “Give me that cup,” and then she broke it and buried it, because how could that possibly ever be used now as a coffee mug? That act shows that she wasn’t indifferent to the liturgy and to the real presence and the power of the Eucharist, but rather she saw the Eucharist as absolutely essential to the work she was doing on the streets. I love that about her.

My good friend, George Weigel, wouldn’t agree with Dorothy Day when it comes to a reading of American capitalism. He wouldn’t agree about
the way she assessed a lot of situations. I would say, fair enough. I think, Catholics of good will can disagree about means. They don’t disagree about ends. They don’t disagree that we have a radical commitment to the poor, we have a radical commitment to right social wrongs, we want to put an end to violence. All Catholics agree about that, or should. And for every Catholic, these commitments are born of the same things in Christ: prayer, saints, sacraments, etc. Now, precisely the means by which we should pursue all these commitments, I think, good Catholics can and do disagree. Fine, let’s have a good debate about it. I think Dorthy Day would’ve loved to sit down with George Weigel and talk it through, have a good argument. Just as there are Catholics today who would sit down with Pope Francis, maybe, and say, “Hey, let’s talk about capitalism. You’re being too negative about it,” and so on. Fine, that’s a great conversation to have and we shouldn’t exclude anyone from that conversation.

What both Dorothy Day and Pope Francis are really good at showing us are the ends. And we’re
certainly a big enough tent to include the opinions of both George Weigel and Dorothy Day when it comes to the means by which we achieve those ends.

**QUESTION:** When you were the rector at Mundelein Seminary, I remember visiting the campus early on in the semester so, I think, the seminarians had just come back. Every year there’s a rector’s address where you set the tone or you give a central theme to focus on that term, and around the campus there’s always little posters or reminders of whatever that theme is. This year, the theme was centered around the Spiritual and Corporal Works of Mercy. Around the campus wherever you turn in any hallway, there’d be a poster quoting Dorothy Day saying, “Everything a baptized person does every day should be somehow connected to the Spiritual and Corporal Works of Mercy.” What does that mean?

**BISHOP BARRON:** I’ve always loved that line because it’s very concrete. She, I think, had an allergy to rendering abstract things like peace
and justice. What is it to say, “I’m for peace and justice”? Everyone from Karl Marx to George Weigel is for peace and justice, so what are you talking about? How? What kind of peace? What kind of justice are you talking about? Dorothy Day wanted to be very concrete. What Catholics are for are the Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy. What was very interesting about Dorothy Day was (and this again confounds the usual left/right conflict) that she wasn’t a fan of the New Deal. She was operative during the Roosevelt period. You would think she was so hard left that she’d be in support of it. She wasn’t because she felt that the New Deal, Roosevelt’s program, took responsibility away from individual people and brought it to the level of the government. Dorothy Day wanted you to feed the hungry and not pawn it off on the government. She wanted you, particularly, to give drink to the thirsty. You should do something to clothe the naked. You should visit the imprisoned, etc.

That’s a really powerful message. We can tend to
say, “Social justice, that’s the work of the government, so I’ll try to vote for the right people.” Or, “I pay taxes.” Fine but she wanted you to say, “Who’s hungry right now in my life, whom can I do something about?” I think, that’s a really interesting part of her program. It’s the way she concretized the concern for peace and justice. I grew up with that language of peace and justice. Fine. Who’s against peace and justice? To paraphrase Alasdair MacIntyre, “Whose peace and what justice?” Day’s vision for helping those directly in front of us is what it looks like for Catholics. I like the specificity of that vision.

**QUESTION:** Of the four figures that Pope Francis focused on, Lincoln is remembered as a paragon of virtue– Honest Abe. The other three are pretty deeply flawed both before and after their conversions. I’m thinking here of Martin Luther King’s well known infidelities, Dorothy Day had an abortion before her conversion and is remembered as an edgy woman even after it. Then, of course, Thomas Merton lived a pretty wild secular life before he found God. What
does it mean to you that Pope Francis would bring these particular figures up as heroes of the faith? wherever you turn in any hallway, there’d be a poster quoting Dorothy Day saying, “Everything a baptized person does every day should be somehow connected to the Spiritual and Corporal Works of Mercy.” What does that mean? wherever you turn in any hallway, there’d be a poster quoting Dorothy Day saying, “Everything a baptized person does every day should be somehow connected to the Spiritual and Corporal Works of Mercy.” What does that mean?

**BISHOP BARRON:** That’s a good question. I think you’re right in seeing it that way. Yeah, I think it’s a good thing, isn’t it? That while you’re pointing out elements in all these people that are wonderful and rich, you’re not saying that they’re flawless— you’re not saying that they’re morally perfect. You make the right distinctions in some cases between pre-conversion, post-conversion. Even, as you suggest, in the case of Merton at the end of his life there was this somewhat ambiguous relationship with a young nurse, etc. I don’t think
Thomas Merton was a flawless moral athlete but he brought something; he opened a window that was very important. I think you’re probably right in suggesting that of all four of them, it’s Abe Lincoln who lived the most consistently upright, moral life. Perhaps, that’s true.

I think, it’s the fact that each one of them opened a window in a certain way that’s worth looking through. As someone who has a great affection for Merton, I’ve always balked at the insinuation that because he had flaws we should pay no attention to him. I think that’s just crazy and unhelpful. Unless he’s not a flawless saint, he’s not a spiritual master. Look at St. Augustine as man who is both certainly a spiritual master and certainly imperfect. If we measure the greatness of a teacher with a rubric that holds them to absolute moral perfection, we’re not going to have any spiritual masters except Jesus Christ and his Blessed Mother. I think it’s good that we draw attention to people that have opened a window in the spiritual life in spite of their imperfections.
QUESTION: Now let’s turn to the fourth and final figure Pope Francis alluded to, Thomas Merton. I know Merton has had an enormous influence not only on your life but on your priesthood. We’re sitting here underneath a picture of Thomas Merton as chance would have it. Talk a little bit about first Merton, who was he? Why does he matter? Then we can get into this very intriguing association Pope Francis gave, Thomas Merton’s openness to God. That’s the value the pope says he contributes to American life. First, who was Thomas Merton? Why does he matter? How did he influence you?

BISHOP BARRON: Thomas Merton was one of the most intriguing Catholic figures in the 20th century, and he was part of that wonderful revival that happened in the mid-20th century, including figures like Graham Green, Evelyn Waugh, Fulton Sheen, and Dorothy Day. There was a revival of Catholic life, mid 20th century and Merton was one of the major players there. He was the son of a New Zealand father and American mother that met over in France, he was
born in France during World War I. In fact, we’re celebrating the 100th anniversary of his life, he was born 1915. His mother dies very young and then he and his father wandered around. His father was a Bohemian, a more vagabond kind of artist type. Then his father died when Merton was only 16, so he was orphaned pretty young.

A very bright young man, he spoke French fluently, of course learned English, and was very involved in the artistic literary life of the 1930s. Eventually, he ends up at Columbia in New York where he falls-in with a very interesting crowd of fellow students and also professors. So he’s a very plugged-in, intellectually alert, artistically sensitive young guy but also has this very deep emptiness at the heart of his life. Until, as I mentioned when we were covering the pope’s speech for the Today Show in New York City, “Right down 5th Avenue, a young Thomas Merton—this kind of cool cat, worldly sort of guy, culturally conditioned—stumbles on this book by Etienne Gilson, the great Thomist philosopher, called The
Spirit of Medieval Philosophy and in that book he comes upon, for the first time, an intellectually serious account of God.”

Like a lot of Bohemian intellectuals of the time, he thought religion was this old medieval thing that we’ve sloughed off and no smart person takes it seriously. Yet, he discovered this extremely rich tradition, and that got him going, that was the door that opened up, and Merton went through it with great enthusiasm. Read his great autobiography, The Seven Storey Mountain, for the details of his conversion but, in short, this spiritual awakening leads him toward becoming a Catholic and eventually a Trappist monk—a man who gave his life utterly to God. That’s what I think is so important. The Pope highlighted his dialogical approach and openness to other religions and all of that’s true. That’s part of Merton’s thing but I think, what’s most important is he’s someone, in the middle of the 20th century, who dramatically opened a window onto God. He discovered God as a young man and it revolutionized his whole
life. I think he intuited something that Flannery O’Connor, another member of that mid-20th century revival, intuited: The West was heading toward an entirely secularized society.

It wasn’t quite there yet, in 1950 the vast majority of Americans would’ve been religious, would’ve bought the basic biblical narrative, etc. I think these people intuited something that was coming, namely, this secularist world view that God is just sort of forgotten about and what Charles Taylor calls, “the buffered self.” The typically post-modern person lives buffered from any contact with the transcendent. Thomas Merton punched holes in the buffered self through his writing about contemplation, which is clearly his central theme. He discusses social justice issues and world religions but his central theme is undoubtedly contemplation. What is contemplation but opening your eyes and seeing God? Opening your ears and listening to God. God matters ultimately and finally. I think that’s what Merton brings to our time.
I would say without contemplation the whole thing falls apart. All the talk about mercy, and inclusivity, and reaching out to the marginalized—Who cares if there is no God? Who cares? I think how he helps us open ourselves to God is what makes Merton an enduring and beguiling figure now in the almost entirely secularized 21st century.

Is he a flawed character? Yes. No question about it. Did he write more eloquently than almost anybody else in the 20th century on the issue of God? I think you’d be hard pressed to find someone who is more effective at opening that particular window. He did it for me. I was 16 when I first stumbled on The Seven Storey Mountain, and it revolutionized my life. This is no exaggeration. In many ways I’m a priest because of him. I always say, “The two Thomases, Aquinas and Merton had the biggest impact on me as a kid.” Aquinas, you might say, appealing to the mind. Merton, to oversimplify, appealing to the heart.
Merton was also super smart. In command of many languages, read everything. He opened, for me, the door to so many spiritual/intellectual figures spanning from the Little Flower, to Hans Urs von Balthasar, to Bernard of Clairvaux, to Teresa of Avila, to John of the Cross. I first learned about those people from Merton and, I think, for a lot of people in my generation that’s true. If we learned that tradition at all, Merton was the one that kicked open the door. For all those reasons I think he’s still a massively important figure.

I hope there’s a bit if a revival because, having now taught at the seminary for a long time, I know that if Merton’s name came up in the last 20 years the younger guys would either not know him or sort of write him off. In my generation and back in the ‘50s, ‘60s, ‘70s, Merton was the bomb! Maybe the Pope’s speech will in fact boost the Merton revival.

**QUESTION:** We were looking at the Amazon sales (total sales not just Religion) rankings both for Merton’s autobiography and Dorothy Day’s
and both of them leapt into the top 100 books on Amazon within an hour of the Pope’s speech.

**BISHOP BARRON:** I would say to anyone listening read *The Seven Storey Mountain*, start with that. I still think, and it’s not fashionable to say in Merton circles, it’s his best book. I reference a lot of his other books, but that’s still his best book. Some will say, “Oh, that’s pre-conciliar and Merton...” Come on, it’s still his best book and it’s a spiritual classic. Fulton Sheen himself, said it’s, “The Augustine’s Confessions for our time.” Evelyn Waugh deeply admired its literary quality. It’s still a wonderful romantic story of a guy falling in love with God and what that feels like, looks like, and sounds like as told by a really gifted writer. Start with that book, I’d say.

**QUESTION:** I want to ask one more question about Merton. If there was a buffer to God in Merton’s day, that’s only increased in ours. I’m thinking of people in my generation in their 20s and 30s who are, for the most part, indifferent toward God and spiritual things. Most of them
aren’t going to stumble across a Scrivener’s bookstore and pick up a copy of Scholastic Theology, so how would somebody like Merton help open a window for people who are deeply entrenched in the secular world view of today?

**BISHOP BARRON:** He might just tease them into it by the sheer radicality of his life. Merton became a Trappist monk which means he entered into the most primitive form of the Benedictine life, accepting a lot of silence so that his life could become absolutely focused on prayer. The very radicality of that vocation might get people’s attention and make them wonder, how could someone actually live that way? Here’s a guy who was a successful player in the worldly sense. He was popular, and he was beginning a career as a writer in New York. That such a man would give all that up and become a Trappist monk, I think will trigger something in people’s hearts. Then also the way he talks about what prayer is: Not just muttering words in the back of a church but a whole attitude and way of life. I hope that message on prayer would impact people.
His influence is more of a witness of his life, I think. Merton had a wonderfully open spirit. Something he and I share is a love for Bob Dylan. He loved Bob Dylan and one of my favorite Merton moments is about Dylan. I read the story, but I got to hear it directly from Merton’s secretary, Patrick Hart, when I visited the monastery where Merton lived. Hart confirmed that when Jacques Maritain, the great Thomist philosopher came to Merton to get something, about 1966. Merton took him outside where he had one of those little phonographs and played Bob Dylan’s latest record and translated it into French for Jacques Maritain. By most accounts Jacques wasn’t too taken by Bob Dylan but Merton loved him. Merton got it. I’ve argued, probably at nauseam, there’s a spirituality in Bob Dylan that Merton got.

I’ve always loved that about him, his openness of spirit toward different cultural expressions and different religions and all that. On that point too, Merton never lost his Catholic center. It’s absolutely a calumny to suggest that Merton became a
“hippy-dippy, anything goes” type of spiritualist that moved beyond Christianity. Never, never, never. Merton never lost his Catholic center as he reached out to other religions. With all his cultural interactions and sensitivities, make no mistake, he died a priest of the Roman Catholic Church and that steadfastness makes him an ever more attractive figure.

QUESTION: Let’s close this segment here on these four figures that Pope Francis mentioned: Martin Luther King Jr., Abraham Lincoln, Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton. I know a lot of people are wondering what books would you recommend to learn more about them. You mentioned *The Seven Storey Mountain* for Merton. What are one or two books you would recommend on each of the other three figures?

BISHOP BARRON: Dorothy Day, certainly, *The Long Loneliness*, her great spiritual autobiography which is a wonderful book, heart-wrenching and beautifully written. Also get her letters and diaries that have come out in more recent years,
I think they are very telling. For Lincoln, obviously, the great speeches of Lincoln including his from the Lincoln/Douglas debates and those great speeches on slavery he gave in the 1850’s. For biographies of Lincoln, the Carl Sandburg biography is still the classic to read. It’s a long book to plow through. David Herbert Donald, one of the really great Lincoln scholars, wrote a very fine biography of Lincoln in recent years. The Spielberg movie about Lincoln is also very fine as a supplementary resource, which is based on Doris Kearns Goodwin’s excellent book *Team of Rivals*.

King, I’ve got a great collection called *A Testament to Hope*. It’s a big fat thing, about 500 pages. Plow through it, it’s really worth reading. There have been a number of good biographies of King in recent years, but I’d start with the speeches of King.
For more conversations like this one, be sure to check out “The Word on Fire Show” at WordOnFireShow.com. You’ll also find instructions on how to subscribe to new episodes so you’ll never miss one.