Episode 706: Hillbilly Elegy: Self-Destructive Ideas and Behaviors Among the White Working Poor

Guest: J.D. Vance

WOODS: I finished reading your book last night. I'm not even going to tell you how late I was up reading this thing, but pretty darn late. Sometimes I say — because we're in the middle of moving, and sometimes you've got to just skim books. But this one I said, no, this one, every single page all the way to the end. You know, I could start this off so many different ways, but when you say "hillbilly," what are you talking about?

VANCE: So hillbilly is a term that in my family is used as a term of endearment. My grandmas always told us that — I grew up with my grandma and lived in her house. She always said we're hillbillies, and what that meant to her is that we — you know, we were from eastern Kentucky coal country. That's where our family roots came from. But it included people who were from eastern Tennessee or Alabama, Georgia, and so forth, so basically it just includes people who were from the Appalachian Mountains, or even those who emigrated from the Appalachian Mountains to Rust Belt, Ohio or Pennsylvania like we did.

But what it means I think on a fundamental level is that you're extremely loyal to your family, to your country, that you love the mountains and you love the outdoors and you love the people that live in those places. So that's what I think of as a hillbilly.

But one thing I'll say is that Mamaw hated when outsiders used the term. She didn't like that *The Beverly Hillbillies* was a popular show; she didn't like it when other people called her or us hillbillies. She thought it was offensive. But for us it was a term that we were allowed to use and that we used proudly.

WOODS: I'll tell you, as I was reading this book, I thought that by the time you got to college and then to law school, probably the insights that you were gleaning were going to get pretty thin, but the insights just kept coming as you looked in the different social situations that you found yourself in. You sometimes weren't prepared for these situations; you had self-doubt. It's interesting how what forms us does indeed follow us throughout life.

Now, you do spend a lot of time with your grandmother. We learn a lot about her in this book, and she is the woman you credit with basically making it possible for you to do what you did. You went to law school, you're very successful, and so on. And yet — I

mean, I almost feel bad mentioning these things — but she poured gasoline on your grandfather and lit him on fire.

VANCE: (laughing) Yeah.

WOODS: It's hard to get around that.

VANCE: Yeah. Yeah, that's exactly right. So my grandparents were both incredible influences in my life, but my grandpa, especially when my mom and my aunt were kids and before I was born, they were pretty violent, and my grandpa was a pretty violent drunk. And one day, he said to my grandma — or sorry, my grandma said to him, if you come home drunk again, I'm going to kill you. And so about a week later, he came home drunk again, he passed out on the couch, and she poured gasoline on him and lit a match and lit him on fire. And my aunt, who was about 11 years old at the time, put it out. It's funny, actually; I was talking to my aunt yesterday, and she said, you know, I read your book again; I've read it, like, two or three times, and she said you got a little detail wrong. And I said, what's that? She said, it wasn't gasoline; it was lighter fluid (laughing).

WOODS: Oh my.

VANCE: And I said, oh, well, that's I guess not too big of an oversight (laughing). But I think it goes to show, honestly, that the life that my aunt and my mom grew up in in some ways influenced the life that especially my mom gave me and my sister. And one of the things that I hope people take away from this is the idea that family strife and family breakdown is this intergenerational problem. So it's easy to look at the problems of my mom, the multiple men, the drug problems, the constantly shuttling me and my sister between different homes and say, that's her problem. But if you think about it, and part of the reason I told stories like the lighter fluid story, is so people start to realize that some of these problems came long before my mom was even an adult. And I think that if we want to understand these problems, we have to appreciate that they're pretty complicated, and sometimes they stretch across multiple generations.

WOODS: What I like about this is that at no time in reading this did I get the sense that you were being condescending to anybody in your family or anybody in your background. That wasn't your point. Your point is much more subtle than that, because you acknowledge freely that a good deal of who you are comes from this so-called hillbilly background, and you look for the good things that you can find. There are good qualities in these people: loyalty to family, for example. But it seems like the key point of the book that comes home on almost every page is that there is a perverse, self-defeating series of behaviors that practically guarantee somebody is not going to advance economically or socially, and people seem to be caught in a kind of cycle. So what are these kinds of behaviors, and where do you think they came from?

VANCE: The behaviors I think exist on multiple dimensions. So in some ways it's just the things, not even that people do, but the way that they say things and the way that

they think. So I'll give you an example. I don't think when I was a kid that I appreciated the difference between intelligence and knowledge. So I tell a story in the book that when I was in the first grade a teacher asked us to do a math problem, and I patted myself on the back because I did this addition problem, and I was only six or seven years old. And then the next kid got around, and he did a multiplication problem. It's not obviously that I was too stupid to know multiplication; it's just that I hadn't — you know, nobody had taught me yet.

And one of the self-defeating attitudes that I see in the community where I grew up is that people assume that intelligence matters a lot more than hard work. And so I went to Yale Law School. When I got into Yale, so many people would tell me that, God, you must be smart. Man, you always — people who had never told me that I was smart before would tell me that I was some kind of genius just because I had gotten into Yale, which, of course, as I say in the book, again, the people at Yale are perfectly smart and nice, but they are not of a different kind of intellectual caliber than most other people. Frankly, they just work really hard. And I think that that appreciation that hard work isn't nearly as important as intelligence is self-defeating, and I think we've got to get around it.

But there are a lot of other things too. So I think that there is a sense that family life, it's natural for family life to be chaotic and violent. It's very common to see people, it's not just yelling and screaming at each other, but hitting, punching each other, throwing plates at each other. I mean, this is something that literally every person that I knew growing up had seen or witnessed, but it makes for a very hard family life. It makes it hard to have a successful marriage. It makes it hard to have happy kids. So I think that there are a lot of attitudes like this, a lot of behaviors that do make it very hard for kids who grew up like I did to make it out, to have a successful life built around what I think is the American dream.

You asked where they came from, and I think part of the thesis of the book is that they come from the parts of our culture — even the ones that are good, right? So I talk about loyalty as being a really critical part of our culture. It makes us enlist in the military at higher rates; it makes us extremely dedicated to our families. But it also makes it really hard to talk about these problems with outsiders. My grandpa once accidentally hit my aunt in the face, and she had a black eye, and when other family, when her own brother came over to the house, she was made to hide in the basement, because we couldn't talk about this problem with outsiders. We couldn't reveal this problem to outsiders. So I think that they come from very complex parts of our culture, and what's so difficult about it, frankly, is that many parts of this culture I think are good and important, but some parts are self-defeating.

WOODS: Tell me something about, at the risk of being accused of blaming the victim — I don't know if you've been accused of that, but if not, just wait till MSNBC gets hold of the book; you will. You did talk about work ethic in some cases, that people who report that they're working turn out not to be working, or if they are working, they show up late or they're surly or they're in the bathroom for 35 minutes or an hour. I think that was back when you were working at that place that made tile?

VANCE: Yeah.

WOODS: What's going on there?

VANCE: Yeah, that's exactly right. I think that what — the thing you'll see in social science literature is this question about how much do people who aren't working value hard work. And so they'll go around and they'll ask everybody, well, do you value hard work? Rate "hard work" as a moral value on a scale of one to five. And they'll always find that, of course, everybody values hard work. Everybody talks about hard work as if it matters and as if it's important. But at the end of the day, hard work isn't a lived value that people see. They don't witness people working hard. They don't see it among their families and among their friends. And so what eventually happens is that I think people start to take in these values, where they're happy to say, well, yeah, work is important and I work really hard, but they're not actually doing work and they're not working hard.

You mentioned blaming the victim, and that's certainly something that I think I'm wary of. I don't want people to think that I'm doing it, though of course I'm sure that people, especially on the Left, maybe tend to accuse me of doing so. What I think is important to note about this is that there are both what might be called structural elements to this problem and non-structural elements to the problem. So it's not just that people are not working hard. Some people are working hard and still can't get ahead. It's not just that everyone is raising their kids in a chaotic family. Some people are raising their kids in happy homes, but there are still problems related to the industrial economy going south and manufacturing jobs being harder to come by.

What I think is important and what I'm hopeful people will be able to get around the "blaming the victim" language that often gets employed in these situations is the recognition that these problems are complex, that there are both structural and cultural problems that make up these communities. And what I would say to my friends on the Left who would accuse me of blaming the victim is if you don't recognize that some of these things are within our control, if you don't recognize that at least some of these problems are due to culture or to personal choices, then you're making two mistakes.

One, you're not ever trying to understand poor people as they actually exist, and so I think you're never going to be able to address their problems. And two — and this is really important — you're not treating the poor as moral agents. The message to the poor people of this country, to kids like me, should not be, "Everything that's happening in your life is not within your control." I think that our message should be, "Fine, maybe there are certain barriers that you face that are unique to your class or to your neighborhood, but you also have control over your own life. You're a moral agent. You shouldn't be afraid to go out and do great things because you don't think your choices matter." I think that's really important.

WOODS: Of course, this leads to the difficult question — when you're dealing with truly pathological behavior — you're describing behavior of your neighbors, as well, or

the woman who, she was complaining of a leak coming from the ceiling, and it turns out that the reason there was a leak was that she had run the bathtub and it was overflowing and she was passed out on drugs the floor below. I mean, this kind of thing, over and over. And kids, no doubt, see and absorb this. They draw lessons about the futility of effort. And it really is astonishing that you somehow — I mean, you had this grandmother who almost took her last dollar to buy you that graphing calculator for $180 to let you know how important your education was. But you were lucky to have that.

VANCE: Yeah, absolutely. I was lucky to have that. And you mentioned the woman who, yeah, she called her landlord because she was reporting a leak, and what had happened was she had passed out on the bottom floor of her house; she was high on drugs, and she had let the bath overflow, had destroyed the entire second floor of the house. And yeah, like you said, that behavior contains lessons for her kids. Those kids are going to draw I think the wrong lessons from her behavior a lot of times. It will make it harder for them to get ahead. And that's just obviously one lesson they learn from a person like that. They learn a lot of other lessons that are destructive and that make it harder to get ahead.

What Mamaw — and that's what I called my grandma — what she provided for me is fundamentally a safe and stable home. So I could focus on school; I could focus on worrying about things that 15, 16-year-old kids should be worried about. But she also gave me a sense of willfulness. She was incredibly perceptive, I think, and recognized that there were some destructive attitudes in our community. And she always would say to me, "Never be like those kids who think the deck is stacked against them. You can do anything you want to."

And it was a really funny statement coming from Mamaw, because she was a classic Reagan Democrat. This is not a woman — you know, she was much to the left of you or I. She's not a woman who didn't believe that government didn't have a significant role in helping the poor and making their lives better. She didn't believe that everything was all gravy and that everything was perfectly equal in America, and she worried about that. But she also recognized that it was incredibly important to believe that your choices matter, to believe that you could make some difference in your own life. Because if you don't have that belief, why try? If you grow up in a home where your mom's a drug addict, where she destroys all your belongings because she lets the bathtub overflow, if you don't believe you're ever going to have a chance to get anything better, then why would you try? And so we've got to be, again, cognizant of both the structural problems, but also the cultural problems, and I hope that somebody who reads this book will be able to take some lessons on that topic.

WOODS: All right, I think I've got some of the best questions of all yet to come, but let's pause for this message from our sponsor.

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I think the episode in the book that most stunned me was the one where you literally were running away from your mother, running, being chased by her, fearing for your life to the point where you went to a total stranger in, I guess she was in a swimming pool, and you said, "You've got to help me; my mother's trying to kill me." And she called the police; your mother wound up being arrested. And your book talks a lot about the instability in your household, different men in the household all the time. Now, I mean, there's a lot you could say about that; you've said it in the book. But I wonder how you would respond to somebody who says — I mean, I wonder even if hillbilly culture would be upset at you for basically airing your family's dirty laundry.

VANCE: Yeah, I think that's a very, very fair question. So one, there is definitely — I would say that the reaction that I've gotten from hillbilly culture broadly, from the people, both strangers and familiar, who reached out to me, is, "Thank you for being honest, but also thank you for being sympathetic to these problems. I'm glad that somebody's talking about them." I haven't really gotten anybody who's said, "How dare you talk about this? How dare you air our dirty laundry?" Which makes me think that there is I think a real need and a real desire in this community to have its story told.

But to the specific story, that story was very hard for me to tell in the book. On the one hand, it's very, very true. On the other hand, I really love my mom, and she's doing pretty well these days. And it's something that I ultimately decided to tell, because I think that if we're not honest about what's actually going on in these homes, then we're never going to have the conversation we need to have about how to make things better.

I think that, if I can get on my soapbox, a big part of the conversation we have about the poor, about inequality, about economic opportunity is frankly completely devoid of any recognition of the real facts on the ground. They're completely devoid of how people live their lives and what actually happens. And we've got to change that. We've got to be honest about these problems, and frankly, that honesty leads me to be frank with people that, look, sometimes in these homes, in these families, the biggest problem is not something you can easily flip a switch on and make better. Sometimes the biggest problems are violence in the homes that make it harder for kids to go to school, to grow up in a peaceful, stable family, and ultimately to be good parents and spouses when they grow up, because that's ultimately what this is about. This constant cycle of violence and chaos doesn't serve anybody. And so I decided to be very honest about what it looked like in our home in the hope of starting a conversation.

WOODS: Now, I wouldn't dream of asking you this if you hadn't made yourself vulnerable by writing this book in the first place, but has your mother read it?

VANCE: She has, actually. And it's interesting; on Sunday, we had one of the best conversations that we've had in 10 or 15 years, and it made me think, if nothing else, if nobody else bought the book, that conversation would have been worth it, because she said, you know, J.D., I honestly didn't quite realize how bad things were, and I didn't realize these things were having this effect on you and Lucy. Lucy's my sister. And that recognition from Mom, you know, one, it meant the world to me, and two, I

think it goes to show that just a little bit of honesty and a little bit of forthrightness goes a long way in these conversations and talking about these problems.

So yeah, it's hard. It was hard to have that conversation with Mom, but God bless her; she's doing well right now, and I'm proud of her, and I think that if I hadn't written this book, frankly, our family may not be in as good of a position as it is now. And I don't mean that to kind of self-aggrandize myself. All I mean is that this book has started a lot of conversations between me and my sister, between me and my aunt, me and my mom, and everybody else, just about what happened and how we've all been processed it. That's been really good for all of us.

WOODS: You know, it's interesting the timing of the release of this book. Most publishers would tell you in an election year, nonfiction is going to be Hillary Clinton is terrible or Donald Trump is terrible. Those are the books that sell. Or, here is the economic policy that we should follow. And yet, you wrote this book, and somehow you got it do extremely well, so I'm curious to know, do you have embedded in it some kind of a subtle political commentary that does make it appropriate for an election year?

VANCE: I don't necessarily think that it's a political book, though I do think that it's reasonable for people to draw political inferences. At the end of the day, the people that I write about, these white, working-class Americans, you look at the polls, and they are going for Donald Trump at an overwhelming margin, much larger than where they went for Mitt Romney four years ago. And so I think in some ways, I hope that people who don't understand the Donald Trump phenomenon, they don't understand who are these people that are the most passionate supporters of Donald Trump, frankly, pick up the book and you can read about some of them. You can read about all of it, I think the really good and beautiful parts about their culture, and you can read about some of the bad things too, as my family experienced it. So I do think it's natural to draw some of these political inferences.

The other thing that I'll say about that is I do talk a little about politics and policy in the book, especially as I grew older and started to think about these problems. One of the things I realized and I have continued to realize is that whether or not you're a Donald Trump supporter, the people who are supporting him have had I think a rough 20 or 30 years. They are frustrated in a lot of different ways, and I think they are frustrated in entirely reasonable ways. And at the end of the day, they haven't felt like they've had a political champion in a long, long time. No one has really spoken to the concerns of these voters. No one has even recognized that there is a problem. Who's talking about coal miners going out of work, construction workers going out of work? The only person who's really doing it right now is Donald Trump. And so I hope everybody and especially people on the Left who don't understand who Trump's voters are, I do think they can learn a little bit about them if they read this book.

WOODS: All right, a couple quick things before I let you go. I'm curious about how you get publicity for a book like this, because it used to be that you'd write a book and you can automatically get on Fox News or something. And then it became, if you don't

have a news hook, then it's harder to get on. And yet, given the tremendous sales of the book, you must have gotten some big publicity. Where'd that come from, and what do you attribute it to?

VANCE: Yeah, so I've gotten some decent publicity. I haven't been on Fox News yet, which, you know, if anybody from Fox is listening, I'd love to come and chat about the book (laughing).

WOODS: Oh yeah, once you hit the *New York Times* best-seller list, you pitch them again (laughing).

VANCE: Yeah, so I think that the publicity that we've had, a lot of the conversations have been about, you know, who are these people who are supporting Donald Trump, why are they supporting him, what are they like. I think that goes to show just how disconnected, frankly, media and political elites are from big swaths of the country that they don't even understand who a lot of these voters are. So I do think that's one way that we've talked about it.

The second way that we've talked about it, and this has been really important for me, is just to say, look, if there is a single takeaway from my life, it's that these problems of upward mobility and inequality, they're very complicated. They do not fit easily into a Left narrative, and they don't even necessarily fit easily into a conservative or Right narrative, as much as I sometimes wish they did. And so one of the ways that I've tried to talk about it is, look, these things are complicated, and if we're not — you know, we're talking a lot about the poor; we're talking a lot about economic opportunity, but frankly we're not having the conversation that we should have. And hopefully someone who reads this book will appreciate a little bit better the conversation we should be having about these people, because, again, I think it's very important to just be honest about what's actually happen in these people's lives.

WOODS: I'm so curious to ask you one other thing. I know you've written for *National Review*. If you don't want to answer this I would understand completely — maybe you see where I'm going already.

VANCE: (laughing)

WOODS: That Kevin Williamson article, you know the one I'm talking about?

VANCE: I do, yeah; I know.

WOODS: About white, working-class communities that are dysfunctional and that deserve to die. You recognize that there is dysfunction, but I bet you wouldn't put it quite that way.

VANCE: No, I definitely wouldn't, and you mentioned earlier that hopefully — and I hope other people think this too — that I'm not condescending and I'm not judgmental. I try to be sympathetic and empathetic about these problems. So I agree with Kevin

Williamson that there's a problem in these communities. I write about it. I've experienced it in my own life. But I think that to say that these communities, that they deserve to die is incredibly uncompassionate. And at the end of the day, the people who live in these communities have heard for so long nothing from media or political elites. They've heard nothing that either appeals to them or that speaks to the concerns and the lived experiences that they've had, that I think that they naturally react negatively to someone who says their communities deserve to die.

And so the way that I would put it is, yeah, these communities have a problem, but they don't deserve to die, and if we want to encourage them to thrive we need to be honest about the problem, but we also need to be compassionate and thoughtful about how we might solve some of these problems, both as a community and as a culture, but also as a country, because I think that for too long we've turned a blind eye to these problems, and we should stop doing that.

WOODS: Well, the book is *Hillbilly Elegy*. I'm linking to it on today's show notes page; this is Episode 706, so it's TomWoods.com/706. I'm telling you, you're not going to read this book and say, Woods, I can't believe you wasted my time with this book. To the contrary, you're going to say, this is why I listen to your show, is because you point out books like this to me. I'm so glad you had this success. I bet you weren't expecting it to be — we all fantasize that our books will be big successes, but, you know, it's one thing to think about it and another thing to actually experience it. It must be an absolute thrill for you, and I couldn't be happier. It's extremely worthy of attention and thought and discussion, and I'm glad you were able to make some time for us today. Thanks so much.

VANCE: Yeah, thank you for having me, Tom. I really appreciate it.