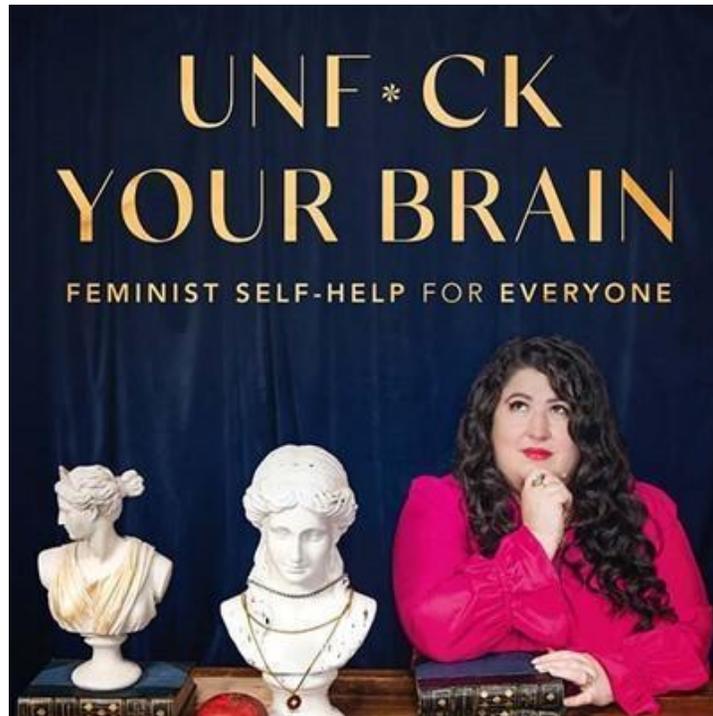


# UFYB 472: How Equanimity Can Strengthen Your Mind & Save the World: A Conversation with Margaret Cullen



## Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

**Kara Loewentheil**

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## **UFYB 472: How Equanimity Can Strengthen Your Mind & Save the World: A Conversation with Margaret Cullen**

Welcome to UnF\*ck Your Brain. I'm your host, Kara Loewentheil, Master Certified Coach and founder of The School of New Feminist Thought. I'm here to help you turn down your anxiety, turn up your confidence, and create a life on your own terms, one that you're truly excited to live. Let's go.

Kara: Hello, my friends. I am really excited today to be here with an author who I had not heard of before I got a cold pitch in my inbox, but sometimes that works because I'm very excited about her new book and I know that you all are going to learn a lot from this conversation.

So, I'm here with Margaret Cullen, and as always, I'm going to welcome Margaret to the show and then ask her to brag about herself because women are socialized not to do that. So, Margaret, will you tell us a little bit about yourself and what you do?

Margaret: Thank you, Kara. And yes, I think this is the hardest intro I've had on a podcast. So, I've spent a lot of my career—I am a licensed psychotherapist. I've spent a lot of my career translating contemplative programs into mainstream settings. And I started out with mindfulness and did a lot of programs for research studies at universities with a lot of different cohorts that ranged from doctors to elite military to inmates at Angola Penitentiary and many, many cohorts in between.

And then from there, helped develop a compassion training at Stanford University that also was a kind of mainstream, accessible program that took contemplative ideas. And now the latest thing is that I've written a book about equanimity, which is another kind of contemplative virtue, practice, that I think can be made widely accessible and that's what I'm hoping to do with this book. And I'll just say, if ever there was a time for equanimity, it's now.

## **UFYB 472: How Equanimity Can Strengthen Your Mind & Save the World: A Conversation with Margaret Cullen**

Kara: That is for sure. So, I'm really excited to talk about equanimity, but I actually just want to back up for folks who aren't familiar with what you mean by when you talk about like contemplative practices or contemplation as something you study. Can you talk a little bit more about what that means?

Margaret: Sure. Well, I've been a meditator for more than 45 years. And Buddhism, as well as other traditions, but especially Buddhism, which I practiced and still do, has a tremendous amount of technology for training the mind and the heart. And it's become more widely accessible, especially in the last 40 years, thanks to people like Jon Kabat-Zinn, who developed mindfulness-based stress reduction and was my mentor in the early days of doing this.

And what he discovered and is so true is that there is a technology for training the heart and mind that doesn't require religion or belief or affiliation with a particular philosophy that can be available to everyone. And those contemplative practices range from mindfulness to cultivating other qualities like compassion, loving kindness, equanimity, and they can be done in classrooms with teachers. I was at Fort Bragg at Joint—what is it called? Operation Special Command. It can be done anywhere with anybody.

Kara: I'm sure you have some amazing stories. I actually want to ask, I have another question before we get to equanimity, just because I'm curious from what you were just saying, since you come at it from the sort of more clinical and scientific and kind of study perspective, when you talk about the mind and the heart and training them, so the mind, I think we probably all are thinking about the same thing. What are you kind of referring to when you talk about the heart in that context?

Margaret: It's interesting. In Buddhist philosophy and I think it's probably true in Hinduism and other philosophies that turned to Sanskrit, they're the

## **UFYB 472: How Equanimity Can Strengthen Your Mind & Save the World: A Conversation with Margaret Cullen**

same thing. Heart and mind, it's one word. So, we're talking kind of about a Cartesian split that many of us have rejected, that actually has had a backlash, I think, in the ways we relate to this thing that we experience daily and we navigate through and we navigate through the world in this body, heart, mind.

We make these different parts of ourselves, and they aren't integrated, and we have trouble kind of conceptually collapsing and overlapping them. And then we get news like, as I'm sure you know and your readers know, oh, wait, there's a brain in the gut. Wait a second. There's a brain in the gut. It's not all in my head. This whole thing we live in is incredibly interconnected and multi-directional. So, heart and mind, we think up here in our head and we feel feelings here. That's just conditioned. That's language. It's not really how it works.

Kara: So, I love that, particularly because one of the things I often am coaching around is people come in and say like, "Well, I think this, but I feel this," right? Or it's like my heart versus my head, right? And I'm like, this is such an unhelpful framing because what are you supposed to do with that, right? Now you're just stuck. You're just like, "Well, I'm a party of two and we are deadlocked. So, like there's nothing I can do now," right? And obviously, those things are all connected.

You're having multiple conflicting thoughts. They're creating like different experiences in your body. And I think sometimes I refer to what I do as like a bait and switch because I'm so cognitive and so people come in, they're like, "Great, I'm not going to have to have any feelings. We're just going to like do analysis on my thoughts and that'll be great." And then I'm like, "Just kidding. We're going to talk a lot about your body and how your brain and your body are connected and like what you're feeling in your body."

So, I love that and I think that comes to that question of like equanimity, which as you say is like so desperately needed right now. And my listeners

## **UFYB 472: How Equanimity Can Strengthen Your Mind & Save the World: A Conversation with Margaret Cullen**

know, but just to say again, nobody is saying equanimity means not giving a shit about what's happening, right? We're talking about like being emotionally rooted and grounded and not being in a state of like spinning crisis all the time.

So, that's my very lay person definition. Can you tell us what you mean by equanimity? And you write in your new book, *Quiet Strength*, about misconceptions about equanimity. So, can you talk a little bit about what it is and what are these misconceptions?

Margaret: Yes. So, you nailed the biggest misconception, which is equanimity means not caring or being indifferent or being in the middle or giving up your passion or giving up your feelings. And you also nailed it when you said equanimity does mean not being caught in the melodrama.

So, it's an interesting thing that this old-fashioned word that a lot of people look at me cross-eyed when I say equanimity. Like, what? It's not a word we typically use in conversation. I like to joke, "Oh, he was so equanimous." Like, when are you going to say that? Never. So, it wasn't an easy sell, this topic. And yet, it points to something really important, which is a way to live fully, feel fully, the full range of human experience without wasting an iota of energy on melodrama.

Melodrama is a big energy drain. And as a coach, I'm sure you know this and see this all the time. So, energy gets spent in this complex system we've been talking about. It gets spent in suppression, and it gets spent in rumination and the proliferation of thought. There's a beautiful Pali word for that, *papañca*, the proliferation, the way that we fuel dramas, both personal and societal, whatever.

That can take up a lot of precious life energy. So, is there a way to feel it all and to capture the wisdom and the depth of our emotions for wisdom rather

## **UFYB 472: How Equanimity Can Strengthen Your Mind & Save the World: A Conversation with Margaret Cullen**

than for the really kind of futile and unproductive drain of melodrama? And we're in an age where that's so heightened. There's the reality of what's going on in the political field. And then obviously, there's the 24/7 news cycle and social media and algorithms that are brilliant at keeping us aroused and keeping the melodrama inflamed, basically.

Kara: Yeah, I'm curious if you think about equanimity as a state—I guess I can imagine it in two different ways. One is like, you are trying to stay in an equanimous state and it's sort of like a meta-state, and within that, you are going to have ups and downs of emotions, but it's sort of just like those are happening without the melodrama. Or is it more like equanimity is a state that you return to? Like you have a big emotion of some kind and then you come back to—does that distinction make sense? I'm just I'm curious if it's sort of like a meta-state or like an emotion among other emotions that you would come in and out of.

Margaret: Thank you. That's a very incisive question actually, and it points to something subtle that I don't often get into when I talk about equanimity. I think it's a both and, and there are a lot of nuances around equanimity that made it a rather challenging topic for me to write about in a mainstream book. But I think an important way to think about equanimity is the recovery of balance.

So, that's one piece you were talking about. Yes, we get hijacked. We have strong feelings. One way to measure equanimity is how quickly do we recover? Do we find balance again? Because the point isn't to just stay in balance all the time. That's not nature. It's not real. Every step we take, we lose balance, we recover balance. This is nature. We are a part of nature. So, equanimity allows us to recover balance readily.

At the same time, we are increasing our window of tolerance, so we're not—we're less frequently hijacked by stronger experiences of emotion, let's say. So, both are true.

## **UFYB 472: How Equanimity Can Strengthen Your Mind & Save the World: A Conversation with Margaret Cullen**

Kara: Yeah, I'm wondering how you see it as mapping onto because as you're talking, I'm like, oh, this is the way—it has some similarities to the way people will talk about nervous system regulation, right? And you used the phrase even "window of tolerance," which is like a nervous system regulation phrase, right? So, it sounds like kind of some of what you're describing is that kind of resilience and it's the same misconception people have about the nervous system, which is like, "Well, I'm supposed to be regulated all the time," right? And you're like, "No, that's being dead." Nobody is flatlining. Like it's like, can you come back or do you get stuck? So, I'm curious how you do you think of equanimity as like being sort of is it like a different way of talking about a nervous system regulation experience? Is it sort of analogous? Like how do those concepts relate?

Margaret: I think it is analogous. I didn't get into polyvagal theory in the book. I like it a lot, but it felt like it was too much to explain it all. And one of the things I like about polyvagal theory is that a healthy vagus nerve has variation. We don't want it to be just low. It's healthy when it's variable. And I think balance is a very dynamic thing. So, I think it's definitely analogous and of course related in that complex system way that we were talking about. It's all very interconnected.

And one of the problems with the kind of papañca, the proliferation, the rumination, is that it does keep us aroused, which is very hard on our nervous systems. So, it keeps us aroused a lot. There's a lot of cost to that. And what we want to do is to be able to recover balance more quickly. That's what the vagus nerve does. That's what we're talking about with nervous system regulation. Not that there's no arousal, but that we have this pliability, this flexibility. We're able to get aroused and recover, aroused and recover.

Kara: Did I answer your question?

## **UFYB 472: How Equanimity Can Strengthen Your Mind & Save the World: A Conversation with Margaret Cullen**

Yeah, yeah, absolutely. And I think part of what's so hard, especially for like listeners of this podcast, this is a mindset and coaching podcast, but my people are generally very politically aware and engaged. Obviously, it's like a feminist podcast. So, and there's so much of what I think is like so unhelpful on social media in the like leftist and progressive political sphere. It's like literally posts that are basically like, "If you are not devastated, you are doing it wrong. If you are not outraged, you are not paying attention." It's literally like, if you are not dysregulated all the time, you are a bad person.

I'd love to hear like your perspective on that, even though I feel like I'm preaching to the choir about like how this is so unhelpful. But how equanimity as a concept can help us deal with like it creates this guilt. You're like, now I'm like validated that I should be dysregulated, and I'm going to feel guilty if I'm not constantly dysregulated. It's so crazy.

Margaret: Thank you for naming that. I've really struggled with that. And among my friends too, who love me and challenge me about equanimity, does that mean I'm not going to do as much? And that there's a false dichotomy that if I'm equanimous, I'm going to disengage from political action, I'm going to do less, that I need the outrage in order to fuel my political activism.

And I think it's a really critical question. So, yes, of course, the guilt does not help. And I think in some ways, the answer can happen in the laboratory of our own hearts and minds. Is the outrage, is the devastation collapsing you into overwhelm? Or is it supporting you in wise engagement so that what you contribute is as efficient, as efficacious as it possibly can be?

Because I see a lot of my friends who are in similar spaces flapping around or just really kind of collapsing in despair and having a competition about who is more devastated. Like, "I'm more devastated than you." "No, I'm

## **UFYB 472: How Equanimity Can Strengthen Your Mind & Save the World: A Conversation with Margaret Cullen**

more devastated than you." And please, can we take that energy and just call a senator?

I've also written about, and this is related, but slightly different, that for me, equanimity is how I don't become that which I am fighting against. I don't want to become the screaming meemie. I don't want to become the person who is othering. I don't want to become the person who acts out of hatred. I mean, it gets triggered a lot. I don't like it, but I sure feel it. I don't want to be the person who's perpetuating that kind of divisiveness. I don't want to be projecting that into the world.

And really, in this moment, I'm thinking a lot about the monks who are walking for peace and that they have over two and a half million followers and that they are equanimity embodied, and they are catalyzing. They are calling to us about a possibility of resistance that is dignified, that is not melodramatic. It has the power to change the world.

So, we should have no doubt about the fact that equanimity can be political. I mean, Rosa Parks on the bus was equanimous, sitting there with her purse on her lap, quietly. It can change the world. It can be an extremely powerful political statement.

Kara: I love that phrase, "like the laboratory of your own heart and mind," because I feel like what I'm often saying to people is, in a less—I don't didn't have a great phrase for it. I'm totally going to steal that. Sort of like, what result are you getting? You know, it's like where we get like lost in this sort of—and I think it's partly for women because we're socialized to outsource our authority, right? And then we're dysregulated because of the news and everything, and so we just want someone to tell us like what we're supposed to be doing, what's the right thing to do.

## **UFYB 472: How Equanimity Can Strengthen Your Mind & Save the World: A Conversation with Margaret Cullen**

And I personally get conflicted on a philosophical level between like the consistency and integrity of being like, all beings are beings, compassion for everyone, all of that, right? And then on the political front being like, is that how we're going to end up all in the camps? It's like having so much compassion for ICE. So, it's complicated.

But I think that what I love about that phrase is just the reminder of being like—I always call it like a certified letter from the universe. Like we're not going to get a certified letter from the universe about what is the best philosophy to have on this. Like we're never going to get the verdict. All you can do is look at in your own mind, body, heart experience, like when I'm thinking this way, what is happening, right? Am I calling my senators? Am I going to the food bank? Am I checking on my neighbors? Or am I scrolling and feeling terrible and numbing out? And it's that like the experience you have, that's your authority. That's what's going to tell you how you are operating.

So, I'd love to hear about one of your experiences that you talk about in the book. Let's take it from the macro to the micro. You share—in the book, you share a personal story from a retreat you went on that really changed how you related to your mother. And I think everybody has to go through an experience that changes how they relate to their mother. So, I'd love for you to share that with the group here.

Margaret: Yeah, that was definitely had a huge impact on me. And it was my first experience doing a silent—I think we spent a week doing equanimity practice after several weeks doing other practices. I'll just say that my mother who died, I think 15 years ago, had an undiagnosed personality disorder and major depression and had been suicidal many times in her life. And I was just talking to my best friend from childhood the other day, and she remembered from age five that I was always kind of there to save my mother, that was my job, pretty much my whole life.

## **UFYB 472: How Equanimity Can Strengthen Your Mind & Save the World: A Conversation with Margaret Cullen**

And what happened on this retreat was that we were given these phrases in the meditation to reflect on, and we were asked to extend these phrases to different people in our lives. And the phrases were something like, "Your happiness and unhappiness are the result of your thoughts and actions and circumstances and not of my wishes for you. Nonetheless, I will always wish for your happiness." Basically, that was the gist of it, not the exact words.

So, I'd been sitting with this, you know, 10 hours of silent meditation a day. And as often happens, not on the cushion, but I'm out taking a walk in the desert. I had this thought of my mother and this phrase came up, "Your happiness is the result of your actions, your thoughts, your deeds, your circumstances, and not my wishes for you." And the key was, "I will still love you. I still want you to be happy."

And what I realized in that moment was that I was working in a false binary. If I stopped trying to make you happy, that meant I was a bad daughter, I didn't love you, I was disloyal. Somehow, the way the child makes these contracts and figures these things out and holds on to some irrational belief, that was mine. And it was so liberating and there were so many tears in letting go of this impossible task, this Sisyphean, Herculean boulder that I'd been trying to push up my whole life. And it was very powerful for me.

And I keep having to learn it. I have a daughter who's almost 32, and I work with that a lot with her. I'm kind of even more invested as we are with our children in believing that her happiness is my job. So, that's the story from the book.

Kara: It's so beautiful because it's—I mean, number one, it's like the opposite of equanimity is the attempt to control. And so it's like both in the political, so we're like, somehow in our brain, it's like things get turned around and we're like, somehow by scrolling or pushing these buttons, I am

## **UFYB 472: How Equanimity Can Strengthen Your Mind & Save the World: A Conversation with Margaret Cullen**

like doing something to control this situation that is frightening to me, when of course, like that's really not doing much. And in the same way, right, when we're trying to control other people, like you never feel more out of control than when you are trying to control someone else or something you can't control, right? That's like the exact recipe. So, that's just a beautiful example of how this same concept applies in your personal life. It's like the most micro and the most macro.

So, I'm curious how most of us and even, I'm sure you in most of your life can't meditate 10 hours a day when you're doing other things. So, and for some people, meditation's wonderful, and then other people, they haven't discovered the pleasure of it yet or it's not their best fit. Certain neurodivergent people have more trouble with seated meditation at least. So, I'm just curious, what are some ways you recommend that people can try to access equanimity in this modern world and in this current situation that they can kind of take away to practice after they finish this episode?

Margaret: Something I'm excited about with equanimity that is a bit different from compassion and mindfulness, which I spent, I don't know, maybe 15 years on each offering mainstream programs, is that you really don't have to meditate. And meditation is one way to cultivate equanimity. There are lots of other ways. And I have them in the second section of Quiet Strength, all sorts of ways.

And some of them are really cognitive perspective-taking. One big dimension of equanimity, one way that it's talked about in different schools of Buddhism is seeing the world through grandmother's eyes, which I think is a really kind of sweet metaphor. And for many of us, immediately brings to mind a certain kind of wisdom. And in the context of my story about my mother, what's lovely about the grandmother is that she doesn't love her grandchildren any less, but there's a lot less melodrama. And so there's perspective there.

## **UFYB 472: How Equanimity Can Strengthen Your Mind & Save the World: A Conversation with Margaret Cullen**

And we can borrow that perspective. Part of what happens when we're doomscrolling or our nervous system's been hijacked or all the things we talked about is that we lose perspective. And there are a lot of ways to get perspective back. And that can be a very quick kind of recovery. We talked about the recovery of equanimity moment to moment. Perspective-taking can be really simple.

It's tricky because you can't inflict it on yourself. The temptation is, think of all the children who are starving in India right now. Like, forget it. You can't inflict it on yourself. You can't inflict it on someone else. But you can invite it and see if it brings relief and liberation in a moment.

So, different ways of getting perspective are obvious ones. Am I taking something personally here? Remembering impermanence. We talked just now about control. How much control do I have? Am I avoiding feeling how afraid I am right now because I'm trying to control something I can't control? So, can I feel this fear just for a moment and just let it kind of arise and pass? And emotions, when we allow them to do that, they move really quickly. They don't kill us. We don't die of them.

Kara: Do you hear that, everybody? I know I say that all the time, but now we have a Ph.D. saying it. They're not going to kill you. It's okay. They will move through quickly if you don't attach to them.

Margaret: They're not going to kill you. I'm going to die of boredom. No, you won't die. This is going to kill me. No, it's not going to kill you. And in fact, if you let it rise and pass—I always get her name mixed up. Jill Taylor Bolte, Jill Bolte Taylor, the neuroscientist who had the stroke and wrote about it, talks about a 90-second rule. Emotions, that's what they do when we don't interfere with them. So, let's have them. Let's not suppress them. Let's not feel them. They're great. They're juicy. Bring them on. They're lovely. Let's have them and maybe change our relationship to them.

## **UFYB 472: How Equanimity Can Strengthen Your Mind & Save the World: A Conversation with Margaret Cullen**

Kara: I love that the grandmother's perspective thing is so interesting that's part of that tradition because in coaching, we use a similar concept called like your future self, basically. So, right, it's like, does your future self in 20 years, what does she have to say, or five years, or next week? What does she have to say about like what you're doing right now? And it is that way of basically like activating that prefrontal cortex that can think and getting you out of that activated nervous system.

So, I love that as a shortcut. And I think—I mean, this is also part of the reason that I think coaching is so helpful is like for instance, I have a call with my coach right after this. And I like spent all afternoon thinking about the problem I'm going to bring her, and then I was like, I obviously don't have the problem phrased the right way. That's why I'm going to get coaching. So, like I'm going to go in there and I'm going to explain to her how these are the four choices, and she's going to be like, "None of those are choices. Like your whole premise is wrong. Like we got to start from the beginning."

So, one of the things I always encourage people to do when they are in that stressed state and then their perspective is narrowing, right, into like it's like the horse blinders, like only these two things can happen and they're both bad, right? These are the only two options, is to like take that step back and cognitively be like, what if there were more options? What might they look like? Like what other outcomes are possible?

There's so much like delusional omniscience that we think we have when we're like, "Well, if XYZ is happening, then this is the only outcome that can happen." There's so much like fatalism and doomerism and particularly right now, it's dressed up as being progressive to be kind of like, these things are happening, therefore the only next thing that can happen is Nazi Germany. You're like, the future isn't written yet. That's not the only—right? It's not assured. But when we get into that stressed state, we think we know everything and that it's going to be a disaster.

## **UFYB 472: How Equanimity Can Strengthen Your Mind & Save the World: A Conversation with Margaret Cullen**

Margaret: Absolutely. And I had the good fortune to work with Paul Ekman, an emotion theorist, for a number of years on a big study. A really important thing I learned from Paul is what he called the refractory period. So, when we're in the grips of an emotion, we see only that which affirms that emotion.

Kara: Say that again. We talk a lot about confirmation bias on this podcast, but I need them to hear that again.

Margaret: Yeah. So, when we're in the grips of an emotion, we only see that which affirms the emotion. So, the example I like to use is when I'm really angry at my partner, I cannot remember why I married him. I married him for a good reason, but honestly, I cannot find it in that moment. It is not available to me. I am making my case. Anger is affirming anger and it is very, very selective in terms of what I see in that person right across from me and all the things he did wrong and why I'm really mad at him right now.

And that's true for any emotion. And I think the more we just have that available as an awareness, it's like, okay, right now, I'm just seeing things that affirm anger or fear or outrage. And in a moment, I'm going to have access to a whole lot more data that I don't have access to right now. And that's just how we're wired. That's how it works. And there are very good evolutionary reasons for that. I'm not doing anything wrong. I'm wired this way. I have been for thousands of years. It's okay. It's not bad.

Kara: Yeah, I love that as a good—what I call like a neutral thought or a we call them ladder thoughts because I teach this tool called the thought ladder about how to actually change a thought, like actually concretely, but so I think for those of you listening, like an amazing takeaway thought when you're really in it and you can't get out is even just to practice something like, it's possible that I'm going to see this differently in a day or two. It will help you also from acting on things in that like impulsive state. Like you don't have to even try to see it yet. Just it's possible that I'm going to see

## **UFYB 472: How Equanimity Can Strengthen Your Mind & Save the World: A Conversation with Margaret Cullen**

this differently, right? It's possible I don't have access to my full brain right now. I totally agree with you. Just having the awareness that might be happening can keep you from being so fully in it and that's like the magic difference.

So, your book comes out when this episode airs, your book will be coming out the next week, so people can still pre-order. Where is it? Should they pre-order from wherever? Should people go to your website? How can people get the book and find out more about you?

Margaret: Thank you. Yes, it'll be available wherever people like, from your local independent bookstore or big, bad Amazon, wherever. And yes, there are links on my website, [margaretcullen.com](http://margaretcullen.com), and the book is *Quiet Strength: Find Peace, Feel Alive, and Love Boundlessly Through the Power of Equanimity*.

Kara: I love it. Where can people find you? Your website's the best place?

Margaret: Yeah, [margaretcullen.com](http://margaretcullen.com) is the place to find me. Yes.

Kara: All right, y'all, you know how important pre-orders are from when we did this for my book. So, go pre-order Margaret's book. Send a copy to your mom who won't stop sending you those scary email forwards. Get a copy for your friend who's texting you at 3:00 AM about the news. Let's pre-order and if it's past March 10th, just order the book. And we will put all this in the show notes, of course. Thanks so much for sharing your wisdom with us today, Margaret.

Margaret: Thank you so much for inviting me, Kara.