

Making Our Way



A McMAHON / CHEYNE PODCAST

#62 • Season 3 • Episode 1

9/10/25

Out of Africa

Our Hosts

Janet Cheyne McMahon is a lover of family, dogs, nature, travel, books, and music. Born south of the Mason-Dixon line, she left after 9 months for parts north, landing eventually in Michigan, which will always be “where I’m from.”

Love of learning led Jan to a Bachelor of Arts (History, Political Science) at the University of Michigan-Dearborn (Go Blue), and a Master of Arts (Library and Information Science) at the University of South Florida. Amid all that, studied for a time with Rob at Colorado State University, a pivotal time in their lives.

Worked at the U of M-Dearborn Library, and then The Salvation Army Florida Divisional Headquarters, with the greatest reward being in serving as the Divisional Librarian. A librarian is who Jan is “in my soul.”

Jan and Rob have made our home in Florida since 1983, and live now in retirement with their dog, Skye, who makes it all the best adventure. They travel as much as possible, spending time in nature and in diverse places on this amazing planet. It has all been, and continues to be a fascinating journey, with hope of making a difference, in small ways, by being brave enough to speak and act on behalf of others.

Rob McMahon is a native Michigander, born in Saginaw and raised in the suburbs of Detroit. Rob attended Michigan State University, graduating in 1978 with a Bachelor of Science degree. He did graduate studies at the University of Michigan and the University of South Florida. Rob is retired, having spent 36 years in public education teaching both high school chemistry and biology and middle school science. He worked as a total quality management trainer for the Pinellas County School District and served four years as the president of the Pinellas Classroom Teachers Association. Rob cofounded a non-profit total quality management training center, The Learning Co-op, for Teacher Unions interested in applying the W. Edwards Deming continuous improvement principles to their day-to-day operations. He worked with teacher unions in Colorado, Maryland, New Mexico, North Dakota, Texas and Michigan. He also worked in a similar capacity with Jim Shipley & Associates. In retirement Rob has written a series of science related children’s books, and enjoys traveling with his wife, Jan, and their black Labrador Retriever, Skye.

Deanna Cheyne, born in St. John’s, Newfoundland, earned a Bachelor’s Degree in Vocal Performance from the University of Toronto (1996), studying with such luminaries as Elmer Eisler, Doreen Rao, Greta Kraus, Lois Marshall, and Rosemarie Landry.

Dee taught music at Mississauga Christian Academy, served as music director for Meadowvale Bible Baptist Church (Mississauga, Ontario), served as Assistant Divisional Music Director for The Salvation Army in Florida, is a former member of Tampa’s Master Chorale, and, for the past 18 years, has been a public school teacher.

Dee has visit 36 of the 50 U.S. states, and 12 countries. Her favorite destinations include France, Prague, New Orleans, National Parks, & Hawaii.

Dee & Jim live in Florida with Brigus (Golden Retriever) and Pip (Teacup Yorkie).

James Cheyne, born in Galesburg, Illinois, earned a Bachelor of Music degree (Theory and Composition) from Michigan State University (1978); and a Master of Music degree (Theory and Composition) from the University of Illinois

Urbana/Champaign (1981), studying with David Liptak, Salvatore Martirano, and Ben Johnston.

Jim has served as music director for The Salvation Army in Central Illinois & Easter Iowa, Orlando Area Command, and the Florida Division, served as a pastor with The Salvation Army, and was a public school teacher for 17 years.

In travel so far, Jim has visited 50 states and 27 countries. His favorite travel destinations include National Parks, New Orleans, Newfoundland, Argentina, Prague, & France.

Jim continues to write music and support Dee’s musical endeavors, and cooks whenever absolutely necessary. Jim & Dee live in Florida with their dogs Brigus & Pip.



L-R: Brigus, Jim, Deanna, Skye, Jan, Rob.
Inset: Pip

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Out of Africa

#62 - Season 3; Episode 1

9/10/2025

Hosts: Jan, Rob, Dee, & Jim.

A conversation about race, and how 3 kids from the suburbs of Detroit, and 1 from Newfoundland, Canada, became aware of racial tensions, and how we came to the positions on the question we hold today, with help from Francis S. Collins. Plus, a nod to television, Ed Sullivan, and Star Trek.

JIM (voice-over): Welcome to Season 3 of Making Our Way, our homegrown podcast where Jan & Rob and Dee & I offer comments on travel and education, religion and literature, politics and culture, and, of course, food and coffee. Except for Dee, who prefers tea.

In these conversations, we seek new and better answers to questions where the old answers no longer work. We even embrace the discomfort of leaving some questions unanswered for now. We share all the experiences that have shaped and challenged our perspectives. For this, we look back over many, many decades, except for Dee, who is ageless.

Today, we delve into the common ancestry of all humanity and explore the perplexing question of why, despite our shared origins, we invest so much in tribalism and territoriality. We’ve titled this episode Out of Africa, which is a continent we have all visited, except for Dee, who will get there one day.

[Music]

JIM: We’re talking about making our way. Where were we? Where are we now? Where are we going? What’s our trajectory? And I went way back to our yearbooks, our high school yearbooks. I looked at Jan’s yearbook from 1972, Franklin High School. Jan graduated at the tender age of six years old. Still on record for Franklin High School. I graduated in 1974, so looking through your yearbook first, page by page, I got part of my answer. Then I went through my yearbook page by page, and I was surprised by something that I found. Because on page 38, there’s someone by the name of Billy Jo Johnson. She was the only Black person I found in our school history up to 1974. And it turns out she wasn’t a student. She was part of a barnstorming basketball team called the Arkansas Lassies. This was a pro team that would travel around and play exhibition games here and there. And so they came to Franklin High School to play our male faculty in a basketball game. And Billy Jo Johnson was the only Black person on the Arkansas Lassies and the only Black person in our yearbook. And I’m just thinking, how could you go through an entire public school time and never have a Black person as a schoolmate or even someone in the school district. Now, Dee, you’re from Newfoundland.

DEE: Um-hmm.

JIM: So, Dee, growing up, were there Black people in St. John’s, Newfoundland?

DEE: No, but one population that was significant was Asian.

JIM: A large Asian population?

DEE: Yeah.

JIM: Okay, and Rob, you're from Saginaw, right? Born in Saginaw.

ROB: Right.

JIM: Did you go to school in Saginaw?

ROB: I went to kindergarten in Shields, which is just outside of Saginaw. A little town. That's it. The rest of mine was in Riverview.

JIM: Riverview. In your schooling, did you have any classmates that were Black?

ROB: I don't recall any classmates that were Black at Riverview while I was there.

JIM: Now, for the three of us, we're all around Detroit. And how could you be around Detroit and not have a Black classmate? Detroit is a highly integrated community. Go west of that and you come to a town called Dearborn. Dearborn was governed by Orville Hubbard, who was quite vocally a segregationist. So when White people were moving out of Detroit, they would go to Dearborn or farther west, which is where we lived, where the Black population just seemed to be non-existent during the 60s. And I thought it would be interesting to explore, well, then, with that growing up, what were our attitudes towards the racial situation and the things that happened in our lives that made us aware of it and gave us the perspective we have today? Do you remember when you first became aware of the racial tensions, the situation of Black people in American society?

ROB: The tensions, I recall, were the '67 riots. See, I didn't go to school with any Black students. We went to church with Black kids. I don't remember any tension until the '67 riots.

JAN: Which is kind of interesting because we've often spoken about being in Washington for the signing of the Civil Rights Act, which is in '64. as a pivotal moment in our lives, but I think it's more pivotal in hindsight than it was at the time because I don't think as the young children we were, we had any real understanding of the significance of that act. And I would say growing up at the Corps, that would have been the first time in my life that I would have had friends that were of a different racial group.

JIM: Our church growing up was The Salvation Army, part of the Christian church, very closely aligned theologically to the Methodist church. So when Jan says "the Corps," she's talking about our home church. It was Detroit Citadel. So it's military terminology for basically the church. In 1964, this was the trip we took together. The first time the McMahons and Cheynes took a vacation, which would lead to several after that. The first time Jan set her sights on Rob. But we also had visited, before we got to Washington, we had been in Gettysburg.

ROB: Right.

JIM: And so the story of the Civil War would have been told in some way there. So we had the '64 Civil Rights Act, and we remember the applause when the news came through the crowd?

ROB: Oh, yeah, I remember that. And I remember being excited about being in the gallery and seeing all these senators that my dad had talked about, basically. Seeing Ted Kennedy. and Philip Hart. And those names that I was familiar with, mainly through my father, because that was exciting. But, like with Jan, I'm not sure that it really sunk in, the significance of what was happening to an eight-year-old, like you say. Well, Jan was 12, so she might have known.

JAN: Such lies.

JIM: She was already in graduate school. *[laughter]*

JAN: Oh, my gosh. I honestly think the riots were hugely significant because in our house, we were impacted by what was happening in downtown Detroit. I mean, we watched it. We had family members, who lived downtown, come and stay with us during that time because we were concerned about safety. And after – so we watched it on the news. We understood it was about race. We didn't really know all the dynamics of that. But then after the riots were over, Dad took us downtown to see all that had transpired. So it was part of our upbringing to understand what had gone on in our city, as I recall it.

JIM: Well, our Uncle Jack and Aunt Midge, and then our cousins Barb and Craig, they lived on Cass Avenue in The Salvation Army facility known as the Evangeline residence, which was a residence for the time for single women. And the way I remember it is that the trigger for Uncle Jack and Aunt Midge was when tanks were going down Cass Avenue. This is the same avenue that had Cass Tech on it. This was the high school that the Supremes went to. So here we are. They see tanks coming down. So get the kids out into the suburbs.

JAN: You know, you mentioned the Supremes. But on some level, I think in a cultural sense, we were aware of race at a young age because of music and Motown and the influence of Black artists, which I don't, again, I don't clearly remember thinking about it in a racial way. But looking back, that was a Black music scene. And it was part of our cultural upbringing, part of our childhood.

ROB: It just came to my mind. I realized that we left town during the riots. I don't know if that was to protect us. If that had been planned before, I can't remember. But I remember we did leave town. And I remember I was worried about my grandparents who were at the Eventide in downtown Detroit, another Salvation Army facility for older people. And I was concerned about them being down there during that time.

JAN: Another interesting connection to that is in 1968 - I know this is ancient history for some people - but in 1968, the Tigers won the World Series. And I remember being downtown during the celebration of that. And it was wonderful. It was amazing, first of all, because the Tigers won, and it had been decades since that had happened. But there was this, we all came together for a celebration feel about the city of Detroit. And to me, even as a kid at that age, I remember thinking of it as being a healing time for the city. Because it was a multi-ethnic, multi-racial gathering to celebrate that event. And it brought people together after a difficult year in '67.

JIM: Talking about the music scene in Detroit, I found something recently that I thought was very eye-opening for a very famous person that I had never had this perspective on before. There was a football game between New York University and the University of Georgia, and this was happening in New York. And the New York University had a running back who was

Black. Out of deference to the University of Georgia, the New York University decided to bench that player for the game. Oh, wow. And a sports writer in New York said this. Now, this is going to use some older language, okay? “I was sickened to read NYU’s agreement to bench a Negro player for the entire game. If a New York University allows the Mason-Dixon line to be erected in the center of its playing field” - Isn’t that a great line? - “then that university should disband its football season for all time.” You know who said that? That was a sports writer for the New York Evening Graphic named Ed Sullivan.

JAN: Oh, yes! I’ve heard about his stands on race.

ROB: Yes.

JIM: And that was in the year 1929...

JAN & ROB: Wow.

JIM: ...he wrote that. Then, Ed Sullivan was often, we know him as the often parodied and caricatured host of the Ed Sullivan Show, Sunday Night Show. He was a pioneer in bringing Black artists into everyone’s home. He was often criticized for it. He would lose sponsors for it. He was seen once, you know, after someone has performed, come over and just give them a hug or something, and if it was a Black person, sponsors would pull their sponsorship from his show. That didn’t bother him. He wanted the best exposure for the best artists, and he knew who to get for that. And so a lot of Black artists had national attention because of Ed Sullivan. So kudos to Ed Sullivan for his stand.

ROB: Yeah.

JIM: That, to me, was one of these things that was just eye-opening. I’d love to find that sort of thing.

JAN: I have a question. I’m interested in Dee’s perspective. Are you aware of any prejudices that occurred, White, Asian issues in Newfoundland?

DEE: No. No.

JAN: *[laughing]* That’s a simple answer.

DEE: Yeah. I mean, when I say Asian, it would encompass Chinese, Japanese, Indian, because Jim was asking me questions, and for me, I mean, I can’t speak for my brother or sister or anything or other people I know, I always thought of the whole race tension thing was an American thing. Because, I mean, in Newfoundland, in Canada, in general, we’re highly, not influenced, but exposed to American media. So most of our television would have been the same television you guys had. So we saw a lot of the tension in television programs where it would be portrayed or the news. So we were aware of it. And I remember asking my parents questions. You know, if I would hear inappropriate language being used toward someone who was Black, my parents were adamant, “That’s not okay.” And there was this drilling into our heads that the way people are being treated is wrong. And it always seemed like it was south of the border for us. And now that doesn’t mean that there’s no racism in Canada, because I was telling Jim, as a young adult, when I was exposed to it by someone who was a minister, I’ll just say that. And in that household, there was a lot of derogatory comments being made about people who had immigrated from Ethiopia, who were in a big city in Canada. And I remember being shocked by it and thinking, this is not how I was raised.

How is it I’m being exposed to it here - someone who’s a minister - and the family?

JAN: I’m curious about that for two reasons. One, I think prejudices sometimes are defined by the populations around you or your own situations. Because when I moved to Colorado, I noticed that the way people from Mexico were spoken of was similar to how people who were Black in Detroit were spoken of. Similar derogatory terms, but this is our group that we’re going to talk about. And then also my friendship with Bev, who’s Korean descent. I learned, something I never understood totally until then, that she faced prejudice, by being Asian, from people who still remembered the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. And so even though she wasn’t Japanese, people didn’t distinguish that, but she was Asian and had to face some of the prejudice of that in her spouse’s family, but also in our social circumstances in Fort Collins, Colorado. So I just wondered how it played out for you.

DEE: I’m not saying it didn’t exist, but I wasn’t really...

JAN: Aware?

DEE: ...Of course, maybe if you talk to Asian people who were living in Newfoundland at the same time, their experience may be very different. But it wasn’t something that I was hyper aware of or anything like that. And I just remember my parents being very, they were aware of teaching us what was not okay.

ROB: Was there any indigenous people?

DEE: I don’t...

ROB: Any...

DEE: Yeah, I don’t remember a lot of Indigenous people in St. John’s. Now, there probably would have been in more of the rural parts. And again, I mean, I know there is, because I mean, there’s all these documentaries. And in Canada now, there’s a big push to highlight Indigenous people and celebrate the heritage. And also the stuff that went on with the Roman Catholic Church.

JAN: With schools?

DEE: Yeah, with schools. So right now it’s like there’s a lot of recognition of Indigenous people and celebrating heritage and all that sort of stuff too.

ROB: That used to be true in our country as well.

DEE: Yeah.

ROB: The national parks in the last 10 years have really pushed the original people that lived in those places and talked about them and celebrated them. And that’s going away.

DEE: Yeah. I mean, any national event like Canada Day or big special national holiday, you will always see a lot of indigenous people being featured.

JIM: I just want to clarify what Rob was saying. You’re saying that the National Park Service recently has been making the effort to include the people who are part of the lands that are now national park lands into the story of that land...

ROB: Right.

JIM: ...and their history, but in recent, let's say, in the last year or so, that has...

ROB: The current administration is trying to take that away.

JIM: Are they?

ROB: Yes. Believe it or not.

JIM: Well, this is part of the thing. We're making our way right now. It seems like the country is making its way back to where we had to start making all this progress in the first place, disturbing things that I think won't last. And I think in a couple of years, somebody of whatever party will understand it's time to start giving this stuff back. We don't need to be directing this. We don't need to be policing this city. We don't need to be taking over this arts center. We don't need to be doing this. This is not the role of the president. It can be corrected. That's my hope. And it's based on the larger arc of American history than just the current eruption of authoritarianism.

Can I do a kind of a quick clarifying thing? Because we're using this word "race." In terms of biology, race is not a category.

JAN: Correct.

JIM: There is no genetic basis to talk about a race of people. And so that has to go away from the conversation and saying, "This all has to do with Darwinism. This all has to do with genetics that people are basically made different and you can identify that because of a couple of characteristics." Race is a very real cultural construct...

JAN: Yes.

JIM: ...and there are many different races, very many different cultural traditions that ought to be accepted and celebrated for what they are. And they happen within large areas like a nation. It happens just in neighborhoods. There are these cultural things that need to be understood. So when we're using this word race, we're doing it in a cultural sense, right

JAN: Yes.

ROB: Yeah.

JIM: For all the Star Trek fans, you'll remember, you'll already anticipate what I'm about to reference. A very famous episode in 1968 where Captain Kirk kisses Lieutenant Uhura. Nichelle Nichols is Black, William Shatner is White, and this is 1968. Now, this would have been in November of that year. This was the year that Martin Luther King Jr. was killed. This is the year Bobby Kennedy was killed. This is the year after the Detroit riots. And in looking that up, I found some interesting things. That is often touted as an example of Gene Roddenberry, Star Trek creator, using a science fiction medium to advance certain radical ideas -radical in the sense of "down to the very root of human existence," not in the sense of "uprising."

ROB: Um-hmm.

JIM: Radical. It was not the first interracial kiss, but it has to do with how race is defined. And that's part of the problem. In the year before, Nancy Sinatra had a show called Moving with Nancy. Everyone remembers that, right?

ROB: That sounds about right.

JIM: And it was like a dance, singing, musical review type of show where she would have all these guests. And in one episode, she kissed Sammy Davis Jr. Now, she kissed him on the cheek, so people will say that doesn't count. But then you go back and I found a number of instances of actors kissing actors, and they were viewed as different races. Lloyd Bridges, in an episode of Sea Hunt, kisses an Asian woman. And that was viewed as interracial. So it has to do with how you define race. And how you define race sometimes has to do with the way you were raised. But the thing about race is not a biological truth. It is a social truth. And the biological thing, throw it away. The social thing, understand it, embrace it, celebrate it.

ROB: I've been reading The Road to Wisdom on Truth, Science, Faith, and Trust by Francis Collins, who is the former director of NIH, the National Institute of Health. And he writes a really cool thing. He was very instrumental in the Human Genome Project, where we mapped the human genome. He says this. "Regardless of the physical appearance or ancestral background of the individual, we found the parts of the genome that are most important for function to be 99.9% the same. The genome told us" - so the science, in other words - "told us that we are literally all part of one family, descended from a set of common ancestors who resided in Africa roughly 150,000 years ago." So, again, the science, there's no basis for race. It's all the cultural differences that have developed over time. I like that.

JIM: Yeah. He's also the one that wrote the book, The Language of God. He's a Christian, devoted, born-again Christian.

ROB: Yeah.

JIM: Not something that people who view themselves as real Christians could define away from Christianity. He's also a scientist who is thoroughly convinced, not that you have to be convinced, but will witness the truth of the evolutionary process. Some will go the no-true-Scotsman route and say, "Well, if he believes in evolution, he can call himself whatever he wants, but he's not a real Christian." I'm not going to address that right now, but he's - I think that book is in on my nightstand.

DEE: Mm-hmm.

JAN: This is a highly - this is the book that I think we should do a podcast on. It's an exceptionally timely book. The full title is The Road to Wisdom on Truth, Science, Faith, and Trust. And it is particularly timely in our current rendition of life here.

DEE: Here's my question, though. we can talk about science we can talk about facts but the people who need to hear it or even if they hear it they just "this is what my eyes tell me this is what I believe I don't care what your scientists say," and they're the people really honestly let's - we're trying to convince, right? Or are we just preaching to the choir?

JIM: Well, no, we're just expressing what we have let people accept it as they will, but the genetic expression that gives us different facial features or gives us different skin color are such a small subset of the genetic diversity within people. There's greater genetic diversity among people of Africa than there is between a person of Africa and a person of Europe. I'm talking about those people whose ancestry goes all the way back in Africa, not those

who left and then came back in some imperialist quest out of Europe. And it happened because of what Rob was saying, that the human population in Africa existed there for such a long time before people started to leave and populate the rest of the world that those that left represent a small subset of the genetic diversity that you have within Africa.

DEE: You just were talking about a Star Trek episode. I want to talk about another Star Trek episode from the original series. And it's the people who half of their body was white and half of their body was black. And they were enemies with what they deemed to be another race, which was people who half of their bodies was black and half of their bodies were white. But it was the opposite side of their bodies. And they had problems with them. And that was the reason. I mean, and that's kind of like what you're talking about, isn't it?

JIM: Well, yeah. In that episode, it's Kirk and Spock, and their question is - it was Frank Gorshin was the actor who played it; he's the one that did the Riddler on the Batman show - they're asking, "What's your problem with this group of people here?" He said, "Well, it's so clear. You can see it, can't you? They're black on the left side and white on the right side. We're white on the left side and black on the right side." And this is where Spock and Kirk give each other the kind of, "What are you talking about?" In my mind, Spock is even raising an eyebrow...

ROB: An eyebrow.

JIM: ...of the absurdity of the argument.

DEE: I mean, you could almost say - and this is going to tie into something else - if aliens were to visit us and look at us and see the squabbling and the reason for it, would probably give a similar reaction to what you just described with Kirk and Spock.

JIM: You know, what's remarkable about what you said, is you pulled an example from Kirk rather than Picard.

DEE: Oh, I know Picard is THE captain.

JIM: In the Kirk/Picard world, she's a Picard.

DEE: I would follow Captain Picard anywhere. I trust him.

JIM: Yeah. It's like when you're talking about Bond. Connery or Craig?

DEE: Oh, no. Craig.

JIM: You're such a young person.

DEE: I want Craig protecting me.

JIM: All right. There we go. Well, you've got me.

DEE: Okay.

JIM: That's the best I can do. Cheyne. James Cheyne.

DEE: Yeah.

ROB: One more quote from Francis Collins' book. "We have a very long way to go to become a post-racial society, but one thing can be said with certainty. Genetics will not support a

concept of sharp boundaries or separate inheritance. We are all brothers and sisters. We are all Africans.

[Music]

JIM: As is often the case, our conversation extended far beyond what could be covered in just one episode. So, next week it's New Orleans, Katrina, plantations, vaccines, redlining, the Equal Justice Initiative, and a lexicon of acronyms like BLM, CRT, and DEI. Do you think we can fit that all in? As you might guess, it was a light-hearted, easy-going conversation. Except for Jan, who had to be gently guided from a few precarious ledges.

Until next time.

[Music ends]

