Hi, I'm Vicki Robin, with a big question, and a guest who might give us some inspiring and provocative answers. In partnership with the Post Carbon Institute, we're asking cultural scouts, authors and activists, academics and creatives, who can see further and report back to us on this question about this moment in time: What could possibly go right? It's June 2020. We're talking against the backdrop of a week of protests sparked by police murder of George Floyd and then against the deeper background of climate disruptions, and of course, the recent background of four months. This COVID-19 pandemic has upended our lives, our jobs, our routines and our plans. Who knows where the pieces will land? And that's both energising and frightening. We don't need dark projections now, nor do we need reassurance that all will be well. To respond, we need a flashlight, a sharp focus and some reliable guides.

My cultural scout today is Bill McKibben. Bill, in addition to being an old old friend, is an author and environmentalist who in 2014, was awarded the Right Livelihood Prize, sometimes called the alternative Nobel. His 1989 book, The End of Nature, is regarded as the first book for a general audience on climate change. He's the founder of 350.org, the first planet-wide grassroots climate change movement, and spearheaded the resistance of the Keystone pipeline, and launched the fast growing fossil fuel divestment movement. So welcome Bill. Let's just start with a little check in. Where are you and how are you and how have the last four months been?

Well, they've been okay for me, Vicki, I'm at home in Vermont. And it's been quite easy to ride out the pandemic here because I can walk out the back door and be in the woods. And I have good work to do, you know, that's connected. I've been writing this climate newsletter for The New Yorker, and really, it's turned into an awful lot about the Coronavirus pandemic over these months as well. I've had 30 years to think about crises, what they mean, what they might teach us. And I think that this thing we're going through now is the beginning of what's likely to be a series of crises this century because we've fundamentally destabilized the planet on which we live. There are no silver linings to something like a pandemic. But if we're going to go through this kind of pain and trauma, it seems worthwhile to try and learn something along the way. So I'm very glad you're doing this series and very eager to see what people come up with. You want me to give you my sense of two or three lessons we might have?

Yeah, precisely. That's why we're here.

Some of them look forward, and some of them look back. I mean, first thing, it seems to me is, it's highly useful to have a reminder that reality is real. We live in a world, because we exist behind screens all the time, where everything seems editable. You know, you can drag things around on your screen and change reality and make a difference and that's all great. But there's an underlying reality. It doesn't work like that. I've spent 30 years trying to convince people that physics and chemistry don't compromise or negotiate. The COVID microbe is doing the same task for biology and it's doing it in short order. Doesn't make any difference if the President stands up and calls it a hoax or says it's going to go away by Easter, the cases are going to drop to zero or if you drink this bottle of something, it'll whatever. That's not how it works. If the microbe says, wear a mask, then wear a mask, because you're not in control; biology's in control. That's simply how the world works. And it really is useful for us to know that because
Bill McKibben
The second thing I'd say is a corollary really to that first lesson is that speed really matters sometimes when you're dealing with reality. We live in a world where our political leaders are used to thinking that you can sort of placate and temporize and do half the job and it'll sort of get whatever the issue is off your back for a while, and you'll go on to something else. And actually, that's kind of how it needs to work with most things. When we're talking about, you know, there's lots of things where you have to make incremental progress and come back and do some more and so on. But, in this case, that's not what we're dealing with. Look, the US and South Korea both had their first fatality from Coronavirus on the same day in January. So the South Koreans who had had a brush with all of this when the SARS epidemic not that long ago; they went straight to work. They stopped big gatherings, and they tested the hell out everyone all the time so they could keep track of what was going on. We obviously did not go to work. We wasted all of February dithering around and delaying and worrying that the stock market might go down or some such. And instead, we now as a result, and this is what happens when you delay, (A): You have to disrupt things way more than you otherwise would have. We had to shut down the whole country. And (B): Even when you do that, you still end up with a huge amount of trauma. Because you delayed, we've got a big pile of dead bodies. In fact, the Times ran an investigative piece last week indicating that even if we got into this one week earlier, there'd be 35,000 more Americans alive today than there are.

Bill McKibben
So that should teach us something about speed. The corollary of that, I mean the analogue with climate change couldn't be clearer. In this case, February is the last 30 years, you know. That's when we had the profound warning from science about what to do. And that's when we did nothing, largely thanks to the power of the fossil fuel industry. And I'll say in passing, that the one blessing of the Coronavirus thing is that there was no trillion dollar industry, whose business model depended on us all dying of Coronavirus because if there was we'd probably be in even worse shape than we are now. But there was a trillion dollar industry that demanded we not take action on climate change and they succeeded. And so now we're in a place where we still have to move very, very fast. I mean, the IPCC says, by 2030, we have to cut emissions in half to have any hope of reaching those Paris targets. But now even if we move fast, it's going to be very disruptive, by necessity, and there's going to be a lot of trauma. It's too late to stop much of what's coming down the road. So reality is real. Speed matters.

Bill McKibben
And third, and this really takes us to where we are right now with these questions, you know, these uprisings around the death of George Floyd and so much else. Social solidarity really matters. You know, Vicki, you and I grew up and politically came of age, kind of in the shadow of Ronald Reagan. He was the dominant political figure of our lifetimes in a lot of ways; the person who kind of changed the zeitgeist, and in a very bad way. I mean, his argument was that markets solve all problems, more or less. People should just pursue their individual self interest and everything would flow from that. You'll remember that his most famous laugh line in his speeches was the nine scariest words in the English language are, "I'm from the government and I'm here to help." You know, haha, it turns out the scariest words in the English language are "We've run out of ventilators" or "The hillside behind your house is now on fire" or things like that. And those you can't solve one person at a time, doesn't matter how rich you are. I mean,
you have to solve those by working together, by coming together. What's government? It's just another name for working together, coming together as a society to do the things we need to do. So now we have to rebuild that, and we have to rebuild it this time with everyone. The uprisings around police brutality and George Floyd's murder are also at some level uprisings around the insane levels of inequality that we managed to allow in our society; inequality, by race, by wealth, by gender, by all the other things that divide us. And we can't let those divisions go on any longer. We need a unified and fair society, because we now face a task, climate change; so large, that it's going to take a united society to have any hope of dealing with it.

Bill McKibben
There are other lessons that come out of this moment too. Clearly, it's been interesting to watch. We shut down the world's economy in a way that would have been impossible. Nothing compares in our lifetimes to what's happened. And yet, interestingly, emissions only fell maybe 15% or so at most. I don't know anyone who's been on an aeroplane in months, you know. So what it indicates is that while our individual habits and choices are important, they're probably not all important. An awful lot of the destruction we're doing is hardwired into our system, and so we're going to have to pull the guts of that system out and rewire it. The good news is that that's more possible than it used to be. The engineers have done their job. In the last decade, the price of a solar panel or something has plummeted 90%. We no longer face the technological and economic obstacles to doing this but we still face those enormous political obstacles that come with vested interest. However, since one of the features of the pandemic is going to be that we emerged with at least 40 million Americans out of work, when we look around our society and catalogue the series of tasks we have that might suck up that kind of labor. It's pretty hard to find anything other than transforming our energy system, retrofitting our buildings to make them efficient, changing our agriculture and make it more local, building out those solar panels, wind turbines... Those are the tasks that can sop up that kind of labor and do it in a way that's filled with dignity and usefulness. So maybe we will seize this opportunity. Not, obviously, as long as the Donald Trump's in power. Talking about seizing anything with dignity, human decency and foresight, whatever, is clearly a pointless exercise in Washington right at the moment. On the other hand, we have elections in November. So, the timing is propitious there too. We don't solve all of our problems with elections. We solve our problems by building movements that shift the zeitgeist and allow us to go new places in our politics. And it's exciting to watch that movement building going on even as we speak.

Vicki Robin
Wow. Thank you for what a clear picture of where we are. If you could take a stab at a few sentences that describe the zeitgeist we need. I mean, you've almost done it in what you're saying, but just a few sentences. You're a writer, you could do this. What is the story? What is the story that you see emerging that's so possible that we could amplify with our words and our means and our relationships.

Bill McKibben
To me the story is very stark. The world faces unprecedented peril. Peril of a size that we've not faced before. Climate change is the biggest thing that human beings have ever done by a large margin. And if we get it wrong, our civilizations will go down. Getting it right requires that we work together, that we build societies that allow us to work together to let everyone have a role in this fight and that protect everyone in a time of real danger. We need that kind of solidarity, of brotherhood or whatever the right term would be now, brotherhood and sisterhood and personhood, and creaturehood maybe, that allow us to really dig in and do work in a way we've never done it before.
Vicki Robin
Wow. Well, that says it. I totally agree with you on that project. And of course, you and I, as writers wake up - oh, I'm gonna cry - we wake up every morning trying to tell that story. Not tell the story of fear and helplessness, to tell the story, and not like the la la story about how it's all going to be like rainbows and unicorns, but the story of how people can face into the storm and together, get through it. We're not going to get through it in little single rowboats. We're going to get through it together and how we build it together. It's up to us. And it's up to today and tomorrow and the next day.

Bill McKibben
Amen, and what makes it an interesting story is, we don't know the outcome. We actually don't know if we can do this or not, and that requires us to be brave. If we don't meet the time limit, then we lose. So we have to work fast and we have to work together and we have to work with courage. So, unity is a big part of all of this. Vicki, let me just say thank you for this series, but also just thank you for your lifetime of work as a convener and thinker and just as a good soul demonstrating to others, how to be a good soul. God bless you, friend.

Vicki Robin
God bless you too, Bill. I love you and thank you so much. We all thank you.