

*Vicki Robin*

Hi, I'm Vicki Robin. In partnership with the Post Carbon Institute, I'm hosting short to-the-point conversations with diverse cultural scouts, asking each one the same question: What could possibly go right? The invitation is to see through these wise eyes what is opening up in the present moment, as normal as up-ended and next is not at all clear. These conversations were recorded a few months into the pandemic in the weeks following the murder of George Floyd. Let's see what today's guest says.

*Vicki Robin*

Welcome to another episode of What Could Possibly Go Right. I am here with Reverend Lennox Yearwood. I didn't know him and I don't know if y'all know him, so I'm going to tell you a bit about him before we get started because he's an amazing man. He entered the world of hip hop politics, as the political and grassroots director for the Hip Hop Summit Action Network in 2003 and 04. He is the President and Founder of the Hip Hop Caucus, a minister, a community activist, a US Air Force veteran and one of the most influential people in hip hop political life. The Hip Hop Caucus is empowering communities impacted first and worst by injustice. They say that we link culture and policy to make our movements bigger, more diverse and more powerful. We exist for everyone who identifies with hip hop culture to come together for positive change. Being part of a Hip Hop Caucus means you can use your cultural expression to shape your political experience. They say we build movements that people want to be part of where you can be yourself, where you can come to learn about how issues that matter affect your life, where you hear from voices you care about, where we speak to right and wrong in simple terms, where we focus on solutions to problems and where big, seemingly impossible challenges are broken into fights that we can win step by step together. So here we are in the biggest upheaval in this country in 50 years, at least in my experience, because so many things are coming together; the pandemic, the global uprising for racial justice, people falling off the economic cliff with little safety net, and in the background, a raging climate crisis. So here you are straddling hip hop culture and climate change working for people of color, people on the bottom of the heap to be at the top of their citizen game. With that background, our question for you, who has a particular capacity to see in to this time with clarity of years and a role as a Reverend, we're asking you: What could possibly go right?

*Rev. Lennox Yearwood Jr.*

Well, I think first of all, thanks for having me. It's really nice to meet you. Glad we're able to connect. This time is a very important time. 2020 in my opinion is a year of truth, and my job has simply been to work with young people and young people who are at risk and on the margins. That has been my life's work forever; when I was young, and now that I'm not so young. I continue to work with young people from vulnerable communities and young people who are literally fighting to make sure their voice is heard. To your point of what can go right and how spirituality can be used in this moment, particularly for young people; they're coming up in a generation where they may not look upon the institutions in the same way. They may not look upon the church or the synagogue or the mosque, the same way as they have to go there; that's the place. They see their spirituality much more open. Definitely the institution is still very important, but they also see it being one in which they can commune with their spirit on a more personal level and more intimate level by themselves. And also their spirituality is used to focus their fight for justice. That's not new, because we've seen for many years to be people of color, and women, and all kinds of marginalized communities literally using their faith to fight for justice. So that's what I do. I literally combined my faith with this belief that we can do what's right. I use my faith and effort to bring us together, black or white, or brown or red, or male or female, this human, to bring us together. And so that's the ultimate goal for what we're trying to do and how I utilize my spirituality to make a difference.

*Vicki Robin*

Yeah, I'm really interested in - I don't know if I'm borrowing your words or mine - in this as a moral moment. There's a lot of issues that are on the table. But there's some underlying right and wrong here. There's some underlying - I hate to say it because it might sound too extreme - but it's like we're sort of like the Roman Empire or we're sort of like the Pharisees and Sadducees in the time of Jesus. We have as a society, I believe - and this isn't my interview, it's yours - but I believe we've lost our moorings. And so do you see this time, this uprising and all the things are coming together... Does seeing it as a moral moment mean anything to you?

*Rev. Lennox Yearwood Jr.*

It's a moral moment, but I think it's also, if I can just use an analogy: if something were when somebody has a heart scare because they haven't been living right. They've been eating the wrong foods, haven't been exercising. They've been ignoring the things that make themselves healthy. Then all of a sudden, one day, they begin to feel their chest tighten and they get really, really scared. This is that moment where as a country, we haven't been doing right for quite some time. We've been eating a lot of junk and doing a lot of bad things to many communities throughout, either from education to housing to healthcare; obviously, how we treat one another through racial discourse. So this moral moment you're talking about is one in which we have been literally committing spiritual decay for quite some time. We've been investing in things, not to bring us together, but to tear us apart. So this moment, you're right; it's a moment when this country is having a heart attack. They're literally feeling the pain of the years of neglect, the years of literally putting forth images of hate, of the Confederate signs or numerous kinds of things. They've been doing things for extraction on the climate side and the colonializing and literally how we treat our brothers and sisters. This is that moment. So you're right. This is the moment when everything has shut down. So from the pandemic, to poverty, to pollution, to police brutality, to man! So many different problems. This is what happens when you neglect literally a spirit of a country that looks out for each other. And now we're at a point where we're like, Wow, we're in bad shape. But there's good news. Like, when you have that heart scare and you don't die, you can now begin to change your diet. You can begin to exercise. You can begin to change those bad habits. That's where we are now. We have to change our political discourse. We can change those who are in political power. We have to change the situation where how we're treating each other - I think the crying now for the movement for black lives is simply that Black Lives Matter. It's a human rights issue, not a political one. We have to change how we treat one another. I think if we can do that, we can move forward. You know, the difference for those I work with, my parents and many of their grandparents fought for equality in the 20th century, but now this generation is fighting for existence in the 21st century. They have a time clock. It's not the same way where they have to just, Okay, we'll get it right. We'll make sure that the people can ride on the front of the bus or you can sit at the lunch counter, or you can drink from the water fountain and it will take 30-40 years to get to that point. They understand that if we don't get it right now, that it'll have disastrous effects for them moving forward. So the urgency now to get it right is what you're seeing. You're seeing an urgency, you're seeing a passion, you're seeing a drive to say: Listen, we have got to change our bad habits, our bad ways. We have to change it around. And it may cause pain, it may cause hardship. I had an old friend who once told me that it wasn't the change, but the transition that can throw you for a loop. So I think many of us will have to go through a transition that we're not accustomed to, but will ultimately make this country and our world a better place.

*Vicki Robin*

Yeah, and so in this moment, where we're in a, I might call it, a healing crisis... And healing crisis doesn't mean unicorns and rainbows. A healing crisis is when you have a massive fever and people sit at your bedside and don't know if you'll survive. That's a healing crisis. So in this healing crisis, if you were a doctor at the bedside, and you're looking at it, where do you see signs that we're actually in a healing process and not an extinction process. What do you see emerging in this moment that we can work with?

*Rev. Lennox Yearwood Jr.*

I see a lot that we can work with. I think the first thing is in a healing crisis - it's a great word - you have to first realize what got you to this point to begin with. I think that we as a country, and we as people, and white people in this country dealing with white supremacy and institutionalized racism, have to really deal with the fact that, Listen, there are a lot of things that got us to this point. We had to really deal with that and actually pain that could really cause us to really deal with some issues. But I think once you come to that awareness that's something that can be fixed and we can change it around, we must for the next generation, our children's children, then I think a healing can take place. If you don't deal with what caused you to be in a position of ill in the first hand, you're gonna just be repeating the process over and over. You may get healed quickly. You may have a quick victory along the way. But you'll be right back into your bed again, praying to be healed, hoping that you can overcome this crisis. That's what does get me excited. I think this is one of the first times when I really feel that this moment is so painful. It's so disturbing, that it's one of those moments when we actually may, I would say, quit cold turkey, and be like: Enough is enough. This feels so wrong. This moment feels so awful, that if we don't fix it, if we don't come together as a nation and fix the issue of racism, or the issue of our political discourse that's so toxic, or the issue of pollution that's causing our water to be bad and our air to be dirty; if we don't come together at this omen, then reality is that we know that there is no turning back. I think we kind of know that. I think we know that this moment is bad. We've had bad moments in the past. We've had riots, we've had uprisings, we've had rebellions. But I think we know that this is something here, that if we don't fix it, that it's game over. We are heading on a pathway, and that's also the exciting part, that we do know that, that we can come together. I've seen - and it's just amazing - I've seen children, our children, 13 and 14, 15, in the streets. Black, white, brown, red, male, female, straight and gay; all of God's children in the streets, hand in hand, fighting for justice. That is something that we've never seen before.

*Vicki Robin*

What do you make of it? So many other times when racial injustice has risen... It's still, white people still treat it like it's a problem for black people. What do you make of this moment as white people are pouring into the movement, not just as allies, like we're gonna help you; it's like brothers and sisters, we're gonna make this an anti-racist nation. What do you make of why in this moment white people are showing up?

*Rev. Lennox Yearwood Jr.*

I think that you made a great point that white people are now transitioning from being just white allies, to white accomplices, in which they are literally saying that: No longer am I going to let my black and brown and red sisters and brothers be the ones that face the brunt. I am going to put my body on the line like never before in mass numbers. I'm going to speak out. I just cannot. They're saying to themselves that what I saw with George Floyd, the fact that we literally saw the life being choked out of him in those eight minutes and 46 seconds. There's no way that people now are saying that: I can live with that. I am not going to go... you are now having white people who are saying: I am not going to my grave knowing what I saw, to not have done

nothing. That is a change. There's a deep spirit to them that is saying that: No, I am not going to leave my time on this planet to allow for that to continue. If I can do everything with my resources, with my intellect, with even my physical body, I am going to say that this must stop now. And that's the change. I think that's something is surprising. I think people on the other side who want to continue that hate and division. They're like, What is going on? They must be Communists or they must be... What's happening? No, you're seeing it throughout this country. Something has happened in this world. You're seeing a change in which people who are white are saying to themselves: This must change. You're also seeing the children. I think the children who themselves saw a black president, who grew up seeing the possibility of hope, are saying that I don't know what this is, with this kind of hate, this kind of anger. But that's not the world we want. You're beginning to see children challenge their parents, their neighborhood. I live in a neighborhood that is predominately pretty much middle class but it's pretty well balanced, and the other morning I woke up with a caravan of kids who had gotten their parents' cars, and they were honking at nine in the morning on a Saturday morning. They were honking. It was mostly about hundred cars honking to our neighbors, mostly white kids, yelling Black Lives Matter. That's a change. I think you wouldn't have seen that. I think that would have been something that you would have been like: Yeah, I'm with this. I'm going to see one or two kind of out there. But never in that kind of numbers and never been so self-organizing to fight against racial injustice. That makes me so hopeful because that means that we have a new generation that is literally fighting their mothers and fathers in some cases, to say what's right. We just have to make sure we give them the support they need, and the love and the hope to carry on.

*Vicki Robin*

Right. That's beautiful. I have one more question for you because I know that you've been committed for a long time to resolving in whatever way we can, the climate crisis. At this point, who knows what resolution looks like. We're deep into it now. So just reflect for a second on the relationship between what you see in this Black Lives Matter uprising, and how that spark could leap over to the issue of climate change, which is still rolling in the background. That's been a pretty white movement, so I'd just love to hear as a final reflection, what you might say about that.

*Rev. Lennox Yearwood Jr.*

You know, one of the things I would say that I would have wanted the climate movement to have done more on the issue of indigenous and black and brown lives. No other movement should have been out front, to be honest, on this issue than the climate movement. 15 years ago this year will become the anniversary of Hurricane Katrina. In that, we saw that the poor people and black people left behind in the richest country and most powerful nation in the world. In that the climate movement which then created kind of an inconvenient truth to say what the climate crisis is, should have said that, you know what? We have seen throughout the years, black and brown and indigenous people left behind. We have seen the places called Cancer Alley. We've seen what pollution can do. We know that 68% of black people live near coal fired power plants. We know what's going on with the pollution. We know some of the poor people in the Appalachian Mountains and those who are in West Virginia; poor people and black people and in Israel are the ones who are facing the brunt of the climate crisis. We know this, but year after year after year, they ignore that. So if some of this - even before Black Lives Matter, the new movement in the 21st century came about literally in 2012 with Trayvon Martin - the climate movement should have been seven years in advance. So some parts of this is like, Why is that not the case? I think it's simply because of the climate movement basing themselves on privilege, and also being comfortable. So what I think needs to happen now is that we have to have a movement that says that we're no longer going to be comfortable. We're no longer going to use our privilege to protect ourselves and the same systems that are causing the climate

crisis, in regards to extraction and looking at where people live and creating sacrifice zones and polluting water like Flint, or creating hurricanes like Maria or Sandy or Katrina. We're going to now take on that structure, because that same structure is within the fossil fuel industry, which is from Exxon and Chevron and Shell and the banks that prop these things up, like Chase, Liberty Mutual, and so on and so forth. We're going to say that that same structure of extraction, and not looking at that people matter; if we take that on, and defeat that, that will then help the issue of Black Lives Matter, the issue of indigenous and brown lives. If we begin to take it off to a more personal level, and realize this has a humanity aspect to it, then our movements - and we connect the dots simply between racial justice and climate justice - then we can be successful. Now that also gives me hope that now I do believe what I've seen from groups like the League of Conservation Voters and Sierra Club and NRDC and Greenpeace, and the list goes on and on and on. I'm beginning to see many of the larger environmental organizations begin to say, Listen, we cannot do this work regarding climate justice if it doesn't have a racial justice framework. If that really materializes, then I think that we will then begin to scare the fossil fuel industry and really begin to transition from fossil fuels to clean energy. That's actually where I think this moment not only connects, but also is our, what my son would say, our cheat code. It's where we would get our success. That's the thing there because when we begin to broaden this movement and we have everybody involved - it just can't be people who are white or, as I like to say, or Birkenstock. It just can't be a certain group of people. We bring us all together and begin to see how we all are very powerful and can connect, then we can win. So that's my thing. I think that we're beginning to see that now and are beginning to take on. So the same basis where Black Rock is, is ensuring the police departments are also ensuring the pipelines. We're now beginning to break down the silos in our movement and now begin to work together. I think once we do that, we will be successful. For too long, race has been the trip wire for the climate movement, but I think now we're about to cut that trip wire and move on to success; being all of God's children, black and white, holding hands, on to victory, to not only a clean economy, but a clean future for future generations. If we do that, then the next generations will say "Thank you" because we now have clean air and we have clean water to drink and our planet is stable because of our courage and our fight now, 20 years into the 21st century.

*Vicki Robin*

I feel like we should queue the organ. So beautiful and that just feels like a perfect, perfect crescendo. Thank you so much for bringing these considerations to this conversation about what could possibly go right. Yeah, thanks. Thanks so much.