

*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*

Hi. I am here today with Peter Buffett. And a little bio: Peter is the Co-President of the NoVo Foundation and Co-Chair of its Board of Directors. In partnership with his wife Jennifer, he helps guide NoVo's vision, strategic mission to build a more just and balanced world, and program development. Peter is a well-established musician, composer, and producer. Born in Omaha, Nebraska, Buffett began his career in San Francisco writing music for commercials and then producing albums. His Emmy award-winning album, titled Ojibwe, was released on his own label BisonHead. Highlights of his film and television work include the fire dance scene in the Oscar-winning film, Dances with Wolves, and the entire score for 500 Nations the eight-hour miniseries produced by Kevin Costner for CBS. Peter is the author of Life Is What You Make It which debuted at number four on the New York Times Bestseller Hardcover Advice list and is a companion to his live Concert and Conversation performances.

*Vicki Robin*

Welcome, Peter. Yeah, just a little tossing you the ball here. So society is walking in knife edge in 2020. Health, economy, justice are all in turmoil and the reshuffling of everything about our way of life is underway. When walls come down, opportunities arise. Some people are looting wealth on Wall Street. Others are looting stores. Most are somewhere between confused, resigned and adapting. Making sense of all this can unfreeze energy. So we're asking cultural scouts like you to tell us what you actually see bubbling up. We want to shine a light on the near now; so people of goodwill can make sense of the chaos and act. You have a unique perch. So I'm asking you: What could possibly go right?

*Peter Buffett*

What could possibly go right? Well, I'll start with "possibly" as you said in the intro. Everything is blown open here and the Coronavirus really did that in a way like nothing else seemed to have been able to do before, even though we've been in this for a very long time in different ways. Now it's exposed, right? We're seeing it. So I'm going to start with a metaphor that I love and that ties into the word "corona", which has its root in crown. I like to think of our species - this young species 200,000 years on the planet kind of looking like we are - as being in the womb. And the birth canal has been these last 15,000 years. Since agriculture, we've been moving more intense and quicker, and really feeling squeezed. I would say, the last 150 years or so, you can really see that. Everything seems like it's getting tighter and faster and more unpleasant in a lot of ways. But the crown, right? As our species is crowning, that's where the possibility is. We may be in a rebirth moment and I think what that means pragmatically, here and now and on the ground... As I live in a town, nearby a town of 23,000 people, Kingston, New York. I live on a farm so I'm able to eat food from the land I live on, which has changed my life entirely. What I'm seeing in small communities, not just here but other places, are people remembering again. It's re-member; we're reconnecting to who we actually are as a species, who we've been for thousands and thousands of years actually, which is in right relation to the world that's around us. I'm referring Wes Jackson who says it best; a perfect phrase. "We're a species out of context." We're a species out of context and I think what people are recognizing as the virus

struck, we changed our relationship to certainly education, our food system, our neighbors. Everything is up for grabs in this beautiful way, even though of course, it's painful. By the way, when I go back to that analogy, birth is painful. It's not an easy process. No one's gonna say, Oh my god, that was the simplest thing ever. This is going to be complex and I do not want to underestimate the number of people that are certainly highly anxious and really hurting and questioning what their future will look like. And at the same time, like I said, I've seen people come together, and I think we all have in different ways like never before. It's so strange to be in the most splintered time in terms of not believing the news; all this dis-identity, you're not that and you're in and you're out and you're not radical enough, or you're not this enough. At the same time in the real world, block by block, neighborhood by neighborhood, we're seeing a level of mutual aid, a level of awareness around systemic racism that's certainly come up since then, like never before, since the Coronavirus came into play. The swamp has been drained. I mean, we talked about that that was gonna happen somehow with some political process. But no, it came in this form, and is showing us things that a lot of people have never seen. As painful as it is, that's a wonderful outcome, because we might just be able to do some things about that. It does get back, from my experience, of being person-to-person in relationship, that the level of immediacy around food systems and making sure people didn't go hungry when their paychecks stop. Now of course, there's some support for that. A lot of people are left out. But there are these relationships being knitted together, that were never there before. When we had a hurricane strike in 2011, I'd never been through one. It came up here, and I met all my neighbors because it was an emergency and people came out and I didn't realize that a kid up the street would take the tree that fell down and turn it into firewood. It was just, everybody came to their senses, I guess in a way, and really were connected. I think there's an extraordinary opportunity in particular for how we educate our kids. I think that is very exciting because we're seeing, nobody knows what school is going to look like. Kids have been home for months now. They're starting to think about, Well, what was school for? What did I really learn there? And the parents were thinking the same. I think they realized that it was failing their children, by trying to not fail, by teaching to the test and all these things that are not really what life is about and what we need to bring our children into. Again, I mostly speak for the small community I'm a part of but because of the Foundation, I get to see it other places as well. There is a rising - and some of this is so obvious - this rising awareness around so many of our systems. The inequality that's built into so many, but also the general pervasiveness that this culture, as culture does, it wants to convince you there's no other way. That's how we keep the systems in place by making it look like there's just no other way; so you better just get that job and pass that test and all these things. Now we're looking at all that and saying, Wait a minute. Maybe there is another way? And maybe it does start, first of all, with me, with each one of us, and how we look at the system that has impressed itself upon us since birth. And is that really us? So a lot of the questioning I'm seeing both on a personal level with people as well as a cultural and systemic level is: What's really us and what's not us? What's been told? "We're supposed to be this way. We're supposed to act this way. If you don't do this, you're not going to get here or there." The pervasiveness of that now that so many of what we thought was necessary has gone away, and school being a big one, right? Then of course, the jobs we hold, and all the rest of it. But if we can take this opportunity to create alternative ways to bring children into the world, we have the opportunity to change the consciousness of the structures we're inside of. To me, that's a key focal point, is what is the opportunity around education in particular, but also around community engagement with itself? Knowing your neighbor; recognizing that it's kind of Gandhi's last man - which he said, man - the last person idea, in terms of if that person is lifted up, we're all lifted up, and recognizing that we really do essentially need each other. I mean, the food system, if supply chains break down, you're going to start looking around and seeing where you can get the things you need. You can find most of them, right where you are, the things you really need. It's this wide open palette right now for the

people that have the opportunity and the privilege, frankly - which I consider myself one of those people - because we have resources that can help move into these new imaginative spaces. It's up to us to listen closely to the people that don't have those opportunities and privileges, and find out how we can work together to make a more equitable world. Which speaks to the last part of the question which is, what could possibly go right? Of course, you have to think about, Well, whose version of right? I mean that is the question, because we are in such a divided place right now in terms of right and essentially, judgment and the qualities that go into that. That's where I think the learning of history and understanding how we got here is critical. I feel like you can't know where you're going unless you know where you came from. This country in particular has done a very good job of telling a particular version of history, and its history, that needs to be and is being, thank goodness, deeply examined. Do not hold on to a story and a mythology that isn't serving the very people it was supposedly meant to serve. I think part of it is how the saying, that grace favors surrender. Grace favors surrender. So the idea that if we surrender and we're vulnerable and we're real - which by the way, men have a very hard time doing, and this is up to men more than anything else - is to say, I have to admit that I'm dependent. I'm dependent on the earth. I'm dependent on other people, I am vulnerable. I can apologize. I can say I'm sorry for what was done. I don't have to take that on as my fault or something but in fact, we benefitted so much from the systems. So the idea of rightness needs to be examined deeply, I think, and basically look at who's been calling the shots for entirely too long.

*Vicki Robin*

It's so funny. Bringing in, to use a short word for it - the patriarchy - actually brought me to tears. Because the #MeToo movement came up and then there's just more and more eruptions of what's wrong that are coming over the hills at us. But to link the colonialism and the patriarchy and the racism; to link all of this to some ideas that seemed like a good idea at the time. Exactly. I'm interested that, because you and I both live in semi-rural communities - I live on Whidbey Island in Washington - and seem to have a focus on localization. I'm interested in that the crisis enforces the vulnerability, that enforces the need, that enforces the connection to go forward. Do you see that on the increase? How do you see that specifically in your community?

*Peter Buffett*

Well, we're fortunate in this community and it sounds like probably in yours too, that we have like-minded government. So we have people in positions of power, generally speaking, who are willing to look at their power and their position and the system that allowed them to be in that place, and what it's doing to the community it's supposed to serve and often does; but then also does it within the framework of structures that essentially put the onus on poor people to sign up for things and be called out in terms of evictions or whatever it might be, where at the same time, the ownership and the control of these things is sort of hidden away. Who owns the properties that are pushing people out? Who controls the food system that is not allowing it to get where it needs to go? Why is it that our school district is so counted on for the only two meals a kid might get in a day, and what happened there? So those things are - specifically with the schools and the evictions and other those things - are being laid bare. It gets back to, and I want to make sure I'm answering your question, but it gets back to a shared responsibility, which we're again very fortunate to have local government here understand that shared responsibility; and then a true relationship where you can listen and hear and recognize that the people that have been most oppressed by the system... First of all, recognize that's true, as opposed to just think, Oh well, you didn't try hard enough. But whatever, that it's somehow their fault. I think that's what's starting to flip in a big way. My hope really rests in that awareness and kind of illumination because of what's happening right now, is that there's a real sense that it is systemic, and it is white supremacy, male domination; these things that have run the systems

for so long. Luckily, again, the people in power and the people with privilege, some places are really starting to listen and understand and allow themselves to say, "Wow, I didn't see that. I'm wrong about how I thought either your behavior was affecting the outcome versus what the system was doing to you or not for you in a way." And what happens is, as you start to allow for that, for the vulnerability and the realism in terms of what we're all living inside of, you do start to get to the personal; you do start to understand that, Wow, this is trauma on a personal and writ large level. I feel we're a traumatized culture right now, just at war with itself because we're not actually addressing what's happening inside. I've seen so many activists, so many passionate, driven, hardworking activists that are actually trying to fix out there, what they haven't looked at inside. That's why there's so much burnout and frustration and anger. There's much-understood anger, but there's also this other burning part that says, "I don't feel whole. I've been pushed down in some way and therefore, I'm going to put it out here before I've addressed how I can take care of myself and understand where the trauma comes from." Those are the conversations that are opening up even here in a small town, is they're starting to look at what's driving the behavior, both from the power structures and from the oppressed side, and how can we see each other as flawed human beings, all of us, that have come from backgrounds that have ancestral trauma connected to it, and start to heal that and that is a beautiful but slow and sometimes painful process.

*Vicki Robin*

Right, it's the birth canal.

*Peter Buffett*

It's the birth canal. It is, and if we don't see how birth trauma itself... I mean, here we were in the womb, all of us. Everything was great; inside, the nutrients and the temperature and we're just sloshing around. Then suddenly we're burst into this world. I know that if we could speak at that moment, we'd say: Who the hell's responsible for this? From that moment, or soon after, we are essentially trying to ascertain how we get fed and taken care of. We're born into someone else's story, and we're acting because we need to get what we need. So who we are truly as humans is a lifelong quest, potentially, because we were born into a story we didn't ask for, and then we had to figure it out, and how to maneuver in that. Here we are as a country, that was also born in trauma and genocide and slavery, all these really egregious acts, saying: Wait, who are we really and why is it that the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution don't line up. Here, we're saying all men are created equal. But then in the Constitution, we're saying, No, they're not. This is a faulty foundation. We shouldn't be afraid of looking at that and reimagining what the country could be.

*Vicki Robin*

Right. You point to that the - even though they don't seem to be suffering - the power holders are also sort of aware that there's something off about the fact that they're sitting on a big pile and other people are sitting on a little pile. But you'll deal off the top of your pile, but you won't deal the pile. A big challenge as I see it - and we both have worked in the field of money in philanthropy - the big challenge is this breaking apart, one of the core stories of this continent, which is life, liberty and property. Property; people and that property. I don't mean to go off on a rant but, you know, it's like the Doctrine of Discovery; I plant my stake and this is mine, 40 acres and a mule. And that's a big unquestioned story. So, as you say the swamp is draining and as it drains, we see all that has been in the discarded muck. You drain the pond and you see the rusty cars, you see the mysterious person who disappeared, you see what you have buried. It's an opportunity, but it is not easy. As we crown in this birth canal, you could just say a few things to people who are having the experience of excitement that there's other possibilities - we don't

know what they are - and also terror of the world's falling apart. Just like a little bon-bon sentence to finish up here.

*Peter Buffett*

Well, I think your comment about the wealthy and those in power need to look at their own trauma and vulnerability, is really important. I just want to lift that up that they, our leaders, need a big hug and to talk about what their childhood experiences were. But, I think that the excitement lies certainly in the possibility which is in the opening statement. What I think needs to happen is, we are built for relationship. We should be in relationship. There's another quote I love, "the abstract without the particular allows the demonic" and we are living in a world of abstractions. We are living in... Whether it's job numbers or homelessness numbers or GDP or other; none of us can really relate to those numbers. Those are abstractions. It's allowed us to get here. Now we have a chance to pay attention to the particular; where our food comes from, how our kids are raised, how we make sure our neighbor's okay. Whatever it might be, the particular is the thing. We have a tendency to want to scale up and make everything bigger. But no, this is the time to know your neighbor, to know yourself, to understand what is driving your behavior really. Where does it come from? And what really matters? That's exciting but it's so easy again to go, Well, let's do it big. Let's tell everybody. Let's make it... No, it's block by block, person by person, and that is how we're going to create a different world, is by being in relationship. That will do both things; for the terrified person, they will feel connected. They will see someone that sees them. That will make all the difference in the world. And for the excited person, it will just bring joy, I promise; to reconnect to humanity, what's real, and not the abstractions even with all the conveniences and all the things we think we need, we don't. So to me, it all boils down to connection and reconnection because the story of the last century plus has been disconnection. The only way back is to shift that, is to be in relation again and know your neighbor.

*Vicki Robin*

And everybody has one, everybody, even if it's just a skunk.

*Peter Buffett*

Exactly. Even if it's not a human. To understand, to be in right relation, to see these squirrels running around, and just in the recognition that they know they're squirrels. They don't have all these outward expectations and what they should be or not be. We can learn a lot from nature. Oh, everything, frankly from the natural. It's all there.

*Vicki Robin*

Well, thank you so, so much. I'm really inspired.