

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, and the weeks following the murder of George Floyd. Let's see what today's guest says.

Vicki Robin

Welcome to "What could possibly go right?" and I'm here with Lyla June Johnston. I'll tell you a little bit about her and then we'll go to our question. Welcome, Lyla June.

Lyla June

Thank you so much for having me.

Vicki Robin

Yeah. So Lyla June is a poet, singer, songwriter, hip hop artist, human ecologist, public speaker, community organizer of Diné (Navajo), Tsétsêhéstâhese (Cheyenne) and European lineages. Her dynamic multi-genre performance and speech style has invigorated and inspired audiences across the globe toward personal collective and ecological healing. Her messages focus on indigenous rights, supporting youth, inter-cultural healing, historical trauma and traditional land stewardship practices. She blends her undergraduate studies in Human Ecology at Stanford University, her graduate work in Native American Pedagogy at the University of New Mexico and the indigenous worldview she grew up with to inform her perspectives and solutions. Her internationally acclaimed performances and speeches are conveyed through the medium of prayer, hip hop, poetry, acoustic music and speech. Her personal goal is to grow closer to Creator by learning how to love deeper.

Vicki Robin

So Lyla June, you have a unique seat at this table we set around the question, What could possibly go right? Your lineage at a time when descendants of European settlers are reckoning with slavery and colonialism helps this conversation. Now the pandemic has impacted communities of color far more than whites and the murder of George Floyd has brought whites out of privilege slumber. You can go anywhere with the question but I just want to state the obvious, that you look at these disruptions from an indigenous point of view and may see sprouts of possibility in the mud of this mess that I and we don't see. So over to you, Lyla June. What could possibly go right?

Lyla June

Well, that's a big question, seemingly because our imagination has been so stifled. It's been hard to imagine what the world could be like, when we're so busy fighting what it's like. That's why I really like NDN Collective. They're based out of Rapid City headed by Nick Tilsen, and they have this whole radical imagination fellowship going on, where they're giving grants to native leaders who have a radical imagination to see what is possible. I think as native people we're constantly fighting off what is assaulting us on all fronts. It's when he asked me that question: What do you imagine? What if we win? I just started crying because it's like I realised how little time I ever have to think about that. But there's a lot of different things I could touch on right now. It's hard to choose; different models and examples around the country and across the Mother Earth. But the one I chose today is actually something that I'm trying to get out there more. It's called the Seven Generations New Deal. We created this when I was running for

office in New Mexico. I was running against the Speaker of the House. We were both Democrats, but he was an oil Democrat and corporate Democrat, casino Democrat, Budweiser Democrat. But he played nice on all the right topics to make people think he was progressive. I was in Santa Fe, which is a highly quote-unquote progressive area. So during this time, I wanted to create sort of an indigenous version of the Green New Deal. As we all know, the Green New Deal is a something that was put forward by various progressive candidates like AOC and Bernie Sanders. But what we didn't really like about it was it didn't have very many actionable items. It was more of principles and guidelines and values, which are important; yet we were really looking to that to bring to New Mexico but we couldn't really apply it in a concrete policy legislative way. So this is a seven point plan that we developed and when I say we, I mean myself and a bunch of advisors who are both indigenous and of European descent. It wasn't later until I realised that I really messed up in not having any African American advisors in this, but myself being half white and half Native American, I usually over focus on those two things. So it's still in the works, but I think this could go right. I think if we implemented this, it could go right. So I'll just preface it a bit, and then I'll get into the seven points. Basically, economy is inseparable from ecology. That's the key thing that Western and American society does not understand. They think that you can destroy ecology to help economy. Yes, you can for a time, but only for a time. Then your whole house of cards collapses. And we're finally getting to that point, which to us seems like it's taken a long time. But from a spiritual and a geological timeframe, it's been a blink of an eye. My PhD work focuses on indigenous food systems and we have seen through fossilised pollen evidence that the Shawnee of Kentucky, what we now call Kentucky, maintained a food forest of hickory nut, chestnut, black walnut, acorn, sumpweed, goosefoot, all these edible plant species for 3000 years. That pollen is persistent in the record for 3000 years. America's not even 300 years old and it's already collapsing. So I guess my point with that is that our separation of ecological health and economic health is one of our greatest mistakes. We think that works. It doesn't. The Seven Generations New Deal does not solely focus on economic development, but heavily on ecological development, if you will, because we understand the two are intertwined. It's pretty simple stuff, but for some reason, people just can't, they just don't get it.

Lyla June

Anyways, let's get into the seven points. Interestingly, in addition to... The first point is democracy. I put this as the first point because the more I started working in politics, the more I started realizing that our stranglehold, the corporate stranglehold on politics is a pretty major obstacle for any real change. That includes Citizens United, where corporations are treated as people and therefore can contribute to campaigns in the same way. That includes Super PACs, which are basically loopholes to the campaign finance laws. Campaign finance laws are all about limiting the amount of influence a certain interest can have on a politician; so that when that person gets elected, they're not beholden to Exxon, they're not beholden to Remington, they're not beholden to any number of corporations who, as we all know, their bottom line does not include ecological health. That's why I put this as number one because I felt as though until we get this right - which we can if we understand it clearly enough, and we demand it strongly enough, and we're unified enough - the other points are kind of moot. Anyways, let me read it. It says: The political influence of the oil industry is a threat to our democracy and climate. While this may seem obvious, little has been done to protect the government from corporate control. This is our first point as without this, much work will be futile. Until this is addressed in a serious way, we will continue to live suppressed beneath the thumb of the oilgarchy. We must demand the concrete elimination of campaign contributions from oil, gas and other corporate moguls to political candidates. So that's what could go right. Why don't we go ahead and actually eliminate the ability of oil and gas if we are serious about climate change, which hopefully, I mean, some of us are. Obviously, some of us aren't. But that would be the smartest thing to do right now,

whether or not Republicans agree with it. That is the thing that seven generations down the line, people are going to say, Why didn't they do that? Because until then, all of our policy which drives a lot of what happens in this country, sadly, will be controlled by oil companies. We don't have a president. We think we have a president but really we are governed by oil companies.

Lyla June

The second one is actually indigenous science. This would have been number one for me, but I felt as though unless we got that first one right, we couldn't go forward. But this is the second most important, and I explain it, I should say, we explained it like this. The value systems and conceptual frameworks that got us into this climate crisis will not get us out of it. We need to look to societies with a proven track record of sustainability for solutions. All representatives at every level of government must fight for indigenous led task forces to appropriately compile and integrate indigenous science into our national policies. This might seem pie in the sky, but I don't think it has to be. I think having indigenous-led task forces within our governmental systems is just a step away. We just have to understand that it's possible. The reason we want to bring these folks in is because it turns out, native people aren't primitive, stupid, Earth-loving, spiritual people. Yes for Earth-loving, yes for spiritual, but we're also scientists. The world is actually eating our foods right now. We are the reason people are eating right now corn, potatoes, chocolate, a lot of the staples that are keeping the world going are from indigenous food scientists, who cultivated these things with incredible precision and intention. Food is just one sector. But there's a lot of ways that indigenous science could actually save our butts right now. It would behoove us to create these indigenous led task forces to go and compile those principles and practices, and start bringing them into our governmental policies, the way we interact. Everything from housing to food to water, all of it, de noche tu plan, you know. Mexico City sits on a lake. Those people lived on a lake. They pooped and peed just as much as we do, and they never poisoned it. How did they do that? How did they work with water? So well that they had a huge city on top of a lake prior to Columbus, and they never poisoned the water. Why can't we do that? Are we primitive or something? I think so.

Lyla June

Number three is structurally shifted green economy. So this goes into not just what we create our economy but who owns it. Not just what we create IN our economy, but who owns it. Creating horizontal ownership structures. For example, a 15 square mile solar farm would satisfy New Mexico's electricity needs. 15 square miles of the State of New Mexico would satisfy New Mexico's electricity needs; eliminating the need for nuclear, coal and natural gas. That's a big one for us because New Mexico is plagued with coal and nuclear. Why couldn't current oil industry workers not only build this solar infrastructure but own it too. This is one of many ways we must fight to restore economic power to the most marginalized. Because I come from the Navajo nation, the Diné nation, and we have a lot of coal plants, and our people work in these coal plants and our people work in the fracking fields. Why couldn't these Diné people, these Navajo people, build that solar farm to make the jobs and then own it or co-own it at least? It's not just about recreating the same hierarchical structure with solar farms and wind. We need to actually restructure the entire ownership setup, so that we can share power, share economic power.

Lyla June

So four is ecological restoration. This is really about what I was talking about before. If we can heal the tissues of the earth, the soils; and it's related to the indigenous science taskforce, right? They would be the ones to help us do this, to heal bio remediation, look into hemp remediation, sunflower remediation, all of these fungal remediation, all of these amazing things that Creator

gave us to heal the earth, to heal of soils, the water. Why can't we implement that as part of our carbon strategy? Because as we all know, soil sequesters carbon, forests sequester carbon, life sequesters carbon. If we can help life flourish, we can help balance our earth. One of the actionable items I threw in here was a joint several liability, or retroactive joint and several liability. What that is, is it's actually holding all of the fracking companies accountable, all the way down the ownership chain. This is less of bio remediation and more like suing, which can help with bio remediation, and they can pay for it. But essentially what fracking companies do is they drill a well, they tap it out, and then they sell the crumbs to another company, or a shell company, as in a fake company that isn't even real. Then they also sell along with it all of the risk, cleanup responsibility, all of the liability. You have Exxon just pumping out all the cream of the crop and then ditching and taking the money and running. A retroactive joint and several liability means every single owner of that fracking well is held accountable for the cleanup costs. This is how they dodge cleanup costs. And this has worked in Wyoming, so this is an important thing that we can do right now. Kyle Tisdale, who ran for Congress here in New Mexico, is an expert in that and he is good to talk to as well.

Lyla June

So number five: Equity. As the second greatest carbon emitter in the world, the US is responsible for harm and destruction across the globe. We're the second greatest carbon emitter. I don't know if you've seen those maps where all the countries are resized based on how much carbon they emit. So China's massive, America is massive, and Africa is just this little sliver of a thing. It's like it's almost not even on the map. Why should they bear the brunt of the emissions that these other industrial companies are putting out? So it becomes a question of equity, of why are other people having to pay for our mistakes? If we reframe it that way, from a scientific option to an ethical obligation, then emissions reduction becomes our moral duty. Furthermore, in the process of transforming our economies, people of color and other marginalized groups must be placed in equal places of leadership and community prosperity. So the notion of sacrifice zones, where mostly people of color and poor communities bear the pollution brunt of our energy systems, must be formally condemned and all together abolished. So what that means is, we actually have the ability within our government systems to formally condemn things, and abolish them. What that means is we can actually codify the erasure of sacrifice zones. This touches a very strong chord in my heart because as Diné people, we are a sacrifice zone. Nuclear materials were mined from our reservation by our elders back in the 40s and 50s, and this was to provide for the Cold War. A lot of our elders are dying of cancer, a lot of our water is radioactive. We were forced to mine it from our own sacred mountains just to survive. They economically impoverished us and then used that vulnerability to, you know the story. Then with coal, we've mined a lot of coal out of our reservation, and a lot of fracking and now helium, so it's just a mess. And Reagan officially designated us as an energy sacrifice zone. That needs to be formally condemned and all together abolished; that notion that one people can take the brunt for the rest needs to be abolished.

Lyla June

The sixth point is climate education. This was sort of thinking about the youth. My elder said, Well, if you look at Greta Thunberg, what sparked her passion was education. She learned, she started to understand. So this is how I say it: Everyone deserves to be informed on climate science, indigenous solutions to food and water collapse, alternative worldviews to capitalism, and effective solutions from multicultural perspectives. All elected leaders can and must fight for both Western and indigenous climate science curricula to be made available at all school levels and types. In other words, everyone deserves to be informed, and not just informed from a Eurocentric perspective, but informed from multicultural perspective. Because, and this goes back to the indigenous science piece, we deserve to know how to live on the earth and

Eurocentrism has not given us those answers. They give us some answers. They're good at finding answers, but they're not good at asking the right questions.

Lyla June

So seventh point is systems change. There's a couple actionable items here and the way we explained it was as follows. We need visionary, forward thinking voices that push lawmakers to think completely differently. Our elected leaders must push to, one: Institute legal rights for nature, which has been done in Ecuador and other places, where you can actually represent a river in court, because it has no voice; represent a certain biome or ecosystem where there are living beings who, just because they can't speak English, don't have a voice for some reason. So that's number one. Number two: incorporate the true costs of fossil fuels into state and federal budgets. What that means is, in New Mexico we were horribly dependent on oil revenue, and then the fracking economy collapsed with Coronavirus. I didn't need to run for office after all that; Coronavirus destroyed it for me. When our states are so dependent on oil revenue, and they think that's a good thing, but they're not accounting for the true costs, like New Mexico's going to run out of water within this century. It's going to be a big problem. A lot of people are going to suffer. Why aren't we incorporating that into the true costs of this fracking boom that we're experiencing? We are just so short sighted and that's why it's Seven Generations New Deal. okay? Thirdly, rearrange subsidies to close wealth disparity instead of widen it. Generate policy in conversation with communities instead of above and apart from them; this idea that policy, just like this policy, was made with community members. Undo patriarchy and racism by electing more women, and women of color, and design every governmental decisions such that it is accountable to the next seven generations to come and beyond. Those are some of the systems changes that we can make and they're only a tiny list of many. Thank you for hanging in with me to hear all the different seven points. But that's sort of where life could go right. One last thing I'll just say; this is not finished. Anyone can take this template and completely rewrite it, plagiarise it, I don't care. This is for the people, and anyone can use it and it's meant to be adaptable and helpful to and changeable for other people's contexts.

Vicki Robin

Wow. I appreciate that we went a tad longer than the little limited, in a Western mind, we're going to keep it to a circle that we define. Number one, I'm going to take it. Thanks for doing the hard work. Yeah, the hard labour of...

Lyla June

And it's online. It's sgnd.info.

Vicki Robin

We'll put it in the show notes and everything. So one of the things that I am hearing from this that I just want to sort of underscore -and we don't have time to go into it now, because I think we don't - is they can take everything from us but our values. At the end of the day, we have to stand on what we know is true, even if it seems unimaginable. I love the question of "what if we win", that opens space in this time when - not the leading edge, but just behind the leading edge - people are realizing we're heading into collapse. The systems, the food system, the food supply chains; the tough and getting tougher problem with that is showing us that the systems we live in are fragmenting. We have to have a place to put our minds. Now, on the question of what if dire predictions turn out to be the turning point? If you can't create the idea that something can go right here, you're sort of disenfranchised and disabled. It's not wishing dreaming, hoping; it's taking a stand for that. There is a world beyond the one we're in and this is an audacious stand for that. I just want to reassure you that what you're talking about, the

intersection of ecology, economy and justice for the people, was distinguished in the mid 1980s by the Brundtland Commission report called Our Common Future. They lifted up the idea of sustainable development, which is rapidly captured by the corporations as sustained growth. But this is a conversation that has been in the world, even though it's not realized. I will take that what could possibly go right, is the realization of a long dream. That was the United Nations, the dream was way before. Also, I would like to just challenge the people who are listening to do your seven point plan. Put meat on the bones of your dreams and stand in them because our dreams, our prayers are what we have. I just want to thank you for the time and if you want to have a last word beyond my ramble, then please do.

Lyla June

No, I'm good. Thank you so much. I just hope that people visit the website and please share it. Please get it out there. That was my hope, that even though I didn't win my election, that I could at least bring this out to the world. As you can imagine, the fossil fuel industry squashed me like a little bug because I was actually a viable candidate and they threw the ugly dirty tricks at me in my campaign. It had to end but I hope that this is what lives on.

Vicki Robin

Right. Okay. Thank you so, so much for engaging in the question Lyla June.

Lyla June

Thank you. Have a great day.