

*Vicki Robin*

So welcome to another episode of "What could possibly go right?" where we ask cultural scouts in a variety of fields to put on their headlamps and tell us what they see in the murky future. Normal is over. Next is a mystery. So now what? Today I'm speaking with Rob Hopkins. Rob is a Co-Founder of Transition Town Totnes and Transition Network and the author of "From What Is To What If", "The Power of Just Doing Stuff" and also "The Transition Handbook" and "The Transition Companion". In 2012, he was voted one of the Independent's top 100 environmentalists and was on Nesta and the Observer's list of Britain's 50 New Radicals.

*Vicki Robin*

So Rob, you feel like a brother of another mother. Your book "What If" asks us to feed our imagination, as almost the missing link to the future we want. I want to read you a stanza of a visionary poem I wrote for a turn of the millennium book. The poem is called, "Could we be happy?" This is the last stanza: "We will all have enough. We will all have hope. Even the poor poor who didn't choose to be poor. Our imagination will be on fire with what if, as though no one told us to forget it and fail gracefully. No life will be capped with despair. No child unloved and crying naked and dirty. Even the rich will want to live in such a world who want to come into the street and sing and drink beer. And the guards and the prisoners will tell stories about childhood until they become brothers. And that tight place in our chests where our hearts are in hiding, will soften and melt and we will finally be free." So 20 years later, here we are in time of pandemic, fragility of institutions that support our lives, long overdue racial justice uprising. I'm not asking for visions of what could be but clear seeing of what is right in front of us. I give this to you to go where you will in our 15 uninterrupted minutes of Rob Hopkins. So, Rob, what could possibly go right?

*Rob Hopkins*

Well, the first thing I have to say is I think that I'm ever so jealous that I didn't think of "What could possibly go right?" I just think that's just such a beautiful, beautiful turn of phrase really. My congratulations on and slight envy that you got there first. So I'm delighted with that and delighted to appear on this. So thank you for inviting me. Well, I guess my work for the last couple of years has really been looking at this question of imagination. And that poem you wrote, it's beautiful. Thank you for sharing that. Because it feels to me like it's the missing piece of the puzzle that we just don't talk about very often. I said something in the book like, we understand that if a population doesn't eat a good enough diet, we see a rise in preventable illnesses. We recognize that if a society's education system isn't any good, then it's unable to reach its potential. But it feels like just slightly out of eyeshot over here; this sort of gradual decline, demise of the imagination is going on and nobody's really spotting it or saying anything. And at the time when our survival depends on our ability to fundamentally reimagine and rebuild pretty much everything, given the scale and urgency of the climate crisis, it's the worst possible time to have that. I just was reading this today, a book called *Climate Leviathan*. How do you say that word, *Leviathan*? By Joel Wainwright and Geoff Mann, and there's a little bit where they say: The political problems we face cannot be fixed by simply delivering science to the masses. If good climate data and models were all that we needed to address climate change, we would have seen a political response in the 1980s. Our challenge is closer to a crisis of imagination and ideology. People do not change their conception of the world, just because they are presented with new data. And I found myself, I kept reading people like Naomi Klein and Bill McKibben; this phrase kept coming up all the time. Climate change is a failure of the imagination. It really got under my skin and stayed with me, this question of, Why are we having a failure of imagination this particular time? I've come to think that actually what we have created in the last 30 years or so has been kind of a perfect storm of conditions that are reducing our imagination. We know that trauma and anxiety and stress and loneliness and

isolation and colonization and systemic racism and social exclusion can cause the imagination to shrink. That trauma affects the part of the brain where our imagination fires from and causes it to shrink. It's this sort of terrifying concept to me, that we're entering this time when we fundamentally have to be able to reimagine everything, and we're just not up to it. I guess for me, what I've seen during COVID has been... There's a thing that myself and a guy called Rob Shorten worked on; he was a lodger of mine, and he was studying at Schumacher College, and he did his dissertation about the book that I was writing. He got an early manuscript of it, and together we created this thing we called the imagination sundial, which we published last week online, which was an attempt to try to nail down: What are the conditions that we need to create in order for the human imagination to re-emerge? How do we create those conditions because we really, really need to, really, really urgently? The first one of those is space. Imagination fundamentally needs space. None of us come up with our most imaginative ideas when we're sitting in front of our laptop with a deadline at eight o'clock that night. Albert Einstein always said his best ideas came when he rode his bike through a forest. So one of the things that COVID has given us is space. Not all of us, but a lot of us who've been dashing around like lunatics for ages have had a pause. What we saw during that time was this incredible sort of flowering of imaginative stuff. People dressing up as old masters paintings and doing incredible dance routines and playing elaborate tricks on their neighbors and all kinds of extraordinary stuff, really amazing things.

There's an exercise I always do when I do talks, where I say: "I brought my time machine. We're going to do a bit of time travel." And we turn on this time machine. We traveled forward to 2030. It's not a utopia, but it's a 2030 where everything we could possibly have done between now and then was done. I've done this with groups of 15 people, and I've done it in a hall with 1500 people. It's all pretty much always the same people. The main things are: The birdsong is louder. There are more insects. The air smells really clean. There are a lot less cars. There's a really strong sense of collective purpose. And I can see more food gardens. That's pretty much the top six everywhere I do it. Usually up until a few months ago, we do that exercise, then people would walk home going, Yeah, that was really nice, but that's never gonna happen in my lifetime. That's what it's been like for the last couple of months in so many people's lives. People who live under aeroplane flight paths who thought, Am I ever going to see the day when there isn't a plane going over our house every minute? And sending me emails going, It's just amazing. You know? So I feel like actually what COVID has done is it's given our imagination some space to think about things in a different way. And they're really interesting opinion polls; there was an opinion poll the other day in the UK that said only 12% of people want things to go back to how they were before. You see the same opinion polls in France; you've just seen this massive green surge in the local elections all across France and a lot of that narrative was about bounce forward to something better. What I'm looking at in terms of COVID is how we now put... if we've seen during COVID this kind of breathing in of the imagination; this sort of, Ah, some space for it finally! And people starting to look around and so many people using that time to start a food garden. The amount of people I know who are growing food for the first time this year, the number of people who... the sales of bicycles, bicycle shops nearly ran out of bicycles in parts of the UK. All of that is a kind of collective [breath]. And actually what we see, certainly in the UK at least, not same in other places but in the UK with our utterly imagination-bereft government, is the only thing they can think of is we have to go back to doing things how they were before. But they're completely out of step with where most people are at. According to the polls, people are wanting something really different. You see in other countries now where mayors, and actually even here, mayors of cities are saying, Well, we've got really used to not having so many cars, we're going to keep it like that. Milan are putting in 22 miles of new bike paths; this idea of taking back streets. Then again, you see when communities experience taking back streets from traffic, we would be led to believe that when you get the cars out of the

street, what happens is it fills up with weeds, and kind of tumbleweed blowing past. Actually what happens is it fills up with children playing, with conversation, with people hanging out, with games, people doing stuff together. So my sense is that that actually what this time has given us is space to breathe, to stretch our imagination. I always like to talk about how the part of the brain the imagination fires from is called the hippocampus. I always say to people, We need to be able to turn our cities into being a campus for the hippocampus. I feel like that's what we've had. The question is the degree to which we can hang on to it and we can build off it. So many of the things that we've been talking about in transition for so long and putting in place for so long, I feel like a lot of those arguments are much easier than they were before. The idea that we need to build really resilient local food networks have usually been debates that have been the kind of terrain of the progressive left, I guess mostly. I think when we emerge from this and people have really got a sense of the panic-buying and the lack of food resilience during this time, that actually there will be a big... it'll be much easier to do a lot of that stuff. So I feel like we're emerging into a time where a lot of the stuff that we've talked about in transition and kind of modeled in Transition and other movements around local food and the kind of things you're talking about, will be much easier. I feel like a lot of people, myself included, I don't feel like I emerge from the lockdown as the same person I went in as, actually. It's been quite a profound extraordinary thing actually, having that space and that room to breathe. Then as you mentioned, the Black Lives Matter revolution happening in the middle of it, and that kind of commitment to say, I need to do this work as a white person of privilege. I need to do this work and I need to do the reading and I need to speak to people and I need to watch the right things. That's been a really profound sort of exercise as well. I feel like, yeah, I feel like I emerged from this a very different person that I went into it as actually. I feel like a lot of people feel that and a lot of people who I'm in touch with a really feeling a sense of now we need to scale these things up. But then don't we always feel like that? I don't know. Am I just talking and talking? Am I talking too long?

*Vicki Robin*

That was your assignment, to talk and talk and talk! If you want to take a pause, I could ask a question.

*Rob Hopkins*

Go on, ask me a question or I'll just...

*Vicki Robin*

Yeah, so I feel the same. I've been noticing that for all my griping about the loss of street life... I mean, my creativity goes up exponentially in conversation. It's just like, the loss of my dance community and you know, it's just like I've been griping. I have a lot of frightened friends who don't want me to or aren't willing to do what I want to do. But I've noticed for myself that there is a deepening of soul that is sort of longed for but never had space. So I would say that for myself; that it's something like that. So would you put some words on, what are you noticing in you that is different?

*Rob Hopkins*

I'm definitely noticing that I have a limit beyond which Zoom just really starts to do my head in, which I think a lot of people have. One of the things to me is, I went to art school when I was eighteen and then my life has just been so mad, I've not really had space to really practice. And one of the things during this time has really been, I've taken the time to go out and draw and make prints and do stuff and that's been so delicious to reconnect with that practice again, as much as anything because for me when you go out and draw, that's attention. We live in a time

where our attention spans are just so shot to bits and so distracted in many directions. When you're sitting in front of something and drawing it for two or three hours, your attention is there and that's just absolutely delicious. I think I feel like, there are people around me in the town where I live who have this whole idea that somehow COVID has all been kind of some horrendous conspiracy and all this rubbish. I feel like actually, it has been the most phenomenal global act of love and solidarity certainly in my lifetime; possibly in history actually, outside of wartime, I guess. The fact that billions of people were prepared to stay home and shut their social lives down, in order to take care of each other is extraordinary. One of the things I read during this time was Rutger Bregman's new book *Humankind*, where he forensically challenges that myth that human beings are fundamentally selfish and destructive and awful; and picks all of that science to bits and says, No, actually what the science says is that we are fundamentally decent and we look after each other and we care for each other. The problem is the power structures that we build. Actually in my town, I noticed an incredible flowering of people, even when I'm walking my street, in my neighborhood, in my town. People really are setting up these incredible networks, and some of those laid really beautifully on top of networks that we built during the Transition Movement for the last 10, 12, 15 years; some of the food stuff, the Transition Street stuff that we did. Many of those networks then just turned into kind of COVID-19 support networks. So I leave it thinking - well, if we leave it, I don't know, it's lifting slowly, but it may well just come back again - with a sense that belief has underpinned the Transition Movement from the beginning, that any solutions will start with us, and they will start with communities, and they will start with people working together, and they will start with a sense of solidarity and mutual support; was really a good hunch, actually. And that actually we've seen during this crisis that that really has come into its own, I think. I've felt, although I haven't seen a lot of people in person, and anybody who knows my town of Totnes will know that actually the idea of Totnes without people hugging has been a very, very strange thing that I never imagined I would ever see.

I feel like now the key piece is going to be the "what comes after it" is going to be a lot more challenging, because what comes after it is going to be possibly the worst recession since the 1930s. Possibly worse than the 1930s, particularly here because it's going to be on top of Brexit, which was a complete car crash to start with, and we're going to see huge levels of unemployment. Actually, this idea that people need to be able to imagine something else, it's just this is so totally the moment to be having those conversations and they're starting to happen in places, but it's just not happening quickly enough. It's the storytelling piece and the pointing to the good examples and the opening up those what I think of as "what if" spaces where people can come together to think about how we can do this differently; because we can't just keep going back to how we did things before, because it's just broken and you just can't keep going round and round trying to make this thing work. It needs fresh thinking, it needs new ideas. Those are there, but we just have to really scale that thing up and work more closely with other networks and other people. I always try to challenge the thing that I see sometimes in transition and in permaculture movements and stuff where people somehow imagine that it's a great act of solidarity and achievement for the Permaculture Transition Movement to make an alliance with the Eco Village Network or something. It's like, Really? That's not really a great, you know. Actually, how are you building networks to communities of color and sort of right-wing organizations and where's the common ground with them with our conservative neighbors? How do we find that ground? How do we find that language? That's the really juicy bit for me. And that again really involves us being able to ask what if and to think beyond what's in front of us.

*Vicki Robin*

Wow, that was perfect. Perfect windup. Yeah, when you talked about - I'm going to add one thing - when you talked about the coming economic, the sort of current actually; what do they

say, the collapse is happening, it's just unevenly distributed? What came to me is that if the neoliberal project is sort of the gum; the barriers to being decent human beings, it's like we want to be decent, but we're in structures that really prevent us. Perhaps mutual aid is going to be necessary and maybe one of the bottom up things that we discover that we eventually don't want to let go of.

*Rob Hopkins*

Yeah, because part of that is that we see, governments tend to view communities organizing and doing stuff as something really fundamentally distrustful and strange and not a good thing; until there's a big big crisis, like Hurricane Sandy or a pandemic, and then they go, Oh, isn't it marvellous how communities rally around each other in these times. Boris Johnson about two weeks into COVID said, Actually, there is such a thing as society. It's like, well, we all knew that, sunshine! And the fact that you didn't tells us so much about your political why you do what you do. So for me, the thing is though, that we imagined that communities do all that stuff happily trotting out as volunteers and they just do it all; and government never thinks, We need to support this and resource this. But for me, the thing is, as community groups - and I know, I meet hundreds of community groups going around meeting Transition groups all over the place - they do a lot of stuff and they do it with pretty much no resource, and they do it while they're also raising their families and holding a job down and caring for their parents or whatever it is. These movements and these things need proper support and resource. I think one of the things that I hope is that we emerge out of this with government saying, We need to properly support communities; because it's a much more effective way of allocating money to making things happen in communities, because it has so many other spin off benefits and you can look at it as being also a public health strategy and a mental health strategy and a social cohesion strategy. Fund the community organizations to do stuff and the benefits will just be enormous. It will put in place so much more resilience for when something like this happens again.

*Vicki Robin*

Wow. Well, so many direct and indirect calls to action here. That's what I feel. It's just like you created all these sort of tracks in the imagination for where we could step next. Any one of these, stepping next into any of these paths, at least will be fun and feed the hippocampus at the very least; possibly make a huge difference. Thank you so much, Rob, for taking the time, for your very clear and honest reflections. I appreciate it.

*Rob Hopkins*

Thank you. My pleasure. And thank you for coming up with "What could possibly go right?" I'll try and drop that into a couple of talks in the future.