

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

*Vicki Robin*

Hi, we're here again with "What could possibly go right?" and I'm here today with Carolyn Raffensperger, whom I admire immensely and I'm glad Carolyn's here. I'm going to do a little bio. Carolyn Raffensperger is an MA and a JD and Executive Director of the Science and Environmental Health Network. As an environmental lawyer, she specializes in the fundamental changes in law and policy necessary for the protection and restoration of public health and the environment. She's at the forefront of developing new models for government that depend on these larger ideas of precaution and ecological integrity. Carolyn, thinking about talking to you today, that Christopher Fry poem came to mind, and you don't have to address it. I just want to say: "Thank God our time is now when wrong comes up to meet us everywhere, never to leave us till we take the longest stride of soul we ever took. Affairs are now soul size." When I think of you, I think of somebody who sort of is a soul sized being in the affairs of the world, really with a very holistic perspective. So very eager to hear your reflections on our question of "What could possibly go right?"

*Carolyn Raffensperger*

Oh, well, in our earlier conversations, we've talked a little bit about some of the work that I've done and the moment that we're in with the pandemic, and with the ugly wounds of racism having been exposed for all the world to see, reminds me of, in part, why I got into the work that I do early on. I'm going to tell a little story of my father who is a surgeon and he's a pediatric surgeon and worked in Chicago, at the large public hospital in Chicago. He came home one day and said that there was a large increase in certain kinds of childhood tumors and birth defects. He's the world's expert on many of those. He said that the environment had caused those problems that he was seeing, and they were increasing. Now, having grown up in a religious household, the problem of pain and why there's suffering in the world is related to God, and can God prevent it, and all of that; but this looked like it was preventable suffering. I asked my dad why he didn't do something about it? And he said that he couldn't prove it. From that moment on, I dedicated a lot of my energy to figuring out what we could do to prevent suffering and the work that I've done on the "precautionary principle", this idea that you take action in the face of scientific uncertainty and the likelihood of harm, seemed like it was absolutely quintessentially preventing suffering. So we might not be able to prove exact cause and effect for how toxic chemicals were going to cause birth defects or childhood tumors. We could not prove exact cause and effect of what was going to happen with climate change. But we knew bad things were going to happen. A lot of the work that I've done is in public health, knowing that some of these are very slow moving disasters. Toxic chemicals, climate change, are relatively slow moving disasters, until they're not. The kinds of pandemics that we see that are related to the environment are surprising, but should not have been. The work that I've been involved in for a long time was involving governments of all sizes and shapes, working with the City of San Francisco and County of San Francisco, California, EPA, various governments across the country and around the world, on this idea of the precautionary principle, since it made sense that if government was responsible, as the fiduciary for these things that we share and for public health - it has a fiduciary duty to the public to care for public health - then it seemed like the precautionary principle was the tool that they needed to fulfill that duty. Everywhere I went,

government agencies and the people who work for them would often cry when I would talk about the precautionary principle and not be allowed to carry it out. The reason was that they had to balance competing interests. What that meant was they could not get in the way of the economy and if there was any other way they could do something; that meant that we would sacrifice children's lives, we would sacrifice children's brains, we would allow some breast cancer that was preventable, we would ignore racism and problems that disproportionately affected communities that had already suffered the brunt of environmental problems of racism, of poverty. And just too bad. Why was that? So I set out to answer that question and began looking at why government was making really bad choices, choices that looked evil, pathological on their face.

*Carolyn Raffensperger*

So I'll tell you one. I've been working on pipelines forever, so a lot of you may know about the Dakota Access Pipeline and Standing Rock. I was a lawyer up at Standing Rock off and on for that whole summer of 2016. The month of August, I was there. They rerouted that crude oil pipeline from near Bismarck, which was primarily a white community and moved it just north of the Standing Rock Reservation full of indigenous people; threatened the water of the indigenous community, but not the white community. Another one. Pipeline that's going through Minnesota. They put in the state environmental impact statement that that pipeline, especially during the construction, would increase sex trafficking, especially among the indigenous community - and they approved it. Enbridge Line 3, carrying tar sands from Canada through Minnesota and the wild rice beds. They knew posed a risk to the indigenous food supply of wild rice and they knew it would increase sex trafficking, according to the state's own documents, and they approved it anyway. I think that what the pandemic has shown is that decisions that government make, that are pathological, that do not protect the public health, the well-being of people, and all people; that those have to stop. What I see in this remarkable moment, is that we have an opportunity to rethink how we're going to govern from the bottom up. All this work that's been done on police, on prisons, on the environment, on climate and fossil fuels; we get to rethink all of that. So it feels to me like a year of jubilee, that we're going to forgive the debts. We have the opportunity to forgive debts, to rethink that. There are some debts that should not be forgiven. Our debt to our black brothers and sisters should not be forgiven without some reparations, but the debts that we have forced them to incur by dint - it was not by virtue, but by dint - of really bad policies that increased suffering. Seems to me we get to rethink those. We know the healthcare system is a complete mess. We know that our public health system which is really different; we've made healthcare basically an individual matter rather than realizing that we are all connected. So we know that our energy system's falling apart, fossil fuels, and that's a good thing. Fossil fuels can just go, bye-bye. We're not going to miss them. We've got lots of other ways of living out our world. We know that our justice system is fundamentally broken now, and we get to rethink that. That is a wonderful opportunity and what I know is that my fellow activists across so many spheres have been doing very important work on these over a long period of time. So we have this bank of wonderful solutions and the trick is going to be, what we get to do now, is to have the cross conversations. That's what I see happening; racism and the environment. We're getting to have conversations about how prisons and environmentalists... the whole prison industrial complex just stole some of our natural areas and then were put in communities that, if that was the only job source that we could provide for some communities, we've got to think through this again, got to use a lot more imagination. It's these cross-cutting issues now that we've never ever had. Well, maybe we've had; I think people have been working at it, but now they're broken open, like the chocolate egg. We get to see some of the magic and sweetness inside.

*Vicki Robin*

Yeah, that's an amazing frame to call this a jubilee moment. What percent do you think is that aspirational, and what do you think is actually... Where do you see that happening right now? Just even more specifics about, are there intersections? Where do you see the intersectionality happening right now that surprises you?

*Carolyn Raffensperger*

I think that the overarching frame of racism has shifted our picture. I have an amazing painting of Frida Kahlo. Until it had a frame around it, you couldn't see her. It was very ornate, and you could not see her until there was a frame. And I think that what happened with George Floyd's death is that all of the dots, all of a sudden coalesced into a coherent picture. Then the list of birders, black birders, trended on Twitter. So we saw the extraordinary talent and gifts of black people who were doing these amazing things in nature, who are ornithologists and studying birds. We saw theater. We saw how race based theater was. There were just these endless conversations where the frame shifted how we looked at almost every single issue. I think that as we begin to look at how we have built this whole government, this whole system on economics, and the kind of capitalism, and how it's interlaced with racism, and how that economic system then impacts the environment and how we would sacrifice public health - all of those children's brains and breast cancer and asthma - and all those other things that have an environmental component, and completely saw them as individual ideas until this frame came up. We are beginning to put together government, race and economics, and all of the things that flow from those. So I think it's a very exciting time for people who've been working on solutions, detail by detail by detail. University basic income now is a real life possibility. What would that do for that economic system and the conversations around race? We would rethink debt, we would rethink a whole lot of things. So I think it's going to spark new conversations that go in multiple directions and then create a whole new picture. One thing I've been working on for the last two years is to examine state budgets under two theories of government. If one theory of government is that the State of Iowa is only supposed to grow the economy, then you're going to throw money at Apple. You're going to throw money at Google. You're going to give them tax incentives. You're going to give them tax credits. You're going to do all of these things. So just parenthetically, we are defunding the public universities in Iowa, and giving tax credits and even writing checks to businesses like Apple when they do research. We are supporting private research that will make those companies richer. So if your theory of government is the government's main job is to grow the economy, you are not going to support things like universal basic income. You are not going to support public education for anything other than creating people who are a little cogs in that machine. You are not going to support public health. You are going to have everybody funneled off into the individual healthcare system. But if your view of government is that it is to take care of all the things that we share - roads, libraries, parks, public health - be central, then you're going to have a different budget. You're going to have - and money is how governments do things - so if you construct a budget where you're going to primarily support economic growth, you're going to defund all the things that contribute to well-being. In the end, the reason that people weren't going to adopt the precautionary principle at California EPA (they did in part) or US EPA, is because they're not going to get in the way of industry and business. But if we rethink what government is for, and this is the perfect opportunity to do it, to say: a goal, the goal, a primary goal of government is to promote the well-being of its people. It is to prevent the preventable suffering. That as a first order of business, that is what we're going to do; how different things would flow? Would we have the kind of violence-base militarized police that we now have? Would we primarily invest public dollars in private corporations to make vaccines that people don't trust, because of that one way flow of money? Is that really how we would do it? And so this time period is a time to step back and ask much bigger questions. I'm watching allies and friends in climate, in public health, the folks who are working on poverty. They said poverty is optional; it's a choice that we made. We

don't have to have poverty. Those cross conversations now are going to result in incredibly juicy solutions.

*Vicki Robin*

I can just hear people who've listened to you carefully, start every testimony at city, county and state level around any issue: "The role of government is the well being of the people and preventing preventable harm. Now that we've established that, here's my testimony." It's like you set a different frame and I love what you said about racism; the fact that this racist issue, the stain on our soul, has come to the fore. It's like the missing piece that would not allow us to focus on what's really going on because as soon as you focus, you see something you don't want to see. So I love this image of the Frida Kahlo frame. The frame of racism has actually brought so much else into focus, and made it possible to look at it squarely and to recognize that you can make a different story. It's ours to do. It's almost like once you once you repent, if you will; once you recognize, Oh my god, I knew better and I didn't do better. But now I see what I did and I can see that I can do better. That basically change of heart and mind, the release, actually the forgiving of the debt that you carry inside yourself for your own blindness, willful blindness; it's just very interesting the intersection of the things that you're bringing. This is going to have to be a wrap, but I just really recommend people follow your work. Also this quick, you glanced over the precautionary principle. But I think people really need to understand what that principle is. So give us one minute on where did that idea come from? Was that a label that you formed? What specifically is the sentence that describes it? Then we'll have to close.

*Carolyn Raffensperger*

The precautionary principle stands for the idea that you take action to prevent harm, even in the face of scientific uncertainty. There are ways to do it. You set goals: What kind of world do we want to live in? Do we want to keep increasing incarceration? Do we want to increase breast cancer? When you watch those trend lines, you set a goal to reverse those. Then you figure out ways to meet them. You look for all the alternatives, alternative ways to solve a problem and meet your goals. You reverse the burden of proof. Why is it that we allow the fossil fuel industry to make claims? The burden should be on them, that they cannot add to the cumulative impacts in an already disenfranchised community. We need a complete democratic participation. One of the things that they didn't mention is that we have to have government with the free prior and informed consent, and this is community right of consent. The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People say that that indigenous people have the right of free prior and informed consent before something happens to affect their future. As part of the precautionary principle, the community knows best about how to prevent the kind of harm that we've been seeing.

*Vicki Robin*

Perfect. Wow. Thank you so much, Carolyn.