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, this is Vicki and I'm here with Heather Cox Richardson for another episode of What Could Possibly Go Right? Here's a little bio on Heather. I will say, I am a fan girl. I love Heather's work and it really serves me. Heather Cox Richardson is Professor of History at Boston College and an expert on American political and economic history. She's the author of six books on American politics and is a national commentator on American political history and the Republican Party. She is also a leading Twitterstorian, explaining the historical background of modern political issues through Twitter threads; co-editor of We're History, a web magazine of popular history; and the author of Letters from an American, a chronicle of the Trump presidency since the Ukraine scandal broke. Her work has appeared in The Guardian, The Washington Post, The New York Times and Chicago Tribune.

Vicki Robin
Welcome, Heather. I will say, from the blog Letters from an American, I picked this up: "Historians are fond of saying that the past doesn't repeat itself; it rhymes. To understand the present, we have to understand how we got here. That's what this newsletter comes in. This is a chronicle of today's political landscape, but because you can't get a grip on today's politics without an outline of America's Constitution and laws and economy and social customs, this newsletter explores what it means, and what it has meant, to be an American." I love that, the past doesn't repeat itself; it rhymes. In your work, I've been reading your books, and I see that you have a deep interest in something that has perplexed me and I've pondered, which is the impossible con of this country. This phrase with liberty and justice for all, it's a con, it is not a solvable equation. So, in this moment when the pandemic continues to burn through American society, and our racial and colonial sins are being revealed, I wonder what you see emerging this moment? What sparks a possibility you can reveal to us. It can be anything; a person, a group, politics, a spirit of fulcrum. I am sure you will surprise us with your answer to what could possibly go right?

Heather Cox Richardson
Well, I may not surprise you with my answer, although I'm very happy to have the opportunity to talk about this, Vicki, so thank you for having me on. People say to me all the time nowadays, "How do you keep your spirits up when you look at how just how terrible things are around us?" My answer to that is that my spirits are the best that they have been probably in my lifetime studying American politics and the economy because what is happening now is simply what has been happening for the past 30 years, at least, but on steroids. What always was really troubling to me was that it seemed that nobody was paying attention; that the more you tried to call people's attention to things like signing statements under George W. Bush - They were started, of course, during Reagan, the way they're being used today and they really went crazy under George W. Bush - People sort of didn't pay attention and people like me kept calling attention to that and saying, Look, we're in trouble, and not really getting any traction. Now all of a sudden, people are paying attention and saying, Look at what's happening around us. We have to regain control of American democracy. So first of all, I'm cheerful about the fact people are paying
attention. But what does this mean in this moment? What do I see that may be something to look forward to and a big change for what could come out of this really traumatic, profoundly traumatic moment in America? I see a lot of good things. First of all, the thing that jumps out at me first is that Americans understand now that Democracy is not a spectator sport. They have really been on autopilot for quite a while now and now all of a sudden, they're waking up and saying, Wait a minute, this is not the government I want to live under. This is not the society in which I want to live. I need to do something, I personally need to do something to change that. Whether that means calling my senators, whether it means running for office, whether it means being in the streets, whether it means talking to my crazy neighbor and saying it's not acceptable for you to use that terminology in my home. All of those things are now in people's regular lives in a way that they haven't been in my lifetime anyway. That, first of all, I see is a really big positive change. We also have the fact that Americans are beginning to be able to understand rhetoric, political rhetoric and political lies. We've had a problem now since at least the 1980s that a major political party has built its support not on fact-based arguments but rather on a narrative, on a narrative that separated us and them, and very clearly said that "us" tended to be heteronormative white males and "them" was people of color and women who wanted the government to equalize the playing field in America, to make the playing field level. Somehow that desire for equality of opportunity and equality of access to resources turned into, in this narrative, turned into being a special interest that was advocating in some form, socialism or communism, because what you wanted was a redistribution of wealth. Those are all themes that have been played on very hard since the 1980s and it really warped our political discourse. Now finally, with the extraordinary disinformation coming out of the current administration, increasingly media is calling those tropes out as lies and regular Americans are looking at their news and saying, Wait a minute. Where are the facts behind this? on both the right and the left, and the return to an enlightenment-based fact-based reality seems to me to be key to everything else. That's what's going on in politics. That's what I think is something that this moment might springboard into in our American political system. There's something much larger behind this and this political change and that, to me, is that we are looking either at the triumph of what I call a toxic individualism - but I actually don't think we'll go that way - we're looking at the rejection of a toxic individualism. People talk about toxic masculinity, but I think the issue is much bigger than that and that is the political discourse really since the 1980s. It has its roots in the 1950s on the idea that what it means to be an American is to be sort of a cowboy; to be a man out there taking care of his wife and children, dominating his wife and children, being caring for them but also dominating them. A world in which that individualism rejects the idea of community based government that levels the playing field, that makes sure that women can compete in America as equals to men, not as wives and mothers; to make sure that people of color can be included in American society, not as people who are tolerated, but rather as equals and who belong here just as much as anybody else does. That reimagining of what it means to be an American - not the cowboy individualism that was championed by Barry Goldwater and then by Ronald Reagan, and then by George W. Bush, and now increasingly by the people in charge who insist that what it means to be an American is for government really to enable businessmen to do whatever they want and to direct the lives and the economy of everybody else - the rejection of that and the replacement of it with something new is to me profoundly exciting, because when you think of what that something new might be, as people of color and as women and as people who have previously felt dis-included in the American political system, at least since the 1980s might construct, it's a wide-open world. And what might that look like? I look at the advertisements that came out in 2018 for House races especially, but for House and Senate races - videos that came out from people like Stacey Abrams in Georgia or Amy McGrath in Kentucky, but there were a lot of them - that focused on people who want to use the government to protect community, to make sure that everybody had education and then everybody had food, and that we treated our natural resources fairly and that we protected the
environment. Rather than being a world looks somewhat like the progressives of the 1930s in the 1940s, who again looked at a heteronormative nuclear family as the centerpiece of America, we have younger people and people of color and women looking at America as being much more community-centered, not necessarily based in a nuclear family, but in a community. What might come out of that seems to me to be a very different kind of interpretation of what it means to be an American, and one that I think will take us more successfully into the 21st and 22nd centuries, than the ones that have proved so powerful in the 19th and 20th. When I look at this moment, and what might come out of it, I see a reworking of the American Dream, if you will, to be a real American Dream for everybody, not just for a really small segment of the population. That actually is what keeps me going on the very late nights that I've been living lately.

_Vicki Robin_

Yeah, it's interesting because we connected through somebody that I worked with on the Center for a New American Dream, and that was about consumerism and simplicity and frugality, etc. So what you're saying is that the American Dream has been hijacked by a narrative that says the American Dream is, this is a place where anyone can get rich to an American Dream... How would you articulate the American Dream that you see as shimmering possibility in this moment? What would you say that is?

_Heather Cox Richardson_

Well, traditionally, the American Dream in the early republic was the idea that any man could rise. Initially, of course, they meant white men, not indigenous people, not men of color, that anybody could rise because of the extraordinary resources on this continent that they would permit people to apply their labor to those resources and produce more than they could consume. As they did that, they would accumulate capital. In fact, early political economists in the first half of the 19th century actually referred to capital as pre-exerted labor. After the Civil War, that American Dream moves West and becomes the idea of the cowboy, really a man again who theoretically doesn't want any interference from the federal government, but who can work his way up just through hard work. But the key to the reconstruction American Dream was that that cowboy was going to dominate people of color and that women really weren't part of that. Before the war, women were acting as the wives to those farmers who are working their way up. After the Civil War, the cowboy really doesn't have a lot of women, unless they're the women who live above the saloons in the town, or there's somehow a wife and mother who's off screen. You think about Frederick Jackson Turner's great frontier in American history, there are no women in that book. He talks about communities but they're no women. I'm sorry, it's not a book. It's a lecture, it's an article. But that American Dream that is really limited to men, and sometimes inclusive of men of color, really doesn't address the inclusion in the American Dream of women as equals, or people of color at all. For the 21st century, I don't think that works any longer. I think this moment where we recognize, because of the pandemic and because of the extraordinary excesses of the Trump administration, just how limited that heteronormative white male vision is, is a moment when a lot of people, a majority of American people, look at that cowboy American Dream or even the farmer American Dream of the early 19th century and say, “Wait a minute. Where am I in this dream? I'm as equal as as any white man. I'm producing for the society. I'm part of America. I live here. My people come from here. Let's rewrite that American Dream to include people like me.” And we have the majority.

_Vicki Robin_

Right. The face of America is - and maybe that's part of the struggle right now - is that the face of America, the actual face of the emerging America, is a very different face from the face of the cowboy or farmer America; white male America. It's a very different place. So, do you feel this is
a fulcrum moment? Like it could teeter one direction or another? Or do you feel like there's sort of a destiny that's being realized through the traumatic rupture of this moment? You know what I mean? Are we hanging by a hair or are we living into something that we have to commit ourselves to but that is a table that's set for us?

Heather Cox Richardson
I call it a knife-edge. There is no doubt that America is walking a knife-edge in which we could slide to one side and become, at least in the short term, a full-fledged fascist state. We could go the other way too. And one of the things that I always talk about when I talk about the future - and of course, historians are prophets of the past, not of the future - we get to choose. That's the beauty of a democratic system, is that we get to choose which direction we're going to go. We've really let this go far too much in one direction, at least over the last 20-30 years. It's going to be hard to regain an America that responds to all of its people, but we can do it. When we do that, you said how different the face would be. I think it's interesting to people who have lived in America for the last generation, your generation and my generation, that view of what America is has changed. To me, it's so much more interesting and so much more exciting. You look at the pictures that are emanating from the Trump administration of a whole bunch of older white men and I just sit there and look at them and think, What dull conversations you must have? You've left three-quarters of the brains in the country out of the picture, and you're all just reinforcing each other. Where's the innovation? Where's the novelty? Where are the good new ideas and the bad new ideas? When I say that, interestingly enough, I'm harking back to Abraham Lincoln. So this is not some 21st century middle-aged woman saying, Let's do everything new and progressive. No, this is exactly what Abraham Lincoln said, when he said, You don't want to have an America that responds only to a few rich guys at the top. Because they're going to concentrate wealth and concentrate power and they won't innovate. They will increasingly reinforce their own views of the world and the country will stagnate. What you really want to do, Abraham Lincoln said in 1859 in a very famous speech in Wisconsin, is you want to make sure that the government supports people at the bottom because they're the innovators. They're the ones who are going to move America forward and come up with the ideas that nobody else could. They're the hard workers. That's where we want to put our energy. So when I talk about how exciting it is to see a country that has new music and new languages and new skin colors, what I'm saying is really that's what traditional Americanism has looked like since the 1850s. That would be a very nice tradition for us to reinvigorate in the modern era.

Vicki Robin
Wow. So Lincoln gave that speech before the Civil War. It was an affirmation of really the soul of this nation; like how this experiment was going to continue. But it took a lot of work to realize that. So, do you see that we have a lot of hard work ahead of us? I guess is what you're saying is it's political work, but really this nose to the grindstone time if we want to tip it, tip off the knife-edge in that more holistic direction?

Heather Cox Richardson
Well, I would go back a step and say that I don't think Lincoln's vision was ever fully enacted. I've written a lot about why that's the case, that vision of equality, of opportunity for everybody and equality of access to resources for everybody really has never gone fully into our legal system or into our society or into our economy. That doesn't say that it can't. That's I think the moment we're in right now, but as you say, it's not going to happen overnight, and it's not going to happen because some president does an executive order. It's going to come about because we rebuild our society along more just lines and along fairer lines. That's going to mean a lot of
people lose some things that they thought were their right. But in the long term - and not even in long term, we leave it in the very, very medium term - the riches that that will bring to our society far outweighs any losses that anybody might feel. I just think we have to reframe the question and reframe it as what should America stand for? And how does society best move forward? Does it move forward best when you let a few small, a few people that are very wealthy, very well connected, very well educated, direct the society for the rest of us? Some people believe that, that's an old ideology in Western society that ran countries for generations. Do you believe that? Or do you believe that you're better off putting your resources and your influence from people at the bottom; people who are working hard and innovating? And spread out opportunity to more people. That's what Abraham Lincoln was arguing. He's really the first to articulate that as an American principle. It's one that I believe that, if we really want to innovate and to change the world, we want to make sure the government responds to people at the bottom, not to people at the top, because that's how societies best move forward; sort of by crowdsourcing the government and society more than by saying, we'll pick two or three people and trust them to do what's right.

Vicki Robin
Totally, what a wind up. That's so affirming without at all pampering my desire to be safe and secure. I mean, I'm already noticing I have to move aside. Who am I has to move aside to create room for this bubbling up for the novelty and innovation that comes from the margins. That's what's gonna make us again.

Heather Cox Richardson
Isn't it exciting? So yes, you look at this and we've got new artists and new music and new thoughts. Do you like them all? Of course not. But what an exciting time to live as you watch us, and primarily people younger than us, re-envisioning not only the country but the world. I feel extraordinary privilege to be living in this society, in this time. I just wish I were younger, so I would be one of the builders and not one of the observers but it is what it is.

Vicki Robin
It is what it is. Thank you so so much. This is just amazing. I really appreciate it, Heather.

Heather Cox Richardson
Well, thanks for having me, Vicki. It's been great.