

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, I'm Vicki Robin, and I'm here with Severn Cullis-Suzuki for another conversation around the question: What could possibly go right? Severn is a Canadian environmental activist, speaker, television host and author. As a child, Severn and friends started the Environmental Children's Organization, culminating in a speech to the United Nations at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, when she was only 12. And I must say, I've probably listened to that 100 times. She is a passionate advocate for diversity in the natural world and in human society, speaking widely about intergenerational justice, the need for ethics in our economics and respect and recognition of indigenous rights and title. Welcome, Severn, and thank you for making time to respond to our core curiosity in this time of great upheaval. The question is: What could possibly go right? I'd like you to first, just in a couple of minutes, take us from the stage of the Earth Summit where you woke the conscience of the world, much like Greta Thunberg is waking us now, to your advocacy on cultural survival. And then, go for it. Thanks.

Severn Cullis-Suzuki

Well, thank you, Vicki. It's always wonderful to speak with you and to just tap into the conversation that you and others are having about where we're at right now and what we can do. So my name is Severn and I have to say that I remain very rooted in what I learned as a child, what I learned from my family and my family's experiences before the Earth Summit. So the reason that I cared so deeply was definitely because of my childhood. I grew up in Vancouver, in the province of British Columbia in Canada and it's an incredibly beautiful natural environment in BC. We grew up spending time in Vancouver. We grew up right by the ocean, before Vancouver was this ground zero of the housing crisis and spike in housing value. So it was more of a regular community and I spent a lot of time in the ocean. My parents started becoming connected to environmental issues in the 1980s, so I was just five years old, and they started getting involved simultaneously in environmental issues and indigenous issues. Really, the two can't really be separated. When I was about five or six years old, we hiked into the Stein Valley, which was a valley that was under threat from logging; an incredible place of natural and cultural value. We hiked into the Stein Valley because the Lytton band in partnership with environmental groups, were trying to raise awareness through these Stein Valley music festivals to draw attention and to celebrate this incredible spot. Everybody hiked into this beautiful Alpine plateau and had a rock concert with teepees and it was life-changing. It was life-changing for my parents. They met incredible activists and people fighting for their land, people fighting for their rights, people fighting for the earth. They learned that the earth and taking care of the natural systems of which we are apart is so fundamental to indigenous values, not only for people in that area, but they also at that those festivals met people from the Haida nation of Haida Gwaii, which was still in BC but quite far away on the coast; an archipelago of islands.

Vicki Robin

So get us now to the Earth Summit and now to the present moment so we can go forward in this question.

Severn Cullis-Suzuki

I'm building it up because the roots of connection with the earth are truly held by indigenous people. And it is still held today; it has been held for thousands of years. So when I then started realizing as a child that the Earth was being attacked by modern society, that everything we do essentially harms our ecosystems, it totally floored me. I'd had this beautiful education and that's why I cared enough to start a club when I was eight, nine years old with my friends. That's why I cared enough to speak out as much as I could and eventually through an incredible amount of support from our parents of this club that we created, the Environmental Children's Organization, through the support of our community we raised the funds to go to Rio. In serendipity, we were meeting people at the right moment, we were working hard. I ended up getting the opportunity to speak for five minutes to the UN and that five minutes incredibly was videotaped. It's really an important part that it was videotaped because this was just before the internet went public. Someone at the UN after this speech that I gave that resulted in a standing ovation and being quoted in the concluding remarks, the documentation of that was sent to me and my family and we started making video copies of it and sending it out to anyone who was interested. People were interested. People were writing handwritten letters, requesting a copy, a VHS copy of this video and so we were sending them out at cost; actually requesting, I think, it was a \$5 donation. We've sent them out and eventually DVDs, we're sending them out on DVDs and eventually the internet became a thing and people uploaded it. It just went around the world again. So it's just an interesting part of it, that it was taped, and that it was able to go viral, kind of before going viral was a thing. It blows my mind because that is almost 30 years ago; that is a generation ago. I've done a lot of things since then but the speech that a 12-year-old gave to the world representatives at the Earth Summit remains one of the most powerful things that I've done and one of the most impactful. So I've had a lot of time to think about why, why it's so important. Really I come to the conclusion that it is because of love, because of the most powerful thing belonging to the human race, which is the power of love; and love that we have for our children, for future generations. It is built into our souls. That's why people still react. That's why people care so much about Greta Thunberg today and the youth that are rising up. They care because we love. I have been saying this for almost 30 years, that we have to build in that love for future generations into the way our society values things, into the values of our society, into the infrastructure of our society, because right now, our infrastructure, the values that our society upheld, are the opposite of love for future generations. Yet you talk to any individual and you ask them, what do you love most and if they have kids, it's their kids. So we have a fundamental disconnect that we have to bridge; a disconnect between who we are as individuals and what we value and what our society upholds. And we got to fix it.

Vicki Robin

In this moment of upheaval, when whatever we thought was normal, which includes this blindness to intergenerational justice... That's part of the normal; "we're too busy", "we can't pay attention", "they'll take care of themselves", "they'll save us". That sort of attitude. When this is cracking up, what do you see? What doors do you see opening up to the love that would... Yeah, I'm going to cry... That would sort of sweep us on a wave over the great wall of resistance to actually addressing the things that you most care about.

Severn Cullis-Suzuki

I think we have these opportunities, these little moments where everything kind of is on hold and people are aware. So it's perfect. This is the time to be asking exactly this question. How can we actually act on this moment before we charge forward and society does pick up? I think right now we're in a period, in a very unusual moment of global humility. When we realize, holy cow, we aren't as in control as we think. Maybe we need to change our actions and habits a bit for the better of all. We're having some amazing conversations about taking care of our elders and

worrying about the greater community rather than just worrying about your own self and your own freedoms. There's a different tenor of the conversation, of the global conversation right now. So this humility, to have people in the Western society talk with humility; it's just a beautiful thing. I hope we extend that because there's all kinds of things we think we should keep our humility for. One of the things that I returned to and this is the origin story of why I care, it's important, is now I live in an indigenous community. I live on Haida Gwaii. It's the homeland of the Haida nation and they've been here for at least 14,000 years. They've survived terrible epidemics. By 1915, the height of population was reduced from 30,000 to 588 people. So this is a really interesting point for the Haida nation too and I think this is a very similar story to all over the world where colonized peoples have survived and held on, and they still have these values that have the seeds of our human survival. They still are connected to place. They still are connected to the traditions that have evolved out of generations of mistakes, generations of insight, vision, harmony with the earth. I think that there's a huge opportunity for mainstream society in this moment of humility and in this moment where we've suddenly discovered diversity is important, there's the moment for us to listen, and there's incredible stuff out there.

Severn Cullis-Suzuki

I wanted to show you this beautiful book that I've just been discovered. It's called "Lo-TEK: Design by Radical Indigenism" and it's really cool. It's put together by Julia Watson. On the cover, you can see there are these two incredible living route bridges. This is an amazing technology that's been developed by one of the nations, one of the tribes in India. It's an ancient practice of building, of training these roots across river systems, so that they can actually withstand flash floods. They actually have rocks on them, and they actually can last for 250 years; much, much longer than any man-made bridges. They're living bridges. So you have the women going one way on this bridge and then they're going the other way on the top. There's another bridge up top. There's all these examples of unbelievable technology developed in a sane way, in a life positive way, that really we need right now; when we are facing climate change, when we are facing social breakdown of this very short, very young society with no kind of ethics or spirituality. There's so many examples of how we can make it through. We just have to listen and pay attention and come with humility. That is one of the biggest opportunities we have and the opportunity is that these cultures still exist. They have survived. They've survived the onslaught. They've survived the epidemics. If we listen, they're still here; they can show us the way.

Vicki Robin

Wow. Are you finding that the technologies of listening today are actually vehicles for that knowledge to spread, such that people whose hearts are now open and their minds are humbled can actually, besides this one little interview with you... What are the channels by which, how do you see us white people from America with no ethics or spirituality... Do you see where's the intersection of awakening here? So that the messages get across the cultural synapses that have been occupied by triviality?

Severn Cullis-Suzuki

Well, it's gonna be messy movement forward, but we can't do worse than we've been doing. By promoting a culture of listening and humility and respect, I think we will make progress. It's really such an intense conversation that we're having right now about race. We're having it in Canada, for sure. We have lots of police brutality and militarization. One group that it's really been so awful for are indigenous people in Canada. Really systematic oppression. It's been really in the interest of the state because Canada wants to assert its sovereignty, obviously, and it doesn't want us to really pay attention to the fact that especially here in British Columbia, there were

hardly any treaties signed. So essentially, there's no legal agreement that this is Canada. So, if you're a law-abiding citizen, then you're not on Canadian soil, right? I mean, there's all these breaks in reality that you have to ignore if you're going to just exist as a Canadian. We're having this really intense conversation. For people who've never had it before, about what does it mean that we're living on stolen land, actually living on land that doesn't belong to Canada; it's really uncomfortable and it's really difficult and everybody's really worried about "what do I do" and they're afraid of doing something wrong and making it worse. I understand that feeling. But unfortunately, there's no shortcut. You have to launch yourself in and be part of the conversation and educate yourself and be quiet and listen. We have to just try to move forward in these uncomfortable spaces and in that uncomfortable mess. If we always come back to it and always come with love, and try to come with as much respect and humility, we will make progress. But it's not going to be easy. Coming with those attitudes is as much direction as I really can give. Just coming with respect is going to be such a huge change from what was in the past that that alone will really help us.

Vicki Robin

Wow, I hear you. I think in our question about "What could possibly go right?" Even that question, as cool as it is, as open-ended as it is, has embedded in it this sort of solutionary American mind; "just tell me where to step". So you saying where to step is to accept that you're part of something that has been toxic without all that, "I can't stand that I did that. I didn't mean to." Accept that that's a reality. This is sort of a hidden tumor that is now expressing itself on the surface. You can't just put a bandaid on it. You have to address this thing as part of your own reality; that the body of who you are, the people in your history, has created this. The healing is listening. The healing is respect. The healing is a willingness to get it wrong, and then keep on listening with respect. So I love that you've given us that.

Severn Cullis-Suzuki

Well, that just made me think of years ago, I went to my mother-in-law, who is an incredible language and knowledge keeper, medicine woman, here in the Haida nation. I said to her, "Were there any kind of teachings about sustainability that the Haida had?" This is a classic non-indigenous approach, you know; "Tell me what teachings, what can I write on principles." She didn't answer me and I kind of thought she didn't hear. Then three days later, she said, "You know, you asked me a question, and it was about Haida teachings about sustainability and I've been thinking about it." And she said, "You know, it just comes down to one word. Respect." Respect for yourself. Respect for other people. Respect for your food; that is a huge, huge piece in Haida teachings, is respect for your food and respect for the earth that provides all of it. It just comes down to respect. It kind of blew my mind, first of all, that she didn't feel that she needed to answer right away, which is what we do, right? "Here's the question, you give me a question, and I'm going to give you the answer right away because I've figured it out." So she actually really thought about it. She really thought about it. Then she had a very simple answer. I thought about what respect really is and how our mainstream culture is, we are the opposite of a culture of respect. We have respect for nothing, nothing at all. I think about how I was treated back in 1992 and yeah, I did get some attention at the time for sure, and I was invited to speak all over the world as a young person about the environment. Yes, I definitely had some people who disagreed profoundly with what I thought, but I did not get the level of - I guess for lack of a better word, disrespect - that Greta Thunberg is receiving. The amount of hate and disgusting comments that I have seen towards this youth is so shocking. That's one of the things that I think has changed the most in terms of the degradation of the global conversation, is public comments. The safety of it has really been destroyed. So the disrespect is the norm for everything and anything. Imagine if we had a culture of respect, it would just be so different. I

just wanted to say, in terms of really listening and how we step, it's as important as what we do is how we do it.

Vicki Robin

Ah, that's beautiful. I think that is a beautiful place to wrap this up. I could go on forever. What a beautiful stepping stone you've offered us. It's probably unexpected to the Western mind, but it's the perfect stepping stone. So thank you Severn so much.

Severn Cullis-Suzuki

Thank you very much. It's an honor.