

What Could Possibly Go Right? Hosted by Vicki Robin for Post Carbon Institute

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Episode 19 with Alnoor Ladha

Alnoor Ladha

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culturehack.io

Transcript

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See this moment as initiation and a trauma at the same time; to see the polarity, the extreme light and the extreme dark that's happening right now.

Vicki Robin

Hi, welcome to "What Could Possibly Go Right?" A project of Post Carbon Institute. We interview cultural scouts to help us see more clearly so we can act more courageously. I'm Vicki Robin, your host. Today we're with Alnoor Ladha, who's a political strategist, writer, activist and board member at Culture Hack Labs. His work focuses on the intersection of political organizing, systems thinking, structural change and narrative work. He was the Co-founder and Executive Director of The Rules, a global network of activists, organizers, designers, coders, researchers, writers, and others focused on changing the rules that create inequality, poverty and climate change. Alnoor comes from a Sufi lineage, and writes about the crossroads of politics and spirituality in these troubled times. He is a Co-founder of Tierra Valiente a post-capitalist community and healing center in the jungles of Northern Costa Rica. Hold on to your hats and switch on your systems thinking minds and culture hacking for a rich ride through Alnoor's world of thought. Enjoy.

Vicki Robin

So Alnoor, thank you so much for agreeing to do this interview. You are a perfect person to consider this question of "what could possibly go right?" in the context of the appearance in this moment of so much going wrong. And yet in what way is what is going wrong now, a doorway? Not theoretically, but in reality. What are you seeing as a doorway into some possibility of a healing and healthy and whole and abundant way that we could inhabit this very same planet? So in your view, in this moment, what could possibly go right?

Alnoor Ladha

Yeah, thank you for the question, Vicki. And it's a beautiful question. When I hear the question, What could possibly go right? The first thing that comes to mind, when I think of a power lens, or a system lens, is right for whom? And also this notion of the binary between right and wrong.

The word "possibly" is also prominent, right? Because I think, not that that's in your intention of the question, but in our belief that somehow the pandemic or the climate crisis or the impending financial recession is somehow a disruption on the arrow of progress, the way things were supposed to be. Those dangerous few words: the way things were supposed to be. I think what this moment is doing for us, this civilizational crossroads, is the dissolution of these assumptions. Actually starting to understand right for whom. Starting to sort of break down the idea of a binary between right and wrong; that in some way, we're being initiated into non-dualistic thought, to hold multiple seemingly contradictory perspectives at the same time. To see this moment as an initiation and a trauma at the same time. To see the polarity, the extreme light and the extreme dark that's happening right now. This is not, as the QAnon conspiracy theorists want to believe, a battle of good versus dark, and good is winning, you know. Those are all part of that old narrative that we are cultivating right now, actually; what John Keats called a negative capability, the willingness to embrace uncertainty, to live in the mystery, to be at peace with ambiguity. And that's cultivating a more resilient character for us. I think also what it's doing is it's allowing us to re-evaluate our relationship with progress, and progress itself is complex, right? It's all of these thought forms together. Western hubris, tech utopianism, anthropocentric arrogance. The belief that somehow a microwave in every house is progress, right? That it's worth all the destruction. It's that type of technological progress in our current story has more value than ancient cultures and languages, old growth forests, that deep symbiotic relationship with a more than human world. When you and I were talking Vicki earlier, I was talking about Stephen Jenkinson, this teacher on death and dying, where he talks about hope, by definition, is inherently hostile to the present moment. So what this moment is doing is it's really allowing us to deepen into the felt immediacy of now with all of the complexity, and also creating a sense of humility, that maybe we don't have all the answers. Maybe science is the floor of understanding, rather than the ceiling of understanding; that the human lens is just one lens on intricate web of consciousness. That's an important place for us to start, as a young civilization, to sort of wake up to that possibility that the earth is not our dominion, that we are not made in God's image. But it's much more complex than that, that there's a more fractal interdependent reality at play here that we are in dialogue with the living animal planet. And this also allows us... this is almost like a heliocentric worldview sort of flip that's happening, right? We're going from a human-centric to an omni-centric universe and what it's allowing us to do is also to see the interconnected nature of all of our problems. COVID; there's this language that's been going around, the "great equalizer" and of course, it's not in some ways, right? It's exasperating the inequalities that already exist. But it's showing to us that you can't have a community in which some people have access to health care, and some don't; where some are cordoned off in their golden gates and some are left in impoverishment. That world that we lived in, created climate change, created inequality, created species extinction, and will create more and more pandemics as we encroach on the natural world. We have to find our right relationship, our placement within this broader symphony of life. But also that we have to fundamentally rethink our economic operating system, right? You can't have a globalized system of extraction, because it has no resilience when a few people are holding all of that power, when our food systems are dependent on these globalized supply chains, and corporate monopolies and power leads. There is no resilience in that system. And so this is the beginning of the beginning, in that sense. And I think for all those reasons, it's a really powerful moment of

both self-reflection, and sort of civilizational level reflection. I think it's really a time that's urging us to be good students of our culture, to really understand the impoverishment of our time, to understand the oxygen we breathe, which is neoliberal capitalism. Every aspect of our lives has been mediated by debt-based capital, by a sort of growth dependent culture that is completely dependent on extractives and fossil fuels. So people who saw themselves as apolitical, or that's something that doesn't interest me or what have you, are starting to see that there is no such thing as apolitical. We are all consuming the dominant ideology and we have to be able to step back from that dominant ideology. We have to be able to both not just critique it and dissect it, but to embody the values we want to live. So it requires understanding the values that are dominant right now. I see the system as a sort of complex, adaptive evolutionary system. It's alive. It's the greatest Frankenstein we've ever created. The market based system, it's artificial intelligence of its own. And what it does is it's the opposite of the merit system. It rewards those who best serve its logic and pulls them to the top. So people who reflect the values of short-termism, of greed, of selfishness, of psychosis, and other life denying tendencies; they get rewarded by the system. So this is the moment for us to say, Well, what do we actually stand for? Not just what we stand against, but also, what do we want to live for? And what are those values and we're seeing it emerge, right? From mutual aid networks, solidarity networks; a deeper relationship with nature, a deeper understanding of systems thinking. These sort of possibilities are emerging, and with it also a post-capitalist reality is emerging. Because whatever we create after this, has to be born out of both our understanding of what went wrong, as well as our vision for where we want to go. And that's required of all of us. This is not the job of activists, it's not the job of a few smart people in a room; we've seen where that model takes us. This has to be a deeper democracy, a deliberative process where we're sort of being initiated into being citizens of our times. None of us are outside of the system. All of us have to have a say, because we've inherited a story in a system that doesn't serve the majority of humans, let alone the more than human world. And that's really the moment we're at.

Vicki Robin

Yeah, wow. There's so much in there, I'm gonna pull some threads, okay? Several things occur to me. One is that a while ago, I started getting really irritated when somebody would say, "We this. We that." And I would say, "Who is the we? Who are you talking about?" Because I feel in my experience, even the word we is a personal construct. It's like, I made up something called "we". Oh, is it like Vicki and Alnoor? Is that the we? Who's the we we're talking to? Who's the we we're talking from? I just think, to not despair of that there is a possibility of a coherence for humanity, maybe post- the knothole; that we're weaving in old coherence where we understood "we", and we're going through something that's sort of breaking up the signal, which is perfect, because we've been dealing with that, you know? So I just find that interesting is that, when you use the word we, or when I use the word we and us, there is part an observation of things that are happening from my point of view. And there's an aspiration. There's a, "This is the kind of we I hope for" and even in these times when the signal is breaking apart so intensely now, where just even the word "and" could have different meanings for different people. So I guess that's just one observation that I want to put on the table. If I could just put a couple more in. You say that we're a young civilization and I think it's almost like that's a frame that I've heard some people talking about; that it's not a question of progress, as in this arrow of progress of

domination. But it's that we're a learning species, that we have a capacity to learn and to mix-match, create together. It's going to be sort of hodgepodge. The truth is going to come out of places you least expect it, and the people you count on for truth aren't going to have it. So that frame says to me that it's about maturation, that we're in a process of maturation, and a lot of the things that you're singling out, as our habits of mind and behavior, are really just simply immature. Like, "I want that. I'm going to take it." You know, it's like not having a sense of... not being an adult. So I'll just throw those two things on the table, and I'm sure you're gonna make something out of them.

Alnoor Ladha

It's interesting that, to start with the we, it's in some ways, identity is the problem, right? In the Sufi tradition, for example, we talk about the universal identity as the primary identity. It's the inter-being ethic. Then the secondary identity is this individual body I've incarnated in to have this experience. In the dominant culture, of course, it's completely the other way around; the self is the prime unit, right? This is kind of the logic of, in some ways, the post-Hellenic world till now, and definitely reified by the enlightenment and strengthened by that logic, where we are self-maximizing units. So both the idea of me and myself and my own ego and my own identity, is problematic to the process. And then the idea of we then also becomes problematic in the sense that we are now speaking for others. And yet, you're alluding to something where there is an innate desire, a human desire to take responsibility for what we have done as a species and where we're going as a species, and that does require some shared dialogue and shared purpose and shared direction. I think back to one of Gandhi's lines, where somebody asked him on a Monday, which was a silent day, a question and he didn't answer. And on a blank piece of paper nearby, he wrote, My life is my message. In some ways, I love that story. But that's kind of the old model, right? Because it's still me as an individual unit, projecting out to the world of being the change, but what we're starting to understand is that we're highly contextual beings, right? That's what 30 years of social science has taught us. In any given context, humans can behave in a myriad of ways. So you put somebody in a context where, somebody in a white lab coat, tells them to shock someone to near death, they will do it the majority of the time. The Good Samaritan study is when somebody who's about to give a talk on the Good Samaritan, and is sort of primed with these values, if they're told they're late for that talk, they'll walk by a bleeding person on their way. And all sorts of biases that we're starting to understand. So we're these highly contextual beings and in some ways, what we need to do is to create a set of rules and a context and a structure and a societal framework that rewards the best aspects of ourselves. That's where both this idea of identity and being a young species comes into play. This current model, this market based fundamentalism, capitalist democracy, capitalist modernity, whatever you want to call it, is just one idea on the shelf of ideas. And contextually, it's bringing out the worst aspects of humanity. So I could do all the internal work I want and be Gandhi. Of course, modern India is a product of Gandhi, because neoliberalism and individual self worth work really well together. It's your fault, your problem, your spiritual development, but actually, we need to create a cultural context in which we're elevating the best aspects of humanity, where we are creating a container for human evolution to flourish. That's what we're sort of grasping at the beginnings of that, in some ways, and whether we get there or not, that's even up for question right now. Right? We have, as we were talking about earlier, that we're in

this deep moment of bifurcation and polarization and we don't know how this race is gonna end up, even if we'll have that possibility for maturity.

Vicki Robin

Yeah, oh man, this is so great. Every time you speak, it's like I see these branching roads. Something you said evoked for me, and we're getting sort of up in the heavens here, but I think heaven is really a great place to be... The stretching oneself over what you can consider yourself responsible for, the thing that you are stretching yourself to feel into or intuit, that I am sort of a cell in the eye of God; I am part of that which God sees through, in God's creation. Just to use God language, which most of my friends don't enjoy, but I like it. With that imagination - not even declaring I'm the eyeball or I'm the nose hair or whatever - but you know, with that imagination, what we're all doing, what this truly is, there is some collective effort to understand where we are and what we're up to. There's some presumption that we understand this, that humanity understands itself. But as you're saying, there's just a gloss of modernity on a flow of historical experience. So there is this effort. It's omni-centric and multi-centric. There's an effort. They're like, What's going on? Who is the we, is not a sassy question to challenge somebody else. It's really the question that we hold, is who is the we? There's something in that, which provides a way of seeing this for me, that is both humble - like, I'm just a little cell back there on the cornea - it's just both humble, but it's also a call to greatness, if you will, of: I'm going to show up for this, because if I'm like a little cell on the cornea of the eye of God, that's a pretty big job, and I need to actually be interconnected with all the other little cells. Because we are forming a picture, we are forming together a picture of who we are. That's a very different sense, just what you gave me right now; it's a very different sense of our specific current dilemma. And the piece of the dilemma that I cannot let go of - I mean, I can formulate this eye of God metaphor, and maybe you can help me and maybe this will wind up our interview - is my heart breaks for the people who are suffering, and I can't get over that. So there's a part of me that is expanding into this non-dual reality. And another part of me is just like, Oh, I just want to help. I want to intervene someplace in this; the desire to intervene, to prevent suffering. And maybe suffering is necessary, I don't know. The equation of modernity has left a huge remainder of multiple human beings and species, innocents that are going to be swept off the game board. So how do you - I guess that would be my last question - How do you reconcile this very large initiation into non-duality consciousness and the specific compassion for the specific suffering of specific people?

Alnoor Ladha

Yeah. This is kind of the crux of it, right? This is the crux of being an empathetic being in the Kali Yuga, to have incarnated in the dark ages of humanity. And to go back to this idea of context, we look at our context. For 99% of human history, we were hunter gatherers. We were, in some ways, living in the bosom of the Mother and in deep relationship, and in trust and reverence. And this period that we have now, this 5000 year blip that we call modernity, is the first time we have the ability to be in self-reflection, right? Where we are not in the immediacy of hand to mouth, at least a small percentage of human beings. There's a moral reason, I think, why we need to create a world where, imagine eight billion humans had access to all of the things we have access to, as people who are beneficiaries of the Western way of living. We

would have a creative spiritual Renaissance on this planet. It's why the moral imperative is to create a structure in a system, where that type of equity and that type of fairness and that type of justice allows human potentiality. And more than human potentiality; really, the potentiality of life, to coexist, to create whatever is going to come next. Human beings a billion years from now will be as different to us as we are from single celled amoebas. That's our responsibility in some ways, it's not to ourselves or to our bloodlines, but it's to life itself. Holding this contradiction and not reconciling it, feeling the deep pain and grief of other people's suffering, makes us more human and makes us more able to be response-able, right? And to situate our place within that privilege and within even the identity, and the racialized hierarchy and the gender hierarchy and the capitalist hierarchy and all of those things, is part of the spiritual practice. We have to understand the cultural context we're in and understand that that cultural context, being born into a broken world, into a broken culture, is part of our soul's mission here on some level as well. And to not amputate those feelings, but to feel them, to nourish our ability to do work in the world. I don't see the point of spirituality, for some kind of inner enlightenment. How could that be, as you were saying earlier, this idea of fractal consciousness, that God is that which is becoming. In Sufism, we say Allah is a metaphor for the universe becoming self aware. If that's the case, then we have this responsibility to understand what's happening in our moment of incarnation, to do everything we can within our privilege and power to contribute to that, and to be of service. I think holding that vision, it doesn't allow me to, let's say reconcile that tension, but it allows me to situate that tension within a deeper mission, if you will.

Vicki Robin

Perfect. Even though there isn't perfection. That's a perfect jewel placed on a velvet cushion, and that ends our conversation. I love that once we talked about our feelings for our fellow human beings, you brought up the moral imperative of understanding that we've incarnated at this time, and it's our responsibility to do all we can to deliver life forward, as has been all of life's responsibility for all time, so this has just been utterly delicious. Thank you.

Alnoor Ladha

Yeah. Beautiful to talk to you and spend time and get to know you, Vicki.

Vicki Robin

Hey, thanks for listening. Don't forget to subscribe and leave us a five star review, which will help this hopeful message get out to more people. Check out the Post Carbon Institute website for show notes and for more guest information. Thanks to all our donors for their support. Thanks also to Asher Miller, Amy Buringrud and Clara Winter at Post Carbon Institute plus production assistant Michelle Wigg from FrugalityandFreedom.com