

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

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Episode 18 with Severine von Tscharnier Fleming

Severine von Tscharnier Fleming
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greenhorns.org

Transcript

Severine von Tscharnier Fleming

We seeded the year with all this uncertainty and then we really gestated. And now hopefully all of that contemplation is going to give birth.

Vicki Robin

Welcome to What Could Possibly Go Right, a project of the 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 visit with Severine Fleming. Severine is a farmer and activist and organizer based in Downeast Maine. She runs Smithereen Farm, a certified organic wild blueberry, seaweed and orchard operation. She is a founder and board member of Agrarian Trust, whose mission it is to support land access for the next generation of farmers. In the next decade, it's predicted that 400 million acres of US farmland is going to change hands. The Agrarian Trust seeks to put as much of this as possible into the hands of young farmers for both sustainable food production and collective ecological stewardship. She's also a founder and creator of the Greenhorns, a 10 year old grassroots organization whose mission is to recruit, promote and support the incoming generation of farmers in the United States. I met Severine about eight years ago, when I had done my own experiment in hyper-local eating. I had a 10 mile diet; I ate within a 10 mile radius of my home for a month, which alerted me to the need for a local integrated local food system, and not just you know, a few carrots at a farmers market. But what would it take for us to be able to have 50% of our food from within 500 miles. I was on a quest and I met Severine. She was on a panel at The Bioneers in a conference in California. I sort of fangirled her because what she was doing was precisely what I saw needed to be done. So here's Severine.

Vicki Robin

Hi, we're here with Severine Fleming - von Tscharnier Fleming, but Severine Fleming now - and I met Severine many years ago. She's famous for many things in the realm of agriculture. Knowing what you know, being who you are, doing what you do, I'm really interested in your answer to this question of "what could possibly go right?" Over to you.

Severine von Tscherner Fleming

Well, a lot could go right. A lot could go right. There's a fleeing that's going on. The desire of humans to move, of human bodies to move geographically, is very powerful. You know, you think about how many bodies are in motion north from Africa, driven by climate, consequence, and ambition and fears, hopes and fears, survival. I mean, whoa. How far of a distance people are willing to go? It's extraordinary, actually. So there's all these different movements and again, this reshuffling. But, around here, we had six kids graduate our local high school. As all of these landscapes and small towns in the United States have become sites of commodity extraction, and the main street collapses, and the schools dwindle, and out migration of youth, well, we shed all of what makes us whole. So the resettling and moving of bodies isn't inherently wrong. I think it's a question of, on what terms? How are those new people going to interact? How are they going to naturalize? How will they be met? You know, I'm in a place where the Passamaquoddy peoples first encountered Europeans, a first interaction of these bedraggled people arriving, who needed food, who needed to be welcomed. What will that welcoming look like as bedraggled people become a part of almost every place that's habitable? And what will it mean for those who are there welcoming? And that cultural dialogue about the reshuffling of our settlement patterns, of our settlement possibility. And the terms, the terms that we have, you know. Last time around, that land was taken, because it was wild, and it was uncivilized, and it was unimproved, and it needed to be worked. And land to the tiller and land to the enlightened Yeoman farmer was used as an excuse for the Allotment Act and claiming yet more Indian territories. It seems like you could really make a pretty spiritual argument right now that land to the healer; those who are willing to work, those who are willing to heal, who are willing to restore should have tenure, should have durable tenure. When refugees and atmosphere and fire and burn and waves... I mean, we lost five feet off the front of my land here, that is that I own, from the sea. We're all a part of the ocean commons. We are all a part of the land commons. We are all, we are all participants, and so an acknowledgement of our common humanity and our common plight would say that a rearrangement not only in human bodies and the harbors of yesteryear might no longer makes sense as the harbors of tomorrow... The wind patterns are changing, the patterns of commerce have changed, etc, etc. And that means that the resettlement and the re-enlivenment of the underlying ecology might actually be what valorizes the entry of new humans into the space, those humans who are coming with a mission to heal and to help and to serve and to mend deserve security. And this word subsistence kind of sounds derogatory, often in the way it's used. Oh, subsistence, subsistence. Yeah, subsisting. Wow, what an honor. What an honorable way to interact with the world. I mean, right now all the table is full. I can show you upstairs of shiny, glistening abundance. And what an honor to walk among all these plants that we've tended all year, and to be slack and easy, and it's all just falling off. It's heavenly. We have mapping tools, we have GIS, we have models, we have LIDAR, we have plenty of surveillance, plenty of conservation biologists, plenty of citizen scientists. We have plenty of knowledge of where our watersheds are flowing and where they flow from and where the wetlands are, and what used to be there. And we can say, with some pretty great precision where the points of intervention are for restoration on the landscape. And those places need structure assigned to them that says, If you come and plant orchards here, if you come and plant willows here, if you come, then you can have an enduring right to subsistence. That's a kind of reparation in the restoration. That's an opportunity in healing.

That's a logic about making home better that you're coming to. That's like being a good guest. And because I don't like it to be so desperationy. Desperation does not make a good farm worker, does not make a good neighbor. My friend had the easement, the conservation easement for his farm, purchased by the Navy, because the Navy wants to keep settlement low, and they want to keep farms around themselves, because they understand that community resilience is what makes peace around a military base. So the figuring out of how to make space and how to accommodate one another and discern how to do that feels really important.

Severine von Tscherner Fleming

In many, many cultures that don't have private property already as a basis, and on the sea, you have customary rights. You have, for instance, in the Sahel region, which is a desertifying region, right along the Saharan boundary on the bottom of it. That's the Sahel region, it's known for gum acacia, and a series of trees, many of them leguminous acacias, but also the shea nut butter tree. In this region, the shea nut butter trees are tended, protected. They're not owned, but they're the source of the majority of female cash income in that whole region. But there's a situation where they don't own the trees, they don't graze, they don't necessarily own the cows that graze, they don't own the crops that are below, but they have a right to those fatty fruits that fall. Their cultural right is understood by all the other users. And their cultural right is understood by their users and is therefore protected and the young trees that are, you know what they say, farmer assisted propagation, meaning "Don't let your goats eat it when it's a baby". So it's kind of like we have an opportunity, I think, to look differently at the base into which we belong, the water base into which we belong, and the opportunities for commoning that exist for us already. You don't have to get even you know, the cemetery, the school, Land Trust land, in front of the grocery store, in front of the old ladies' houses, the church, nursery school, the median in the town. The biggest collection of oaks in the world is in Aiken, South Carolina, where a man just collected oak trees and planted them in the public strips of the town. So I feel like that's what I'm hoping for is that this has been a time of everyone really tuning into their naked body on the land that they are. Wherever it is, wherever your naked body is, it is land; whether or not you own the house, you are on land and you are of land. And belonging fully in the present to the land as an economy that is not the same as capitalism demands responsibility, demands our responsibility. And I guess I don't know where that's gonna go. I just think that that might be what goes right. If that happens and guided a lot of souls, that: "Okay, here I am. I better make it great. I better figure out resilience and diversity and preparedness and knowing my neighbors and thinking ahead and fire mitigation, water, drought prevention and debris collection and mulching and all the things." That's the work.

Vicki Robin

So I agree 100%, I have 100,000%. I'm doing it in a minor way. I have friends here on Whidbey Island who are doing it in a slightly larger way, with real commitment and really taking the opportunity of the pandemic to reshape how the kids are getting schooled, what they're doing with this extra pasture that they own because they bought it a couple years ago, because they had the opportunity. So I just would like to, in our few last few minutes: Do you see this happening right now? And do you see that the disruptions right now are even lighting small fires of what could be? Do you see what could be arising in the midst of what is?

Severine von Tscherner Fleming

Well, what's emerging right there on Whidbey is the first Puget Sound land commons of Agrarian Trust, thanks to the gift of land. And thanks to the gift of support from Patagonia, that land is getting restoration, a little remnant wetland. It's getting hydro. It's getting, obviously, weed abatement problems, but native restoration. And that land will be made available for lease for a young farmer who can be growing there in a place that's quite pricey, and where there's a lot of people who'll buy it. Now, this issue about money and land and land prices. So often I've talked about this in terms of this inflection of transitioning stewardship and how 70% of the land is owned by people 65 and older, and how do we get the young ones to be able to buy it out, and something needs to be gifted. You know, that's the thing that feels like, the truest truth that I can come to is giving the gift of good land is something that has to become central to any strategy for the survival of any community. And we've had a really great tax abatement framework around land conservation for many years in this country. It's gotten us a certain distance along this path. But now, actually, urgently, we need to do more faster. And there's bodies ready to do the work. We cannot say now there's no organized young farmers movement; it's organized in 44 states. You cannot say there's not a practice that's been established, that there's demand for local food. You know, it's here, it's ready. It's totally game ready. And so those who have the means, and those who have the means know who they are, it's time to give it.

Vicki Robin

Right, and sometimes give it with the assurance that you can live out your years on your land. And then also the assurance that, and this is dicey, and it would be a whole other conversation, but it's the mind shift that our estates - and it's literally the physical estate - our estates are passed along to our children, because in prior times, that was class, position, wealth, etc. and the children were going to carry on. That was how the children could carry on. A lot of people now, their kids are not interested in farming; none of them are, of some of the people I know. So that's the other part of it, is it's a mindset change of you can give to the children of other people; the children who want to carry on the legacy, your legacy. You can give to them as long as they will take care of you as you age out. And you can assure that the children of your bodies who have other destinies can have what they need. When I'm listening to you, and we're sort of out of time now, but when I'm listening to you, I love that everything is sort of, We're really shovel-ready. We have the elements in place, but there's barriers to access, stewardship and assurance of long term capacity to continue farming.

Severine von Tscherner Fleming

Well, and it's on both sides. I think that's the point; there's needing opportunity, and there's needing release, and there's needing assurance. And how do we make a truce? You know, it's comfortable. It's uncomfortable at both ends. I mean, Agrarian Trust exists for this purpose and we have the honor now of there are 17 parcels that are lined up. We just had a great success fundraising in Maine for the Somali Bantu Association, the little Juba Commons, that was 1500 people chipping in their little bit of money to buy the farm so that these guys can keep farming on a 99 year lease with high stewardship requirements; organic, only local only, etc. That's a

structure that we're living out in public view to say, here's a proposal for how we would host land for community use, in community ownership by organic farmers with affordable, durable leases dignity. And this is one pathway that we're prototyping for everyone's benefit, but there's so many other pathways that could be undertaken. And often when there's a family farm, there's other non-farm assets that have happened, and that farm can be given away and offset the non-farm assets and not pay taxes on those. So from an estate perspective, there's a lot of benefit to thinking about the farm gift as a way to offset the legacy that you want to pass to your blood kids, but also keep the land actually productive. Yeah, thank you for the opportunity. And yeah, this feels like a good, a good frame. I think you're gonna find that a lot of people have been rearranging their priorities and a lot of humans have been thinking more about what am I really going to do with this, my precious life on Earth and this precious time.

Vicki Robin

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