

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

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Episode 20 with Tzeborah Berman

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Transcript

Tzeborah Berman

We are racing against the clock. But what if we just choose to tell ourselves that this is our moment?

Vicki Robin

Welcome to What Could Possibly Go Right? A project of the Post Carbon Institute. I'm Vicki Robin, your host. Today we're with Tzeborah Berman. Tzeborah has been designing and implementing environmental campaigns and working on environmental policy in Canada and beyond for over 20 years. She currently is International Programme Director at Stand.Earth and the Chair of the Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty committee, dedicated to phasing out fossil fuel production and fast tracking progress towards safer and more cost effective solutions. She has been honored multiple times, as well as threatened multiple times for her work. She's risked and persevered and as this interview shows never ceded power to those who think they have a corner on it. I heard Tzeborah speak many years ago about her work on stopping the Kinder Morgan pipeline in Canada. Her clarity and strategic focus informed everything I did afterwards. We love bringing you these gritty visionary voices and we need your financial love to keep these interviews going. Consider donating. And now our interview with Tzeborah Berman.

Vicki Robin

Hey, Tzeborah. Thanks so much for joining me and everybody with our one question interview series with cultural scouts, people who see far and have a long history of activism, asking them to tell us what green healthy shoots they see coming up in the cracks of the old system, now that we're in a time of pandemic with no end in sight, and economic precarity and racial justice uprising and polarization. And as you and I well know, in the background, the climate crisis has not slowed down just to give us a break. It's been roaring ahead, and waiting for us as we get out of some of these immediate challenges, and our coast is on fire. So yours have been pipeline and tar sands battles, but really, it's almost like you're every woman, who sees something, then grabs hold, and you say, "This far. No further." And you take it up, and sometimes win, but always persist. So here we are. Put on your headlamp. Look into the muck.

Help us through your eyes see more clearly, so we can act more courageously. Take it away.
What could possibly go right?

Tzaporah Berman

Thank you. Thank you, Vicki. I love the question. And I love the way that you just framed it around green shoots, in the muck, because I've been working on climate change now for a long time. I've been working on environmental campaigns now for 30 years and climate change for close to 20. And I actually feel more hopeful right now than I have in maybe ever, which is a strange thing to say for someone who, I spend a lot of time reading the science, looking at what's happening around the world. And we all know the bad stuff. We see it every day, in our lives and the fires and the smoke and the droughts and the floods, and we see it in whenever we turn on the computer, and then the news is everywhere. We know what's going wrong. But I'm taking a long view, having worked on this for a long time, I do want to talk about what's going right, because for a long time working on these issues, it was like it was almost impossible to get people to engage. Because, climate change has for so long has been the invisible threat. It's been the threat in the future; we need to act now, because "in the future", the world could look like this. That's really hard for people, if they're not experiencing it in their daily lives. Carbon dioxide is invisible. It's hard to see. I think one of the mistakes we made honestly as a movement is that the movement grew out of policy walks, that grew out of all these people who were looking at carbon tax, or cap and trade, and vehicle emissions regulations, and etc. I can remember as a younger activist starting to get interested in climate change, and started trying to figure out, What do we do? And there was always, "Well, we need to be looking at 1990 benchmarks, and we need this percentage reduction by this date. But actually, this percentage is the wrong benchmark." You know, it's hard to get excited, it's hard to get people excited about that, when they kind of barely understand it. So you felt like you had to be an expert to engage. My background is in the forest movement and those are much more tangible battles in a lot of ways. You can see this forest coming down. You know this place. And I think a lot of us who came into the climate movement later, we were moved by a sense of place and people. So the fossil fuel fights emerging in the center of the climate debate - the pipelines, this LNG facility, this refinery facility, this coal plant - those started to make the choices that we have to make, more tangible. Over the last decade, I've watched that grow and grow and grow to the extent that it is now, I think, fueling mass movements around the world. So that's one of the green shoots. We have more engagement today on the issue that I think is the greatest challenge of our age - on climate change - than we have ever had. I organized a lot of rallies in my time, maybe too many rallies. "Can we get 1000 people?" Huge rallies. "Can we get 10,000 people?" I can remember working on the New York Climate March years ago and the idea that we had 300,000 people there was so incredible. Well, last year, a million people marched in Canada alone on climate change, inspired by the youth movement, Fridays for Future and all of that. Around the world, millions and millions and millions of people are now engaging in these issues. I mean, it's in part because of the bad news, because they can actually see the impacts; like in California right now with the fires. People are starting to see the impacts more and more in their daily lives, more people. But also, I think, because these tangible fossil fuel fights have made the climate debate tangible. They made it something that people can wrap their heads around, they can think about, and that I think has made a stronger movement.

Tzaporah Berman

The other thing that I think is a green shoot is the fact that this movement, this strong movement is diverse. For the last several years in Canada, I've been organizing with indigenous leadership, under indigenous leadership. Indigenous communities and indigenous leaders are at the forefront of the fights against so many; of the expansion of the tar sands, or the pipelines, like Trans Mountain Pipeline. And it's brought together the scientists, the activists, the youth; with those who have a deep sense of what it will mean to lose for history, and culture, and human rights, and the air we breathe and the water we drink. The water protectors coming into the climate movement, or maybe the climate movement coming into and lifting up the water protectors, I'm not really sure, has made us a more diverse and stronger movement. I think we see it also around the world with human rights advocates and environmental justice advocates who have been fighting the unjust and unequal pollution from fossil fuel refineries or major oil development from Nigeria to California. Now connecting that with the climate movement, folks fighting for their land and eminent domain farmers in Nebraska joining up with others in the climate movement to fight those infrastructure fights. Anything, like in nature, that is more diverse is stronger. So I think we're a lot stronger than we were before. We have a stronger movement, we have more people seeing and taking action and understanding what's happening on climate change. And simultaneously, we have a revolution in technology. We have seen every day, we see new technological breakthroughs for the electrification of our world, because that's what the solution is ultimately; it's about more efficiency and it's about more electrification, so that our systems can be run on renewable energy, solar, wind, geothermal, instead of on the fossil fuels that are killing us. So what we've seen is major technological breakthroughs, more breakthroughs in the last two years than in the last 20; in electric vehicles, in battery storage, in concentrated solar, and the list goes on. What that means as those breakthroughs happen is that prices drop for the solutions. We have seen a dramatic decline in the price for renewable energy to such an extent that it is now cheaper in many places of the world, to build large scale renewable energy solutions than it is to build oil or gas or coal. And that's really critical. So if we have changes in technology, and we also have changes in finance, the drop in price, and we have more engagement from civil society, that starts to create political space for decision makers to actually act, because ultimately, we're not going to get it right unless governments have the power to stand up to the fossil fuel industry. Because that is actually what needs to happen.

Tzaporah Berman

Right now, I'm working on a new global Fossil Fuel Treaty, which is a big idea. But the reason I started working on it is because I actually think governments are ready to talk about something of this scale. I think we know that civil society is ready to talk about something of this scale. I will never forget the day that I searched through the Paris Accord for the words: oil and coal and gas and fossil fuels. And I couldn't find them because our current international agreements do nothing to stop the expansion of fossil fuel production. They're only about emissions. That is, you know, the fossil fuel industries successfully dialling that in. Every company, and every country in the world currently believes they can continue to build as much oil, gas and coal as they want. And actually, the UN reports are on track to build 120% more oil, gas and coal than

the world can safely burn under 1.5 degrees scenario. We actually need to stop expansion not just in Canada or California, but everywhere. The only way the world has ever come together to address a global security threat, to stop the expansion of a dangerous good everywhere, has been through international cooperation and agreements like this. We're calling it the Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty, modeled in part after Nuclear Non-Proliferation. Because we need to stop the stockpiling. We need to put our intellectual and our financial and our political capital towards the solutions and we need a globally negotiated just transition, so that equity is at the core of who transitions and how fast; who gets to produce fossil fuels as the world is phasing out fossil fuels and how much. And we already have a number of countries who are interested in it. We have hundreds of organizations who have already signed on to the FossilFuelTreaty.org to endorse it. Last week, we launched it for the first time, talking about it publicly. We had leaders from the Youth Movement come and endorse it. We had Naomi Klein and Bill McKibben, and it's real. I think it's exciting to actually be campaigning and calling for something that is commensurate with the scale of the actual problem, instead of just pushing around the edges or fighting project by project, because if there's one thing we know is that we need big bold breakthroughs, because we are racing against the clock.

Vicki Robin

So that is so much in there. One thing, one question I have is, do you think it took this much pressure to create the breakthroughs? You've just told us a story of 30 years, and a story of when we've been quite self critical in our movements. "Oh, we were policy wonks, and that didn't work." Or, "Oh, Jimmy Carter shivering in the White House in a sweater. That didn't work." We've been critical of ourselves for missing the mark, because the march of the pollution, the carbon pollution has gone on and on and on. And we've watched that line go up. And it's been a tough haul, you know? We're on the 49th yard line and the skirmish is really tough. So what I'm hearing from you is that the pressure of the urgency is precipitating, and the technology coming together, so much is coming together. And also, the head to heart part of it. You started out because you fell in love with the forest. Then you became an expert in policy because you wanted to protect your forest, but you didn't talk about the love. You talked about the policy. Is it that we're back to the spiritual aspect of it. I just am curious about your reflections on what is tipping us in this moment.

Tzaporah Berman

Tipping is exactly the right term. Because social change isn't linear. It doesn't happen like this progression and okay, then we're going to change policy. No, think of other great moments in history. It happens because of tipping point moments. It's like the bubbling and boiling up of all of these different pieces; the finances, the technology, the engagement of society. We often do beat ourselves up. I'm not trying to underplay the problem. Right now we are racing against the clock. We have not bent the curve on emissions. They continue to go up. It's a massive problem. It has to be dealt with in this decade. But let's not forget that what we're doing is literally confronting power in all of its sources, in every way you understand that word, because the most politically powerful people in the world are actually the investors and those who run the fossil fuel companies. They have been the strongest and most powerful companies in the world and they've had the greatest political influence. Look at the billions that the top oil companies

have spent just since Paris in lobbying our governments to not act on climate change. And so policy after policy has been reduced. These are very powerful people who want to hold on to the fact that they own the source of production for all of us around the world, to move around, to talk to each other, to live our lives. What we're talking about is redistributing power and energy in every source, every idea that worked. If we are actually producing our power and energy from the sun and the wind, you know what? Nobody owns that. No one person owns that. And that's an entirely different model than the model that industrial society was built on, of fossil fuels. So it's taken us a while to figure out how to have a global conversation to shift that, how to engage at all the levels: finance, technology, policy and civil society unrest and engagement. But I think that we are even more powerful if we tell ourselves a different story. What if the story we're telling ourselves is that this is our tipping point moment? And that, yeah, we're racing against the clock; the fires have started, the floods have started. More people lose their homes today as a result of climate change than war. We are racing against the clock. But what if we just choose to tell ourselves that this is our moment? Because what we're hearing is that every day, more and more major financial investors are divesting from fossil fuels. The largest banks in the world, and the largest insurance companies in the world have all in the last year, said that they won't fund new coal development, new oil development, new oil sands or tar sands development. We're starting to see major financial institutions, we're starting to see millions and millions of people engage, we're starting to see all of these pieces at once. What if we actually just tell ourselves that we were learning? We made some wins, we had some losses, but we got stronger and stronger and stronger as we were learning. And now this is our moment. This is our moment to propose some significant bold shifts and new ideas to change the landscape. That's what I'm holding on to right now. That's what keeps me going every day, when I think about these issues.

Vicki Robin

That is so beautiful. I just feel like we've been on this sort of collective scouting mission; like, who is holding us back from having the world that we know we want, you know? You can do poll after poll. This is what the people want, but somehow or another, we can't get it through. I think you've nailed it; it is about money and power, and that money buys power. So it's about finance, it's about the money system, it's about people knowing they can prosper without the addiction to the thing that we thought was necessary for us to prosper, and have all the energy we need and have the happy lives we want. Also, what I hear you doing with this new initiative is saying we are power; we're not petitioning power, we're it. You know, we hold power now. So I just feel like you've, as they say, what do they call it? Bearding the lion in its lair. And, wow, what a great inspiring message. I know you weren't doing a sermon, but it landed on me, like a new energy for a new year.

Tzaporah Berman

Well, you know, I am Jewish. We just had Rosh Hashanah, and I have been thinking a lot about the new year, what we can learn from what we've all collectively experienced. And you know, what we can learn from it gives me hope too. It's come at a very high price; hundreds and hundreds of thousands of lives. But we actually have a collective global experience of knowing

that we have to listen to the science, and that if we act early, we save lives. That's exactly what needs to happen on climate change.

Vicki Robin

Exactly. Thank you so so much for taking the time and just allowing that beautiful spirit to pour forth after the cleansing of the High Holy Days.

Tzeporah Berman

Yeah. Thank you for having me.

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