

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

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### **Episode 22 with Kumi Naidoo**

Kumi Naidoo

Human Rights & Environmental Justice Activist

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### **Transcript**

*Kumi Naidoo*

If we don't connect and we don't find the intersections between our different struggles, we are not going to be able to move forward.

*Vicki Robin*

Hi, Vicki Robin here, host of "What Could Possibly Go Right?", a project of the Post Carbon Institute. We interview cultural scouts to help us see more clearly so that we can act more courageously in these crazy times. I'm so pleased to introduce you to our guest today, Kumi Naidoo. He is a new friend of mine and I think that he'll be a new friend of yours. His biography starts with anti-apartheid protests in his native South Africa at 15 years old, and runs through many organizations and projects, most recently as International Executive Director of Greenpeace International, and Secretary General of Amnesty International. As of June 2020, Kumi has served as the first Global Ambassador for Africans Rising for Justice, Peace and Dignity. So for over forty years, Kumi has been a voice among many for social, economic and environmental justice. From his humble township upbringing in South Africa to his work as an anti-apartheid activist to his leadership of international NGOs, Kumi has remained rooted in Martin Luther King's creative maladjustment principles, refusing to normalize inequality and devoting himself to economic justice. So what a perfect person to speak with about what could possibly go right in these times; somebody who's seen so much and has some wisdom to share. Enjoy.

*Vicki Robin*

Hey, Kumi Naidoo. It's an honor to meet you. You bring a global perspective to the question that animates this Post Carbon Institute series, called "What Could Possibly Go Right?" You're my first guest with a truly global perspective rooted in the African continent, and concerned with human rights and climate consequences everywhere. So I'm especially eager to hear what you see about our current crisis, the spread of covid, the economic precarity, the K recovery with markets soaring and working class languishing, reckoning with racism and colonialism. So changemakers have expressed cautious hope that this finally might be the tipping point for a better future. But we're not interested in that. We're interested in the gritty hope, the hope that

comes less from our imagination and our convictions, and more from clear seeing what green shoots are actually sprouting in the rubble of failed systems, and how these are being watered and leveraged. So with that, I invite you to give us your honest answer, your honest intelligence to the question: What could possibly go right?

*Kumi Naidoo*

Thank you, Vicki, and thanks for having me on the program. There's so many things that are wrong, we need lots and lots of things to go right. I'll tackle a few. I think we are, for the first time, at the cusp of addressing one of the biggest challenges that humanity faces, and that is a broken, a fundamentally broken economic system. After the global financial crisis in 2008-2009, those with power responded with system recovery, system maintenance, system protection. And what we needed then, and what we need now is system innovation, system redesign and system transformation. So unless we address some core issues in the economy - and right now, I feel less lonely than I've felt in a very, very long time on some of these issues, because there are more and more voices that are saying it. Maybe not the majority, maybe not yet in the right numbers, but certainly much more louder, and no longer being relegated to the sidelines. So people are saying, for example, we need to contest the very idea of how we measure wealth, GDP, gross domestic product; what a friend of mine, Lorenzo Farah Monti, in his book called "gross domestic problem", because we've got a measurement of wealth, that just doesn't make any sense. So if you chop down an entire forest, for example, that's a tick on the positive side of GDP. There's many, many other examples one can give for a system of valuing people, valuing work and so on, which is broken. Associated with that is a pathological illness that you and others have called affluenza, which I define very simply as an illness where we have come to believe that a meaningful, prosperous, decent, dignified life comes from more and more and more and more and more material acquisitions. I am encouraged that we could get this right in this current moment where we are running out of time, and climate is fundamentally a problem of consumption and inequality. When I hear the young voices of so many activists, and also more and more parents and grandparents speaking out, I think we might be able to get it right; to address a broken economic system that has driven climate catastrophe. But to address that, it means a values change. Then let me just conclude this by saying, the other thing we have to get right, to get any of the other things right, is for activism to recognize that the power and the control that is exercised by those that are resisting change for decency and for justice, is not exercised primarily through the deployment of the repressive state apparatus, by which we mean the army, the police, formal laws and so on, which of course, exercise quite a lot of formal control. We need to recognize actually that the biggest form of control is more through the ideological state apparatus, the framework for education, the framework for schooling, and most critically, the framework for the media. So, in the United States, for example, you can have 40% of the American people, who sadly not through any fault of theirs, are not only getting an alternative set of opinions by Fox News, but that are getting an alternative set of facts. Right? And they can get away with it. Right? And so when we look at one of the things we need to get right in this moment, and I think we're going to get it right, because I'm seeing more investment in people thinking about how we communicate the messages, like affluenza. I mean, it's not the easiest thing to communicate, right? It's clever, if you have a certain level of education and knowledge and so on. But, we need to be thinking much more about whether, in fact, activism

far too often projects our consciousness on those that we are seeking to organize, mobilize and to engage in resistance together with; or whether what is needed right now - and this is what I hope we'll get right. Activism I hope will get right. More humility in activism, where we listen more to people on the ground, where we shift our gaze primarily from appealing to those in power, who know what we are repeatedly saying to them over and over again, and shift our gaze to those that are powerless, and to ensure that they can speak directly with the eloquence and power that is needed, which is much more irresistible for those in power, especially when we see large numbers of people being mobilized, than the work of our well-meaning activists who move ahead without taking the people who really need to be part of the conversation with them.

*Vicki Robin*

It's interesting what you're saying, because it's part of the learning of activists now; that no matter how smart and educated people with privilege are, they're not the voices that are needed. They need to step back, and lift up the voices of people who are actually directly experiencing the consequences of the broken system. Just when you're saying that, I wondered if it wasn't just sort of giving somebody else the stage, but that there is a greater moral force, when the voices of the people who are most impacted, speak with dignity about their situation; that it speaks to that which is human in all of us. So the power holders; what is it about those voices, that you think is maybe a tipping? Is it a sort of a tipping intervention?

*Kumi Naidoo*

I think the voices bring an urgency that only those that suffer an injustice can bring with the kind of eloquence, power and passion that makes it hard for the media to ignore or for policymakers and those in power to ignore as well. And second, I think that the voices are much more intersectional these days; by which I mean, that one of the weaknesses of activism for far too long has been we've been in our silos. Environmental justice, racial justice, and so on. We did not follow, we did not get right, and I do think that one of the things we can get right at this moment, which is to build on the wisdom that came from the feminist movement decades and decades ago, and the power of intersectionality. Admittedly, it's one of the most cumbersome words, but one of the most powerful words in terms of, if we don't connect, and we don't find the intersections between our different struggles, we are not going to be able to move forward, because those with power will continue to divide and rule us. So if you look at the question of development and addressing poverty and inequality and addressing climate, they've always been put as if they are contradictory. Governments get told, "Oh, we first have to develop and then we'll worry about climate", when climate today is the biggest underdevelopment issue. It's wiping out project after project effort, after effort, and so on. I think that's what excites me about some of the new voices, the intersectionality of it. I also see a more openness to civil disobedience and I think when we have governments who sadly all seem to be suffering from the same inability to hear the voices of people, then history has shown that it is only when decent men and women get up together and say, "Enough is enough. And what more, we're prepared to put our lives on the line. We're prepared to go to prison if necessary." History teaches us, only when people show that level of seriousness that those in power have to capitulate and give in to the just will of the people. That willingness for civil disobedience, I have

not seen it on the scale that I am seeing it at the moment, and I welcome it as somebody who's been advocating it for a long time. I hope it won't be too long, that I myself might get an opportunity to engage in an act of civil disobedience soon.

*Vicki Robin*

So, the movement I'm familiar with at the moment is XR where there's massive civil disobedience. Where else in the world do you see that rising up?

*Kumi Naidoo*

Oh, in Nigeria, as we speak right now. We are seeing a peaceful, massive uprising of people against police brutality in Nigeria, and people have been killed in the 10s of, I forget, about 60 people I believe have been killed already. And people are being told you cannot protest. They are peacefully breaking those laws. I can take you country after country after country. Right now in Belarus, a president stole an election. People have been on the street now, I think, for the seventh Sunday in a row and are not going anywhere, and even though violence has been deployed, and so on. So governments must recognize now that those that have lost legitimacy, it's going to become increasingly harder to hold on to power. But in reality, in far too many places in the world, we have people in power where they've colluded with election manipulation; who have used huge amounts of corporate money to engage in misinformation and disinformation and so on. We also have some tough choices to make. Right? The one thing that we could get right, is to ensure that we genuinely have democratic systems where people have a fair chance to run for political office and so on. That would be a very good thing to get right. Sadly, in far too many countries around the world today, we have the form of democracy without the substance of democracy. Just because we have elections doesn't necessarily mean we end up with a democratic outcome.

*Vicki Robin*

Right, and sounds like it's almost like civil disobedience is the form of real democracy at the moment.

*Kumi Naidoo*

Yeah. I mean, I wouldn't say it's only civil disobedience. It's all forms of participative democracy. Let me say that. One of the things we must get right in this moment of such great challenge, is how we also think about mobilization and organization. In far too many conversations I have been privy to over the many, many years, especially at the global level, is when people talk about, how do we engage people? People engagement and so on. It's very much as if the people are there and we are here, one. Two, is also very much the people don't have power. We as activists have some power, by education or knowledge or so on; access of some sort, you know? We can sort the problem out. We have to recognize that people are mobilizing today, not waiting for leadership to come from any particular place. In fact, if you think about an image, there's a book called *Spider and the Starfish: The Unstoppable Power of Leaderless Organizations*. Why spider and why starfish? A spider is hierarchically structured. You chop its head, the spider sort of dies. Starfish, you chop one of its arms, I believe they're called; they grow another starfish, right? So it's for decentralized versus centralized forms of organizing. We

need to be more starfish in our way of mobilizing, now also because of Depression coming from the States, and so on. So right now, I think we need to have the courage to ask ourselves whether in fact, we are making the same mistake that Albert Einstein once warned us not to make; when he said, "The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again, expecting to get different results." People like you and me, we've been in this marathon for decades, right? I think it's fair enough for the younger generation to ask us that and say, "What do you have to show?" Right? And I think it's up to our generation not to be defensive, to have humility to say, "Folks, we tried our best. But let's look back together at what we got wrong." History is a good teacher. And let's look at the current moment, which is different from any other moment. And let's look at how we marry new ways of thinking, creative uses of social media, all of those things; and take the best of what we can learn from history in terms of activism. It's not to say, there's nothing good in the history of activism, or lots of good things there. But sometimes I think we have been inorganic, in how we have tried to draw from history in the current moment, because things are moving so fast. People get upset with me when I say what I'm about to say, and that is I believe that the conservatives, Steve Bannon and company, are much better at understanding a very simple fact. And that is politics follows culture. Culture does not follow politics. Right? What I mean by that is, culture is central to the way people make political choices; to spend their spare time, where they worship, what music they watch, how they engage with families, and so on. If activism cannot look and understand that and see where people are, and meet people where they are at, and then bring them or shift them or engage them in a way that moves them to a more progressive and more courageous place. When I was, I think I was a 16 years old activist, I came across something from the Philippine Rural Reconstruction Movement. One of the leaders wrote this wisdom about how to mobilize and organize and it said: Go to the people, live with them, learn from them, start with what they know, build on what they understand. And ensure that when struggle is won, victory has been achieved, the people must say, "We have done it by ourselves." I think that wisdom I will fight for today with the younger generation, I say that wisdom still applies. But there are many things that we have done that have not delivered the successes that we needed to have done on human rights. Think about human rights, did you and I think after the fall of the Berlin Wall that today we'll be looking at a situation where we have a fascist in the White House? Where we have at least about 10 political heads of state for whom xenophobia is routine, sexism is routine, denying climate? Well, they're finding it harder and harder to deny climate as Mother Nature speaks in voluminous terms; seems louder than the climate scientists have done. So it's becoming irresistible to deny climate and so on. So given all of this, we must be - my generation of activists. I'm appealing to them in this moment of transition - is to engage in... We have things to offer, possibly. But we need to make space, we need to listen, we need to encourage new leadership. Let me say, if there's one thing that keeps my energy going right now, is the creativity, the innovation of the new social energies that are emerging. That and maybe I end my comments by saying this as a challenge. Many of us, you know... I've written books, I've done videos, I've done any number of policy papers, have been part of doing policy papers. And I then see an act of cultural resistance, that communicated a million times louder than all those policy papers, which dealt with the question of racial justice, right? I'm thinking of all activism on racial justice, the taking the knee. That simple, positive act of taking the knee communicated in volumes much louder than those policy papers and so on do. I'm not saying they're not

important. But I'm saying that they've been far too important. But if activism is simply about getting good positions, and appealing to the people at the top, and hoping that they're going to do the right thing, life would be very simple. But activism today has to be about ensuring that people have the tools, the good information, can make informed choices, can mobilize and organize and appeal their own voices. Because when people who are directly impacted by an issue, whatever that issue is, when they speak, they speak with greater eloquence, greater clarity, and greater power.

*Vicki Robin*

I think you've just described Greta Thunberg, you know? And many, many others. I thank you for this. And I just want to say, and I don't think it's in any defense of our generation's failures. When I felt like such a failure, because I had been in a decade's worth of work of trying to change consumerism, and you know, nada; the young people I met said, "Please don't think that. You broke open the ice. You broke open the space. We need your shoulders. Do not collapse." So I think there's a humility and an availability and a dignity of just: Okay, this is a very long struggle, and we are a piece of it, and maybe our arrogance thought we would nail it by now, but we haven't. But we're part of a long chain of struggle, and we can celebrate the emergence right now. I think what you're saying is going right is the dignity and strength of Black Lives Matter; is the dignity and strength of the uprisings that you see in Belarus, in Nigeria, and probably many, many other places. I think that's what we need to ground our faith in that, whatever that is, that is in the human community, not human individuals, in human community, that again and again asserts the dignity of all humans. It's like the old - I learned this from a Lakota elder; he says that, "You don't want to be good. You just want to be 51% good." It's like you need those darker energies, but basically, we're moving together. We're moving something forward. I think what you're saying, or at least what I'm taking from what you're saying is, it's time to keep the faith no matter what the evidence is out there.

*Kumi Naidoo*

Yeah, if I can maybe share one last anecdote. And this is a sad story, but it's intended to be inspirational. When I was 22 years old and was fleeing South Africa into exile, one of my best friends at the time, Lenny Naidoo; we were fleeing in different directions, we hugged each other, shed some tears, and at that time, he asked me a question. "What's the biggest contribution we can make to the cause of humanity?" And I said, "Giving our life" and he said, "You mean, when participating in demonstration and getting shot and killed, in becoming a martyr" and I said, "I guess so." Because that was happening in South Africa every weekend; that in every week at that time, and every other weekend, we were at funerals burying people who had been murdered by the regime. He said, "No, that's the wrong answer." He said, "It's not giving your life, but giving the rest of your life." I was 22 years old at the time. I didn't understand what Lenny was saying. He was way ahead of us. He was the only person amongst us who understood the intersection between environmental justice and racial justice. I jokingly say at that time, I think he was like one of the only maybe 5000 voluntary vegetarians on the entire African continent. He was a special person. Anyway, he goes into exile. He gets shot and killed two years later, together with a three young woman from my own city, Durban. I had to think deep and hard about the distinction he was making between giving your life versus giving the

rest of your life. What he was saying is that the struggle for justice, economic justice, social justice, climate justice, gender justice, whatever justice; these struggles are marathons, not sprints. Those of us that have had the privilege to understand injustice, either through education or through exposure, or through involvement, the biggest contribution we can make is not to give up. Not to give up, right? Not to stop, because the biggest contribution we make is to have the perseverance, the stamina, and the courage to push and push and push until those injustices are dislodged. Now, some people when they look at the climate science now say, maybe it's too late already, and so on. Even to those people who take the view that it's too late, I am still an optimist who says the window is small and closing, but the window is still open for us to secure the overwhelming majority of humanity. I admit that the window is closing; but even to those who believe that the window is closed already and we have to just prepare for the worst now, I say to them: Let's not let those that brought humanity to this point of destruction get away with the injustices that it created. Activism still has meaning even if you take that position, so that history must record that there were some people who genuinely try to push against the madness of overconsumption and inequality like we've never seen before, and that it was a minority that got us to this point, so that if humanity were to ever emerge again after a catastrophe, then maybe they won't make the same mistakes we made. On that cheery note!

*Vicki Robin*

It is actually cheery, because it says we have it in us to persevere, and I believe that and you've brought me to tears.

*Kumi Naidoo*

And it's not good for mental health. It's not good for mental health for us to see injustice and not have a chance to express it. Because we are taking all that injustice and bottling it up inside of us. I have seen friends of mine, family of mine, people in my community and so on; when people are stripped of voice, when they're stripped of participation, it's the worst thing to be. As has been said before, even the pessimism of our analysis can be overcome by the optimism of our action. That's not my words, but they're good words.

*Vicki Robin*

Good words to end on. I thank you so, so much for your incredibly deeply informed perspectives on what could go right. I think we dug pretty deep into that question, and I appreciate it. So thank you Kumi.

*Kumi Naidoo*

Yeah. Thank you very much, Vicki.

*Vicki Robin*

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