

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

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Episode 26 with Julian Brave NoiseCat

Julian Brave NoiseCat

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Transcript

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The ability I think for people to retain a sense of community, a commitment to who we are as people, and to create and make beauty at the other side of truly devastating circumstances does give me hope.

Vicki Robin

Hi, I'm Vicki Robin, 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 we can act more courageously in turbulent times. Today's guest is Julian Brave NoiseCat. He chose to talk about three stories he's reporting on now; beautiful stories of resilience, honor, tradition, and irony. While Julian was featuring other stories, I say these are the very qualities I saw in him. Officially, he is Vice President of Policy and Strategy for Data for Progress. He's the Narrative Change Director for the Natural History Museum. He's a Fellow of the Type Media Center, NDN Collective, and the Center for Human and Nature. His work has appeared in The New York Times, The New Yorker, Rolling Stone and other publications. Julian grew up in Oakland, California, and is a proud member of the Canim Lake Band, and descendant of Lil'Wat Nation of Mount Currie. So enjoy Julian.

Vicki Robin

Hi, Julian, and welcome to "What Could Possibly Go Right?". It's an honor to talk with you today. So as a journalist and a storyteller, as a data policy analyst for progressive causes, and in some way as an interpreter and advocate for Indigenous peoples in North America, and probably a lot more roles and hats and hearts I don't know about, you will have a unique perspective on our core question. In one interview I've listened to, you quoted someone saying, "Indigenous people are post-apocalyptic people." And what we're going through now as a nation feels nigh on to apocalyptic. So in this potent moment, when so much is falling apart, and it's not clear how our world is going to reassemble itself, put on your headlamp and shine a light in to the contentious and murky landscape ahead and tell us what you see. What encouraging green shoots are sprouting? What do you see could possibly go right?

Julian Brave NoiseCat

Well, firstly, thank you so much, Vicki, for reaching out and asking me this question. Just the fact that people are asking this question actually gives me a small measure of hope. So I really, really appreciate that. You know, I was thinking really hard about what my response to this question might be. And, as you said, I wear a lot of hats. So I, as a policy person, a wonk, an advocate, I get to see how politicians and social movements and organizations all interact and how they put together things that could potentially someday become laws. I was originally going to talk about that. But at the end of the day, I don't think that that's actually the thing that inspires people. I'm actually not even sure that that's what really inspires me. Policies on the page are not the thing that makes me get up and get excited in the morning, although certainly, I think that it'd be cool if our country passed some remarkable and historic laws to take on climate change and deliver social justice and all those sorts of things. Obviously, that's important. But it's not what gets me, you know, what makes me feel things at the end of the day. I do think that it's important for progress and justice to make us feel things. I think that the real.... When social change and justice and compassion are happening, it makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand up, I think; makes me feel things. It's beautiful. And so I was thinking about some of the other work that I do, which is as a reporter, and as a journalist, and some of the seemingly small but remarkable things that post-apocalyptic people, my people, Indigenous people, are doing to bring ourselves back from the depths of a genocide, the loss of an entire continent. And really, truly more than that; an entire world, loss of languages, cultures, the knowledge that those things held. The immense amounts of death and devastation that isn't something that just happened, you know, 100 or 200 or 300 years ago, but is still something that our people, our families, our loved ones, that we are still dealing with.

Julian Brave NoiseCat

So I've thought about three stories. The first is just really briefly actually how that post-apocalyptic idea first came to me. It wasn't actually originally my idea. Most of my ideas aren't actually my ideas. They're things that other smart people say or tell me or things that I observed in the reporting that I do. And that was a little over two years ago now, when I was invited to participate in a literary festival in Paris. I was there with this Blackfoot guy named Cowboy. So he's an Indian guy whose parents named him Cowboy so he had a pretty good sense of humor, that one did. We were touring around this castle in the town of Vincennes just outside of Paris, and he told me about, well he had said this thing about Indigenous people being a post-apocalyptic people on a panel. When we were sitting there in front of this hall full of French people, I obviously could hear what he had said first because I understood English so I heard it a little bit before and it really made me go, "Wow." I knew exactly what he meant when he said it, but I had never heard it articulated exactly that way. Then later, we were hanging out and he was talking about how he had just gone to Scotland and visited Castle Calgary, and Castle Calgary is the castle in Scotland that shares the same name as Calgary, Alberta, which is the major city that is located in what is now, or in what IS Blackfoot territory. He told me about this idea that he had to reclaim or maybe even buy if he could figure out some wealthy person to finance it, Castle Calgary, and rename it Moh-kins-tsis which is the - I probably didn't pronounce it exactly right - but it's the original Blackfoot word for the city of Calgary. So he basically wanted

to do a reverse colonization of this castle in Scotland and reclaim it on behalf of his people, the Blackfoot people. I don't know, I think that just in the capacity of people who have... The Blackfeet endured massacres against their people. They resisted, they endured purposeful efforts of starvation by the Canadian government. That was the way in which the Crown actually pushed First Nations on the plains to settle with treaties its claims to its land. And the fact that someone who descends from that and is living in the long and enduring aftermath of that can still become and grow to become a filmmaker and come up with crazy fun ideas like reclaiming Castle Calgary and renaming it his peoples' name for the city of Calgary is kind of awesome, you know? The ability of humans through art and creativity to do things like that, to me suggests that as we approach and enter what are again apocalyptic circumstances - with climate change, with the pandemic, with the rise of right-wing tendencies towards fascism and racism - the ability for people to retain a sense of community, a commitment to who we are as people, and to create and make beauty at the other side of truly devastating circumstances, I think does give me a bit of hope that no matter what we face, and what our ancestors have faced, we can pull out to the other sides of these things, with hope and with a sense of who we are, and even with fun and crazy and cool dreams. So that was the first story.

Julian Brave NoiseCat

Then the second story that I was thinking about is a podcast, actually, that I'm working on right now; follows a young woman named Cheyenne Brady, who was a former Miss Indian World titleholder. So Miss Indian World is the biggest powwow princess in all the world and so powwows are these intertribal celebrations of song and dance; kind of like rodeos. If you've ever been to a rodeo, each powwow celebration will often have its own princess and representative, who then throughout the rest of the year travels to a whole bunch of other celebrations and powwows representing the celebration that she is the titleholder for and then inviting people to come to that celebration the next year. Usually if you hold that title, you have to carry yourself in a particular way and then you also have to do a large giveaway to signal that your family has been honored by this thing and that you're now ready to pass on the title to the next titleholder. There's this notion in a lot of Indigenous cultures that to be truly wealthy is to give what you have away, which I think is a very different relationship to riches and wealth. So Cheyenne was the biggest powwow princess in the whole world. She was the powwow princess for the gathering of nations, which is the largest annual powwow that's held - absent a pandemic - held every year in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and there's often dozens of young women who try out to become Miss Indian World. They get judged on their speaking ability, their dancing ability, their knowledge of their traditions and culture and arts, and things like that. An essay, you know, these sorts of things. It's not like the Miss USA pageant, it's a different kind of thing. At the end of the process, someone gets crowned in Miss Indian World and Cheyenne won this title. So she bears still, even though she's no longer the titleholder, a lot of responsibility in her community. She lives in the Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara Nation, which is a reservation in North Dakota, actually in the heart of fracking country in North Dakota. She's a young woman. Now she's a young mother. And she's a community leader and someone who's really looked to in her community to lead and to solve a lot of problems. One of the big problems and big challenges that's facing Indian country right now is we're doing a census, right? The United States is conducting it. It's every decade, we conduct a census. And as a rule, since we've been doing

the census, Native people have been the most undercounted group by the census. We, more so than any other people, are considered the hardest to count, of the hard to count. In 2010, there was something like a 4 to 5% undercount of Native people, which really matters; more so than even just the numbers. The census determines, essentially, political representation in the House of Representatives; determines how the 435 seats in the House of Representatives are apportioned. It also determines the allocation of federal spending on all sorts of different programs, from schools, to hospitals, to roads, all of those things. Of course, Indian country is especially reliant on those things, not only because we are often the poorest of the poor, but also because Indian country is considered Federal land. So a lot of the Federal programs that we rely upon are apportioned based upon the census. We are disproportionately dependent upon that funding. So Cheyenne was tapped by her tribe's leadership to lead the census efforts on her reservation, to do what has essentially been an impossible task for people going back decades, which is to make sure everyone on her reservation is counted. It's a very simple task. It sounds like it's a very simple task, but it's an incredibly difficult thing to do. It's an incredibly important civic exercise. You know, on one level, it's about making sure that Native people count, but on a deeper level, it's about making sure Native people aren't once again erased. Of course, our country has erased Native people since its inception. It's also about not just what does it mean to be counted, but what does it mean to count? What does it mean to matter? What does it mean to be visible in that kind of a way? I've been following Cheyenne as she's tried to make sure that everybody in her tribe is counted, and everybody in her tribe is seen to matter by the federal government, a government that has throughout its history insisted that Native people do not matter, do not count; it's okay if we do not count them. Just watching someone like Cheyenne go about what has been an impossible task for so many people with grace and grit and determination, and a "can't quit, won't quit" attitude. Even as I've asked her and interviewed her for hours and hours now, if she's mad at any point about the situation she's been put into, the fact that the federal government has made this an impossible scenario, that it's impossible and then you get a pandemic on top of it. She never has, because at the end of the day, I think that there is a calmness and beauty in the leadership that is emerging out of Native communities and honestly is being driven and led by Native women in seeing the imperative and need to rise to the occasion; that at the end of the day, coming back from the brink of genocide and annihilation requires leadership and often requires care and attention and that very often it's Native women who are doing those things. Her story also inspired me and gave me hope.

Julian Brave NoiseCat

The last story that I've been writing and reporting that's almost published, but I haven't quite published it when we're taping this, is the story of two Navajo medicine people on the Navajo reservation. They live in a town called Sanders, which is in the southern and western portion of the Navajo Nation. It's an area where many Navajo were relocated, actually, after what's called the Navajo Hopi Land Settlement Act of 1974. This was a very recent relocation of as many as 15,000 Navajo families from their ancestral homelands that was carried out nominally because of a dispute over the boundaries between the Navajo and Hopi reservations, but really truthfully, because there was interest from a coal corporation, Peabody Coal actually, in getting at the coal underneath those lands. And so they're descended - actually, they're not descended; they ARE

some of the people who were displaced from the parts of the Navajo Nation that were that absorbed by the Hopi reservation and then opened up to Peabody Coal. Amidst the pandemic, the Tsosies is their name, David and Bess Tsosie, their grandparents, have been living in one of the most impacted places in the world by the Coronavirus. The Navajo Nation has a population density about equal to Siberia, but had a per capita Coronavirus cases higher actually than Wuhan China, than the Hubei province in China when cases there peaked earlier in the summer. So they're living amidst one of the most impacted communities not just in the United States, but actually the world by this pandemic. Amidst all of this, as many of their family members are falling ill, many of their friends are catching the virus and then not getting adequate treatment because Indian Health Service, the federal agency that provides health care for Native people, is funded about a third of what Medicare and Medicaid are funded. So it's a deeply underfunded agency. When the pandemic started, the Navajo Nation had all of a few dozen ventilators and other forms of essential protective equipment. Amidst all this, they start tending their traditional garden, their corn, their squash, things that actually were handed down to them from their parents and the parents before them, all the way back to the Navajo Longest Walk where the Navajo people were sent on a long walk out of their homelands to Bosco Redondo. This is corn that they're planting that's descended from corn that was hidden by their ancestors, so that it wouldn't get burned down by Kit Carson in the United States military. So that's the corn that they're planting and they're caring for this tradition that stretches back all the way to the Navajo creation story. At the same time as they're doing that, they're transitioning their healing practice essentially as medicine people to a socially-responsible work-from-home telehealth model. They're figuring out how, in the middle of a pandemic, are we going to hold these prayer ceremonies for a community that we have always had, that is at this time in need of us now more than ever; in need of prayers, in need of that connection and community that you get out of faith. How are we going to do this in a way that is responsible and socially distanced during the pandemic? And ultimately, the Navajo Nation actually handled the Coronavirus very responsibly. In September, the Navajo Nation actually reached the point where there were days when there were no new cases of coronavirus reported on the reservation. So the tribe with very limited infrastructure - 30% of homes don't even have electricity, 10% don't even have running water - one of the least resourced places in the United States actually did the job correctly. Amidst all this, Navajo people like Bess and David Tsosie, they found ways to carry forward their tradition, the things that had been handed down to them, and to pass them on to their kids and to translate them into socially responsible and healthy models.

Julian Brave NoiseCat

I think between all of those stories, the creativity that Cowboy showed, the determination and grit and leadership that Cheyenne has showed, and the content, continuity and commitment to carry forward tradition, but also to bring tradition into not just the 21st century, but also into an era of social distancing, that David and Bess showed; I think that there are small but remarkable and beautiful things that people who are living in some of the hardest circumstances in this country, some of the hardest circumstances that humans have faced, are figuring out how to live in a way that is compassionate, that is beautiful, that is creative, that brings not just meaning and joy to themselves, but to other people around them. I think that, at the end of the day, of

course, we need to do laws, we need to do policies, but the things that we can do as people to live in that sort of dignified, beautiful, humble, creative, compassionate way to make in our small interactions, and in the people and family and communities we have around us, to make good things happen. I'm always amazed at the things that I see in Indian country, and I think that makes me just a little bit hopeful.

Vicki Robin

Wow. Thank you, because that was so well done, because you did your own summation. What I'm noticing, the adjectives that I'm noticing in the stories, they have, I think the word is honor. It's like honoring the past, honoring tradition, being put into a role of leadership, like the World Princess, and understanding that that is a responsibility to her family, to the community. It's almost like a different relationship than - normally, right now, people are frantic and they're upset and the media is reflecting back to us, reflecting back to us upsetting things. So upset; we're sort of in upset and when you're upset, you can forget. You can forget the strength that you were given, whether it's by your parents or teacher or religion; you can forget these things. So I think there is going to be, as we go forward, there's going to be perseverance. Perseverance is going to be like, we're going to have to, and yet she persisted. We're going to have to persevere. To know stories of a people - and I did my research, and I know that you are from Indigenous and Jewish lineages, both of which are peoples who have persevered, who've carried forward, who've used the strength of community and family and tradition, and understood that you're carrying something really valuable; honoring what you're carrying, not diminishing it, saying a lot, "That was the old ways. And now there's, like, this new cool thing called video games." You know? I feel inspired by that, and that there are people among us who know how to persevere and they know what qualities of spirit, whether it's having a great sense of humor, an irony, and never giving up your mojo to the difficulties that are being thrust upon you. Thank you so much for going to the heart of the matter, because I think you're not telling stories of the old "rah rah" of if everybody does a little, we can do a lot. These are not, like, every little blade of grass, every starfish. These are stories of dignity. I think that we need these stories and we can carry them in our hearts, not just our minds. Policies, we'll carry in our minds, and the policies need to embody those. They need to be like baskets that hold the spirit and the people going forward. Anyway, that was my little summation of your summation, and I really appreciate your stories. Thanks so much for joining us.

Julian Brave NoiseCat

Thank you so much for having me. I mean, at the end of the day, I just feel really honored and fortunate that people, in my writing and journalism work, feel comfortable sharing with me their stories and trusting me to tell them and treat them fairly and with kindness and dignity and to tell them well. I think that's what's important.

Vicki Robin

Yes, and to find the stories that in their specificity and in their heart, somehow tell the larger story. Not imposing an intellectual frame on real people who are doing real things, but honoring the reality of it.

Vicki Robin

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