Vicki Robin
Hi, I'm Vicki Robin. In partnership with the Post Carbon Institute, I'm hosting short to the point conversations with diverse cultural scouts, asking each one the same question: What could possibly go right? The invitation is to see through these wise eyes What is opening up in the present moment, as normal as up ended and next is not at all clear. These conversations were recorded a few months into the pandemic, and in the weeks following the murder of George Floyd. Let's see what today's guest says.

Vicki Robin
Yay. Here we are. I'm here with Susi Moser for a conversation about What could possibly go right? So just to introduce Susi or Dr. Susanne Moser: She is Director and Principal Researcher of Susanne Moser Research and Consulting in Hadley, Massachusetts. She's also an Affiliated Faculty in the Department of Landscape Architecture and Regional Planning at the University of Massachusetts Amherst and a Research Faculty in the Environmental Studies Department at Antioch University in New England. She's a geographer by training, with an interest in how social science can inform society's responses to global challenge. She's worked in coastal areas, urban and rural communities, and forest-reliant communities, and on human health issues. I know from doing my research, Susi, that you think about hope, and hope in hard times; hope in impossible and unthinkable and unbearable predicaments. You don't have to talk about hope but the question that we're asking people is pretty much in that realm of not wishful thinking, but just observing what's so in this moment. What do you see as a cultural scout, as to what could possibly go right?

Dr. Susanne Moser
I love that framing. It's so beautiful how it directs our attention to things that we as researchers certainly don't usually think about. It's mostly what's wrong and what do we do about those things? So "hope": this is an interesting starting point. You know, one of the things that I often say to the people who ask me, "How can we possibly have hope in this time?" is that hope is something that requires us to look at the very truth that is, and then from there, see what is possible. What is a worthy outcome that we might work toward? What possible steps could we take in along the way to in that direction? And hope is a thing that you need in times like these, in times of great uncertainty. If I asked you, if you're completely convinced that we're doomed, or if you're completely convinced, all is going to be fine, you don't need hope. Right? Hope requires uncertainty. Only if the future isn't written can we possibly wish for hope. One of the things that I really appreciate, and in answer to your question "What could possibly go right" at the moment, is that we're all experiencing this uncertainty. There is more truth telling at this moment than certainly at any point in my lifetime, which is more than 50 years. I have not experienced the time when people are so willing to name what seemed pretty much unspeakable, just two months ago, four months ago; and to open up the conversation in areas that were off limit of the conversation, right? I mean, the racism, the political system, the right to vote, all these things. Yeah, a few groups have mentioned that, but it's everywhere now. I don't think this is just my selective, you know, Google's search engine that is trained to look at these things. You open the newspapers, and it comes from every corner right now; how we are not just saying we've got to stop the racism, we've got to stop the police brutality. We're beginning to have conversations about what could community safety look like. I mean, that's an incredibly generative question. So in the midst of all this uncertainty and hitting the limits of what we thought was possible, we're opening up to possibilities. To me, those are some of the core ingredients of hope; that we have sort of a real assessment of how bad things are, and we're beginning to at least search together for what could be a possible meaningful, better future.

Vicki Robin

I agree. This sense, I have this sense too of this aperture opening, is sort of like eyes wide open and now wider open. So for me, the interrelationship between the issues that I've cared about, whether it's #MeToo, or climate, or the smarmy underbelly of the money system, or racism; all of these, activists have talked about intersectionality and it seems sort of like a formal term for something. But now, it's so clear that all of these streams are participating in a sort of a core generative story that seems to be breaking apart.

Dr. Susanne Moser

I think what you just said, the breaking apart, that seems such a crucial piece, right? As long as we hold on to what is and we keep the story intact, there is no opening. So what feels like the end of the world, what feels like the collapse of so many things is actually... it's painful, no doubt... but it is actually making it possible for transformation to begin. As a long path to it, there's absolutely no guarantee we're going to move in a positive direction at all, because the darker forces are just as hard at work as the rest of us. But I think this is necessary, a necessary precondition that things fall apart.

Vicki Robin

Yeah, and you brought up that question that I found so powerful too, about what would community safety look like? It's not just sort of some angry "Defund the police because we hate them". It's like, okay, no, defund the model of community safety and find, ask what another model is. That's such an amazing question. So, in what you look at in terms of climate, I know that that's been a focus for you. What would be some generative questions of that ilk that we could be asking now that things are breaking apart? The climate issue is not in the front and centre at the moment. The pandemic isn't racism, but it's like right there in the wings. What questions, what would open and keep open that aperture around climate, which seems like we're so far, almost over the edge?

Dr. Susanne Moser

Yeah. Well, it's challenging and let me just say that I don't think climate change has been forced to retreat into the wings entirely because the issue has not gone away by any stretch of the imagination. In fact, many of the trends are accelerating as we speak. The sea level rise is such that people have, even during beautiful weather, have flooding in their streets. Water is coming up through the sewer system. You know, everybody is looking with great anxiety to stronger hurricane season predicted for this year than the previous year. So it's not exactly in the far edges. Having said that, you know what I'm seeing, and I have observed over the last several months is that and I'll just make it really graphic: During a crisis, our concerns become very basic, right? It's about toilet paper and food and keeping the housing over our heads. So it's really at the very bottom, if you will, of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. But let's tie that for a moment to this idea of community safety. So one layer of safety in the face of climate change, a pandemic, an economic crisis, or crime or any other form of violence and whatnot, would be that we have those basic needs met. How to create food systems, how to create industries, businesses, that are resilient in the face of shocks that have the flexibility to go from in-person to online almost seamlessly; those kinds of things, without crashing the entire economy of a community or a nation for that matter. Those would be the bottom line of safety concerns that I would think a community has to deal with. But to reimagine, what does our local community look like? Or our local economy look like? How are we dependent on things that happen far away? And what do we do? What's the redundancy we can build into the system to not be so vulnerable when something happens, like a pandemic or a shock far away that has all these different ways to ripple to our shores? I think those kinds of questions would be very important

to ask. I actually have seen some beginning conversations of thinking about resilience and recovery in that broader term; not just let's go back to exactly what we had before the pandemic or the economic crisis, but now that we have recovery dollars, what actually do we want to invest them in? How do we create that greater resilience to the complexity and compound simultaneous events, that inevitably will happen? I think what we're experiencing right now is a little bit of a preview for compounding crises of the future in a much more disrupted climate system and environmental system. So to me, that's sort of the base, the first question, that layer of safety to meet our basic human needs. But then after that, it's the higher needs in Maslow's pyramid, right? Who do we want to be with each other? Who do we want to be as individuals within that collective of a community? If we're not emotionally safe, if we're not politically safe to express our differences, our uniquenesses, then I don't think we have community safety. I think the anti racist uprising that we're seeing right now is one very, very loud reminder, long overdue reminder that that form of safety of expression has been curtailed for centuries. So it goes from the very basic to the higher aspirations of who we are as human beings. Quite frankly with that, can we even expand our notions of community and include the non human beings around us as being part of that safety?

Vicki Robin
So I hear - and I know that we have to keep it really short - but what I'm hearing as a focal point is this question of safety. When everything's going hunky dory, you don't need hope and you don't really even have to think about safety. That's all being handled in some background level; everything just works and I get to go on with my life. But right now under threat, safety and public safety and community safety seems really important and people recognize it at the level of toilet paper. We're recognizing at the level of policing, just even the question, "What keeps us safe?" without even having an answer seems to be a little sort of worm that could run through some of the many conversations and thoughts we have.

Dr. Susanne Moser
Well, it's one that concerns us right now because we have been so shaken in what we thought was background and we took it for granted. When I say we, it's mostly us privileged ones who were able to let that all be background. People who live in neighbourhoods where there is constant police violence, where there is constant violence of all sorts, women who are not safe from men in crises, whether that is people who are in the path of storms... I mean, there's so many layers to ways in which our existence is not at all assured and our lives are precarious. I think this moment is shaking these foundations of belief so strongly that we actually have a chance of waking up to it. And to really question, is the way we have created safety actually inclusive? Is it there for everyone? Is it really safe? We can create illusions of safety that are on the backs of others, or that just push the problem a little bit further down the line, but are not really solidly anchoring our existence at all. I think this is the opportunity in this moment that we ask it. You could have thrown me a different bone and maybe I would have started the conversation from a different angle. But I think it's a useful one to really think about that and in the uncertainty of not being assured of our existence, of our safety; how then do we want to create our lives, recreate them with each other, with the earth?

Vicki Robin
Well, let's call that a wrap because it's so good. Thank you so much, Susi. I'm gonna chew on that for a long time to come. Okay.

Dr. Susanne Moser
My pleasure.

Vicki Robin
May you be safe. May you be well. May all that you love, be safe and be well And may all be well.

Dr. Susanne Moser
Yeah, for everyone.

Vicki Robin
Yeah for everyone. So safety is sort of a core prayer from our hearts. That may all be safe. Okay my friend. Ciao ciao. Bye.