

*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*

Hi, Vicki Robin here, hosting cultural scouts to shine a light on the road ahead. Normal is over. Next is a mystery. Now what? And we're asking: What could possibly go right? We're with Tim DeChristopher and Tim disrupted an illegitimate Bureau of Land Management oil and gas auction in December of 2008, by posing as Bidder 70 and outbidding oil companies for parcels around Arches and Canyonlands National Parks in Utah. For his act of civil disobedience, DeChristopher was sentenced to two years in federal prison. Held for a total of 21 months, his imprisonment earned him an international media presence as an activist and political prisoner of the United States government. He has used this as a platform to spread the urgency of the climate crisis and the need for bold confrontational action in order to create a just and healthy world. Tim uses his prosecution as an opportunity to organize the climate justice organization Peaceful Uprising in Salt Lake City and most recently co-founded Climate Disobedience Center, which exists to support a growing community of climate dissidents who take risks of acting commensurate with the scale and urgency of the crisis. So, just before I pitch you the question, Tim, I'm going to read off something that Wendell Berry said to you in a recent interview in Orion Magazine, because it seems to fit. He said, "The argument for despair is impenetrable, it's invulnerable. You've got all the cards. You've got the statistics, the science, the projections on your side. But then we're still sitting here with our hands hanging down, not doing anything. One of the characteristics of the machine civilization is determinism. You'll find plenty of people who'll tell you there's nothing you can do, it's inevitable. You can't make an organization to refute that; you've got to do it yourself. You've got to cleanse that mess out of your heart." So, here we are with this question. You can ignore the setup, but the question is: What in all of this mess right now could possibly go right?

*Tim DeChristopher*

Well, I think that's a really interesting question for this time. Leading into it with that quote from Wendell Berry from our conversation, which I actually had with him last summer and then was published by Orion this spring; it just gives me perspective on just how much my own point of reference has shifted since last year, just since that interview that I did with Wendell and how much that impacts my view on what's going on right now and what could be emerging. Two big ways that my perspective has shifted is, one, after having spent the last five years living in Pawtucket, Rhode Island in an urban predominantly people of color community. I moved at the beginning of this year out to Chepachet, Rhode Island to an intentional community with a permaculture farm. We're an isolated little community here in a rural, conservative and very strongly predominantly white part of the state. So that's a big shift for me that obviously gives me a different perspective, particularly as we're in another moment of resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement and that national conversation. I'm in a very different viewpoint now, being in this conservative white community that I have been for some of the last few surges in the Black Lives Matter movement. The other thing that has shifted my view on things, I think, is that last November, I got rid of all my social media, just deleted it all and got rid of it because I felt like it was impacting my thinking so much, hindering my own creativity, hindering my own empowerment and creating so much internal self-censorship that I had really internalized a lot of that social media culture of critique, so that it was already happening before I even explore an

idea or explore a project. So obviously, looking at these cultural phenomenon that we're experiencing right now, without social media for me, is very different than where I've been the last decade of being on Twitter and getting a lot of my cultural feedback through that. We've had the conversation here in our little community about what is different this time around with this resurgence of Black Lives Matter. One of the things that to me feels different, which I realized may just be because I'm not on social media - and if I'm totally wrong about this, don't correct me - is that this moment feels so much more productive and cooperative from a movement perspective, less focused on purity and self righteousness and those dynamics of shaming and trying to one up each other and kicking people out of our movement boat, that I think are so destructive of social movements. I'm seeing and feeling a lot less of that, with what I'm seeing right now from the protests that I've been a part of and stuff like that. I really hope that that's true and that it's not just the absence of social media in my life. I'm encouraged by that, that we've worked through some of those destructive social movement dynamics and are ready to really claim power and get shit done here. So that's really exciting to me, and of course, seeing a Black Lives Matter movement through the eyes of a conservative white community, on the ground at the local level, is a different perspective for me that I've had for a while. It's been probably a decade since I've lived in a rural conservative community like this. That to me has also been encouraging because I know that on lots of online sites and sources of information, it's easy to highlight the ugliest backlash to calls for racial justice and the ugliest iterations of white supremacy and racism. I think it is important to pay attention to those and I don't want to wipe those out; but it's interesting for me to now be seeing that at the grassroots level and not seeing that resentment and backlash and sort of paranoia that somebody's coming for our privilege. Seeing a lot of folks that are just like, "Well, yeah, obviously they got a right to be pissed off." People that just get it. They might not be showing up, they might not be really taking a stand on the side of racial justice, but they do seem to be understanding the same reality of the world that those of us who are out there fighting for racial justice and fighting to try to overthrow white supremacy are seeing as well. That to me is encouraging because it's been so easy, particularly over the past decade, to just feel like we've got this divergent cultural evolution happening in our culture and there's a huge portion of our country that must be living on a different planet because they're experiencing such a different reality. It's kind of nice to see that plenty of that silent middle of the country are still seeing the same reality even if they're not necessarily taking to the streets or taking to the internet to speak up about it. So all that is encouraging for me.

*Vicki Robin*

I'm so interested in what you're saying. My experience with social media - and I'm a Boomer so I'm on Facebook; I don't quite get Twitter yet - but it's so profoundly about identity creation, and part of identity creation is othering. "I am this, I am not that, and I'm these other things that you can't see." A lot of the challenges - and it's not just the pandemic, it's not just this moment - it's you and I know that there's waves of change coming upon us, there's waves of disruption and it will not be from people in the streets, it will be from rain or no rain in the sky. A big challenge is going to be identity. It's going to pierce so many of our armored layers. I'm hearing from you that, in a way, what could possibly go right is that we're better off than we know we are in a way because there are decent human beings who aren't in that polarized fight that is so public. Is that your sense of things just from your little pinhole and your community, that there is some possibility that we are not as good or as bad as we're characterized.

*Tim DeChristopher*

Yeah, I like that. I like that phrasing of it and it might be that the pandemic sort of helped create that opening where people have a different relationship to identity than we've had in the recent past; where I think in the normal frenetic pace of a capitalist life, where everybody's rushing

around and maybe has some sort of corporate identity that they're expected to have because of their job, where everybody asks, "What do you do?" as the first question when you meet somebody, as in what are you paid for? People are spending most of their time at their jobs and then so much identity is based on going shopping and buying all this stuff and the thousands of commercials that people are seeing in advertising that people are seeing every day, that is shaping your identity; you buy this, you'll be this kind of person. The pandemic really disrupted that sort of flimsy identity-making that was prominent in our capitalist culture. People were suddenly spending time with their families in their home, in the place that they live in, spending more time with the physical land that they're on, whether that's a tiny little urban plot or more space in the country or whatever. They're spending time with the people that they care about. Their time is more of their own. I think for the first month or so of the pandemic, people were like, "What do I do with my time?" Then people found that, "Wait a minute. There's things that I enjoy doing when I don't have to do something to make money all the time." So with that widespread disruption of fake capitalist identity, people might be more rooted in an authentic identity where they're not so desperate to try to create this identity in that social media culture of distancing themselves from others; being more self-righteous, more radical than now, whatever that may be. With an authentic identity, they were more authentically confident and ready to just work together with people.

*Vicki Robin*

Do you see then, you refer to capitalism and that is actually the thing that has us all in its grip and it's laced throughout us, so every time we move, capitalism is moving with us. It's just this thing that we're all wearing. It's like woven into our skin. Do you see that in the pandemic and possibly this new iteration of Black Lives Matter, that actually capitalism is losing its grip; that there's some opening here, that there is like glimmer of a post-capitalist something that will be part of how we live into the collapse, or is that too big an idea?

*Tim DeChristopher*

Not yet, but I see the hope for it. I feel like we are on the verge of that, that the pandemic really opened that door. I know people are really excited about certain elements that have emerged, like the resurgence of gardening and people trying to be self-reliant, that sort of thing during the pandemic, which is somewhat encouraging, but I don't think it's really a threat to capitalism. The thing that I feel like we are on the verge of with the pandemic is a new relationship to our mortality. I tend to believe that a big shaping factor of how we've gotten here in the recent past culturally is rooted in the denial of death and the denial of our mortality. I think the pandemic sort of escalated that fear of mortality to the absurd and to an unsustainable level. So where I see that promise is that in this sort of really freaked out fear of mortality that people are experiencing now, that I think can't last and it's going to have to crumble and people are going to realise how absurd it is, as folks are trying to come to terms with, "Well, I guess I'll just never hug anyone again, so that I will stay safe forever and I will never have to die." I think that's what can't last and I think folks will get to the breaking point of realizing actually, I would rather hug the people that I love even if it means being vulnerable, then pretend that I'm going to be able to control things forever. That will open the door to a new understanding of what it means to be this vulnerable little organism in a great big powerful universe. There's a huge amount that can then spin out from that. I think that's a really foundational part of our culture. Our new relationship to mortality can really be revolutionary and liberatory, as folks like Ernest Becker have written about for a long time. I see more and more people, more and more original thinkers writing about that recently. So I think we're at a moment where the idea's lying around, when people reach that breaking point of, "Wait a minute. This notion that I can be so in control of the world that I can keep myself safe forever"; when people start to question that, I feel like there's a lot of good recent writings around that can open up a different perspective for folks. There is that

possibility for a big cultural shift in a relationship to death. There's a really interesting book by Drew Faust called *This Republic of Suffering* about the Civil War and its impact on American cultural relationship to death. I actually read that book when Drew Faust was the President of Harvard and I was part of the divestment campaign there in the Divinity School. I actually read it thinking, Oh, maybe I can learn something about Drew Faust's perspective and use it against her in this campaign? I didn't find any of that, but really got into the book and was like, Oh my god. This is really profound, that the scale of death and the way that it impacted everyone in American society created permanent chips in science, in religion, in sociology, in grieving rituals, really throughout society. I think we are potentially at another one of those moments, because everyone will be touched by COVID and by the pandemic and because we're forced to deal with it in such different ways. So many people's grandparents are dying alone, or they're not able to visit them in their last days, and they're not able to get together for a funeral; some really inhumane and kind of counterproductive ways that at this point, we're dealing with that. I think there's the opportunity for that to kind of flip the switch to the opposite extreme, where we realize it's not necessarily a tragedy for an 85-year-old who has lived a good and rich life to pass away. But it is very sad if that 85-year-old has to pass away alone without the presence of family, and the family doesn't have any way to grieve for it together and isn't able to physically touch each other as they're grieving and as they're dealing with that loss. So I think re-engaging with that relationship to death and by extension, our relationship to vulnerability, can have a profound impact on how we then move into this next period of history on earth; where we are dealing with an unprecedented amount of vulnerability, where it's more clear than ever that we are not, in fact, masters of the universe that are in control of everything, but that we are these vulnerable little organisms. That's going to be truer than ever, as climate change really makes itself felt in profound ways. So if we're able to go into that with a new and different mindset, that could be perhaps the greatest gift that we get out of this disruption.

*Vicki Robin*

Wow. We only have like a minute, but I'm going to say that in what you just said, was the word divinity. Do you think that this metanoia can happen without a sense of a greater reality that holds us in both our vulnerability and our sort of magnificence? You know what I mean? Do we need a divinity, a sense of divinity, in order to go through this radical shift where we accept our vulnerability? You got just a minute or so.

*Tim DeChristopher*

I think we certainly need a sense of wonder at something far bigger than ourselves, something that we will perhaps never understand, that we certainly don't fully understand now. To me, religion and spirituality is the relationship to the unknowable and beyond thinkable. That doesn't necessarily have to be the supernatural of divinity. The natural world and the interconnected web of life of which we're part are full of plenty of wonder, far beyond our ability to ever fully wrap our mind around and plenty to give us that sense that there is something far bigger than us going on here.

*Vicki Robin*

Wow. Thank you. I'm very inspired. So thanks Tim for the interview.

*Tim DeChristopher*

Yeah, thanks for inviting me.