

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

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### Episode 23 with Vanessa Andreotti

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### Transcript

*Vanessa Andreotti*

It's about a recalibration of our internal compass of vitality, how we sense ourselves as part of something much bigger.

*Vicki Robin*

Welcome to "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. I'm Vicki Robin, your host. My guest today is Vanessa de Oliveira Andreotti. I will read her credentials in a sec, but I want to put my own words on my sense of Vanessa. She resolutely stands between academia and indigenous wisdom, working with a team of academics, elders and students to distinguish the agonies of modernity decline, and to embody the humility and responsibility of stewardship. Perhaps that's as opaque as this official biography, but it points to the enormity of the dedication to let modernity in us die and let a new and ancient human blueprint be born in us. So officially, Vanessa holds a Canada Research Chair in Race, Inequalities and Global Change at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, BC. Drawing on different critiques of colonialism and human exceptionalism, her research examines the interface between historical, systemic and ongoing forms of violence and the material and relational dimensions of unsustainability within modernity. Vanessa is one of the founding members of the Gesturing Decolonial Futures Collective and "In Earth's CARE", an international network of Indigenous communities located mostly in Canada and Latin America. We love bringing you these inspiring voices and invite you to chip in some financial love so we could keep doing it. Now, here's Vanessa.

*Vicki Robin*

Welcome to What Could Possibly Go Right? where we ask cultural scouts, people with a long view and a deep knowledge, to put on their headlamps and peer into the fog and tell us what green shoots they see, what possibilities are opening up as old systems are unraveling. Welcome, Vanessa. As you and your colleagues well know, we're in a time of pandemic with no

end in sight, and economic precarity and racial justice uprising and extreme polarization and on and on and on. Yay, 2020. I'm particularly interested in how you will answer our question because you seem to not just talk about what's wrong and how to fix it, but talk from a more Indigenous way of seeing the world. So what's going wrong for Western civilization could actually be something going right for the cultures who were here before Europeans came and settled and owned and exploited and made an unsustainable paradise for ourselves. So all that said, Vanessa, here we are, and here's my question. Given all of that, what could possibly go right?

*Vanessa Andreotti*

First of all, thank you so much for the invitation to talk today. I think I'm going to start with the proverb that we have in Brazil. I was born and raised in Brazil. In Brazil, we say that in a situation of a flood, it's only when the water reaches your hips, your bum actually; when the water reaches the bum, that it's actually possible for people to swim. So as the water is only at the ankles or at the knees, it's only possible to walk or to wade. I work with a collective of artists, researchers, Indigenous knowledge keepers that uses this method to talk about what's happening today, the situation of social and ecological collapse, and also to offer an analysis of the violence and the unsustainability of what we call modernity coloniality, the systems that underwrite our livelihoods. But I think what's important in the analogy is that we can only see what is going to be possible, and we will only be able to see what's going to be possible as the water reaches the bum, right? So if the water is only at the knee, we can only walk and be who we have come to be and learn from the process, from what's violent and unsustainable in the current system. So as the water is rising, and the temperatures are rising as well, in the climate emergency, it is important to probably learn from or be taught by the communities that have been swimming for a long time against the tide, that we have brought to their communities, of colonialism, of capitalism, of unsustainability and of violence. So the teachings from communities that we call communities in high density, high stakes, high risk struggles, are very different from the teachings that we find in low intensity struggles, right? So it's important to bring these teachings together, not as a form of learning from them the responses, but understanding that they can show us that it is possible to swim. So my analogy to swimming is also related to accountability, responsibility, and making connections that people avoid making as they are walking. So in swimming, you have to have a very different relationship with the water. You have to become, you have to remember that you are mostly water, and you have to become water as well. You have to have a different relationship with your breathing. You have to be able to read the context in a very different way and use this capacity to hold space for these things that I believe the waters themselves are going to force us to reconnect with; to reconnect with capacities that have been exiled by the current system, the modernity coloniality and its violence and unsustainability. We will be able to realize that we are part of a wider metabolism than our own metabolism. Our bodies are nested within something much larger, and we won't be able to deny that anymore. So the Indigenous communities we are working with; I'm not saying that they have the answers, and I'm not saying even that all of them are welcoming social and ecological collapse. They know it's going to be hard. They call it the collapse of the house that was built through colonialism. They know they have to learn to leap very fast back, otherwise it will fall on their heads. It's already built on their backs, it's gonna fall on their heads

if they're not quick. So many of them, many of these communities are preparing for facing the removal of the very basic securities that the government, especially in Brazil, used to provide and is not providing anymore. But what we say is collapse, the way we understand collapse, for them is something else, right? So what we may be afraid of or forecast in terms of lack of access to certain securities and in welfare, has not been the case already for many communities. This connection between it not being the case for many communities and us having access to that as a result of these other people not having access, is something that we'll probably start to realize more and more. But I don't think this is a moral awakening, in the strict sense of the term. It's more an existential thing that comes from a disillusionment, a gradual disillusionment with the satisfaction that we have, with the consumption, comforts, enjoyments, securities that we have taken for granted; because these comforts, enjoyments, securities and consumptions are actually based on violence and unsustainability somewhere else. We won't be able to deny that anymore. In this disillusionment, disenchantment, we will also have to compost all the waste in our project; we call it shit. All the individual and collective shit that has accumulated, that has maybe saturated. In order to do that, we will need to access the capacity that have been exiled. so that we can also find joy and vitality in places that we have forgotten that they exist. So most of the forecast is a forecast of difficulty, of a lot of pain, of discomfort for a lot of people and of increased violence in many cases. Unless we develop the capacity to face this with stamina, and enjoy - and maturity, sobriety, accountability, responsibility, and humility - we may end up in a very destructive place. But if we can activate these other sensibilities and these other capacities to hold space for these things, and walk with the storm that we need to face together, I think there's much to be learned and much to be experienced in terms of creating new possibilities for existence, as we offer palliative care and as we hospice what is dying, as we learn to face death in a different way, as we shift our relationship with dying. In those two processes, I think, both the learning to face death in a different way - we're not only facing the death of the system, but also our own. Part of the teachings that we've had with the Indigenous communities we work with is that living well is not separated from dying well, and combining the living and the dying, and not being haunted by pain but also seeing pain as an inevitable teacher in all of this; it's something that, these are lessons that we have forgotten and that we need to remember, so that this sense of responsibility and accountability is not just enacted as an intellectual choice but as a visceral, embodied thing. It's not a choice. It is something that will happen, that will come through you, once you declutter all these distractions and addictions, especially the addiction to consumption of everything, right? When I talk about consumption, I'm not only talking about consumption of stuff, but I'm talking about consumption of relationships, consumption of experiences, consumption of critique, consumption of ideas about the end of the world as we know. So it's about re-calibration of our internal compass of vitality, but fundamentally, how we sense ourselves as part of something much bigger than ourselves and as we sense our temporality not just related to our lives, our individual lives, but to the greater metabolic life of the planet itself. Not just the human beings, but of non-human entities as well.

*Vicki Robin*

Wow. Yeah, I know that, since I've been sort of studying you, I know what a rich teaching you're trying to bring forward in ten scant minutes. But I do want to probe this, because the question is,

"What could possibly go right?" as an observation, not as an evocation. I mean, what you're talking about, I've come to the awareness over doing these interviews, that the transformation that's going to be happening is going to happen over lifetimes. Not my lifetimes, but generations, you know? That this is not something we're going to get right very soon. Nonetheless, there are people who have gone further along this path, whether it's the Indigenous communities you're working with, or Indigenous communities around the world, or retired schoolteachers tending their gardens. I mean, there are people who are already on this journey. They know the water's up to their bum and they also feel a sense of responsibility to, basically, be lifeguards or whatever you want to call it. I love that you actually use this metaphor of the river or the flood, because it's similar to the Hopi prophecy that we've been imbued with over the last decades. The river is getting swift, we let go of the bank, let go of trying to stand up and just find your people. So the question I'm trying to get around to really is, where do you see this capacity for holding space for the changes emerging? And people who are decluttering and creating the conditions in their lives and in their communities? Where is this happening? Where can people look not just to run off and join the commune, but where can they look to see, "Okay, I see how people are preparing for these changes that you're talking about?"

*Vanessa Andreotti*

I think this is a very important question, because in my experience with groups working in alternative education, for example, or social innovation, both in terms of the environment and in terms of society, it's very easy to fall back into the same paradigm and think that you're innovating, when what is actually driving this is something else. So when I've seen the water reaching the bum of people, you see a shedding of arrogance, that is actually very rare. In this work, I saw it the last time with somebody who was in the middle of the fires in California and had lost her house; at that moment, realized the pain, the collective pain that she hadn't paid attention to before. I also saw it in young people I've worked with, who could see the school trying to numb but felt a pain that was described as a phantom limb pain that then was explained by Indigenous people as collective pain that could not be named in mainstream culture. So this collective thing can only be held with collectivized hearts. An individual heart is overwhelmed by collective pain. So the capacities for this kind of work would usually happen through a painful incidence, that makes it impossible for us to disconnect with a deeper level of pain; that to take that pain as a teacher. That level of arrogance, where your narcissistic mirror breaks, it's not about your self image anymore, it's not about becoming even a role model anymore. You see yourself in the middle of the complexity of everything, and you need to, in order to help, we say we need to see ourselves as cute and pathetic in this enormity of what's going on, right? So figuring out seeing yourself from a very different standpoint, allowing the effective forecasts that we have of fear, of insecurity, of wanting an expansion, always an expansion of entitlements, or unrestricted autonomy to shift the word; this desire or yearning for... it's not yearning for, it's a yearning that manifests responsibility, but it's the yearning for health, for healing, and for a different kind of joy that cannot be consumed. Because it comes, it interpolates, it appears, it trespasses you, so it's not a choice. It's not a choice between either doing this or doing that, and it's not being done for people to feel good or look good or move forward. It's done for its own integrity. So in our projects, we talk about accessing this medicine that we all have, this medicine, it's different medicines and learning to cook it and to integrate it

with other medicines, so that when we act, we do not act out of self interest, we act out of the bio-intelligence or the metabolic intelligence, and we do what needs to be done, rather than what we want to do. Decentering the ego, disarming effective landmines, decluttering existence and getting out of the distractions, so that we can disinvest in the pleasure of what's dying, and be able to create and hold space for everything that wants to be born without suffocating it with our projections and expectations and anticipation, is something that we all, I think, are trying to learn how to do it. Having events forcing us in this direction, then I think it looks like an evocation, but I think Indigenous perspectives on the use of language in invocation is also a manifestation of something, right? Language is not something that describes something; it moves the world, it's an entity, it's a living entity that moves the world. So by saying what we observe, but also what needs to move, we are moving it in many ways. The call for maturity, for sobriety, accountability, responsibility, humility, for shedding arrogance, and for being together in very different ways, for the interruption of the addiction to consumption, for growing up, in showing up differently to each other into the world at large; I think is at the core of what we've been trying to learn and we know how difficult it is.

*Vicki Robin*

Yeah. I love that you're talking about maturity, because this has been my intuition, that it's a question of maturation and that rite of passage. Think of rites of passage, you think, "Oh, I'm going to go and some holy person is going to put me up to the mountain for three days, and I'll have a vision, and then all will be well." But really, it's like a fire, like your house burned to the ground or like a loss of a partner or a child. These are like major disruptions in the continuity of your story and you have to make sense of them; and what you used to make sense of things isn't available to you anymore. So in a way, not to be too lofty, but in a way, this sort of crisis that we're in, the 2020 shit show we're in; this is a collective sort of ejection from the tribe and out into the forest to find out whether we're going to sink or swim, or live or die, or whether whatever we have in us is sufficient to the moment. In a way, also what I'm hearing is that there are peoples who've gone through this dissolution. When Western society landed in the Americas, there was a way of life that went through this dissolution, and has reconstituted the groups as best they can. Now, the trials have come to the doors of the privileged people and when I say privileged, I don't mean like the 1%. It's like the global 20%, the people who thought that participation, our success of participation in the dominant story would protect us, and the protection is cracking. So there's something I'm hearing in what you're saying about what could possibly go right, is really that acceptance, that this story of separation and control, that is really the story that we put ourselves together, and we have all of this stuff we've packed around us, material and immaterial, that that stuff is starting to crack. It's not like the institutions are cracking, it's the institutions in us. I know a couple years ago, when I really faced, "Oh, my God. We're not going to fix this. No matter how hard we try, we're not fixing it." Everything I'd done for 30 years was trying to fix it. So I've been going through myself, that whole dissolution of the specialness that comes from being even a cultural scout, of having something to say out there in the edge. It's a big thing that we're in. I really appreciate that it's like you're finger pointing at something; not a thing, but at a process that we are confronted with. We don't get to say that the dam hasn't broken and that we're now up to our ankles. We don't have any say over that, but we do have a say. We do have a say over how we swim when the water reaches our bum.

*Vanessa Andreotti*

Or you just hold the refrigerator.

*Vicki Robin*

Yeah, float downstream on your car and your refrigerator and the roof of your house, etc. So, it's a big task that we have again ahead of us; to let the river wash out, that mindset of control. Anyway, we're at our end, but I want to give you a chance if there's one something that you want to say to wind it up, that'd be great.

*Vanessa Andreotti*

I think something you said about maturity and in Indigenous cultures, we human beings are perceived to be the youngest of all other relations and of the human beings, Western culture is perceived to be the youngest of all relations. So a collective rite of passage that interrupts a form of self infantilization that has been having out of this protection that you're talked about, is something that just came up for me as a classical way to explain it as well. From a mountain of warriors to a mountain of providers would be the way that I've heard it being explained in Indigenous storytelling. In this invitation to eldership, this invitation to see for example, education from the day we're born, as equipping people or preparing people for becoming good elders and good ancestors after the past, for all relations, is something that we have been missing. That trajectory, I think, is being presented to us by breaking our glass ceilings.

*Vicki Robin*

How exciting. Everything's falling apart. Anyway, thank you so so much. I really appreciate this. I feel like I'm surfing on the edge of your knowledge and I'm really, really going with you. So thank you.

*Vicki Robin*

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