

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

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Episode 27 with Kathleen Dean Moore

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Transcript

Kathleen Dean Moore

Sometimes it feels like the whole world is burning to its foundations, but the foundations are still there, and they're holding a space for the future.

Vicki Robin

Welcome to "What Could Possibly Go Right?", a project of the Post Carbon Institute. We interview cultural scouts, people who see far and serve the community, to help us see more clearly so we can act more courageously in crazy times. I'm Vicki Robin, your host. Our guest today is Kathleen Dean Moore, who is a writer, a moral philosopher, and environmental thought leader. She holds a PhD from the University of Colorado. For many years, she taught critical thinking and environmental ethics as a Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at Oregon State University. But her growing alarm at the devastation of the natural world called her to respond directly to the moral urgency of the climate action. With that decision, Moore quit her university position. She began to write and speak about our responsibility to protect a thriving future from corporate pillage and imminent climate chaos. Her first climate ethics book, *Moral Ground: Ethical Action for a Planet in Peril*, co-edited with Michael Nelson and foreworded by Desmond Tutu, gathered testimony from the world's moral leaders about humanity's obligation to the future. In 2016, Moore published *Great Tide Rising: Finding Clarity and Moral Courage in Times of Planetary Change*, and a novel, *Piano Tide*, that Bill McKibben said was, "savagely funny and deeply insightful." Moore's essays are widely published and anthologized. She calls herself a public philosopher, and she speaks widely and offers workshops about the moral obligation to stop fossil fuels and the climate chaos they're causing. She's addressed audiences ranging from 350.org activists to Nobel conference scholars, to Disney World executives and students all over the country and world, calling people to moral courage as they confront the forces that would wreck our world. So here's Kathleen.

Vicki Robin

Hey, Kathleen and welcome to the Post Carbon Institute inquiry of 2020, "What Could Possibly Go Right?" 2020 is the year when apparently it's all going wrong. We thought it had all gone

wrong and now another one goes wrong. We started with the pandemic, and then the murder of George Floyd, and then economic precarity, and then we started with political polarization, and now we just have a poison well of polarization. In the background I think that the pressure on the climate has been relieved a little bit, but you know, it's been cranking there in the background as humans try to deal with this. The polarization has left us with sort of a diminished capacity to pay attention to science, to pay attention to shared truth, to pay attention to shared solutions. So in a way, I'm really glad to be talking to you today because I think you speak into the deeper dilemma that we're in. When things come apart, there's always possibility. So put on your headlamp and show us what you see. What could possibly go right?

Kathleen Dean Moore

Thank you, Vicki. I will do my best. You know, out here in Oregon, it's been a terrible year to be a climate activist. Winds, 50 miles from the east. Humidity 8%. The end of this long hot summer in the midst of this decades-long drought. 100 sparks, lightning, electric wires and 100 wildfires ripped through the forest and the towns in the Cascade Range. Out here in the valley where I live, 50 miles to the west of the fires, soot fell on the roses, and the shoes that were left by the front door filled up with ashes, and the air was black. If you could see the sun at all, it was just this little orange moon in the sky. There were police officers who were directing the evacuees and the rescue trucks and the horse trailers all into the football stadium. You could hardly see their flashing lights the air was that dirty and foggy. So when the smoke cleared, when it finally cleared after a couple of weeks, my husband and I drove up along the Mackenzie River to see what had happened up there. We drove along the river for miles and miles and miles. The river had been lined up with houses and cottages. We saw not one half-burned house. We saw not one framework of charred two-by-fours. None of the frameworks were left. Every house had burned to the foundation. So I think global extinction, climate change, political upheaval; sometimes it feels like the whole world is burning to its foundations. Francis Gallegos, a Mexican philosopher wrote, The soul feels torn and wounded. The soul sickness comes from cracks in the framework of meaning that we rely on to make sense of our world, the shared understanding that we rely on to make sense, the shared understanding of what is real, and who is trustworthy, what risks we face and how to meet them, what basic decency requires of us, and what ideals our nation aspires to. In that context, what could possibly go right? That's a question.

Kathleen Dean Moore

So I have a haiku for you, Vicki. It's Mizuta Masahide: Barns burned down. Now I can see the moon. Barns burned down. Now I can see the moon. So I have to ask, what do we see in that moonlight along the river? And now that the structures have burned, what we see are the foundations, and many of them are hidden underneath the rubble of people's lives and some are cracked, but the foundations are still there. You know where I'm going. The foundations are still there, and they're holding a space for the future. So what are these foundations? I want us to consider the possibility that we still have a shared foundation of understanding, of human decency deep in the earth. A lot can go right if we can hold on to our shared moral foundations. I think why is that so important? Jose Ortega y Gasset, the Spanish philosopher says, Barbarism. Barbarism is the absence of standards to which an appeal can be made. It's not the

absence of adherence to the standard. It's the absence of standards themselves. If we can't say what's right and good and true and worthy of us as human beings, then we are barbarians. I like to think that the opposite is true. That civilization is the presence of standards to which an appeal can be made. Some people say, Moral values. You're always talking about moral values. What do they have? Get real. Civilizations are not shaped by moral values. They're shaped by markets and by power. No, I think that's a misreading of history. I want to tell you about when I was at the Society of Environmental Journalists and I had just been listening to a representative, the chief lobbyist for the American Petroleum Institute. He was trying to defend BP against that big Deep Horizon oil gusher. He's a big big guy, shaved head, broad shoulders, black jacket, huge feet. So as it happened, he and I were walking out together; just us, just the two of us, no one else around. And I thought, This is too weird. I have to speak with this man, I have to say something. So I thought, Okay. I said to him, "So, do you have children?" He turned to me. He looked me dead in the eye and he said, "Don't you ever, ever, ever, ever, ever underestimate the power of the fossil fuel industry." Okay, so, if I had thought of it - which I didn't, I can never think of the right thing to say - if I had thought of it at the time, I would have said back to him, "Okay, and don't you ever, ever, ever underestimate the power of moral courage." I think that in fact, almost every major change in US history has been the result of a rising wave of moral affirmation. We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal. That is a moral claim. And the great European monarchies fell like dominoes. All persons held as slaves within any state shall be then henceforward and forever free. And the direction of history reversed its flow. I have a dream, that one day this nation will rise up. And the troopers and the dogs stumbled back. Black Lives Matter. There's a moral affirmation of intrinsic value, a ringing affirmation. Climate movement, Greta, she says, You say you didn't know. But if you knew, and you kept drilling, I would have to call you evil. So this is moral language. It is moral language from the conscience of the streets. It's moral affirmation of basic standards of decency. The point I want to make is that this changes history, and then we have American history to show it how it works. You know, my work these days is focused on what I believe is the world's most powerful moral foundation, which is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. A strange and wonderful thing happened in 1948. After the horrors of World War Two, the barbarous acts that have outraged the conscience of humankind, the nations of the world got together and they drafted this Universal Declaration of Human Rights, calling on states to protect the rights to life, property, and security of person. It was as far as I know, the very first document of moral value adopted by an assembly of the entire human community. Eight countries only abstained. The closest thing the world has ever seen to a globally agreed upon moral foundation for civilization. That strikes me as huge and still important. No matter how many edifices have burned over top of it, that foundation still stands, holding a space for the future.

Kathleen Dean Moore

So I'm involved in the project that I wanted to tell you about, that's using the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to call the oil and gas industry, particularly the fracking industry, to account for widespread violations of human rights. We want to move deliberations about energy policy away from the realm of cost benefit analysis, and into the realm of basic human decency. So our argument is that fracking and climate change will cause the greatest violation of human rights the world has ever seen. The right to life, when fracking wells poison the aquifers, when

melting glaciers flood crowded cities, when agricultural fields dry to deserts; that's the right to life? The right to liberty, when fracking wells seize farmland and desecrate hunting grounds and rise Great Lakes, when drought drives millions of people from their homes? Security of person, when supercharged hurricanes and wild fires destroy their homes? Ibram X. Kendi has drawn a direct line that connects climate change and the moral failing of racism. He says burning fossil fuels causes climate change. We know this. And no one can burn fossil fuels unless the industries mine them, and they can't mine them unless they have social licence to claim and poison and denude wide swaths of the land. And they can't wreck the land, unless they have social licence to displace people, destroy their livelihoods, harm their health. And industry can't harm people on this scale, unless the affected people are considered to be disposable, and their interests without value. And this requires widespread and unquestioned racism and racial injustice. So there is a direct connection between the fossil fuel industry and the kind of moral depravity that we are so concerned about. But now there's a small group of philosophers and legal scholars that brought the human rights case against fracking and climate change to the Permanent Peoples' Tribunal. The Permanent Peoples' Tribunal is this very well respected, Rome based international human rights court, that was first established by Jean-Paul Sartre and Bertrand Russell way back when, to try the United States for war crimes from Vietnam. Since then, they've taken on the moral violations of Bhopal and Chernobyl. Now they are taking on climate change and fracking. For the first time in history, an international human rights court has talked about, deliberated about whether they systematically violate human rights. And the verdict is in. The verdict now is in. Number one. This court, this international human rights court says fracking and the consequent climate change breach substantive and procedural rights guaranteed by international law. Two, in a widespread axis of betrayal, governments are complicit in the rights violation. And three, because rights violations are integral to the very practice, fracking should be banned. So we've got to say, What difference does that make? Well, already, because of wonderful work from journalists and lawyers, the oil and gas industry can't claim that they didn't know that their actions were going to harm, wreck the world. Now, because of this trial, the oil and gas industry can no longer claim that they didn't know that their business plan directly violates human rights. So we have been thinking all along that this was normal, that this kind of destructive activity was normal, this drilling and burning. We've been thinking that this was business as usual. So we granted social licence to the extreme extraction industries. But now, that licence is hereby revoked. So what could go right? I don't know.

Kathleen Dean Moore

I want to tell you about one more thing. I want to tell you what's happening along the burnt out Mackenzie River. I've been talking about my faith in this incredible foundation for morality, which is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. I've been putting that in the context of these terrible burns. What happened along the Mackenzie River is that it turns out that people had built their beautiful homes out of poisons. They had built them out of asbestos, foam plastics, PCBs in the carpets, all these things, and that the debris from the houses as it fell into the foundation is toxic waste. So clearing away the foundations has to be done really carefully and it's going to take a very long time. I feel the same way about the country, that we have a solid foundation of moral accord. But on that foundation, we have built a toxic mess, and that removing the hatred and the lies and the spittle and the disdain is going to be a long, dangerous

and careful process. But I do believe that the foundation of human decency and democratic ideals is down there somewhere and we will find it again. So that's what I wanted to say about what might go right. Thank you for giving me the chance.

Vicki Robin

And it's so beautiful. It's so easy to despair in the short term, looking at how shallow, apparently shallow the moral dimension is in our public discourse. You know that, what is it? 75 million people had to outvote 70 million people in order to get the word decency back into our vocabulary. So, it is a political fight, but it's a moral fight. I love that you bridged that in the fracking. Yeah, there's so many things that were interesting. In a way, I think, for all it's been bastardized, that the basic construction of sustainable development is also a moral ground; that we live today, we unfold our lives today, and all their beauty and creativity and love, etc, without compromising the ability of future generations to be able to unfurl their lives with as much resource - spiritual and moral, environmental, you know? So basically, intergenerational rights were articulated by the Brundtland Commission Report. Then in Ecuador, they've put into the Constitution, the rights of nature. So is there a rights, an overall rights movement? You're working on the law around fracking, the moral law, and also the material law that says life, liberty, pursuit of happiness is being abrogated by fracking. So, yeah, it's illegal. Period. So are you for a common cause with a lot of other groups, or other groups that are also looking at the rights of those who don't have a voice?

Kathleen Dean Moore

Yes, as to the first point, I think that one of the things that the prior president did was allow people to be proud of what they had previously been ashamed of; racism, sexism, selfishness. But you're not ashamed if you don't know that what you did was wrong. So even shame has some sort of moral foundation, and I take some hope in that. As for the worldwide - which I believe you're quite right - movement towards rights, including the rights of nature; yes, we are seeing that all around the world. The rights of nature in Pennsylvania, in India, in Ecuador, as you say, in Australia, everywhere people are thinking about, You know, there's a certain kind of decency that we owe to natural objects too; to rivers, they have interests, they have well being and we have an obligation to honor them because we're all part of the same moral universe. So yes, the notion that a right sets a moral minimum, a right puts limits on what you can do without being ashamed. So it's a standard against which we can measure ourselves, and it's a standard against which we can measure what the governments do, because remember, that's the whole point of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, that the horrors from Germany were all legal, they were all basically according to German law. So there needed to be some other kind of appeal, some standards to appeal that would trump may I say, the national laws. That's what the Universal Rights Declarations do. It's not just the Declaration of Human Rights. Now we have declarations of rights of nature, we have declarations of Indigenous rights; we have many, many standards being articulated and affirmed, broadly affirmed. So I think that that's one thing that can go right, is that we can sit down and think about, What is it? What is the minimum standards of behavior for us to get along and create a civilization? And what is worthy of us as human beings, the beings with the ability to imagine, to imagine a better world?

Vicki Robin

So I'm going to ask one last sentence of you, or maybe two or three, which is: If you could, if you had a megaphone, if you were asked to be the chief moralist of the new Biden administration? If you were asked to gather a group of people around you of moral philosophers who understand rights and could articulate a "We the People" statement? I know it's sort of a big thing, but you've probably been thinking about this. What is the sentence that could be put out or the sentences that could be put out into this sea of complexity, the sort of cesspool of our consciousness at the moment that would ignite it?

Kathleen Dean Moore

I don't know about ignition. I have, in fact, done that. I have assembled a group of philosophers and people I thought were very wise and we have asked that question. We basically addressed ourselves to the three fundamental questions of the worldview: What is the world? What are human beings? And therefore, how shall we live? We call it the Blue River Declaration, it's online. We offer the view that the world is finite, resilient, beautiful, extraordinary. And if the good English word for that is sacred, then we'll use that word too. Human beings are blessed to have the ability to turn toward the universe and understand it to a certain extent. We therefore have a responsibility to be the meaning makers of the universe. It's a deep, deep responsibility. But it requires us to recognize the extraordinary gift of being part of the world, not rulers of it, but part of these interconnected, interdependent parts. How then shall we live? With respect, with restraint, with reciprocity, and with gratitude and joy at the world that we find ourselves in.

Vicki Robin

Amazing. We are the meaning makers, but we don't get to throw out pieces of the assemblages just in front of us, because we say that that piece or that piece doesn't have meaning. If we're going to be the meaning makers, everything has to be part of the meaning that we make. I'll take that. I'll be a meaning maker, I'd sign up. Thank you so much.

Kathleen Dean Moore

You are a meaning maker.

Vicki Robin

So are you. Anyway, I join you spiritually in your circle of meaning makers. Thank you so so much for this beautiful reflection. I personally think this is what we need at this moment. I don't think anybody could sit on one more Zoom call or read one more policy statement. We just need this. So thank you, Kathleen.

Kathleen Dean Moore

Thank you for the chance. Bless your work.

Vicki Robin

Thank you. Yours too.

Vicki Robin

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