

Life As It Is

“From Despair to Possibility”

Episode #21 with Rebecca Solnit

July 26, 2023



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James Shaheen: Hello and welcome to *Life As It Is*. I’m James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. These days, with catastrophe after catastrophe, it can be easy to turn to despair and to believe that there is nothing we can do. But writer Rebecca Solnit is determined to change that narrative. Over the course of her career, Solnit has published twenty-five books on feminism, popular power, social change and insurrection, and hope and catastrophe. Her most recent project, *Not Too Late: Changing the Climate Story from Despair to Possibility*, brings together climate scientists and activists from around the world to address the social, political, and spiritual dimensions of our current crisis. Together, they envision a path forward. In today’s episode of *Life As It Is*, my co-host Sharon Salzberg and I sit down with Rebecca to discuss the power of hope in times of catastrophe, the dangers of hyperindividualism, and why she believes beauty is an essential piece of activist work.

James Shaheen: So I’m here with writer Rebecca Solnit and my co-host Sharon Salzberg. Hi, Rebecca. Hi, Sharon. It’s great to be with you both.

Rebecca Solnit: Likewise. Thank you.

Sharon Salzberg: Hi.

James Shaheen: So Rebecca, you’ve published twenty-five books on topics as broad as feminism, popular power, social change and insurrection, wandering and walking, and hope and catastrophe. So today, we’re here to talk about a book of essays you’ve edited called *Not Too Late: Changing the Climate Story from Despair to Possibility*, which is part of a larger project to

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change the narrative around climate change. To start, can you tell us a bit about the book and what inspired you to work with others to write it?

Rebecca Solnit: Yeah, in 2020, I met the wonderful young climate activist Thelma Young Lutunatabua, who's based in Fiji, and we realized we had a really shared vision that a lot of the climate despair, grief, anxiety, angst could be not washed away but really helped a lot by good frameworks and good facts, and that you really needed both because it's not only the facts of the situation but how you understand big things, the nature of change, what human beings really need, what abundance could consist of, where power lies, that we're really impacting how people imagine where we are and what we can do. So Thelma and I started a project that was initially just a website a little over a year ago and weren't quite sure what we were going to do next. At a dinner party for a climate activist, I announced the Not Too Late project, and everyone else just kind of looked at me and said, "Rebecca, this needs to be a book." So I scampered back home, Thelma and my wonderful publishers at Haymarket got on board immediately, and Thelma and I started reaching out. We knew we couldn't do this alone, and we needed voices from different experiences within the climate movement from people on the front lines, people who are scientists, people who are organizers, people who understand the politics particularly well, and that really only a diversity of voices, only a chorus could really address the breadth and depth of what's going on.

James Shaheen: Well, I have to say, I think the chorus has been successful so far. In writing about climate emergency, you say that emergency comes from the word emerge, or to exit or leave behind. So what can we learn from this understanding of emergency as a leaving behind the familiar?

Rebecca Solnit: I love etymologies in general, and I found the etymology of emergency so compelling because you look at it, and it literally means to emerge from something, to exit the

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way that things have been and enter into something new, which is always a scary time. Things can go wrong; they can get much worse; sometimes they can get better. And it's a real moment of decision. It reminds me of the term crisis, which in medical terms means the point at which the patient either begins to recover or heads towards death, and both are possible. Emergencies often get us out of being stuck, and although we tend to fear them, they're not always bad.

James Shaheen: Well, you write that our present moment is an exodus into the unknown, and our task is to make a home in this space of uncertainty and possibility. Can you say more about how we can take refuge in the unknown?

Rebecca Solnit: I've been talking about the fact that the future is dark, the future is unknowable, and running into the Western and I think particularly American wild enthusiasm for certainty, whether or not it's based on truth and accuracy or not. People seem to really dislike uncertainty, or a lot of people. One of the things I love about Buddhism is I think it really encourages to engage with codependent arising, which means that innumerable forces are at work and exactly how they'll dance together remains to be seen. I think of both optimism and pessimism as well as despair as forms of certainty about the future. "We know what's going to happen" is their assumption. Pessimists assume it's terrible but let themselves off the hook from doing anything because they speak as though the future has already been decided. Optimists take the opposite position but with the same kind of certainty that everything will be fine, nothing is required. I think part of it is that uncertainty is unnerving because certainty is predictability. Security means no emergence, no emergency. But also because it demands a lot of us. If we are actually creating the future in the present, the future does not yet exist, then we have tremendous responsibility to actually get in there and engage and create it. So I really wanted to look at all the things around that: that anxiety about the avoidance of recognizing the truth of uncertainty, which I think is also about recognizing another thing Buddhism has to teach us, which is change is constant. I think people often don't have much memory of the past, the historical past, so they think of the

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present as a kind of eternity that's somehow being shattered, rather than that the world was radically different twenty and fifty, let alone a hundred years ago. So of course, it's going to be different in the next ten and twenty and fifty years, but how it will be different is something we're deciding now. And that's so true for climate. This is the decade of decision.

Sharon Salzberg: Throughout your career, you've written about the power of hope in times of catastrophe. You say that hope is not a lottery ticket but an ax you break down doors with in an emergency. So how does hope function as an ax? And how can we harness hope as a powerful organizing tool?

Rebecca Solnit: One of the quotes when I began writing about hope twenty years ago I loved is that you can't have hope without action, but you can't have action without hope. I think there's a lot of misconceptions about hope. One is that it's optimism, which is certainty about the future, whereas hope is just about possibility. Another is that hope is a feeling and that if you don't feel good, you can't be hopeful. And we know people in the worst situations in the world dared to hope not because everything looked good or felt good but because there's something worth doing. So hope is an ax to break doors down with for me is about first of all recognizing that it's active, not passive. Hope is where you begin, but you don't just sit there on the couch feeling hopeful, but that you actually need to take it and act on it. I love the anti-prison activist Mariame Kaba's definition that hope is a discipline, meaning that it's a real commitment to who you want to be, how you want to be in the world, that you're going to try without being confident or certain about outcome.

A quote that Thelma and I both go back to a lot is Vaclav Havel, the Czechoslovakian activist who helped topple the regime but in ways that were so unforeseeable until it happened. And so he's a great beacon of hope, and he said, "Hope is not the conviction that something will turn out well but the certainty that something is worth doing no matter how it turns out." And I'll just say one more thing, which is, I think also people think if you don't always win, then your

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hope was ill-founded, but it's always a gamble. You know, you're breaking down that door with an ax, but whether you're going to get everyone out of the theater on fire or the flooding basement remains to be seen, but you might as well try.

Sharon Salzberg: Well, I think one of the things you also serve in your work is redeeming words, which is a very powerful thing when they've changed meaning. I think about love in that way, for example, you know, where it's kind of gotten degraded so that we see it as sentimentality or losing energy rather than gaining energy and so on, being able to kind of turn that around and say, "Hey, wait a minute." So you actually liken hope to love and the sense of taking risks and being vulnerable to the possibility of grief and loss. So can you say more about that?

Rebecca Solnit: Yeah, hope, I think, is a kind of vulnerability, and you don't hope if you don't care, so it's a form of care. Cynicism is a way of saying it's not worth caring because it's all going to hell anyway, there's nothing we can do, we never win, etc. It's a form of giving up beforehand. And it's often seen as very sophisticated. When I wrote my book twenty years ago, *Hope in the Dark*, I was really struck by who was hopeful, which was often people on the frontlines of the Zapatistas, farmworkers facing modern-day slavery, poverty, and exploitation, and who was cynical and despairing, which was often really comfortable people who saw it as a form of solidarity with people they imagined as being desperate and therefore hopeless. And there I think they were wrong about the hope, if not the desperation. But they also I think were ultimately taking care of themselves rather than the world. Cynicism doesn't require anything of you. It's a posture. Hope does put you on the spot. If you hope we can win, then why the hell aren't you doing anything to win? If you hope that this life can be saved, you better get out there and save it. You know, I think hope is inextricable from action, whereas cynicism is really kind of almost inextricable from passivity or making decisions that may benefit yourself but not the greater

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whole. I think it comes partly out of a sense of powerlessness, partly out of a sense of separateness.

I think so much encourages people to believe they can't win, so all you can win is a really good posture for yourself in the world and how you present yourself. But I think that's wrong. I think there's so much more you can win, and the historical record shows that, which is why now think of hope, which is about the future, as very connected to memory about the past. If you remember how different the world was, how many times small groups, civil society, nonviolent direct action, concerted campaigns, dedicated individuals change the world, you know that the world can be changed by these means because it has been changed, and you know that the world is changing all the time, and the fossil fuel companies, Wall Street, capitalism are all very willing to change it for the worse. We should be at least as willing to change it for the better.

James Shaheen: Rebecca, you also quote AOC, who says that hope is not something you have but something you create with your actions and manifest in the world. So can you say more about the process of creating and manifesting hope through action?

Rebecca Solnit: Well, she's referring to a bunch of things that are in that wonderful passage from a talk she gave. I think one thing is that she herself was pretty hopeless. Standing Rock made her hopeful, which I find incredibly exciting, because I know a lot of people would say the action at Standing Rock tried to stop the Dakota Access Pipeline; they didn't stop it, therefore they lost. But so many things happened at Standing Rock. It was maybe the biggest gathering of Native people in North American history. It gave a lot of young Native people a sense of hope and worth and agency they didn't have before, which I've heard directly from people on Standing Rock. It educated a lot of the settler colonial world about Native land rights, a commitment to protecting the natural world, and it convinced AOC, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, to give her her full and proper name, to go home and run for office. And in one of the great upset victories of recent years, she beat an incredibly powerful and successful-long term Democratic Congressman

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to take office and then become a great force for climate in Congress. To back up a little bit. I think AOC is saying her own version of hope without action is just wishful thinking, or kind of toxic positivity, you could almost call it. Action without hope, I'm not sure really knows what to do or why it's doing it. And people also think hope is this very big, fancy thing that most of us don't have, and it's like you stand at the bus stop, because you hope the bus will come, you flip the light switch because you hope the light's going to go on, you go down to the coffee shop because you hope they're open, and they're going to make you a cup of coffee. We have little acts of hope all the time. You call your mom because you're hoping she's gonna pick up the phone and act like your mom if you were lucky enough to have a good mom and she's still on Earth. And it's really kind of about cause-and-effect relations and our ability to participate in them and influence them. It's not exotic. It's not extreme. But it can be harnessed to big political goals, big goals for a better world, for some cessation of suffering. And I think it's a good way to live because there's also often this rhetoric that all these things that are noble are somehow eating your broccoli, and nothing against broccoli, but as I often say about activism, sometimes it's drinking your champagne, and I have met the most wonderful people and seen the most extraordinary things by being in the activist world. It's been an education. It's given me great friendships, it's greatly enriched my life. And I think I feel a lot better about climate change, because I'm actively engaged. I don't do it just to take care of myself, but it is a certain kind of well-being I think is a fringe benefit of living this way.

James Shaheen: One thing that did come out of Standing Rock is precisely the sort of narrative that supports us and encourages us and invites us to engage. So I don't even think about whether or not the pipeline was built, I think about the amazing kind of galvanizing force that movement brought to the public. But you draw from the work of the Jewish philosopher Moses Maimonides, who argued that hope is a belief in the plausibility of the possible as opposed to the necessity of the probable. Can you walk us through this statement? How does hope emerge from possibility? And how can it free us from the sense of doom and gloom inevitability in despair?

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Rebecca Solnit: One thing I find among the many excuses people have for inaction is that sense of what's going to happen. If they don't say that the future has already been written or is already preordained, they'll talk about plausibility. The big guys usually win. And that's often true. It's not always true that the likely thing is what happens and it can happen in the worst way, too. One of the things I found terrifying just before the 2016 election is that Hillary Clinton was given, I think, an 87% chance of winning. A lot of people walked around like that was 100% chance. And as I've been saying, ever since, guess what, she had an 87% chance of winning, but guess what, we live in the 13% chance about 13% of the time. And so I think possibility rather than probability is partly about knowing it's worth trying even if it doesn't seem like what is likely to happen but also that you can make things happen. For a while, I was leading climate chants at protests that were like, "Don't ask what will happen, be what happens." We see people make things happen all the time, the civil rights movement made voting rights happen. And you know, we're not in racial paradise yet. But it changed a lot of things. We know that this stuff matters. We know that this stuff makes things change. And what I love about the greatest activists is that they don't say, "Does this look likely? Does this look possible? Does this look easy?" They just say "This is the right thing to do."

There's a wonderful book by Adam Hochschild called *Bury the Chains* about a dozen Quaker men in London in the 1770s who decided to abolish slavery in the British Empire. And it was such a radical thing to decide. And it was so implausible. Only one of them lived the next 50 years it took to see slavery abolished in the British Empire. But they were one of the forces that did that, and it was implausible when they started out. Women voting was really implausible when that idea was introduced into the conversation in the 1840s, which is why it took 80 years. So many things take a while, five years, ten years, twenty years. We had about a decade-long campaign to stop the KXL pipeline, and there were people telling us we were going to lose all the way until we won, and 10 years isn't even that long compared to a lot of other struggles. But it took a while. And so all that I think is equipment for doing what needs to be done without just

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passively guessing what's likely to happen, and really settling for it, settling for destruction, settling for suffering, settling for abuse, settling for any quality is something we don't have to do. Settling for it is a form, as my friend Roshi Joan Halifax would say, of moral injury.

James Shaheen: Right, you also talk about the dangers of settling for despair, and you write that despair is a luxury. So what do you mean by this?

Rebecca Solnit: I did write a piece about despair as a luxury. Because if the threat is imminent, you're usually not despairing. If you can get the kids into the lifeboat, you're gonna get the kids into the lifeboat, not say, “Oh, it probably won't work to get the kids into the lifeboat, I'll just watch them drown.” And so I often find that despair is people who weren't on the frontlines aren't facing these things, essentially giving up on behalf of other people and excusing themselves from action. What I'm calling action, I think, is part of being connected to the greater whole. I also think that that's a good way to live. The opposite is to feel powerless and disconnected. And I know why people feel both ways. And I feel that a huge amount in our society works really hard at making you feel those ways. A good citizen is a bad consumer. A good consumer is often a bad citizen. Everything tells us we're consumers, and almost nothing tells us that we're citizens, not just consumers, that we have agency, we have a role to play, we have power, maybe not alone, but we have immense power together.

Sharon Salzberg: I once was writing a book on faith, which is a lot about the way you describe hope, you know, I just use the word faith. My freelance editor said to me, "What's the opposite of faith? Isn't it doubt?" And I said, well, no, in the Buddhist tradition, the right kind of doubt is really helpful to faith because you need to question and wonder and find out for yourself and then your faith deepens. So she said, “Well, what's the opposite of faith?” And I said despair. And I meant it in the sense of disconnection the way you're using disconnect. But it sounds like

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you're saying within despair, we can still have a sense of possibility and that the despair is the heartbreak in a way over what is and yet we can also see what could be.

Rebecca Solnit: One thing I ended up saying pretty regularly is that I totally respect and acknowledge despair as an emotion. I can feel it myself about things in my personal life, things in the world. But to recognize despair as an emotion, we have to add it's really important not to confuse it for an analysis. And anybody who's ever been depressed knows that feeling that nothing will ever get better, nothing will ever change, and we can usually throw in nobody loves me, and it's not worth it.

Sharon Salzberg: And I'm the only one who's ever felt this.

Rebecca Solnit: Oh, god, yeah. You know, I often think of the fact that depression, back to etymologies, also means a hollow in the ground. It's as though you fall into this hollow where you can't see out, you can't see the bigger world around you. Your horizon is just the sort of crumbly dirt edges of this hole that you might have dug yourself and you might be able to dig or climb your way out of. So despair as an emotion, absolutely, and there's every reason for people to feel it at times. We're in a really tough era and between the new authoritarianism and the kind of white supremacists, misogynist, transphobic homophobic backlash, the physical state of the Earth as climate impacts are all around us. There's a lot to feel despair about. But despair as an emotion doesn't have to be despair as an analysis. I also say base your feelings on facts, and that's what the whole Not Too Late project was about is that people literally, without consulting with the best sources, with the scientists, with activists, the people who are really doing the hard work to understand the situation deeply. People would think it's too late. We don't know what to do. We don't have the solutions. Nobody cares. Nobody's doing anything.

So base your feelings on facts, recognize despair as an emotion, but don't turn it into an analysis because that usually means that you're fiddling with facts, or sort of cherry picking

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misinformation to feed the despair. And that's the feedback loop people get into is that they seek out stuff that feeds the despair that renders them passive, that keeps him disengaged. And so it's partly about picking good sources of who to believe, who to follow, who to connect to, I think, and partly about how you live in relationship to an emergency or a crisis. And that's a choice we get to make. I think there's a lot of spiritual equipment in Buddhism and other practices. There's a lot of practical equipment in understanding how activism works and understanding climate science. We have four or five really top climate scientists in the *Not Too Late* anthology, because we really wanted to hear from them directly about why they're hopeful and what they believe can be done, just like we have people on South Pacific islands facing going underwater, facing typhoons facing tremendous loss, speaking about their commitments.

Sharon Salzberg: Well, it's also possible to encounter a narrative that grief and sadness are almost a kind of failure, and what you're suggesting seems to be that sadness is a totally appropriate response to crisis and can serve as a doorway to action. So it's really interesting how sadness and grief might mobilize us toward action.

Rebecca Solnit: I've come to think of emotions as deep and shallow rather than happy and sad. Part of consumer culture tells us that what we really want is to feel happy. And I think people imagine that as what I like to call the wall-to-wall carpeting of the psyche of nothing ever makes you feel terrible, nothing seems difficult, nothing feels tragic. We're mortal beings on earth. Death happens, loss happens, change happens. Of course, we're going to face things that will make us feel sad. And I think much worse than sadness is that fear of sadness, that you may feel sad, and then you feel like you're not supposed to feel this way and it's wrong and you have to do something to abolish it or find some way to numb out or learn to not care. And so I think this is pretty far from climate, but different relationships to the emotions can be really helpful, that it's OK to be sad. Of course, all of us are sad some of the time, and it's not a failure, just like mortality is not a failure. Sadness also is not defeat, and it doesn't have to break you.

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One thing I hear a lot is a version of human nature in which we're tremendously fragile and we cannot deal with despair, grief, loss, difficulty, or we should not be expected to. One of the things I love about Roshi Joan Halifax, I think she comes from another generation, but she also comes from decades of deep Buddhist practice. And her whole take on human nature is that we're actually really tough, we're resilient. We can survive a lot. And so I also think part of what we need to do to address the climate crisis is to look at the deeper stories we've been told: that life is supposed to be easy, that we're very fragile creatures, that we can't adapt. Another story I find really important for addressing this as so many people believe another false narrative, which is that we currently live in an age of abundance and climate requires terrible renunciation of us. I think there's a way to reframe that where we live in an era of austerity when it comes to social connection, to joy, to friendship, to free time, to hope about the future, to living in a healthy world where the air is breathable, the food is good for you and not contaminated, the ocean is thriving.

For the sake of fossil fuel, in particular, we've renounced so much. We've renounced clean air, we've renounced the future, we've renounced kids not having asthma in so many parts of the world. Because of fossil fuel emissions, about 8 million people a year die of respiratory problems related just to the particulate matter, not even to some of the other aspects. So what if we don't live in an era of abundance, but doing what the climate requires of us, leaving the age of fossil fuels behind, could bring us to an era where the water is clean, the air is clean, the natural world is thriving, and we can feel more joy than anxiety when we look at it, where food is good for you, where people have more time for friendship, for joy, for time in the natural world, for creativity, or meditation, or cooking or painting or whatever gives us pleasure. And so how we tell the stories are so crucial, and not only the stories about the natural world, but deep down, the stories about human nature. What do we really want? What makes us thrive? What is the nature of our connections to each other? All these things, I think, are part of what we need to address. And so the climate crisis, as Thelma likes to say, is partly an imagination crisis, lack of an ability to imagine that maybe the world could get better, maybe this is not as good as it gets. So

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changing the story is not all you need to do to change the world. But you can't change the world without changing the story about who matters, what matters, who we can be.

James Shaheen: You mentioned renunciation, and in Buddhism, it's letting go of what harms us and allows us to cultivate greater freedom and joy, and it seems to me that that's what you're saying.

Rebecca Solnit: Absolutely. I think it was a Buddhist practitioner who said renunciation is great when you're giving up something that makes you miserable. But of course, the dominant culture in the Western world is Christianity, where renunciation is the kind of monastic austerity or giving things up for Lent. It's about a form of self-denial where you're giving up things you actually want or that you think are fun or that might even be good for you. I think the Buddha's take on renunciation is a lot more encouraging. But I think around climate, people imagine that we're supposed to renounce things. And you often hear people when you ask them what they're doing about climate change, talking about recycling, or I don't fly anymore, or I'm vegan, about thinking that all we have in our own hands is renunciation of one kind or another. But in fact, there's so much more we have in our hands. We have so much more agency and power. And I think the renunciation we need has to be collective. First of all, we have to give up fossil fuels. We have to find other ways to power the systems. And one of the things very few people grasp and it took me a long time to really understand is that in the 21st century, we've had the most astonishing energy revolution. In the year 2000, we could not really have left fossil fuel behind. Thanks to the incredible improvements, we can give up fossil fuel, and it's not a renunciation any more than drinking poison, giving that up should feel like renunciation. You know, we're giving up something incredibly destructive, or we can give it up.

And so reframing is such an important part of the work and it's why the climate crisis is an imagination crisis. Why old stories have gotten us into this and new stories, which are sometimes the oldest stories of all indigenous stories, Buddha stories of non separation, non

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duality, of the fact that we in nature were never separate, are really important equipment. And it's exciting to see that they are more and more present in the culture at large.

James Shaheen: Well, you mentioned reframing, and you also reframe what it means to measure our wealth, if you don't mind, I'll read from the book: “What if we measured our wealth in other ways, as confidence in the future, as the clarity of the air and its breathability, as pride in one's community and country, as integrity in our material and moral lives, as having seen the summer's shooting stars or throwing moon-viewing parties or watching the migratory birds arrive, as friendship and the sense of safety that means help is there when needed, as honor and dignity and a meaningful life?” And I'd also just like to add, there's a difficulty about writing about spirituality in a culture that is to a significant degree hostile to it. There isn't a lot of room sometimes to affirm spiritual life. So can you say something about that?

Rebecca Solnit: Yeah, I think a lot of people imagined spirituality as the kind of religion that either they think depends on theocratic beliefs that are not scientifically verifiable. The kind of dogmatic atheists think religion isn't about going and hanging out with all the people you know at church and hearing the good word or singing with the chorus, listening to the music, smelling the incense, they think it's just about believing things that aren't true. So I think that there's suspicion on that level. But I also think one of the radical and exciting and beautiful things that's happened in the last maybe fifty years, particularly the last thirty, is that Buddhist ideas and indigenous worldviews have come to play a larger and larger role in the Western world. It's really common on part of the left to talk as though we're starting from scratch, the good things don't exist yet, we need to bring them in. But they're already here. I was so moved when Thich Nhat Hanh died to see how many people who didn't consider themselves Buddhist had one way or another been touched by his life, his words, his writing, his example. And it was just a reminder for me that these other sets of values, I think, are increasingly prevalent in the culture already. They have real meaning for people. And I think indigenous ideas that we're not separate from

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nature, that we have deep responsibility for it, that relationship to it is an important part of our spiritual, emotional, psychic, and cultural lives, as well as physical dependence.

These ideas are circulating. To me, it's like the seeds have been planted, we just need to water them and help them propagate and spread. And so I would add science to indigenous and Buddhist worldviews as more and more telling us in beautiful and terrifying ways that everything is connected to everything else. Climate itself is a kind of dharma teacher come to tell us, damn it, everything is connected to everything else. Because all that burning of coal, oil and gas is thickening the carbon dioxide in the upper atmosphere, which is an insulating blanket, which makes it hotter, which is why there's unbearable heat right now in China, Mexico, and Texas, why there's unprecedented forest fires in Canada and smoke as we speak, making the air perilous in Michigan and a lot of the Midwest, and that will probably return to the East Coast as it did earlier this month.

So the ideas are there. I think just supporting them, helping people understand the basis for them, promoting them, talking about them, supporting them is part of the climate job. And people usually also think climate work is just shutting down fossil fuel extraction or putting up wind turbines. But it's also about changing our imaginations, about giving us the equipment to be the people we need to be to live in the world we need for the best possible scenario. It's a cultural crisis. And I think the creative work, which is also the theological work, is not just the practical stuff, not just fossil fuel and energy and energy policy and economics. It's what kind of human beings do we need to be to be people who make choices based on the well-being of the whole rather than individual profit and benefit. And that's something Native American culture has been very strong on is this sense that you don't make decisions in isolation, because you don't imagine yourself as an isolated individual, you imagine yourself as woven into a beautiful tapestry or network or Indra's net of the whole.

Sharon Salzberg: So some of that sounds like self-awareness, some intuition, because we need some means of discerning that this is just a loop, this is bringing me down, this is leaving me

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feeling hopeless, or this is leading me to seek community, this is leading me to seek clarity and more information, and I want to do something to help somebody even if it feels like there could never be enough.

Rebecca Solnit: Enough is such an interesting thing. Thelma talks about enough and how we become people who feel like we have enough. But I also think enough in terms of how much is enough to do. And there's often a sense that if you can't save everything, you can't save anything. One of the most profound things I've seen in recent decades was the day after Hurricane Katrina put 80% of New Orleans underwater, there was bumper-to-bumper boat traffic of people trying to get into New Orleans, that is people towing boat trailers. And those people stand for me for the greatness of human nature, engaging in an emergency, nobody thought they could put their fishing boat in and rescue all of the tens of thousands of people who had been stranded, mostly because they're too poor to evacuate. But these people went in there anyway. And they did rescue tens of thousands of people. Nobody rescued everybody, but a lot of them rescued somebody.

I think for me, that's been the great metaphor or allegory for the world: Get your boat in the water. You're not going to rescue everybody. It's not your job to do it all by yourself. And rescuing somebody is deeply meaningful even if you can't rescue everybody. With the climate crisis, we're not going to return the world to the ecological state it was in fifty or a hundred years ago. But the best case scenario is infinitely better than the worst case scenario for their survival of hundreds of millions of people and their ability to stay in their ancestral places rather than to become climate refugees for species for the overall condition of the planet for people now living and people yet to be born over the next thousands and thousands of years and all living things. It is so worth doing. And of course, enough is such a strange criterion. But if you rescued thirty-seven people in the flooded city of New Orleans, was that enough? It was certainly something.

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James Shaheen: You know, as you and Sharon have both said, there are some stories that move us toward a more positive outcome. And then there are stories that move us toward despair. And probably one of the more pernicious stories in the climate crisis. And in Western culture, perhaps, is the notion of the autonomous individual actor. Can you say more about the dangers of an overvaluation of individualism and how it can prevent us from acting in community?

Rebecca Solnit: Yeah, as I said, when you ask people what they're doing about climate, mostly they'll tell you about individual acts of virtue, usually renunciation, like, "I recycle, I don't eat meat, I bicycle," although I definitely count bicycling as a pleasure too. It's rare that somebody says, "I vote, I work on getting out the vote for climate positive candidates, I support this legislation, I campaign for my high school to put solar over the parking lot." So we've really been encouraged and the fossil fuel industry played a direct role in it when it came to climate footprints to think of what we have to contribute as our individual virtue, which is mostly passive. It's mostly not doing things. It's that we imagine ourselves as individuals, we imagine ourselves as consumers who can maybe consume less or consume differently. And I really want us to see ourselves as citizens, by which I don't mean you hold nationality and a passport in a country, but you see yourself as a member of civil society—to see that together, we have so much more power to decide who wins elections, which decides what kind of legislation will pass, to create pressure to pass important legislation to maybe get out there and physically blockade the fossil fuel project or pipeline or something like that, to educate, to encourage each other.

There's so much we can do not through the renunciation that's about giving things up but by actively laying hands on our own power and possibility. And there are times when individuals have tremendous power but only because somehow they connect other people. Greta Thunberg got out there all alone at age 15 with her cardboard sign for her climate strike, but only because she was the right person in the right place at the right time did her action resonate. That made it something that was internationally impactful that caused climate strikes and youth actions to go

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on on every continent on Earth except Antarctica. So also seeing ourselves as members of communities, and that's where our strength lies to build a movement. So the isolated individual I think makes us both sad and weak—sad because it feeds loneliness. It feeds a sense that we don't need to care about anything else and nothing cares about us. And weak I think because our power lies in our connections. It's not autonomous, because we were never autonomous. So I think getting over the idea of individuality is that I don't get to have my own dreams and wild imagination and course through life, but I do that in relationship to other people and with respect for all the other beings that I impact and they impact me. One other thing I'll throw out is the kind of sad framing we constantly get around climate as responsibility, which is like, "Oh, I have to take care of this other thing." To me, it always sounds like chores and the ways that we tell kids that doing stuff is chores, which makes it kind of moral virtue and also kind of a drag, not nearly as fun as playing. What I love about Robin Wall Kimmerer in *Braiding Sweetgrass* and her public speaking and other work is that her constant framework is reciprocity. We want to do stuff for the Earth because the Earth does everything for us, that food, water, and air are all produced as something we benefit from depend upon. We're giving back because so much has been given to us. We can give in a spirit of gratitude while feeling rich, rather than like, oh god, we have to do our chores or we can't do this; we have to do that. I think the spirit of it is really important too.

James Shaheen: You seem to be describing alternatives to hyperindividualism. And I like that you quote Bill McKibben, who says that the most significant thing we can do for the climate is to stop being an individual and join something. So it's almost like a renunciation of the notion of a separate self. We're back at renunciation again in a way that we renounce something that is harmful to us.

Rebecca Solnit: Can I just reframe what Bill said, because I think what he said is such a perfect summary. The first time I heard him say it, he was exhausted because he worked so hard for

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decades for climate. We were sitting on the floor of an activist event in Paris while the Paris climate treaty was being negotiated, and somebody came up and asked him a question he's heard a thousand times before and said, "What's the most effective thing I can do as an individual?" He looked at them and said, "Stop being an individual. Find something to join. Join an organization, a movement, a campaign. Find a community." And again, I think this feels like the refrain of the conversation. That's where you find your power. But I think it's also really helpful personally. You also assuage loneliness and being alone. You assuage your powerlessness. You get to hang out with people who maybe already have some good experience of making change and can help you learn about it. And I find that there are a lot of fantastic people with great strength, commitment, idealism, and generosity, and being around them is so good. There's a wonderful anecdote where Ananda asks the Buddha, "The sangha, good community is half the spiritual life, isn't it?" And the Buddha replies, "It's the whole thing." And I think that you could interpret that very narrowly as just getting your Buddhist sangha. But I think looking for people living a bodhisattva vow or a life of commitment in another way including climate activism is another way to pursue that.

Sharon Salzberg: Well, sometimes the notion of community can seem a little daunting. I think one of the great things you've said is getting to know our neighbors is one of the most powerful things we can do.

Rebecca Solnit: We live in terrible isolation. I think the pandemic made it worse. I think there's a deep yearning for community. And even the Surgeon General of the United States right now, he's an extraordinary man, talks about loneliness as the other epidemic in the United States. And it has a real impact on people's physical and mental well-being. I think it lies behind a lot of the mass shooting, suicides, addictions, and other really tragic things around us. And so seeing community as a health thing for the planet, for human beings, for society, I think is important. And it's also a kind of garden that needs feeding and watering and being taken care of.

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I fear that we need to start over again, because so many of the organizations, whether it's churches, recreational groups, square dancing, bowling, unions, etc. that people used to belong to aren't part of people's lives now. So we have to look at joining things, as Bill said, as something for our own benefit as well and figure out where that lies. And I think again, about what constitutes abundance. We're in an economy that makes so many people work so hard. They don't have as much time for friendship, for community, let alone for volunteering and activism as they might. In a world where people feel pretty secure, they don't feel like they have to work frantically, they don't work sixty hours a week, they have time for their family, their kids, their garden, their neighborhood, they're participating in public life, participating in festivals and connecting to the natural world. And so time is something we can imagine poverty or abundance of too. We often think of abundance in material terms. But as I said before, I want to turn that around to look at all the nonmaterial things that we can be rich in, and being rich and time is such a good foundation for all the rest of it. In an economy with more security and more quality, we're much more likely to have those things than we are in a radical inequality and precariousness that so many people experience in the United States right now.

I would just say there's an indigenous worldview that tells us we're not separate. There's a Buddhist worldview. And science more and more, natural science, biological science, is describing a world of interconnectedness, a world not driven by the competition that Social Darwinists wanted us to believe in. But by cooperation, mutuality, symbiosis, we now recognize the majority of cells in our own body do not have human DNA. They're all the microbes that keep our guts working and everything else, that even what you call yourself is actually a big community of many species lurching around. There's so many forms of beautiful interdependence of relationships between species, the plants that require the insects and birds and bats to pollinate them, the insects, birds and bats that in turn require the flowers to feed upon all the natural systems. And of course, climate science is also understanding the feedback loops of everything being connected. So I feel more and more that it's coming into focus on spiritual, imaginative, and also scientific levels. We're recognizing a world in which we have never been

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individuals, that the individual is sometimes a useful way to describe ourselves or others, and sometimes it's not a useful way, it's a harmful way, because it's obliterating the nonseparation, the nonduality of all being. And Rachel Carson's 1962 book, *Silent Spring*, was a real milestone for that, to understand the natural world is so deeply interconnected, that whatever we do affects so many other things, that we can't really treat anything as separate, we have to understand how it affects the whole. And so that's a scientific fact, that's also a moral imperative, that I think is also a beautiful vision of a world in which we don't have to feel that existential loneliness, of separateness and we don't have to imagine human beings is separate from the rest of the web of life, or Indra's net, or however you want to describe it.

Sharon Salzberg: You say that above all, *Not Too Late* is a love story, which I loved, and though we can be told that beauty and pleasure and joy aren't necessary, they are in fact vital to our survival. Can you say more about how love and pleasure can guide us in these difficult times?

Rebecca Solnit: Yeah, I did an event last fall with the wonderful writer Julian Aguon, who's a queer Indigenous poet from the island of Guam, colonized still by the US, also a climate lawyer with the Blue Ocean Law firm, a leader in an incredible victory in the United Nations recently. But so I did this event for his wonderful book, *No Country for Eight-Spot Butterflies*, where I was his interlocutor. I'd never met him. I didn't really know what he'd be like. Before the event, he murmured in my ear, "Be sure we talk about beauty, joy, and abundance," and I was just in love. It was so great, because so often we are taught to frame these things in terms of austerity. And I think the left has been very austere. We've treated beauty and joy as superfluous, self-indulgent, unnecessary, bourgeois.

I wrote a book called *Orwell's Roses* recently, and I was very amused that a left-wing woman wrote in scolding him that flowers are bourgeois. Flowers have existed for tens of millions of years before human beings did. Most of what we eat is either a flowering plant or something that depends on flowering plants directly. So it's such a funny thing to say. But I think

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beauty also comes from meaning, from moral beauty, the opposite of moral injury and moral ugliness. I think joy comes from a meaningful life, from deep connection. I think beauty, joy, and abundance can also be imagined in these ways that are quite banal and superficial. Beauty becomes "Mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the prettiest of them all?" Joy becomes just the kind of disconnected lightheartedness that's not paying attention to the state of the world. Abundance becomes greed or materialism. But there are other versions that I think are spiritual or ethical or engaged. I think, first of all, if you're utterly miserable, you're usually a terrible activist, and you're often dragging down other activists around you, and that kind of self-denial often creates miserable activists.

Second of all, I think you can lose sight of what we're fighting for. We want a world of beauty, joy, and abundance, and there's no reason why we can't enjoy as much as possible of those things along the way. I think there's a real danger, and I've seen it in a lot of hardcore left-wing activists, of actually forgetting what the goal is or imagining that the goal is some kind of justice without knowing that justice is beautiful and joyful, that justice should be a kind of abundance, that security, not the security of weapons and militarism, but the security of knowing that you're not going to starve or be homeless or go without healthcare, that you're not imperiled by guns and violence. I think there's beauty and joy in the security of feeling the interconnectedness that's almost the opposite of violence. I think understanding how everything's connected is beautiful. And there's a kind of intellectual beauty and understanding and learning and things like that.

So I think we have to understand those things more deeply. And I think they are connected to love, that love is itself often a kind of beauty, joy, and abundance and something that comes from within us. And again, I think capitalism is so often teaching us to ask, "Well, how do we get love?" like it's a commodity we want to stockpile. We want lots of people to love us or people to fall madly in love with us. But giving love is also a kind of abundance. How do we feel that we have abundant hearts that can afford to love, that have a lot of love to give, that we're rich in love and generosity in that way? How do we imagine love as also a pleasure and a

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joy to give as well as receive and that there's a reciprocity there, that it's circulating? It shouldn't only be coming in, it shouldn't only be going out, but the more it circulates, the more it circulates. Because I think also capitalism has taught us to imagine everything in terms of material objects. If I take away some of your toys, I have more toys because you have fewer toys. But if I take away some of your well-being, I don't have more well-being. If I take away your joy, your sense of abundance, your sense of your own value, it's like cutting you off at the knees may make you shorter, but it doesn't actually make me taller. So I think it's also understanding the economy of the immaterial, which is a generosity economy, a gift economy, an economy in which the more you give, the more you get, because it's weaving it all together. It's helping it all circulate.

James Shaheen: So you mentioned your recent book, Orwell's *Roses*. So how did you learn about George Orwell's love of gardening?

Rebecca Solnit: There's a bunch of pieces of that. I went into the roses. The people who live in the cottage he moved into in 1936 at the time were quite confident he planted them. They're a little more uncertain about that now, but it made me look harder first at the essay that had got me there about planting roses and fruit trees and then into his journals and letters. I found in Orwell that nothing had led me to expect. It was a lot more joyful, sensual, engaged with the natural world than that kind of angsty, austere, grim, antifascist Orwell we're usually given. And so I spent a few years delving deep into his work. First, I think Orwell understood that in order to spend a lot of his life facing the most difficult, scary, and unpleasant things, he needed to come back and renew himself, and he took such joy and pleasure in gardening. In a 1940 questionnaire, he said, "Aside from writing, the most important thing in my life is gardening, particularly vegetable gardening."

But I think he also understood we can live in a world of swirling and confusing information, and that grounding yourself in something tangible and specific, hands on with the

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physical material natural world helps you keep your own capacity to perceive, judge, trust yourself, because all through *1984*, that's what he shows his protagonist Winston Smith doing. There's a beautiful passage where Winston says almost like a little mantra, "Water is wet, stones are hard, objects dropped fall towards the center of the earth" because he lives in a world that's trying so hard to disorient you, make you distrust your own capacity to perceive, remember, and judge. So how do you revolt against Big Brother? There's another line in the book that says, "The final instruction of the authorities was not to trust the evidence of your eyes and ears," and something I've learned is you can invert something to understand what is the opposite? Trusting your eyes and ears makes you a rebel, makes you a person who thinks for herself or himself, makes you a person who can be independent from Big Brother telling you what to think.

Winston revolts very ineffectually and basically gets swept up in a trap when he tries to join a conspiracy against the regime, but he revolts pretty effectively by having a love affair, going to the country, listening to birdsong, cherishing memories and objects, trying to ascertain the truth, trusting his own judgment, really setting himself up not as an individual in terms of separateness in the way we're talking about it for our climate purposes but separate from a manipulative and corrosive regime. So I think Orwell understood that this also kept his mind equipped, that not only was there pleasure and joy and abundance in the gardening and all the time he spent in the natural world but that it was also keeping his mind kind of supple, independent, capable of sorting through the information not completely swept away. And something that's been really interesting to me as a writer is what are the things we need to do that a lot of people might say are frivolous, decadent, self-indulgent, superfluous, and people on the left say those things all the time if you're doing anything fun and leisurely. What are these things we need to do that don't look important, don't look productive, but that allow us to then go do the most important and productive things we need to do.

There's a wonderful essay by Lawrence Weschler called "Vermeer in Bosnia," where he's sitting in the war crimes tribunal for the Bosnian war crimes in The Hague, and he asked the judge afterwards how he can bear to sit and listen day after day to these stories of absolute

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atrocities. The judge thinks for a moment, and then his face brightens he says, "Oh, after work, I go to the museum and look at the Vermeers." And I know lots of people would say looking at Vermeers is frivolous or superfluous or unnecessary or a thousand things like that. But essentially, looking at the Vermeers, if it helps a judge prosecute war crimes and therefore maintain justice on Earth, then 400-year-old paintings and the enjoyment of them is part of justice work, and we can't discount anything, whether it's baking cookies or birdwatching or surfing or any pleasure, if it helps people do the really important work they need to do, and that's something I really felt I got from him.

James Shaheen: You know, sadly, we're out of time. But Rebecca, thank you so much for joining us. It's been a great pleasure.

Rebecca Solnit: Thank you for letting me circulate some ideas, and wonderful to be with you.

Sharon Salzberg: It's beautiful. It's wonderful.

James Shaheen: You too, and for our listeners, be sure to pick up a copy of *Not Too Late: Changing the Climate Story from Despair to Possibility*, available now. We'd like to close these podcasts with a short guided meditation, so I'll hand this over to Sharon.

Sharon Salzberg: Thank you so much. I would like us just to sit, eyes open or closed, however you feel most at ease. Just feel natural in what you're doing. Take some breaths, which as we've heard is one of the great markers of interconnection, like it or not. Feel what's coursing through your body, different emotions, different resolves perhaps. Pay some attention to those stories. "I can't fix it. I can't do enough." If you feel yourself just getting swept up and lost or disconnected in some way, take a breath. Come back. We have a refuge. We have a home base. It's already happening. Just feel the breath. So thank you.

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James Shaheen: Thank you, Sharon. Thank you, Rebecca.

Rebecca Solnit: Thank you both. And Sharon, if you're ever coming out for Spirit Rock or anything, I would love to meet you.

James Shaheen: You've been listening to *Life As It Is* with Rebecca Solnit. We'd love to hear your thoughts about the podcast, so write us at feedback@tricycle.org to let us know what you think. If you enjoyed this episode, please consider leaving a review on Apple Podcasts. To keep up with the show, you can follow *Tricycle Talks* wherever you listen to podcasts. *Tricycle Talks* and *Life As It Is* are produced by As It Should Be Productions and Sarah Fleming. I'm James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. Thanks for listening!