

The Second Transition Podcast

Episode 1 - Hopepunk with Elin Kelsey

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SPEAKERS

Philip Loring, Alexandra Rowland, Elin Kelsey, Greta Thunberg

E Elin Kelsey 00:02

When we look at Hope, for example, as a as a motivating emotion, when we see other people acting in ways that are meaningful, it helps us to stay doing something even when it's really hard to do. People may think I'm saying, Oh, you'd have to be happy all the time joyful and you know, skipped and that sort of thing. I'm not saying that at all. I'm just saying that we we all have a diversity of emotions and feelings around these real issues, and we need safe spaces to name them and feel them.

P Philip Loring 00:39

How do we keep pushing for a change that we know is right? When it seems like that change is so far away, so impossible to achieve? How can we be realistic about what we can achieve, without giving in to the inevitability of the status quo, to the rightness that whispers in our ear, the futility? It seeks to impress on us at every turn? How do we hope without that hope, being a platitude. Welcome to the very first episode of the second transition Podcast. I'm Phil Laurie. This podcast is about radical change. It is based on a simple premise, that radically changed world may be much closer than we think. Now, I know this is a tricky premise. It's hard to believe. It's hard to have hope. Sometimes hope can be challenging. Sometimes hope can be a platitude, the opiate of the masses, there are some pretty horrible and discouraging things going on in the world. Racism seems like it's on the rise, nationalism, prejudice, greed, they all seem like they're getting worse, not better. But here's the thing. When systems change, they often exhibit much more extreme behaviour right before a major threshold is passed. So while it can be discouraging to see people so polarised so disconnected from one another, to see erosions of women's rights, and voting rights, my gut tells me that these are signs that we're close, not far away from a radically changed world. So that's why we're here to take a look at the major movements and changes unfolding in the world around us and see if we can glimpse what a radically changed future will entail. What does prosperity look like without growth? What do Safety and Justice look like without policing? What does North America look like after indigenous peoples get their lands back? I think that seeing the tangible possibilities on the other side of these major movements can help us better recognise the work that is already underway. To get us started, I'm talking this week with Ellen Kelsey. Ellen is the author of Hope matters, why changing the way we think is critical to solving the environmental crisis. Ellen and I talk about the crisis of hope about how to make hope evidence based. We talked about the starting line fallacy. And then we talk about how youth are turning social movements on their ends. This was a really great discussion. Let's dig in. Today, for this inaugural episode of the second transition podcast, I have the very great pleasure of talking with Elin Kelsey. Elin, thank you so much for joining me today.

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Elin Kelsey 03:50

It's my pleasure.

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Philip Loring 03:51

I'd like to start this conversation. For this first episode of the podcast with a quote from early in your book, you write, there should never be just one dominant story. In a well functioning democratic world, there are multiple stories competing with one another for our attention. The idea that something is complex and extraordinary as all life on earth could ever be encapsulated by a single grand narrative just doesn't make sense. I really like this quote, why do you think having a plurality of storylines for life and for humanity's future on this planet is so important.

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Elin Kelsey 04:27

Thank you so much. And thank you for pulling that quote. Yeah, I mean, I think what is magnificent about this planet is we live on a planet with 8.7 million other species, at least that's the that's the number that's sort of most commonly shared right now. It could be much more, but that's the number that scientists tend to use. And when you think about that, that means there are, you know, infinite things going on at any particular time. You know, and we know the longer that we look at what other species are doing. We see cultures within the same species we see seasonality we see, you know, that expression of intergenerational resilience, you know, so we know we live on a dynamic planet in terms of the natural ecosystem that we are all part of. And I think we're certainly living in a time where we're recognising the incredible diversity of people with on the planet as well. And so the point I'm trying to make is that when we think about, you know, what's happening, this just one narrow idea that everything was good. And now it's, you know, this doom and gloom narrative, that just can't be an accurate fulsome story. And when you're trying to make social change, which we're all very interested in right now, in this time of COVID, this time of climate change, that we know that we're strongest when we have people working all along a spectrum, those who are really calling out the alert, those who have already embedded those changes as values that are just lived ethics, you know, and so it's the diversity of response. And we see it if we think about gender equality rights, for example, if we look at that, as a movement, movements become much stronger, when there's a diversity of voices, there's a diversity of contexts, there's a diversity of histories, then we can place ourselves within them and become really very strong activists or take action within whatever position feels right for our own identities.

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Philip Loring 06:17

Now, it sounds to me like what you're saying is that there are no panaceas. So many people seem so caught up in finding the one solution, the one silver bullet, but really, the solutions to the problems that we're facing, are tied up in all manner of local circumstances and nuances and culture values. My getting it right.

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Elin Kelsey 06:40

Absolutely, absolutely. And I think it really, I often speak with groups of people, and they'll say, please tell us the three things I should be doing that sort of idea. And we can certainly look in our history of environmental action, we would communicate the 10 best things are there. And there, there are lots of examples of those that are full summon worth looking at, you know, we know that switching to a plant based diet is a really positive thing to do. And many people are in fact, already doing that. It's a very large trend around the world. So those are not bad questions to ask. But,

but I think what where they get maybe missed the point a little bit is that if we, if we look at groups, like one that I'm very interested in right now is the intersectional environmentalist Council, which is a group of social influencers who are coming at this from their own positionality their own identity. So there's a wonderful person who self identifies as a drag queen in Australia who's interested in climate change messaging, that person is going to communicate to a group of people who will identify with that person in a way that may not identify with, you know, a scientist speaking about the top three things. And so I think it's when we come with our own full identities, our own unique qualities, the things we do, even if people say, you know, why are you still doing that thing, it's something you're passionate about, then we embed these practices in ways that are just truly asked, and we speak about this, I really love the urban birding movement, for example, it's sweeping the planet right now. That's an exciting movement, because it's people at home in their own place, recognising you know, the joy of birding and and there's been ongoing studies that show that when somebody becomes an urban birder, and becomes involved in that way, they're much more likely to notice environmental things happening around their city, and then to take action around those things in their own city where they probably have much more influence than they would on some, you know, top four things that are generalised and not specific to their place. So I really do think that plurality is the important part of it is finding our own things that drive us.

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Philip Loring 08:48

It strikes me too, that what you're saying, really up ends how we think about leadership and makes addressing environmental and social problems, much more of a collective task, and much less about waiting for the hero waiting for the one Saviour, the often white male saviour who is going to swoop in with their money and their technology and their solutions to solve these problems. For us, you're talking about something very different.

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Elin Kelsey 09:14

And maybe just to add on to that, I think, when we look at Hope, for example, as a as a motivating emotion, we know that collective hope is quite powerful that when we see other people acting in ways that are meaningful, it helps us to stay doing something even when it's really hard to do. So being part of a collective is very motivating. And even when we think of narratives, you know this, some people talk about the grim dark narrative, which we see in lots of dystopian films and books and all those kinds of things around climate change. And then there's the noble bright narrative, which is that one shining hero who will save us and I think we've used that a lot in environmental communication. And then there's one called Hope punk, and in that narrative, if it's the idea that we we, as members of bigger Communities Act in the way that we think is the right way forward around this, and even if we don't believe we're gonna have a positive impact, which I do believe and I'm seeing that's what drives us is this belief in acting in the ways that we know to be right in terms of, you know, tackling the difficult issues ahead of us. So it is hoped punk is a collective narrative, whereas noble, bright and grim, dark are individualistic.

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Philip Loring 10:34

Okay, so I need to diverge here for a minute and talk about hope punk. Alexandria Rowland, author of a conspiracy of truth and acquire of lies, coined the phrase, they offer it as an alternative to the grim dark view that we see in everything from The Hunger Games to even Batman. I asked Alexandra, if they would read an excerpt from their 2017 essay, where they introduced the concept.

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Alexandra Rowland 11:00

So the essence of grim dark is that everybody is inherently sort of a bad person and does bad things. And that's

awful and disheartening and cynical. It's looking at human nature and going, the glass is half empty. Hope punk says no, I don't accept that. Go fuck yourself. The glass is half full. Yeah, we're all a messy mix of good and bad flaws and virtues. We've all been mean and petty and cruel. But, and here's the important part. We've also been soft and forgiving, and kind. Hope punk says that kindness and softness doesn't equal weakness. And that in this world of brutal cynicism and nihilism, being kind is a political act, an act of rebellion. Hope punk says that genuinely and sincerely caring about something, anything requires bravery and strength. Hope punk isn't ever about submission or acceptance is about standing up and fighting for what you believe in. It's about standing up for other people. It's about demanding a better, kinder world, and truly believing that we can get there if we care about each other as hard as we possibly can. With every drop of power in our little hearts.

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Philip Loring 12:20

As a mission statement, hope punk is pretty awesome. But at the same time, there is worry that hope can be a platitude. Now, I brought this up to Elin, which leads us to a discussion of evidence based hope, something that Elin spends a lot of time on in her book.

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Elin Kelsey 12:36

I think often we use hope and wishing as interchangeably. So we say, you know, we hope this will happen. And it has this wishful thinking quality and and I personally think that when Greta Thunberg is speaking out against hope,

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Philip Loring 12:50

you're referring to her speech at Davos? Yes. Let's have a quick listen to what she said.

G

Greta Thunberg 12:58

Adults keep saying, we owe it to the young people to give them hope. But I don't want your hope. I don't want you to be hopeful. I want you to panic. I want you to feel the fear I feel every day. And then I want you to act. I want you to act as you would in a crisis. I wanted to act as if the house was on fire. Because it is

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Elin Kelsey 13:30

what I hear her saying and you know, I don't wish to put words in her mouth. What I hear her saying is she's speaking out against, you know, fatuous wishful thinking. But evidence based hope is hope that is grounded within looking at trends of where things were and where they are now and where they're heading. And so we're really looking at, okay, how much protected areas are there on land and in the ocean? Now, where were they in the past? And how close are we getting to these new goals, which are out there now around establishing 30% of land and ocean by 2030? You know, so that's a very ambitious goal, and one that I find really helpful because it wasn't long ago that I worked on a marine protected area strategy to try and convince former George Bush to establish what was then the world's largest marine protected area back in 2008, as his final act of leaving office, at that point, there was very little of the ocean was protected, you know, very, very little small percentage points. And in fact, we were successful as a as a much broader initiative and George Bush did declare what was then the world's largest marine protected area, and it's something like now the 12th largest. And so just within you know, that last decade, we see a real movement towards ecosystem scaled marine protected areas. Now there are issues with them and how well they're protected and all of those kinds of things. But that movement is a really important example of an evidence base

shift. And now this goal of 30% by 20 Again, we have to work hard to get to it. It's fraught with challenges. But the but the fact remains that we're moving from a few percentage points to 30 percentage points within a, you know, less than a 20 year time frame. So that's an exciting shift. It's evidence based.

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Philip Loring 15:15

And that's a fast shift to



15:17

fast shift Exactly. And, and I think where where I've find this to be so important is that, when we know that the number one way that most people learn about the environment is through the media, and almost all of the media that we hear about the environment is in a problem identification frame. So we hear what is broken, and almost nothing is about what is actually happening. It's helpful to know that because then you say, Oh, I'm actually missing, you know, the other half of the story, which is, and that's where fields like solution journalism are so important, I think, because that network of journalists from all over the world has been in the last decade, actively saying, we need to look just as vigorously at solutions as we do at problems.

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Philip Loring 16:01

By not looking at possible solutions. We're just convincing people, these problems are too big to solve, that they're too intractable that individual actions can't help that civic action can't help.

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Elin Kelsey 16:11

Exactly. And it doesn't tell us anything about the solution. Tony Lisa to set Yale University, he talks about this hope gap that we have, where what we've really seen in recent time is a big movement of people who know really know about climate change, and are really concerned about it. The challenge we now have isn't that people don't know and are concerned, it's that there's this gap in a belief that there's anything they can do about it. And if you don't believe there's anything you can do about it, then that that's very disempowering. And there were just two massive studies that came out just last month, looking at youth under the age of 25. And one of them looking across 10 countries found that the majority of those youth in that age group three out of four, believe that there's nothing we can do about this climate crisis, that that is a really powerful and problematic issue that we have that I think is as big a promise as climate change itself is that we're disempowering by focusing so much on the problems only those people who are most engaged in trying to make a change.

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Philip Loring 17:14

And Elin, it also makes it feel I think, like all of the work is still ahead of us.

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Elin Kelsey 17:19

And we know that urgency discourses, and something I talked about is this start starting wind fallacy. We often talk about the environment, as you know, as if all the hard work is ahead. And we're just at the starting line if we do this. But when we default to an urgency discourse, we know that urgency is tied to fear and in fear discourses, we tend to

get shut down. We don't think collectively, we don't think as creatively, we think more individualistically all the things we don't want at this particular time. And so I think it really is helpful to say we have an urgent issue and look at the kinds of things we are doing that we want to amplify.

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Philip Loring 17:59

And you talk about needing to make solutions crave worthy.

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Elin Kelsey 18:02

I'm so glad you brought up that idea of crave worthy because it's people at this Hannaford University has a mind body lab that looks at the power of mindset. And Alia Crum, the person who has led the mind body lab, was looking at our good intentions of trying to get people to eat healthy vegetables. That's the example she's, you know, we, we know, they're good for us, but we're not choosing them. But but when they were recast in a way that those healthy vegetables sounded yummy and crave worthy, then people are much more likely to take them up. So you're quite right, that craving is such a big part. And I do think that we're definitely seeing movements around people's capacity, you know, around cities since COVID, has hit cities have been really leapfrogging ahead with this idea of walkable cities and bikable cities or pedestrian first cities, which we know are really important from air pollution situation. And air pollution is one of those ones, it's very fast. Reports show that, you know, within 48 hours of changing car patterns, we see positive very positive health benefits across populations. It's a very quick response. And so and we know that there's actually around cities that have closed off their city centres to cars, the big concern was around people would not go into shops, but in fact, they shot more, you know, so these these sort of movements that allow us to move at a pace that is right for our bodies, you know, a walkable way, has all these environmental benefits. It has community benefits, it has these sort of things. So, so repositioning this thinking about how we how we move in cities and how cities being for people first is is an important initiative for all kinds of things that we crave, and it has these very positive impacts for climate change and positive impacts for air pollution and other things.

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Philip Loring 19:56

So earlier you brought up youth and I think if we want to look to Apples that we want to amplify youth is where we should look. But an interesting thing about your book is that while so many people today it seems lament youth and talk about all the things they're doing wrong or not doing or not doing the way that the boomers did. Your book takes a very different approach to thinking about youth and, and proposes, I think that there's quite a paradigm change and how they see themselves in the world and environmental problems. Can you tell me about that?

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Elin Kelsey 20:27

There's been in recent years student guides to the climate crisis that have been created by university age students often or sometimes high school students. And some of the things you see in there are a real focus on things like communal care, and Ally ship, and how we look after each other and self care. And these sorts of qualities, which we know are important to our own personal resilience. And so labelling them right in that guide, as equally as important as understanding what's happening around ozone layers or climate change problems. You know, and I think that recognition of our emotional well being, as is really being driven by the climate justice movement, which is how you see climate change, they are asking for a transformation, not for sustainability, but for transformation, which is a justice oriented movement. And your your earlier point, which is we tend to misunderstand people of different generations, we certainly know Millennials were the first big demographic where we were able to say, people are very

involved in the environment, but not in the way it looked for older generations. So not joining environmental organisations, for example, but heartily engaging in activities in their own local communities, and then switching to another activity in their own local communities that matters to them, where they can see meaningful change. And so it's, I think, this requirement to not stay stuck in, you know, this thing doesn't always look this way. But what's now actually happening, you know, so I guess it's an openness of mind to what's the impact? What are people actually engaged with, rather than say, Oh, how many people have joined environmental organisations, and that's declining, so therefore, they must not be interested in the environment.

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Philip Loring 22:16

Right. And you've almost really brought us full circle here to something we were talking about at the top of the show, and that's the plurality and that, that instead of looking at these new ways of engaging and thinking of them as wrong or not the right strategy, let's revel in the plurality of all of the different ways and modes that people are engaging with these problems. And let's, let's work with that. Let's amplify that. Now, Elin, as my first guest on this podcast, you're the first person is going to answer this question, but I plan on asking a version of this question to everybody that joins us. And that is, what is the most radical change that you would like to see in your lifetime? And are we getting there?

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Elin Kelsey 23:09

Boy, that's a beautiful question. I think that we put in place ideas around the Anthropocene, which is this idea of a geological period in which humans are the first time one species This is a dominant force on causing global change. And and the naming of the Anthropocene is a very powerful thing is in order to hold us accountable as people, one of the unintended consequences I think of that is it can reinforce this great chain of being where humans are at the top, and everybody else is kind of underneath. And that's really in opposition to how I see the world and the radical change I want to see, which is this ecosystem worldview, where we are one species amongst 8.7 million others, all of which are vibrant and active and have agency. And so the most radical change I would like to see is that that ecosystem worldview, where we recognise the culture of other species, their agency, that when we put in place, better protection so that other species can thrive, that we are in fact, floating on behalf of our greater connection, you know, that we are just nature. And and that is undeniable, you and I are only breathing thanks to those phytoplankton. And so we have a very vested interest in the ocean. And that ocean is taking care of us whether or not we know us. So I think that's the most radical changes that that we know it in ourselves, and in our bodies. We are nature, but we often behave as if we think we're on a human only world. And that doesn't serve us.

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Philip Loring 24:49

And with that, I want to thank you for listening to this inaugural episode of the second transition podcast. The second transition podcast is produced on the traditional lands and territories of the Washoe people what is now known as Northern California. Funding for this podcast comes in part from the ArrellFood Institute, from the University of Guelph and from VoicEd Radio. My guest today was Elin Kelsey, author of Hope matters. You can find her contact information, social media details and how to buy the book on the website. Thanks also to Alexandra Rowland for reading to us some of their words on hope punk. Stay tuned for new episodes every two weeks. Joining us next episode is Jamie Beck Alexander, Director of drawdown labs. Jamie and I will dig deep into the future of the private sector. How do we leverage their great positioning to affect change while avoiding the deception and predatory delay? That seems to be the modus operandi of so many private sector firms? I really can't wait for this one. You're listening to limitless future by Dominic Schwarzen. See you next time.

