

## Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness & Dekila Chungyalpa

**JVN** [00:00:00] Welcome back to Getting Curious! I'm Jonathan Van Ness and every week I get to sit down for a gorgeous conversation with a brilliant expert to learn all about something that makes me curious. On today's episode, I'm joined by Dekila Chungyalpa, where I ask her: If faith can move mountains, can it also fix climate change? Welcome to Getting Curious. This is Jonathan Van Ness. We have such an interesting episode. I feel like all of our episodes are interesting, but this one's especially interesting because it's super intersectional. It's, like, bringing, like, all these worlds together. So welcome to the show, Dekila Chungyalpa, who is the founder and director of the Loka Initiative at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She works with faith leaders and religious institutions to support environmental protections, sustainable development and global health. She is also from Sikkim, which, y'all, if you remember our gorgeous episode about the eastern Himalayan borderlands and Dr. Mona Chettri. How do I say that, like, cause it's, like, Sikkim Sister?

**DEKILA CHUNGYALPA** [00:00:59] I love that, Sikkim Sister. Yes, please call me that.

**JVN** [00:00:59] Oh, my God. Well, it's not mine, it's really, like, you and Dr. Mona are, like, Sikkim Sisters. You know what I mean?

**DEKILA CHUNGYALPA** [00:01:08] Yes! We are!

**JVN** [00:01:09] So here's our question, which I think is a really fascinating question. It's one I really never asked myself before I was introduced to your work. How can we restore our faith in our environment? And your work is really in working with, like, faith leaders from all sorts of different faiths, like, not just Christianity. You work with all sorts of people. And not to generalize, you know, because within any group of people, you're going to have people who are going to fall all over a spectrum on, like, any given issue. But you would think that more evangelical Christians who tend to be conservative would be more into, like, helping the earth or something. Cause in 2015, Evangelical Senator Jim Inhofe brought a snowball to the Senate floor as evidence that "manmade climate change wasn't real." "Only God," he said, "could change the climate." Do you remember that?

**DEKILA CHUNGYALPA** [00:02:02] Mmmhm. Oh, yes, I do. So I think there are two parts to your question. I think the first part is that everybody's worried about global warming. Everyone is experiencing the impacts of global warming. We're looking at, you know, not just rise in temperature, but rise in disasters, right, rise in extreme heat, extreme cold. It's affecting agriculture, food productivity, water, all of that. So people are experiencing it and they are getting terrified. And we see it everywhere, not just, not just in the global South, but also in the U.S. and Europe. I mean, we're in the middle of a heat wave right now, aren't we? So, of course, I remember that very theatrical move Senator Inhofe did in 2015. And he brought in the snowball, right, into, into the Senate and said, "People talk about global warming, but,

look, it's snowing." And I think in D.C. there was an unexpected cold wave at that moment, but that year was the hottest on record up to that point. And since then, we've had eight years that have been the hottest on record, year after year.

And so whether you indulge in that kind of theatrics or not, I think the reality is the people of Oklahoma, whom he represents, are experiencing a heat wave just, like, we—, the rest of us are in the United States. It's really important for us to talk about who crafts the theatrics of climate denialism, because it's actually not everyday people. It really is a minority. I often think about these leaders who claim that they reject science, but they don't really because if they did, they would not have gotten vaccinated. They would not go to the dentist. They would not drive a car. So the question is, why do they reject something like global warming, which is so obvious to everyone? And I think it really comes down to the implications of what the science tells them. Basically, what science is telling them is that their way of life, and I think more importantly, their position of superiority is over. And that's what they're fighting against.

And I feel like it's also worth pointing out: there have been several studies done looking at climate denialism. And what we see is that it's the exact same group of people who also denied that smoking is bad for your health, who denied that there is rampant racism and that our systems are racist, who deny any protection for LGBTQ, who, you know, are now denying that guns kill people. Right. This group of people that craft climate denialism do it always for the same reason: either they are white supremacists or aligned with white supremacy. And what they're doing is doing everything they can to consolidate power, because what they see when marginalized folks rise up is the loss of power. And that's really their end game.

**JVN** [00:04:50] And then I can also almost just hear, like, the talking point in my head that it's, like, "Individual responsibility is, like, bullshit and just, you know, use your plastic straws and you know, go fuck yourself. Because, like, until these corporations change, like, there's nothing that we can do as individuals to change that." Which I kind of resent that and really don't agree because, like, I think that it's a "both and," I don't think that it can be "either or." And I think that being so black and white about it is really detrimental because we do ultimately live in, like, a capitalistic economy. And if you can't show that there is a demand for something, then they're never going to supply it. So if someone can keep getting rich off of your choices. They will continue to do so. So there is a way that we do have power individually and collectively.

It feels like the Jim Inhofes of the world use faith to shield responsibility, which then allows them to hoard money. I think sometimes when we say, like, "Oh, you know, this time for these white supremacists, like, you know, their time's up. And so they're fighting really hard to whatever." I think that that is true, but I don't know if these types of people are smart enough to think of it like that when they wake up. And the only reason I think that is because, like, I know so many of them, like, so many of them are like people who I've encountered in my life who have consumed, like, the rhetoric that those climate denialists spout out. It's about climate. It's about queer stuff. It's about, like, basically, like, weaponizing the Christian faith at

a federal and state level. Look at what Kelly Loeffler did, look at what Perdue did, finding out about stuff February 2020 and then selling all their stuff, like, there's so much backdoor trading, so, like, all of these Republican senators will weaponize their Christian faith on the backs of their constituents who keep getting poorer, less healthy, except for, like, the top, like, you know, 10% that are super rich, that, you know, support them.

**DEKILA CHUNGYALPA** [00:06:46] Well, it's interesting because we often see very sort of populist figures. Right? I'm thinking about so many people right now who are political powerhouses, who claim to be one of the masses. But actually went to Ivy League, right? I mean, you can just think about—

**JVN** [00:07:02] Ted Cruz!

**DEKILA CHUNGYALPA** [00:07:03] Every other senator, right, that we know. And so there's something really fascinating to me about how the elite—and these are very, very powerful white men who went to Ivy League, who probably got a degree in business, some, some variation of that. And then basically recreated their image to be very folksy, to be one of the people, to say they're a person of faith. It is worth pointing out that 80% of our human population believes in a faith. They subscribe to a religion. Right. So we know that in many ways, when you think about stakeholder groups, they are one of the largest stakeholder groups you can think of. Very self, self-motivated, very committed to the cause, right, of being a better religious person. And so when someone shows up, who has redesigned themselves to be a person of faith, who claims to have had a crisis moment and then has been reborn as a Christian, they get an acceptance that they otherwise would not get and then they are able to design and build this empire that they've always been meaning to, right?

There's a reason why I think we have more millionaires in the Senate, in the House of Representatives than we've ever had before. You know, I'm really grateful that you brought up the power of the individual and also the private sector, because I think, I think it's a little bit like a two-edged sword, right. We know that a lot of the environmental and climate problems are driven by the markets. And until we signal to the markets that it's not acceptable and people will opt for the more sustainable, better product, they will continue to do whatever they do. So it's really important that we as individuals vote at every level, vote literally by going to our elections and voting, vote with our money, right. Vote by showing up to all the causes we care about.

**JVN** [00:08:50] Seriously, like, I see so many queer people, like, chowing down on Chick-fil-A. And I'm sure that I do this too, unknowingly with, like, certain fast food places. But like, for instance, like, when I realized that the owner of Equinox, like, the owner of that board, was donating to Trump's reelection in 2019. I've never went back. I've literally never stepped foot in an Equinox again. I loved the classes, I loved the community, I loved the people. But, like, I'm not going to show, like, the fitness industry that I'm going to reward someone who gets off on fucking up trans kids in small places. You know what I'm saying?

**DEKILA CHUNGYALPA** [00:09:26] Yeah! It's worth saying that it's really overwhelming. My husband does the shopping because I get stuck in the cereal aisle, and I just am so overwhelmed by choices. It takes me 30 minutes. It takes him 2 minutes. So I think people do get overwhelmed by having to do all the research. What looks like diversity. It's worth pointing out that pretty much any of the grocery stores we go to are owned by ten companies at most. Right?

**JVN** [00:09:50] I feel like I get overwhelmed a lot, too. But if we can just, like, if you're really into gardening or beauty or whatever your thing is, like, if you do feel overwhelmed, like, just think a little smaller or something?

**DEKILA CHUNGYALPA** [00:10:00] And I think there are solutions to that. Like, for example, for people who love fish, you look for the label, right? The Marine certification. So there are ways to, I think, be a responsible consumer. But I also think collecting in community is really, really important for so many reasons, including mental health and sustainability. You're much more likely to continue to do what you do when you are part of a like-minded community. Right? That reinforce these values, reinforce that excitement and the commitment. That's been part of the motive for why I wanted to work with faith leaders. You know, going back to the idea that they are the biggest stakeholder group and trying to influence that behavior. But also it's worth pointing out they're, I think, the third largest financial investor when you collect all of them together. So it's not just, "It's a mass of people." It's also people who are voting with their money, who are using their money, who are investing with their money. I think going back to what you were saying also about individual choices is that I feel like a lot of the time we're presented with "either or" scenarios. And for me, I always joke about this, I'm an "and and and" person. [CROSSTALK]

**JVN** [00:11:08] Yes! We talk about "both and" all the time.

**DEKILA CHUNGYALPA** [00:11:13] Yeah. And so I think it helps to have that attitude when you work with faith leaders because you get a whole range of, of political views, right. And so finding a place where I'm working with people who really want to see positive change, you know, you earlier brought up the fact that why don't more evangelicals or why don't more Christians care about global warming? What I find is they do, but they feel really overwhelmed at the thought of the implications. And one of the things that we've seen in America is that evangelical preachers that speak out very loudly on global warming get reprimanded. They, they get kicked out of their positions. And so the church itself has taken the stance where it's almost like they've presented saying, "If you're loyal to us, if you're loyal to Christ, you will not step out of line on LGBTQ rights. You will not step out of line on climate change, guns." And there's a whole variety of other stuff, right? Women's choice, all of that.

What we are seeing is a slow pulling away from young people, in particular, on these three issues. We're seeing people pull away. And I think the church is trying to grapple with this. But

for the most part, it is run by, you know, older white male groups, which we know is the demographic that doesn't believe in climate change. Right? The work that I do is very much around building a bridge so that they are not left isolated. Given their power, and given their voting power in particular, I think our way of ignoring the far right or ignoring the religious groups that we're uncomfortable with doesn't serve us. We have to build bridges everywhere we can. And so that's partly the reason why I've been working with faith leaders for now almost 15 years. Didn't plan to, fell into it, but I'm loving it.

**JVN** [00:13:03] So Senator Inhofe, he was, like, wrong on two things because he said that, like, climate change wasn't happening, which he was wrong on. Because obviously, like, having a cold snap or a hot snap in an out-of-context place doesn't negate global warming. In fact, in a lot of cases it can reinforce it or can support it because it's just, like, extreme, unexpected weather occurrences. So we know a lot of, like, who is *not* getting it right—who are some examples of faith leaders who are also, like, climate leaders?

**DEKILA CHUNGYALPA** [00:13:33] Mm hmm. So my favorite example is to talk about a group that people would tend to forget, which is the Vatican. So what's really interesting to me is that the last three popes, including the current one, all believed in climate science. Pope Benedict—right, which we would not expect—Pope John Paul, and Pope Francis.

**JVN** [00:13:52] Damn, have we lived through three popes in my lifetime?!

**DEKILA CHUNGYALPA** [00:13:56] We have lived through three popes! We're living through interesting times.

**JVN** [00:14:00] That's more than often, isn't it?

**DEKILA CHUNGYALPA** [00:14:02] Yes, very much so. And so what's been really interesting to me is how all along they've created a framework on climate action. They've activated the dioceses all over the world. And I have a personal experience because when Pope Francis returned to Latin America for the first time as the Pope, it was for this big pilgrimage, the largest pilgrimage in the world called World Youth Day. Two to three young million Catholics show up for this and the Pope speaks to them. I'd created a program at the World Wildlife Fund called Sacred Earth. So we were actually able to create all these environmental messages in Catholic language, and they absolutely approved it. It was amazing how strongly the Vatican supported it. So for me, it's actually a big beacon of hope that someone like Pope Francis not only talks about climate change, has not only created an entire framework for climate action for the Catholics, but also he's connected the dots because he talks so much about inequity. He talks about poverty. He talks about the power differential between the global south and the global north. Right. He's connecting all those pieces together.

One of the biggest challenges is looking at how basically all of the emissions to point have happened because of the West, because of all this, you know, hyper aggressive, neoliberal,

extractive, exploitative economies. Right. But the burden is being carried mostly in the Global South because there is no way for them to build resilience. There's no way for them to protect themselves. And he just has made that front and center as part of his climate messaging. Like talk about intersectionality! You know, here's someone who's connecting all of these dots. So that is not to say, "The Vatican's doing great on every issue." We know they're not. But on climate change, they've been particularly, I think, progressive. And I also see a lot of faith leaders, including in the United States. And, you know, there are evangelical organizations, EEN comes to mind: Evangelical Environmental Network. YECA: Young Evangelicals for Climate Action. So we're seeing a rising of a movement because people are experiencing the impacts and they cannot pretend that it's not happening anymore.

**JVN** [00:16:18] So how did these groups take a faith-based approach to their work?

**DEKILA CHUNGYALPA** [00:16:23] For the evangelicals, everything is crafted within this framework of creation care, which basically means, "God created the Earth. God gave us the responsibility to be stewards of this planet, this earth, right? This beautiful, bountiful Earth. And that it is part of our duty, therefore, to responsibly take care of it." And so that is the framework. And, you know, I have been trying to build relationships with evangelicals since 2008, and I'm now working with evangelical preachers here in the U.S., but also around the world. And our strategy is very much to have closed door dialogue. I spend a lot of time in the trust-building process, which a lot of the big NGOs forget to do right, which is you just invest and you become a listener and you learn, you know, you learn from, from the people who are trying to figure out how to solve the problem. And so even in the evangelical community, I have found a lot of allies who are really looking at it from a creation care perspective and saying, "Oh, God, we did not live up to your mandate for us. As humans, we have not been good stewards, and therefore we must do everything we can."

I do think there is a small subset of evangelicals that will never listen to us. And I honestly think, you know, the elites we talked about earlier who are in many ways fueling and, like, whipping up this, this denialism and hatred and anger in general, all of that to create this schism. I don't think I could ever reach them because they know the science. They just don't care. They're just trying to protect themselves, you know, and make themselves as wealthy as possible in the process. Right? But I think the everyday folks that you mentioned and I mentioned that, you know, are really just they they are hard working. They don't have time to look at the science. They might believe in the Bible more than they believe in the science. Those are the people that we actually need to be building relationships with, because when it comes to climate change, climate change is not going to discriminate. We're all getting the impacts, whether we like it or not.

**JVN** [00:18:30] So typically we would ask this, like, later in that episode. But I do think that here it's important for us to ask about it a little bit earlier and we kind of talked about it, but it's, like, how did you fall into this work? What's your relationship with nature and how did you kind of get into this?

**DEKILA CHUNGYALPA** [00:18:45] Like we talked about, I come from Sikkim, I come from a Bhutia family, which means basically "a Tibetan settled in that region" family. And I come from a family of Tibetan Buddhist practitioners. So my mother took her vows when I was very young and became a nun and a meditation teacher. So I was raised in a particularly unusual way because my mother spent so much time traveling and teaching and being in retreat. So I was in wilderness a lot. I always knew I was going to be an environmentalist. I loved wilderness. Growing up in Sikkim, I just saw a lot of wildlife: bears, red pandas, all of that. And so I had this deep connection and sort of just awe when it came to nature, no one was surprised I became an environmental scientist.

But what happened was, as I studied in the West, I sort of experienced what I call a "bifurcation in personality." Because to say you're a person of faith, especially if you have Indigeneity, it's like putting a spotlight on yourself professionally. People look at you weird. You know, we have this idea in the West of what professionalism is, and that means you don't bring your church to work, right? And so I thought of myself as, like, "a professional by day and then a person of faith by night." And I was really good at what I did. I loved doing field work. You know, I manage the World Wildlife Funds programs in the Himalayas and then the Mekong region, but I was personally going through a lot of turmoil because I was experiencing what we now know is called "eco-anxiety," but there was no term for it then, which was this panic realizing what the impacts meant for people and for wildlife. It was sort of this, "Nothing I do is going to make a difference." And it's sort of bearing down at me with this, the weight of the universe. What the impacts are going to be like.

And I happened to have a meeting with His Holiness, the Karmapa. And he asked me to create environmental guidelines for the monasteries. So, you know, I joke about this, but I genuinely was, like, "This is great. You know, this is, like, future investment into my karma bank!" I was, like, "This makes me a better Buddhist, this is great." So I went on vacation, did this work, created the guidelines. And then, you know, I had not even imagined it for a second, it basically created this movement of monks and nuns doing environmental projects. And then it was, like, the snowball effect where I was just watching the movement get larger and larger. And so what I thought was this one-off, very private thing, ended up being an environmental movement. And we have over 50 monasteries and nunneries that do everything like rainwater harvesting, climate preparedness, disaster management, the whole–, everything you can think of under the environmental umbrella.

**JVN** [00:21:29] Oh my God we're going to start doing rainwater harvesting! [CROSSTALK]

**DEKILA CHUNGYALPA** [00:21:33] For the gardens? It's so great for the gardens! I love it, I love it! We can talk about it!

**JVN** [00:21:39] Yeah, yeah! I didn't mean to talk about myself! I'm just excited about it! Anyways, but so they were doing, so 50 missionaries?

**DEKILA CHUNGYALPA** [00:21:44] Over 50 of them! Monasteries, Tibetan Buddhist monasteries, monks, red robes, all of that in the Himalayas doing these projects and it was like a light bulb went off for me. I suddenly looked around and said, "How come we're not working with religion? And how come I, as the daughter of a faith leader, never considered that faith moves mountains." How often do we use that phrase? It just had never clicked. So I went back to WWF and convinced them to let me open the Sacred Earth program, which then allowed me to go to East Africa and the Amazon and work with different religious leaders. Because I was trying to prove that it didn't matter what religion, it didn't matter what geography. If you work with faith leaders and they buy into the mission and you co-create a goal together, you are going to be so much stronger because they will bring the power of their institution with them. And it's been really successful as, as a strategy towards environmental and climate goals. But I also think it brings something to the environmental and climate movement that we've lost along the way, because we've become so fixated on science and facts that we've forgotten what moves people. It's the heart. So for me, part of the mission is bringing the sacred back into the science.

**JVN** [00:22:55] It's so interesting. In yoga, we learn that, like, yoga means, like, "union" or, like, "to yoke," which is like to bring together. And in this world, we're, like, so polarized where things are, like, growing, like, further and further apart. It's like I think a lot of the people I really respect and I look up to, you being one of them, a lot of their work is, like, in building bridges and it's, like, reaching across even in really uncomfortable spaces, which I think is really moving and beautiful. I grew up, you know, like, in corn fields, soybean farms in, like, rural west central Illinois, very Christian, Christian summer camp every summer, my mom is really involved in the church, like, it was just a really big community part for me. And so even when I was reading about your work and where it, like, said, like, "faith-based," I just noticed this, like, piece of me, this like reactions obviously, like, being queer and coming up in the church, like, that, like, anything "faith-based" it like it just makes me automatically feel a little bit in turmoil, a little bit worried. So I was, like, "Oh, I don't know." But then as I started to read about you more, I was like, "Oh, this is, like, really cool." It's not, like, a Eurocentric, like, Christianfaith-based being, which then led me to what we were just talking about. And we don't have to talk about it because, like, but I'm just, I'm curious. When you work with Christian people, aren't they always trying to, like—

**DEKILA CHUNGYALPA** [00:24:12] [LAUGHTER] Convert me? Is that where you're going?

**JVN** [00:24:15] Yes!

**DEKILA CHUNGYALPA** [00:24:16] Oh, yes!

**JVN** [00:24:17] Because isn't that a big problem with, like, because it's like there because it's like it's part of me because then I start to think about it. Because obviously, like, I, you know, "As we say in the Christian religion," I feel a need to start talking in a Southern accent when I



talk about this, "I accepted Jesus into my heart on several occasions as a child. And, you know, I know that—" But I was thinking, just like two weeks ago, I was, like, "Oh, you know, minus the whole, like, converting everyone piece. It's fierce. Like, a lot of, like, the lessons and, like, it could be really cute, it's just it's that part of, like, having to, like, go to war or to like, murder." Because if you don't think of me like this, it's like it's that escalation that makes the kind of this, like, other point that's, like, harder to get behind, but like, yeah, how do you deal with that? Because it's that just like left, right? I mean, isn't it just like—

**DEKILA CHUNGYALPA** [00:25:03] Yes, I do. I do have days where I think, "How did I, a Himalayan Buddhist woman, a brown woman, end up working with a bunch of white evangelicals, you know?" So I have a running joke with a dear friend and, and colleague of mine, Reverend Ed Brown, who heads Care of Creation, which is an evangelical creation care organization. And he loves to tell me that Buddhists are the most slippery people he's ever met because apparently whenever evangelicals try to convert Buddhists, including me, they will say, "You know, this is the absolute truth, right? Jesus died for our sins." And we will say, "Yes," and we will apparently get really emotional and then we will bring out karma. And, you know, Buddhism and Buddhism has no God, right. So we'll bring out all the pantheon of gods we have instead and be, like, "And this is also the absolute truth." We're relativists. We train from a really young age to accept all truths as possible. So in some ways that makes it very easy. And he's always saying to me, he's, he's on a mission to convert me. And we just have this ongoing joke about it and a conversation about it. I think for me, I've been raised to be really respectful of all faiths from a very young age. You know, I said my mother was a nun. She read the Bible, you know, she read the Quran, like, it was just something that was in my household.

**JVN** [00:26:24] She probably knows more about the Bible verses than, like—

**DEKILA CHUNGYALPA** [00:26:27] Yeah, and she would read it out to me and it would reinforce my sense that there is sacredness in everything in life. And then, of course, being Bhutia and coming from one of the, you know, Indigenous communities in the Himalayas, like, we are raised to believe that nature is alive. I don't know if Mona talked about it on the side with you, but, you know, we have a mountain called Mount Kanchenjunga. He's the third tallest peak in the world, but no one's heard of him because we refuse to let him be climbed. We're just, like, "Nope, nobody's desecrating our protective deity."

**JVN** [00:27:02] Cause they'll just put water bottles, and, like, shit all over it.

**DEKILA CHUNGYALPA** [00:27:06] And, like, flags! Like, we with our puny 80 years are claiming to have conquered a mountain that is literally rocks that are almost a billion years old. Like, I just—, I've never understood mountain climbing expeditions.

**JVN** [00:27:20] Me either! But you know really what it is, I'm pretty sure, it's, like, process compulsively because it's just, like, you know, you just get high from danger and all that training and it's, like, those chemicals are fun.

**DEKILA CHUNGYALPA** [00:27:33] And there is something really consumeristic about the whole process, right? Like, you're "buying" this experience, and somehow that makes you feel like you're superior. And so, you know, I can go on. This is one of my pet peeves. But I think, I think those two experiences of understanding how beautiful, ultimately at the core, all faiths are. And then having the sense that everything has sacred value, nature and humans alike, meant that it was—, it was easy for me, even, even in the process of, you know, as you said, there are points of tension. You know, I have had preachers tell me that the devil is riding my shoulder.

**JVN** [00:28:14] Yes.

**DEKILA CHUNGYALPA** [00:28:15] You know, all of that. But no faith leader has ever turned me away from a conversation about the environment. But I know a lot of scientists who turned religious leaders away because they are so anti-religion. So part of my own mission is to find enough scientists who want to build bridges, who want to actually talk and explain the science to everyday people who don't agree with them. Part of it has to be that we step outside our ivory towers, right? And that building a bridge has to be from both sides, you know. And that's who I look for in all of these communities I work with. You know, I've worked with Muslim clerics, I've worked with evangelicals, Catholics, Buddhists, Hindus, you name it. I'm looking for that person who's also building a bridge from their end.

**JVN** [00:28:58] It's, like, just not getting caught up in those detours because, like, your focus is environment. It's like, "Yes, he's probably right there, honey, like that devil's probably right there. But anyway, back to what we were—" You know what I mean? That just must be so, but then, not in an effort to make me feel better about Christians. But maybe in an effort to make me feel better about Christians. Is everyone a little bit like does everyone feel a little bit of a nightmare sometimes? Or are we—, like, not "we," but I think I still—

**DEKILA CHUNGYALPA** [00:29:25] No, not at all. I mean, I know I'm not trying to make you feel better. Not at all. I mean, the thing is, like, I when I reach out to faith leaders and the first time I had the meeting, you know, I do this thing where I always show them the globe and I explain to them that it's a closed system. The Earth is a closed system, when we think of our planet. Right. So we have the atmosphere, we have the lithosphere, we have the, the hydrosphere. So air, water, and soil, right. That's what we have. Nothing voluntarily enters it or leaves it except for meteors and an occasional billionaire, maybe. Nothing really does. Right. And so everything that happens, all the people we hate, all the people who hate us, all the wars, all the good things, the love, everything is happening in this closed system. And guess what? We are recycling into each other because we die. We're born, we live, we die, we decompose. We just are, like, constantly recycling. So for me, one of the reasons why I talk

about it in this way is because it's a reminder to myself that actually I have more in common with people who I don't share maybe the main values with. But I still have more in common than less. We're still living, breathing people. We still love. We still want to protect those we love. And I think part of my responsibility is to broaden that group that people love. To say, "Okay, you and I are both living people. We are both people of faith. We both are really worried about what happens to our communities. How big can you make your community? You know, can you extend it to include migrants? Can you extend it to include homeless people? Can you extend it to include BIPOC, LGBTQ? Right, like, how much can we play with your idea of who you are protecting."

**JVN** [00:31:12] "Well, as long as they love Jesus, we can." That's what they'd probably say.

**DEKILA CHUNGYALPA** [00:31:17] If they say that to me, the opening is: "Great! I'm going to step out of the way. And here is the Kenyan pastor who's going to speak to you, who's your brother in Christ?" Like, my job is to create that space where they meet. There is no way I should be communicating, right, to them. Because at the end of the day, I am a heathen. Right. But a brother in Christ, from a community that is severely impacted by climate change, they can have this deep conversation that I cannot. You earlier used a word that is actually part of Loka's vision, which is "intersectional." And when we talk about intersectionality, which was coined by Dr. Kimberlé Crenshaw, my hero, one of the things that you can do is layer people's different vulnerabilities and then look at the community that has the most number of vulnerabilities, right. So we know if you're poor in America, you're really vulnerable. If you're Black and poor or Latin and poor or, you know, Indigenous/Native and poor, you're even more vulnerable. Right. And then let's say, on top of that, you identify as LGBTQ, like, your vulnerability is stacking up, isn't it?

So whatever it is we build, we have to build it for the people that are most vulnerable no matter what. Right. Who are we trying to protect? At the end of the day? Who needs the most protection? Who needs the most resilience? And so Loka's vision is very much around this idea of intersectionality. You know, we say all the time that "inner"—meaning mental—community and planetary resilience are interdependent. You cannot achieve any one of these without working on the other two. We have to find a way to integrate what's happening to us inside ourselves and what's happening in our community and what's happening to the planet. And so I think going back to what you were saying, it's really important that we don't suck up the air when we're in these spaces, that we actually center vulnerable people and they speak for themselves, you know. So Loka, we don't have a mission of our own. Our mission is to serve faith and Indigenous leaders on environmental and climate issues. So they tell us what they want and we make it happen and then we step out of the way.

**JVN** [00:33:25] So it's, like, 2010s or something. You had been working with WWF. And then you were, like, "Ooh, I want to do this Sacred Earth thing." And then they were, like, "Okay, you can do that." And then after that you established Loka.

**DEKILA CHUNGYALPA** [00:33:39] So in 2014 I received this very unexpected award from Yale for the work I'd been doing with faith leaders. And I had always thought I was totally invisible doing this work because I was over there in Amazon, in East Africa, and everywhere else, right. And when they sent me the letter, I got so freaked out, I acted like I didn't receive it and they had to follow up with a phone call. So they gave me this lovely grant and fellowship. And so I moved to Yale and basically designed the prototype for Loka there. So it took me 3 to 4 years and then I was invited by UW Madison and the Center for Healthy Minds, which is headed by Richie Davidson, whom you should totally talk to, mental health mindfulness king. And invited to come and build it here. And so the way I did it was I basically talked to over 50 faith and Indigenous leaders in a three-year period saying, "What do you want? If, if I could create this for you, what should it look like?" And so the program I have now is very community-based in that sense, because it's a community of faith leaders I really trust and admire.

**JVN** [00:34:45] And then so now, like, the Loka Initiative is, like, that work basically looks like building those bridges you were talking about, like, if there was a lot of, "As long as you accept Jesus, we're not using plastic here," and then you're, like, "Great, perfect, getting your brother in Christ." Honey, he's like stepping in. So but you do that, like, whatever the different faith is and you guys are doing that, like, everywhere.

**DEKILA CHUNGYALPA** [00:34:04] So we do it everywhere, but there are four communities we're really focused on. My criteria really was: "Who isn't present at the climate events, who isn't showing up in the environmental and climate events?" So I went with evangelicals, I went with first nation elders, I went with Indigenous leaders around the world. I went with Tibetan Buddhist monastics. And because of our intersectional vision we are building an interfaith program for faith leaders in Madison, Wisconsin, where we are based. And so these are the four communities I work with. In 2019, we had a symposium and we had 20 faith leaders coming from different religions, like, representing their religious institutions. I had 20 scientists and 20 faith leaders and 20 experts, so it was like 60 people in total. The scientists ended up asking the faith leaders for help, which I had not anticipated. And you know what they asked for help on? It was mental health. So we had two climate scientists, both of whom are super powerful in the field of climate science, who have been lead authors for the IPCC reports, right the International Panel on Climate Change. And they both had these moments where they said, "I am struggling personally. I feel like giving up." You know, one of them is having panic attacks. The other was having depression. And they said, "If the faith leaders can help us with anything, it would be helping us get through this trauma that we are experiencing in the climate world." And so Loka also has a focus on eco-anxiety and climate distress, where we build all kinds of things, including courses, we have meditations on apps and different things where we're helping people in the frontlines of climate change actually deal with their own suffering, right, while they're working on this important issue.

**JVN** [00:36:53] Mmm! That's so good because we need to, like, restore people who are doing this work. What about the people who may be listening to this, and they're, like, "Oh, eco-anxiety, eco-depression. Like, that's just another reason why I'm, like, you know, 'fuck it with

my disposable cups,' like, and not giving a fuck, honey, I can't deal with all this." But there's also people who maybe just feel like they don't know how to make a different choice. It could be financial, it could be whatever. For me I always think about, like, Internal Family System and, and parts and like I have a part of my Internal Family System, like, in my psyche, which is the way that this therapy, like, talks about it, that, like, I call it, like, "an overwhelmed part." And I realize that, like, "I'm not overwhelmed. It's, like, a *part* of me that is feeling overwhelmed. Like, actually, my centered self is totally capable of sitting with this, handling it, whatever." But for people who are just, you know, wanting to get into it or a little bit newer, experience a lot of anxiety or depression around climate change, global warming stuff, or even just dipping their toe in, what's some stuff that you have found works for people to get into this work without, you know, being—, becoming super anxious or depressed?

**DEKILA CHUNGYALPA** [00:38:01] Mm hmm. So, I mean, the first thing is to acknowledge that it's real, right? What you're experiencing is absolutely natural. It's, it's your, it's your internal warning system telling you that there is an existential threat that's coming. Like that, that's healthy. That's actually healthy. Right? It's not a maladaptation. It's something that we have evolved to do. Right. To tell ourselves to flee because there's a problem. So I think sitting with that and acknowledging that it's real and there's a reason why it's happening is really key for our mental well-being. You know, pushing it away, pretending it's not there doesn't help us. And we know this, right. It's why I love my therapist so much. She forces me to look at the problem I'm trying to avoid, right? And so I think that's the first piece of it. I think the second piece of it is it is overwhelming and it's designed to overwhelm. And so for us, I think understanding that it's designed to be overwhelming and therefore to protect ourselves, we're going to pick what we can. We don't have to pick up the universe. We pick what we can. We pick the issue that is nearest to us.

So is that rainwater harvesting, is that trying to figure out what the community is struggling with that? Is that volunteering in the soup kitchens? Is that, you know, whatever that might be with the confidence that because everything is intersectional, everything is interdependent, we're actually working towards these larger solutions. So I think understanding that the larger picture includes the work you do is really key. As long as you're working on social and environmental problems, you're working on a solution, right? I think the other piece that's really important is that we work in community. We know that when we are physically aware of other people around us doing the same thing, it actually gives us an uptick on our own mental happiness. And so I think that's also really important.

And the final thing I'd say is sit with nature, go into nature. You know, have a moment where you're connecting with the plants you grow, whatever that might be. Remind yourself that you are part of nature. I think something that has happened a lot is that we humans tend to think that we're outside of nature, right? When in reality we are a living being that nature created just like it created every other living being. And so we get to feel like we are part of that web of life. And I think sinking into that awareness for me as an environmentalist, nothing gets me out of my funk faster, you know, than, than reminding myself that, "Oh yeah, I'm part of

nature. I'm going to recycle with all of these different elements sooner or later. And how amazing is that?" Like, we we, are part of life and finding a joy in that and allowing that to kind of give us that boost we need for our resilience.

**JVN** [00:40:41] We had, like, we had to rip out two of the pumpkins from the ground today in our cage because they were suffocating like the leaves were suffocating the pumpkins and the pumpkins were fucking rotting. And they weren't they weren't flowering right. And they were, like, pissed because I packed them so, because it's, like, "A little good, a lot better, let's get more pumpkins." And I didn't listen but that's fine. You know, we have our compost bin. So yes, we put the vines in the compost bin. So they're going to be back there, you know, and our peat-free ass soil next year, you know. Because actually now that we have our big ass compost bins, we don't need nearly as much as we used to need, which is fierce. I didn't mean to talk about myself again. I just. It just happened like 3 hours ago. And when we started talking about nature, I just ahhh, I was remembering my pumpkins. But, and then I'm gonna start talking about. I swear to God. But we did, like, these two other kinds of pumpkins this year and then like seeds from our old pumpkins last year. And there's this one pumpkin like the size of my head that is still alive that didn't get suffocated. And it's on the new kind that we planted this year, like Russian blue or something. Like, obviously, like I didn't choose the name, but it's like this like different kind of, ah, it's really cool. Anyway, I'm excited for that one, pumpkin, like we have. I got chills just thinking that there's one. Ah, thank God.

**DEKILA CHUNGYALPA** [00:41:47] I feel this way about our cauliflowers. We have four and they're just getting, like, they're starting to edge each other out. And I'm just every day, like, "Do I move them, what do I do?" Because they're kind of huge.

**JVN** [00:41:59] Mark keeps telling me next year, he, he's telling me like, "Every year, we learn something every year," and then we like another bit, you know? But then I feel my capitalist Eurocentric white stuff that I learned, right? I'm just like, "No, like, this was the year I needed it now! Oh, like, I wanted it yesterday!" I said, but, you know, but then I started that part. I was like, we're all like, "Girl, this is, like, propaganda. Like, you just think you needed it yesterday. Like, you'll, it'll be great next year, you're going to love it." But anyway, going back just a smidge, so basically your work at Loka, your, like, the four communities that we're working with, like, most often. And one of those was Indigenous leaders and that just brought up for me, for us—everybody at team Getting Curious—one of our favorite episodes, Dr. Jessica Hernandez, who taught us about Indigenous science.

**DEKILA CHUNGYALPA** [00:42:44] Yes.

**JVN** [00:42:45] We love Dr. Hernandez, we love Jessica. I just really love her and her work. Can you share what some of your work has been like with Indigenous leaders, and what's the importance of Indigenous wisdom in these efforts?

**DEKILA CHUNGYALPA** [00:42:56] Oh, I would love to. And also one of the things that we did, Jessica was involved, so I'm just so excited to, like, tie all of this together. So when we first decided that we, we would launch the Loka Initiative. I went to the First Nations of Wisconsin. We have so many, but there are two tribes in particular where in their creation story they are actually as human beings born here, in Wisconsin, right, at the Great Lakes. So that's the Ho-Chunk Nation and the Menominee tribe. And so I work particularly with elders from those two tribes. And, and, my sense of accountability is very strongly to them. And then they represent the Indigenous community to me, in many ways. And so in the conversations we've had 14 Indigenous leaders who have been advising us over the last three years and then two years before that, while I was designing the program and the feedback I got very much the first thing they really wanted Loka to focus on was creating events that is just Indigenous led. You know, Indigenous moderators, Indigenous speakers only. And it was in a whole variety of topics, right, environmental, climate and so on. But what they wanted to see was this Indigenousness being represented to them as leadership and as experts.

If you, I think, polled Indigenous people wherever we are, we would think—and this is how I was raised—“It's white folks that are the experts. We are the students.” Even though so much of Indigenous knowledge actually has fed and is, is lightyears ahead of the science. Right? Like now people talk about systems thinking. I mean, that's, like, Indigenous paradigm right there, you know? And so Jessica was involved in this as well. And she spoke at the event and she helped make it happen. But we had an online event last year that ended up having a thousand registered people, 25% of whom were Indigenous people calling in from, you know, New Zealand and all kinds of places all over the world saying, “This is the first time we're seeing this, an event that is only got Indigenous speakers and moderators on environmental and climate issues.” We're also producing a film, I should pause to say, one of the problems with having a mission when you're in service, the mission is to be in service, is that you end up doing things that you have zero expertise in sometimes. And so for me, if someone had told me I would work on a film, I would have thought, “That's a wild idea.”

But basically this is how Elder Janice Rice put it, from the Ho-Chunk Nation. She wanted us to create a film that “is an invitation and creates a pathway to bring Indigenous people who are lost home.” And I get super emotional whenever I think about it, because this part of what's happened with colonization is that we've ended up being separated from our identities and we've been taught to look down on Indigeneity. Right. It's something that we don't talk about. You know, when you come to the West or you're working in a Western professional setting, it's something that you almost are raised to have shame about. And in the last 10 to 20 years, we've seen this resurgence of Indigenous pride. And I think Jessica is, like, the perfect person because she writes about it in her book so beautifully. But I think part of that is reclaiming our Indigenous expertise and also what we are experts in professionally. Right. It's not just having to “either or.” So this brings me to the “and and and.” And so it's, like, we get to be “and and and” humans, like, we get to be full. And I think that's, that's part of what Loka does, is trying to figure out ways where we reunite our Indigeneity within ourselves. But also we, we try and unite Indigenous peoples around the world because we know we have common values. We

know that nature is alive, we believe in kinship and this idea of interdependence. We center wildlife and animals and, you know, nonhuman living species as being equally important as human species.

And so to me, that has brought so much beauty to the work we do. And interestingly, my experience has been that other faith groups I work with are fascinated and really want to imbibe some of these values because they see where it's gone wrong. By us ignoring, you know, other living beings that live on this planet, who have we really helped? We haven't helped ourselves. The most easy explanation for this is bees that we tell our kids all the time. Right. "If bees disappeared from this planet, one third of our agriculture would collapse tomorrow." You know, we're living in this way as if we think as a human species, we are totally independent, when actually we need everything else to thrive, for us to thrive. And to me, Indigeneity and Indigenous wisdom and Indigenous knowledge, this is, this is the core of that knowledge system. And so for Loka, what we do is we try and promote that through the ways our elders tell us they want us to. And that includes now producing a film.

**JVN** [00:47:51] I love that. That's so cool. So Dr. Hernandez also talks about the history of eco-colonialism, which is what we were just talking about. Yes! And the importance of having Indigenous leaders run local restoration projects. How can faith leaders who are not Indigenous keep this sentiment in mind when they consider climate action?

**DEKILA CHUNGYALPA** [00:48:10] Mm hmm. So I, I would love to broaden that question, but the one thing I can say is—

**JVN** [00:48:16] Broaden the shit out of it.

**DEKILA CHUNGYALPA** [00:48:17] Broaden it? Okay. So for me, this is a larger question. This really is a question for everybody who is not Indigenous. First of all, it's like we need a kind of awareness, right? We don't think about yoga. We don't think of mindfulness as having Indigenous roots. They just showed up in our world and we love it and we do it, but we have no sense that actually it came from something, you know, yoga is rooted in India. It's a Vedic tradition. Right. There's all this spirituality that's embedded in it. We've totally forgotten it. We've turned it into a commodity. Cut that root and turned it into its own thing. Right. Same thing that I see with mindfulness when we forget that it's coming from Buddhist roots, from Tibet, from other parts, you know, Southeast Asia, other parts of the world. We're doing ourselves a disservice because then what happens is we get a product that is incomplete. We get a product that is not going to fix the problems that we really want to fix because it's incomplete by itself.

When Jessica, for example, talks about eco-colonialism, part of the problem with the environmental movement is for the longest time, we've had this very colonial idea of what—I mean, the language we use, "pristine ecology looks like," "what a pristine habitat looks like." And that basically means kick all the humans out. And of course, that's not how Indigenous



people think or live with nature. It's very interactive. Growing up, there were areas that were really sacred where we were told not to go, that belonged to the spirits or that belonged to the land deities, right. But for the most part, we lived in nature and we protected nature, you know?

And I think when you think back of when the first colonists arrived in America and they thought America was just this "wild" area that no humans had cultivated and managed, and it was untamed. We now know that was false. Actually, all the Native American tribes were managing the land as it were, right. So I think going back to thinking about how, how humans need to be seen as part of nature, they cannot be treated as the enemy. They are part of the solution. And in particular, Indigenous peoples have been protecting nature from time immemorial, right. For me, I'm on a personal crusade, I think using that word to show environmental and climate movement leaders that all the protests we see in North America. Especially around pipelines, right? #NoDAPL (Dakota Access Pipeline), [Stop] Line 6, [Stop] Line 3, all of that. That is part of climate solution. Why do we not see that as a climate movement? They are actually putting their bodies on the line to prevent pipelines from happening. How is it that we've created such a division that we don't see Indigenous peoples' movements as part of the climate movement? Right. And doing that internal work to say, "Why am I othering them?"

**JVN** [00:51:05] That seems like a major climate solution—or at least for me personally, like, that feels like, yes! So my sister just got married and it was interesting because, like, the priest who is this, like, you know, I've known him for a long time. I really like him. He said this thing in the, in the vows that I just thought it, like, so interesting, you know, because as a priest, you can say whatever you want in a marriage. Right. And so he felt the need to say in marrying, you know, my sister in this guy, you know, "God created man and woman and his image." You know, he *had* to get that line in there. I was just thinking like, "Oh, I wonder if he doesn't do queer weddings or I wonder, like, you know, just whatever." But it's like then I thought I've thought about this joke, like, 15 times in our episode so far, which is the whole thing. Like, because, you know, me being raised in, you know, very rural, like Christian place, like I think I really there's a world where I could've, like, totally been an anti-vaxxer like MAGA—like three different experiences and I could have, like, been totally sliding doors, like, the other way. Just be like a self-hating, like, you know, still queer, still nonbinary trans.

Like, all these things that just, like, not letting myself be who I am and just and so a lot of I feel like the threat to this is that, like, like, what Jim Inhofe said, which is that, like, "God will save us," that we are not powerful enough as people to hurt this beautiful world that God created 10,000 years ago from his rib. And so even saying, like, "climate action," it's, like, that is an offense to a lot of really fundamentalist conservative Christians because they believe that the Earth was literally created 10,000 years ago—that's serious for them. The other thing we have to remember is that, like, the Bible has been translated, like, 15,000 times over the last 2000 years. So it's, like, a lot of these things that, like, fundamentalist Christian, you know, God creating man and woman like these are "newer things" because I mean, 2000 years is the blink

of an eye like, you know, yeah, in time memorial in the way that we think about it. So it just feels like, you know, I feel like that's where my eco-depression and despair comes in. Is it just, like, even hearing you talk and knowing, like, where I come from and how people are, it's like. It's just, like, a lot to cut through. So let's say that, like, Jim Inhofe wants to talk. He hears this episode. It's been three weeks after it came out. He wants to talk. How do you make the case that he should care about climate change?

**DEKILA CHUNGYALPA** [00:53:27] I mean, the first thing I'd say is it shouldn't be me who's talking to Jim Inhofe.

**JVN** [00:53:31] Well I don't make the rules! [CROSSTALK] He reached out, no no no, Queen, his office reached out you. So you're the bridge builder. So you've gotta to do this, you just told us how you do this!

**DEKILA CHUNGYALPA** [00:53:45] Yes.

**JVN** [00:53:45] Press staff reaches out, "Senator Inhofe wants a meeting." Who do you have at the meeting?

**DEKILA CHUNGYALPA** [00:53:51] So I would go surrounded by evangelical preachers who are really concerned about climate change. I tend not to use the term climate change when it's with more conservative faith leaders. I just talk about disasters because you know who really donates generously post-disaster? Evangelical churches, right. So I would build with that. I would build with something that they feel very proud of, that they feel is part of God's work, that they feel protects their Christian community around the world and say, "Let's talk about disasters." You know, "You have this incredible record of donating or doing this post-disaster work. And then let's talk about the future disasters."

**JVN** [00:54:28] "And I have these 20 guys here."

**DEKILA CHUNGYALPA** [00:54:29] "I have these 20 guys and we are going to talk about the future disasters that are to come." And do you not want to disaster proof the church? Do you not want to? Right. And so when we take a lot of that, what we know polarizes people take the language away and it just becomes about what they care about the most. They're much more willing to listen. And if even 1% of what we say seeps in. That gives me an opening to come back and maybe broaden it to 2%. I don't think I'm the right person to speak to the most conservative faith leaders by any means. In fact, there have been times I've asked, I've literally, even at UW, turned to one of my colleagues and said, "Huh, you're from the Midwest? You're white, you're tall, you're male. You go!" Right? Like, "You're the one who needs to go and have this conversation." But I think in so far as understanding that the goal isn't to convince somebody immediately, because obviously that's not how faith and that's not how our beliefs are built.

**JVN** [00:55:25] You've got to say that again. Say that again.

**DEKILA CHUNGYALPA** [00:55:28] Again and again and again. And your goal is to turn that 1% of receptivity to 2%. Your goal is then maybe in a year to turn it to 3%. If you're going in thinking one conversation is going to save the world, you're not saving anything or anybody like that, that is not in any way a recipe for success. And, you know, who knows these people who've really been trying to change other people's minds in terms of, like, you know, I think about LGBTQ rights all the time and how there was a watershed moment, right? There was this moment where it started trickling into public awareness and it became more acceptable. And that's kind of what we're looking for is that it didn't happen overnight. The number of people that suffered, the crisis that people went through, but it happened. And so there is so much hope in movements actually creating a larger acceptability. So for the people who are the most conservative, they might never accept it, but the people that surround them who are unsure or who have a sibling that's, you know, homosexual or is trans or is like identifies generally non-binary. Right. Any of those like *that's* who we are trying to shift that, it's, it's the people that are unsure that we really need to reach out to and build the bridges with.

**JVN** [00:56:43] Ah! And, too, I feel like in times like when people a lot of times, like, don't vote, it's because they are, like, unsure of how these things affect them or think that they don't in the first place. And I'm always just kind of bowled over like how in 2020, which was like our most turned out election and it was like in the middle of a pandemic and it still had like more people turnout than like I can't remember how many because like, I think, like, it still was, like, about half. Like it was like about a half. But I need to think about if that's, like, over 18 people, but it's like 80 plus. 75 is like 155 and there's 330 million people in the U.S. that is that voting people are just all people. But still!

**DEKILA CHUNGYALPA** [00:57:21] Yeah, it's still very low. I think India has 65%, India. Like, over a billion people has 65% turnout.

**JVN** [00:57:29] We just still have, like, millions and millions of millions of people who I think that if you don't vote, that doesn't mean that you're unsure, that you're not quite sure about how this impacts you or like why you should vote. And so those are the people that we're really reaching out to. It's like not and and I also think that a lot of those people are probably a lot of people who like, honestly, like, don't spend that much time online anyway because they sense that it's polarized. And the algorithms will make it so that they don't come too close to it and contact with something that's going to upset them or that they're not going to spend a lot of time on. You know, it's like if you don't like political stuff and if it comes across your screen, you zoom past it and don't watch, like, TikTok, Instagram, Twitter, it all reads that stuff and knows like, "Well, don't show them that. Only show them so that they're going to want to keep watching."

So I do think it's, like, sometimes we feel hopeless about reaching out to people or maybe the way that we've been trying to reach out to people. It's not working. And also what you were

just saying, it reminds me so much of my dad who, like, I love him, I feel committed to wanting him to change, like, or just wanting to change his perspective because I'm so passionate about it. So but it's never been one conversation. This has been, like, 20- and 30- and 40- and 50-minute conversations. It's been like talking a lot and then not talking because I had to set a boundary, come back to the table, try again, like and not that it's been perfect, but it's been relentless. Like, it really has been resilient. Like, in my, in my effort to keep coming back to the negotiating table with him on, like, how we see the world. And I don't think that that's, like, a template for most people. But I am just saying, like, I have seen someone go from, like, 5% of accepting and, like, willingness to, like, I feel like he must be in the 40 or 50% now. I mean, he's not, he's not even a centrist Democrat, but he is, he's giving you, like, Lisa Murkowski vibes, you know, which is like...

**DEKILA CHUNGYALPA** [00:59:15] We'll take it, we'll take it!

**JVN** [00:59:19] Yeah, it's better! It's better! You know, it's a little bit better than what it was. I don't see Murkowski over Cruz any day, you know?

**DEKILA CHUNGYALPA** [00:59:25] You know--

**JVN** [00:59:26] I think she voted against Kavanaugh, so fuck! It's something.

**DEKILA CHUNGYALPA** [00:59:33] I mean, so the thing I mean, listening to you, you know, talk about your dad. Like, what comes through really strongly is love, right? It's love that's motivating you to try again and again, no matter how hurtful it is, because I can guess how hurtful it is. Right. And so for me, I think that's really informing the work we do to is that ultimately what we have to look for is what we do have in common. And that's why we keep returning to the conversation. And I feel like one of the things I do say a lot to my climate and environmental friends is we cannot come from a position of hate and judgment. We cannot come from a position of, "We know everything, you know nothing," and then expect them to change their mind, expect them to open their minds and be like, "Okay, tell us." That's not how humans are constructed. It has to come from love. It has to come from an understanding that for whatever reason, they do not agree with us.

Our job is not to tell them they are wrong and yell at them. Our job is to say, let's find what we agree on and build from there. I think one of the reasons why the polarization is so terrible is we're just shouting at each other, right, constantly. They have figured out what's at stake for them, because when they change their minds on one kind of science, that means they're forced to change their minds on the other kinds of sciences they've, they've rejected. And that's very scary. And so understanding and respecting that, changing somebody's worldview is a scary experience for them. You know, you are shifting the ground underneath their feet. And so doing it, just like we would want it done to us, doing it respectfully. You have to have that understanding that by just going in and shouting that they change their entire worldview means that they're going to turtle up. We would turtle up. I think the approach that you

described with your dad is, like, the *only* approach that actually works. You know, starting with love, knowing it's a long distance run, you know, understanding it's a marathon.

**JVN** [01:01:30] I would just say to that, though, really quick, I didn't know that stuff and I did it totally wrong. Like it's just been a slugfest. And he could have also, like, cut me off like a dead foot at any time and has—, I think we both have kind of done that where "We just can't really do this right now" because I did not lead with love. There was love there, but I think the thing that I did do is that I have consistently tried, even if it was messy, even if I could have done better, whatever, like I tried. I think that trying is that is the only is, like, attempting, like, just trying, falling down, getting back up. Which leads me to our final few questions, which is: you said before that someone who doesn't work specifically on climate change can still be a part of the climate solution. What do you mean by that statement and what do you think the climate solution could look like?

**DEKILA CHUNGYALPA** [01:02:19] Oh, that's so huge. You know, I mean, I think given, given what's coming in terms of climate change, for me, what I think about a lot is what we need is resiliency. And what we need is not just resiliency in this, like, planetary level or ecosystem level, but at the community level. At the end of the day, when a disaster strikes, who are the most important people for us? It's our neighbors, right? It's actually, who do we need? Who are we going to run with? Who are we going to hunker down with? Who are we going to work with? It's going to be the neighbors. So for me, building from that mentality out is really crucial when we think about a climate resilient future. Having relationships in your neighborhood, knowing the names of all your neighbors, knowing what they are like, sharing, having shared goals with them. Right. I think doing all of those things are really important. And I feel like, you know, going back to this binary of either or for me, one of the things I find really frustrating is when we determine what climate solutions are and we say, "It has to be this way. It's REDD or it's, you know, it's the Paris Agreement and or it's, it's people who bike and don't use a car at all." And it's this whenever we give these kind of like "either or" or black and white solutions, what we do is we end up othering everybody who cannot be part of that, who are really struggling to to be part of the solution, but don't see themselves in that because of the circumstances they are in. Right?

And so broadening that so that if you care about climate change and you're acting in your local church, or you're acting on fresh drinking water, or you're working on human rights or immigration rights or for refugees or for LGBTQ, whatever it is. When you imagine that the world is intersectional and you realize that everything is interdependent, whatever good you're doing in social or environmental fields actually feeds into the larger world, right? You brought up earlier the importance of why individuals matter. As consumers, we vote with our money, right? All of that is part of the climate solution. One of the things that I really worry about is when we say, "It's only the corporations," or, "When we say corporations are really at fault," which, I do, I think the reason why we're in this mess is because of neoliberalism. What I don't mean is that people should just sit back and say, "Okay, well, the system needs to

change and I can't change the system" because we have to remember we built the system, you and I.

We're part of it. So whenever we do our part, whether it's just to publicly say, "I vaccinated," or "I voted," we're actually influencing that larger system because we are part of it. And that is so key, you know, because, again, we're not trying to reach the extreme polarized, power hungry people. We're trying to reach the people in the middle who are confused and unsure. And what we are doing is adding to the chorus to tell them, "It's okay, this is what we're doing, come join us." Right. I think that's the only way we reach a resilient, climate resilient future. You know, that's how we build by, by not doing what's been done to us, which is this process of othering. And by opening our own hearts and saying, "We'll take all of you, we're all stronger when we're, when we are a larger us."

**JVN** [01:05:33] So I love that. For listeners who listen to this episode and they are, like, feeling super inspired to advocate for the climate or—, for the climate. Oh, my God. Jesus Christ loves us. It just comes out! It's just something I say. Jesus. Fuck! Ha, ha! So what do you have to say for our listeners who are feeling super inspired to advocate for the climate and their faith-based circles? Just kind of calm down, open the heart, or don't calm down, but open the heart.

**DEKILA CHUNGYALPA** [01:05:57] Open the heart. Recognize it's a long-term process. Pick issues that are easy, low-hanging fruit in the beginning. Start with a conversation where the church has done something they're really proud of and then just broaden the meaning of that. Right. So if the church, for example, has an orchard or the church has suddenly started doing, I don't know, it could be anything. Whatever it is, broadening that conversation to include something more. So let's say if it's a soup kitchen, that it could very easily be a community garden because then people get to pick and eat the food, that they grew. And so like starting with that and we know, oh my gosh, community gardens have, like, a hundred fold. So it's, like, a 100 fold solution. It addresses so many things. It's spreading knowledge. It's creating awareness of interdependence. Right? It's literally, "You're growing your own food. You're much more sustainable. You're buying less plastic." So it's like you're looking for those solutions that are, like, two-fers and three-fers when it comes to solutions, you know? And I think, I think it's everything that you said earlier, which is you don't give up, you just keep trying, you get knocked down, you get up and you try again. And I think at the end of the day, that is resilience. That is a spiritual, mental resilience we're talking about when you can get up again and say, "Okay, I hurt, that really didn't work. You know, I need some time off. I'm going to try again." Right. So that is the example of resilience.

**JVN** [01:07:19] So then I have one more question kind of along those lines that I'm going to answer it, because I don't want you to think that I haven't been listening, but I think I know what the answer is. But I just want to ask it just to make sure that we are all together on this. And this really isn't for you, queen. This is, like, for our listeners. And just tell me if I'm right or wrong, if I'm a good student/host. So if you have someone who's, like, a religious relative or,

like, a really, you know, like, climate skeptic, like, friend, family member, is it that in in dealing with those types of people, it's, like, more, like, maybe don't go to those people who we know are super hardcore denialists at first. Like, it could look, like, getting more engaged online or like volunteering for, like, a climate change community, like, within your church or your organization, your community, whatever, at home, and then through doing your own work with people like you want to kind of attract people who are unsure and go to those like unsure people first rather than going to the people who, you know, you're going to piss off and who are probably going to like fire up, like go to people who are like more unsure and just kind of get involved in the community based things that you're not like on your own going for people who are, like, not to use, like, a Department of Homeland Security, like, George Bush analogy, but like, you know, "the ace of spades in that, like, terrorist deck of cards." Like you want to like try to just like go get and like the community first before you go start trying to, like, pick off the most hardcore Marjorie Taylor Greenes in your life.

**DEKILA CHUNGYALPA** [01:08:40] Yes, absolutely. And I think, you know, somebody recently asked me, like, about voters that vote for Trump, and I was like, "Well, who trumps Trump?" That's what we need to be thinking about what trumps Trump. What is it that is a source of authority that's greater than these? Like, oh, I don't know, you know, let's just say, like people who really love power. I'm thinking about the f- word, the fascist word, right? Like, what is it that trumps that? And so is that biblical references? Is that a local faith leader? Is that parents, is that grandparents, like, you're thinking constantly about when we talk about behavior change that first of all, long distance, you're running long distance. Second of all, low hanging fruit, and then third of all, making sure that, like, you have systemic checks and balances that, that *you* can use, right, that *you* can work with. So to me, I think building a community allows you to create those checks and balances. You know, it allows you to, like, reinforce behavior change. And so doing all of those things allows us to further this dialogue and ourselves not do the othering, which I think has happened as well.

**JVN** [01:09:49] So back to our last question. What sustains *you* and gives *you* hope in your work?

**DEKILA CHUNGYALPA** [01:09:55] I'd love to expand the question.

**JVN** [01:09:57] You're so allowed.

**DEKILA CHUNGYALPA** [01:09:59] And just say it's what gives me courage, because hope comes and goes. Honestly, I'm being really honest, right. Every day, I mean, whenever I have to look at the projections on climate, for example, I have this moment where I can feel my hope sink, right. So it's not reliable, but courage is. What gives me a lot of courage is remembering that we are part of nature. Nature wants us as human beings to thrive. It doesn't hate us. The Earth doesn't hate us, right? The Earth wants all its living creatures to thrive. That's it. You know, soak in the rain, bask in the sun, grow. Extend your roots, right. That's it! And so I think it's remembering that for me personally, I, whenever I get really exhausted and I

can feel it, I can feel it in my body where I've overdrawn all the resources. I just go into wilderness because that, since I was a child, that's, that's my safe space. And I think a lot of it is being in a community with like-minded people. You know, I turn to all my friends, my colleagues, people who've been doing this work for 20, 30, 40, 50 years, and we're just still trying, right, because we know what's at stake. At the end of the day, we're all trying to protect that we love. So whether it's our family, whether it's our community, whether it's the planet as a whole, we're all working towards that. And that gives me a lot of hope and courage.

One last thing I would love to say is, like, I think there's a real tendency for us to put the, the burden of the solution on young people, you know, who are actually showing the highest rates of eco-anxiety right now. You know, we have a tendency to be, like, "What gives me hope is young people." That just furthers the burden that they are carrying. Right. What does give me hope is actually all the ancestors that came before me. You know, I think about all the things that have changed. I think about the fact that, like, human rights was not a concept 200 years ago and is universal now. Every person in the world knows that they are accorded a certain level of human rights. Right? And that became a universal ethic within like a few hundred years.. And so we do change as a species. We do evolve as a species. And I think thinking of it that way, that evolution is inevitable because we know what's coming. And the question is how do we make people resilient to it and how do we try and evolve a larger group of people as quickly as possible? Thinking of it that way makes the burden less frightening and makes it seem less overwhelming.

**JVN** [01:12:27] That's beautiful, I also, I love that you said courage because courage, according to my therapist, is, like, one of the tenets of our centered self. There's these, like, seven "c" words, like calm, clear, compassion, courage. If one of those "c" words is, like, motivating your emotion in the world, you know, you're really identified with your centered self. So I think courage is, like, so important and it's so one of those words. I just think that's beautiful. I'm so grateful for your work and for your and just how openly you share your knowledge and what you're doing in the world. Just so generous with your time and your spirit and your energy and your knowledge. I'm so grateful to you. Thank you so much. Dekila Chungyalpa, we love you so much.

**DEKILA CHUNGYALPA** [01:13:08] Thank you.

**JVN** [01:13:12] You've been listening to Getting Curious with me, Jonathan Van Ness. My guest this week was Dekila Chungyalpa. You'll find links to her work in the episode description of whatever you're listening to the show on. Our theme music is "Freak" by QUIÑ, thank you so much to her for letting us use it. If you enjoyed our show, introduce a friend, honey, and show them how to subscribe. Throw it up on Facebook, your Instagram and TikTok and Twitter! [SINGING] Do all of those things - we appreciate you! Yeah! I don't know why I keep singing at the end of my credits but is it working? Do you guys love it? Let me know! You can follow us on Instagram and Twitter @CuriousWithJVN. Our socials are run and curated by



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