

New and Ancient Story Podcast - Episode 11 (2016)

Charles Eisenstein with Lyla June Johnston

<https://charleseisenstein.org/podcasts/new-and-ancient-story-podcast/lyla-june-johnston/>

Introduction: Welcome to *A New and Ancient Story*, a show dedicated to the transformation of self and society. We're moving from the story of separation to a new story of interbeing. We explore it all: technology, spirituality, agriculture, healing, economics, politics, ecology, relationships, education--because the changes that are gathering today will leave no aspect of our world untouched. For deeper engagement with these ideas, join our community at newandancientstory.net. [Sound of three deep bells]

Charles: Hello everybody. Well, here we are at The Kiva, Santa Fe [unintelligible]. Charles Eisenstein, in conversation with Lyla June Johnston. Lyla, we met at this peace conference thing, in Geneva, of all places. Yeah, we're both in the jet set, we fly to Geneva all the time. [Laughter] But nonetheless, there we were, and, I don't know, did we meet up maybe two or three times? Not a lot. And then I wrote an article about Lyla, called "The Woman Who Chose to Plant Corn," about her choice not to go to Harvard Business School, which, you know, would be part of a story of a Native American woman who made it in the white man's world. Not that that's not an honorable story--an admirable story--but it's not really on the edge anymore.

So Lyla's one of these edgewalkers, which, like all of us edgewalkers, means different things to different people. It doesn't mean that any of us are walking on the edge in every aspect of our lives, but still, nonetheless on the edge, taking forays into new territory. And I like to have conversations with people like that so I can say "What have *you* seen in the new territory?" which is also, we recognize, perhaps very ancient territory. So I really don't know where to begin, Lyla. Maybe do you want to tell a 5 minute version of your story, the whole Harvard, Stanford, and corn thing?

Lyla: Absolutely, the Harvard, Stanford corn thing. [Laughter] So, I come from a long legacy of assimilation. My great-grandmother was one of the first nurses on the Navajo reservation. And she was raised by Dutch Christian Reform missionaries who travelled all the way from Holland and decided to set up shop in the middle of the desert in New Mexico. [Laughter] And my great-grandmother had my grandmother go there and my grandfather also went to this missionary school. And my grandmother tells me stories of when the children would speak Navajo, they would say, "Sit in the corner, don't do that, and here's your sheet of paper, get your pencil out and write 100 times: 'I will only speak English, I will only speak English, I will only speak English, I will only speak English'. So Diné Bizaad, the Navajo language, was stamped out of my lineage at that point.

My grandfather was this really rough, go-getter, ambitious guy, and he was just always pushing the limits. He enlisted in the army at 17. He was one of the few Navajos to go to Stanford during his time, and he really worked to assimilate his own people--out of love, you know, but he said when he was president of Navajo Community College, he said "Western science will be our meat and potatoes and cultural curriculum will be the salt and pepper, because the culture

doesn't put any bread on the table." So he believed that to be Navajo was to be poor. But his sampling of what Navajo was, was after we were released from a concentration camp and had been starved for four years. So the Navajo he saw isn't the true Navajo!

And so, I remember when I was in second grade I got a really good report card. I got 21 "E"s, which stood for excellent, and my grandfather gave me a dollar for every "E" and took me to get some ice cream. I think that was the beginning of my personal assimilation.

Went to Stanford, graduated with honors, and wanted to go to Harvard because I believed that in order to change the world, I had to do well in the white man's world, so to speak, and gain their respect. And that's when they would finally listen to me. And when I graduated from Harvard, the great plan was to say, "This is stupid; we need to change!" and was hoping everyone would say, "Oh yeah, she's right! She went to Harvard. So we gotta change."

But then I met an elder, and this really wise, really old elder said, "Lyla, you can swing the pendulum of society from inside the system. You can swing the pendulum of society from outside the system. Or you could just make your own pendulum." And so that really began my realization that maybe my purpose on Earth is not to tinker with and transmute a broken system, because in order to do that you still have to play by their rules. You still have to gain credibility by their standards. But to just build my own system, and work to support other people who are already building that new system, a new territory.

Charles: This is coming up a lot in recent conversations I've recorded. First I want to mention that, even if you go with your Harvard degree and say, "The system's broken," you're implicitly, with your Harvard degree, saying that the system is sound. "Listen to me because of the Harvard degree," you're implicitly saying, "Listen to other people with a Harvard degree, too." And that validates the system.

Lyla: Exactly. I sought to discredit the institution by joining it. Which makes no sense.

Charles: Right. But, you're in a similar position to a lot of young people I talk to, and I guess not-so-young people too, in a way, that if you join the old system there's a landing place for you, at least possibly. There's a way through life that's mapped out. There's a way to make money, there's a way to have social status, and kind of a structure to hold you. But if you choose not to do that, it's pretty scary. You're stepping into the unknown.

One of the things we were talking about in a previous conversation was this idea of creating "waystations", these kind of sanctuaries where people who decide not to go to college, or not to do the career thing, they can go there and be supported, and have ways to express their creative energy and not be told that they're irresponsible, impractical, and naive, but to actually be celebrated. And other kinds of support--maybe this is what this conversation can do, just by giving examples of that. It makes it kind of okay, you know?

Lyla: Exactly. And what am I sacrificing going to Harvard? I'm going to spend three grueling years, likely, doing something I don't actually care about, and I'm also making it one more year that I haven't relearned my indigenous language, which is going extinct as we speak. And so, I could have learned how to plant corn. I could have learned what it's like to water your corn, I could have learned what it's like to watch it grow. I could have learned what it's like to take it off the stalk. I could have learned what it's like to collect the pollen for ceremonial use. I could have learned the songs that go along with all these stages; I could have learned what it's like to give away my corn to people who are hungry. I could have learned what it's like to be grateful for the rain that's coming to water it. And all these things we can't learn in a book.

Charles: And those things we're learning, it's beginning to dawn on us, that those things are actually really important, not just for some private satisfaction, but because the way that civilization has navigated this world isn't working. And perhaps, I think, when we learn those things and listen to those things, we'll find a way out of the maze that we're in. Yeah.

Lyla: So like you said, the issues that humanity--that we're facing today are so great, and so beyond our comprehension, that we're not gonna have the solutions coming from a place that we've been. We're only gonna find those solutions through complete surrender to nature--not just to nature but to time. Surrender to the day, and see what it'll teach us. And we do have clues, like breadcrumbs, we can follow back. Our ancestors did plant corn. So maybe if I plant corn I'm gonna learn something. And what I find is, it's really hard to be angry when you're surrounded by beauty and nature. Which is what this poem is about that I recently wrote.

When you're surrounded by nature, you can't get lost in the illusion for very long. And so I think by venturing out into unknown activities [laughter]--we're not very good farmers anymore, but if we try it, it's automatically going to teach us, not just intellectually, but on the molecular level, who knows what.

Charles: I think that relearning languages is so important. If you asked me rationally, how could it make a difference--I wouldn't be able to answer that. Well, maybe I could if I really sat with it for a while. But it seems, in the face of this supposedly very urgent crisis we're facing--and it is urgent in a certain way--in the face of that it seems like a frivolous indulgence to learn to plant corn or to learn Diné again. But something tells me that the place that we occupy in pursuing that is the same place from which real healing of the planet will come.

Lyla: Mm-hmm, yeah.

Charles: How many people still speak Navajo?

Lyla: It's in the thousands, I want to say? Quite a few, maybe ten thousand? But they're all elderly, so if the babies aren't learning it, which they aren't, then it doesn't really matter how many speak it today.

Charles: It reminds me of Gaelic, you know, when I was in Scotland I heard the same story. Indigenaity actually is still in living memory in Scotland. Because I talked to an old person who described how they were forced to speak English and not Gaelic in school, and if they disobeyed, needles were stuck into their lips. Really intense.

Lyla: Awful.

Charles: The same thing happened in Taiwan. I used to live in Taiwan, where if you spoke Taiwanese in school, instead of Mandarin, they would hit you with a bamboo cane.

Lyla: Which to me is evidence that these languages are incredibly important. If the dark is working this hard to expunge them from the Earth, then they are a threat to the dark, and that's a good sign. [Laughter] That it's a threat to the dark.

Charles: Yeah. It's a good way to navigate, isn't it? Yeah. What has been ridiculed, disparaged, suppressed. Let's go to that. Including--and this is related to--I'm also doing this "masculinity journey", and, in fact, I recorded a conversation with your mom about that. Lyla's mom is Pat McCabe, Woman Stands Shining. One of the things that's been degraded is pretty much everything that women used to do. And then, in a way, feminism bought into that, and said that women's liberation comes from not having to do this degraded stuff. So, for me that's been another--even, in fact, right now it's even an inspiration. We're doing all this--I mean, here we are doing a podcast, which is gonna be listened to by thousands of people, and there's still that part of me that says, well, that means that it's more important than if I turned this off and Lyla and I just had a conversation. Because that will only reach two people, so it couldn't be as impactful, could it? But maybe if we did that, it would be more impactful on the planet, through some devious thread. [Laughter] But I don't know, we won't shut you guys out. We have our little box here that's our guest. [Laughter] Lyla, could you read that poem that you sent me?

Lyla: Absolutely. I think I revised it a little since I sent it. Okay. So I was walking in Salt Lake City, which is very built out, and there was this little flower there in the street, and it was so beautiful, so [laughter] this poem happened. (15:50)

This flower alone,
which at once
is beauty
is rooted into beauty
and whose petals
reach out to beauty

This flower alone,
whose quiet song is drowned
by the blasts and by
the evening news
of the modern world

This flower alone,
and the ambrosia
it plants in every cell
of my being

This flower standing here alone,
living proof of wonder;
living proof of hope;
living proof of beauty;
living proof that God's love for humanity
has not lost its devotion.

This flower alone,
who sits patiently like
a prophecy waiting
to be known

This flower alone,
like a messenger in the dark of the night
telling me
that everything
is going to be
alright

This flower alone,
is enough to change my life forever.

For the glittering distractions of the information age vanish
and there is only me, the lover,
and you, the wonder.

And if the only beauty alive in this world was this flower
and if all the rest were chaos,
this flower alone,
would still instruct me by sensation
that I am held in the arms
of something greater.

And if my whole life was colored by darkness and destruction
to one day be so blessed as to just behold this flower,
that alone
would be worth
my birth

and my dying.

This flower alone

has
in a moment
deprogrammed my mind

to eat faith and not fear
to wait on joy and not sorrow
to expect communion and not solitude
and to face the fires of this world with an unwavering knowing
of beauty and all the fruit it brings.

This flower alone,
in its unassuming tenderness and grace
has in a moment
incinerated my grief
like sweetgrass in the flames
and left behind only the
beautiful scent of what is real.

These eyes can finally see
the beautiful song sung
all around.

And if I could rest
in this place
for just a moment
I would remember who you are
and who I am
and where we are
and how it is supposed to be for everyone.

Because concrete may last for a decade
but the earth will never
ever
stop bursting through.

This flower alone,
a window to the truth,
plucks me from illusion
and plants me into peace.

Creation's perfect body lovingly ignores the evening news.
Like a lava rock in the fire.
Unscathed, unchanged, and unafraid.

I can only pray to be more like you.
You who has no name.
You who has no money.
You who has no clothes
and eats the light of the sun.

This flower alone,
unintentionally and nonchalantly declaring to the universe
that peace
order
compassion
and beauty
awaits us all
in this life

or the next.

She accidentally wins every argument against her
just by being everything that she is.

The warring nations try to ignore her
lest they become dumbfounded and see that
all their great plans are jejune
in the face of just one piece
of her pollen that can generate children
as beautiful as her
so wondrously and effortlessly.

And can anyone please tell me the purpose of beauty?
Why is it here?
Why do we feel the way we feel when we stand before it?
Why are her petals painted in this way?
And how does it help the economy?
Could these brushes against her being truly be
God's calligraphy against the world whispering to us
in the dark of the night about something great that lies in store?

Charles: I think the line that really pierced me when I first read it was "She accidentally wins every argument set against her."

Lyla: [Laughter] There's more, actually. I was gonna stop there. There's more.

And how can this flower alone
with no hands and no words
be strong enough to turn my face away
from the nightly news
and towards a sight that teaches me more
than the Ivy League ever did?

I see now why the darkness has
so systematically isolated us from
Creator's natural world.

Because humans lost in their infatuation with
trees and bees and rocks and rivers
are hard to control.

They can only laugh at coercion,
or worse, you could start laughing yourself.

And if I was just one soldier
who dropped her gun on the ground
and ran into the forest
in search of more of these flowers
would it do anything to change the world?

Or would the war still rage on?

But oh, if the whole army came with me
would we finally rob the world of war
completely

and sing sweetly with her songs of praise
thanking the lapping waters
like a bunch of human beings
lost in the wonder of Creator's
great scheme to feed our bodies, our mind, and our spirit.

Why does that line stand out to you?

Charles: It pierced me. I don't know why. Just because I got it. I really, really understood what you were saying. It was beautiful to me.

I feel very grateful that you didn't go to Harvard Business School.

Lyla: [Laughter] Why is that?

Charles: Because you probably wouldn't have written that poem if you had.

Lyla: [Laughter] True.

Charles: One thing that's coming up for me right now is this concept that I mentioned in *Sacred Economics* of turning the accumulations of separation toward the purposes of the union-- specifically, people who have inherited wealth from their ancestors, monetary wealth. Or from themselves, from an earlier time in their lives, you know, they have money. Wondering what to do with it. So that's the resource. And then the need is people like you times several million, who are opting out of the structures that would ordinarily feed you with a salary.

Not that you're necessarily doing that, but symbolically, that's what the decision not to go to Harvard Business School is, and there are many, many who are part of that morphic field, who are making similar choices. So there needs to be some kind of alternative, an emergent structure that holds those people. And I just see the glimmerings of it. But if I had a large amount of money, and I wanted to be impactful with it, I would set up some kind of absolutely no strings attached fellowships and sanctuaries, these waystations I was talking about, for people to explore a different story of how to be human, so that they're free, free of this incredible amount of pressure, free of the pressure to conform.

Lyla: Absolutely. And the convenience of conforming. And one of the things that's really been big for me these days is the density of energy of fossil fuels, because it's so energy dense that a teacup full can propel a several thousand pound object through space cheaply and conveniently. And they propose that the reserves will last about 40 years, and before then the demand will outweigh the supply so it'll get very expensive. So I foresee a scrambling coming up very soon in my lifetime. But eventually that will all play out and there won't be this really easy way to live. And we have options. We can recreate a new world, a petroleum-free community, which is really hard. You have to spend a lot of time preparing for the winter, 'cause you're localized, you can't just go wherever you want and your food can't come forth from wherever. It has to come from where you are. And so we, right now, think that it's easier to participate in this petroleum-based economy, because we can go 75 miles per hour down the freeway, and hang out, and go to the movies, and go here, and probably the chairs we're sitting on right now were shipped here using fossil fuels. And everything we own is--our clothes are made out of petroleum, and shipped. And so we think we're taking the easy way out by participating in this petroleum economy, but it's not going to be easy for long. [Laughter] So actually moving into these spaces that you talk about, which aren't dependent on wage labor and capitalism and what-have-you, we're actually becoming much more fit to survive the coming, basically, proverbial carpet getting pulled out from under the feet of humanity.

Charles: Right. You know, I think fossil fuels is one way to look at that, but I think it's much bigger than that. Even if we come up with an alternative to fossil fuels that allows our culture to

be, quote, “sustainable”, there’s also a growing consciousness that this isn’t what we want to sustain. What does sustainability mean? What do we want to sustain? And our culture of separation, alienation, obliviousness to all other beings, it’s not actually a culture of ease. The more modern society is, I find, the less easeful people are, as far as feeling at home in the universe, having a sense of belonging.

My life is--the life that I was raised to participate in is a life of constant anxiety, where at any moment I could be doing something productive. Rest is always a luxury. It’s almost a kind of forbidden indulgence, and permissible only to the extent that it allows you to be even more productive afterwards. That’s not ease.

And I think also that as the consciousness of interbeing grows and we look at the causes and effects of these chairs and our clothes and everything else, and we see what’s been beyond the veil, we see the sweatshop labor, we see the refugees from places that the economic system has made unlivable. We see the devastation of the mountaintop removal. Fossil fuels aside, what about the pit mines that make the copper? That stuff, it’s hurting more and more. It hurts to see that happening.

And so I think that, even if fossil fuel depletion doesn’t force us into a different world, we want to go there anyway. It just hurts too much to be here anymore. And so, ironically, even from the perspective of making a prudent choice about your future, it might be more prudent, for all these young people now that I meet, who are going into permaculture, and healing arts, and music--and that might actually be the most practical, prudent choice as well, in the society we’re gonna move into. But, yet, you have a guidance system that will take care of you, even though it doesn’t look like that all the time.

Lyla: And that does relate to the story of White Buffalo Calf Woman. When the people were starving, and when the people were really in disarray--their practical needs were not being met--she didn’t give them a saw, an axe, and a gun, and some food. She actually gave them a pipe, which was made out of a rock and stick, and that this pipe was gonna be their connection to their Creator, and that this pipe was gonna be their connection to each other. And it was also the connection which governed the relationships between men and women, that the pipe, the stone and the stem only come together in the most reverent and sacred and respectful circumstances, and we were meant to model that.

And this is really related to what you’re saying, which is maybe what is practical isn’t always practical, but maybe what is practical is born in the heart, and in the spirit, and that this inner circumstance of feeling a part of something, and feeling like you are working for something better than yourself, *is* health, *is* well-being, and *is* the basis for the more physical aspects of well-being. And they already said that in the Bible, that “man cannot live by bread alone”. And that’s really what I’m seeing too, is that, from where I sit, I don’t know that it’s really going to be this way, but the communities that will thrive in this new chapter of human history are the ones that really look to each other with a lot of compassion and look to Creator with a lot of compassion.

And just like Sun Bear talked about, “my measure of civilization is not how much concrete or buildings they have, my measure of civilization is how well people respect the Earth and respect each other. And that these “soft goods”, the intangible emotions that we house within us, those are actually the root of any “hard goods” or physical goods, and from that soil of inner peace and inner compassion is what sprouts physical peace and physical well-being.

So I think you’re right, then. The kid who didn’t like school because it wasn’t talking about anything real, like forgiveness or how to relate to each other--their intuition was right on target.

Charles: So on the one hand, not to single you out, but I feel like the kind of choice you made is a rising tide, that many people in their twenties who, in my generation, would have unproblematically participated in the system, because its dysfunction was a little less visible, from the inside. If you were living on the Navajo reservation, maybe not so invisible, but if you were living in the heart of middle-class America, things were looking okay. That was already starting to change in my generation. Take it back to my parents’ generation and it seemed like civilization was on the right track. And that’s no longer true, so many people are making the same kind of choice, or facing the same kind of choice, that you are.

But I want to also be careful not to set it up in too simplistic a way, and to say that you’re either choosing the old story or the new story. Because in my mind, it’s not really about this binary choice between inside the system, outside the system, and if you stay inside and get a degree, or get a professional thing, then you’ve sold out or made a less-courageous choice. It’s not like that. It’s really about following a call, and that could take unexpected forms that seem irrational. And also to say that we just don’t know. We don’t have a map. At least, I mean, maybe other people outside the dominant culture have better maps, but I think we are living in a unique time.

And so I wanted to say that, kind of as a preamble, because it’s not like you’re entirely outside the system. You work for a large corporation, and you were telling me about cubicle land, right?

Lyla: Yes. So I was working very hard to stay outside the system. I didn’t have a job for three years. I was giving away everything I had--my skills to make websites, my skills to make films, my skills to organize community events. I really was enjoying just giving everything away. And then my sister had a child. And she was very young, her boyfriend was very young. And they needed a really peaceful place to raise this beautiful baby, my niece. And so I did what I never thought I would do and I prayed for a job. And Creator actually answered that prayer in a very interesting, very unexpected way, because I was hired at one of the nation’s largest tech companies. So I walk into this space, very much suspicious of everyone, and mind you, just a few weeks before I was working diligently to take down capitalism, to show the world that we don’t need to live to make money, to show the world that profit maximization was absolutely something we had to stop, right now. And then all of a sudden, I’m in cubicle land. And there’s a sea of cubicles, and I go into this space thinking, *These people. Ah, I hate their BMWs and their Lexuses!* And I moved to Orange County, of all places, from New Mexico. And I’m trying to wear a pencil skirt and heels and I’m trying to fit in. And this is when I was still going to go to Harvard,

and I was going to put the fact that I work for this tech company on my resume for Harvard. I was going to get in, because I had worked at a corporation.

So as soon as I walked into this place, I realized that I had to try even harder than I had to before to love the world, because I was surrounded by everything I detested. [Laughter] And I walk into this space, and I start really seeing the people who work in these cubicles as some of the most beautiful, kind people I've--well, not I've ever met, but just as kind as anyone else.

Charles: Yeah, darn it, that's really inconvenient, you know? [Laughter] Like, why couldn't they be nasty so that you could keep your story.

Lyla: Not a single one of them was nasty! I can't think of--actually, one. One of them was. But for the most part, they were very nice. [Laughter] And what I wanted to do was I wanted to go in and work with their foundation and that's exactly what I was brought in to do, was turn this corporate foundation into a gift-giving entity, and to turn capitalism on its head, and instead of generating lots of profits for bank accounts and, what do you call them, pensions and things like that, to funnel that money to the communities that need it most.

So I start working with them, and I realized over time the way that the paycheck was really changing me as a person. Because I was making 36 dollars an hour. Actually, I still do. And I went from having nothing, like literally, very happy to have a bowl of soup in front of me, to getting paid about 1500 dollars a week. And I started to notice how my entire being was being transformed. And I have never been so fearful that I didn't have enough than when I was at the height of that career, making so much money, and I would think about money all the time, and I would think about, okay, I have enough for my apartment and I have enough, I got my sister a car, I got her a house [laughter] but do I have enough for *this* and do I have enough for *that* and do I have enough to apply to Diné College.

So I started noticing how even though I ran into the corporate world with the prayer to change it, I lost steam really quickly and it began to change me. And the more I wanted to--I just couldn't fool myself anymore, that this was the way to change the corporate world, was to join it and to be inside it. So what I was able to do was, now I work remotely. And that has changed everything. Because the cubicle is a very strange form of cruel and unusual punishment. It's a gray box, and I started to notice that all my creative capacity was, over time, dimming down to just a flicker. I could barely come up with ideas. It's almost like the box was limiting my realm of creativity and thinking.

Charles: Maybe, in a way, that's good that corporations are set up in a way that you can't be very creative.

Lyla: Definitely there is a very intentional design to the cubicle. It isolates you from the world, it isolates you from your coworkers. It's supposed to make you focus. But what ended up happening was it backfired, because I just became so unproductive--

Charles: There's Facebook for that.

Lyla: Right. And they disabled Facebook on our computers, but I was sure using it on my phone. And I started working remotely. 'Cause I said, "Okay, I quit," and they said, "No, don't quit, we still want you, we like what you do. Just work from home." I said, "Okay." And now I feel like I'm able to help this company. For instance, we just gave a bunch of touchscreen tablets to Native American high school students for free, and we helped them make these films with these tablets, these cultural films, and it was this big beautiful thing.

And I loved it, my coworkers loved it, we really felt that we were doing something meaningful. And all the colleagues I work with have told me this is the best thing, the best part of my job I've ever been able to be a part of. And they all get so happy. But when you follow that trail back to the CFO, at the end of the day, even though we as colleagues are participating in a kind of gift economy, the original impetus for it is still about money. In fact, they just merged the foundation and the marketing department. So it's like, you bring these two things together, and you're only giving to your recognition and your status.

Charles: Yeah, I want to throw in another perspective, in fact, though. Sometimes I suspect that--I mean, certainly there's a lot of that corporate giving as a way to improve public relations, and corporate image, and all that stuff, and as a way to open up marketing channels. I mean, that stuff is all obviously there, right? But I think there's another thing, also, because I believe that it's fundamental to human nature to want to give, to want to do something meaningful, to want to create something beautiful in the world, to help others. That's, I think, part of our nature. And that's just as true of people in corporations as anyone else.

So they want to do that kind of stuff. But then there's a guardian that might take the form of a CFO, a bean counter, or an internal version of that, that says, "Whoa, you can't do that. It's not okay, because you won't be okay. You won't have enough." So then the part of you that wants to do that can say, "Oh no, it's okay, because it's going to bring these PR benefits and these marketing benefits."

Lyla: Uh-huh. [Laughter]

Charles: So those are the excuse to do what the heart really wants to do. But I think that's present, too.

Lyla: I agree.

Charles: You know, ultimately, it's like any other dichotomy, and when you examine what it really is to be in the system or out of the system, that boundary breaks down. It's a blurry boundary. We're all participating in it in some way, and we're all rebelling against it in some way, I believe.

Lyla: And what I found was, I would ask my supervisor, “Hey, can we give this grant to this Native tribe which is working on revitalizing an endangered being of their ancestors?” He’d say, “Oh, that would be great, but I don’t think *my* supervisors would be okay with that.” So I go to his supervisor, and say, “Hey, can we get this grant?” And they would say, “Oh, that would be *great*, that would be so cool, but what about my boss? I don’t know if they would be okay with it.” So I go there, and they say, “Oh, that would be *great*, but, you know, the CFO wouldn’t be--” and so everyone wants to--” [Laughter]

Charles: But, you see, the weird thing is, you go to the CFO, and he says, “Well, that would be great, but I don’t think middle management would--”

Lyla: [Laughter] Exactly.

Charles: I’ve seen that kind of thing happen, where everybody in the room wants something, but no one dares say it, because they think that everybody would be against it.

Lyla: Yes, exactly.

Charles: It’s so ironic and so tragic. You could almost say that’s true of our whole civilization. Nobody believes in it anymore. But it looks like everybody else believes in it. So I better keep quiet about that.

Lyla: Exactly. And this is a company that makes four million dollars every hour. In pure profits. That’s not counting operational revenue. Pure profits, four million an hour. And they give away, somewhere in 200 million a year. Which is, I don’t know, if you do the calculations--about a week’s worth of--

Charles: Which is actually probably a lot more than a lot of corporations do.

Lyla: Could be. So we’re all sitting on this pile of money, and we’re enjoying it. We’re flying over here for a business trip, we’re eating caviar over here for that business trip, and we all order steaks after we do our business trip over here, and we’re just hanging out. And now I’ve got my new shoes, and my new car, and my family’s set, but it’s still--everyone in that corporation, the moment I brought out an abalone shell, and the moment I brought out tobacco tied into buckskin bundles, and I said, “This is what my people are about, and if you want to work with indigenous peoples you need to understand this,” the day I did that, in the middle of the West Area Team conference, they flipped their lid. They just loved it. And they were like, “Can I have one for my sister?” “Did you know I pinned it up in my cubicle? My little bundles? And I call it my little buddy!” [Laughter] And so, even though they have all of this money and all of this power, the moment you just give them the smallest taste of what’s real, they just completely blossom and just get on their *knees* almost to thank you.

And so, the day I was able to give all these corporate leaders medicine bundles and they were overjoyed, I was like, okay, I [unintelligible]. [Laughter] And so, participating in the system isn’t

all bad, just because you have opportunities to do things like that. But it comes with its costs and it's dangerous.

Charles: That's a powerful image and it speaks to the hunger that the people there must have, that you touched by giving them something that meets a little bit of that hunger. Because ordinarily, what they're hungry for doesn't exist in their world, so all they can do is consume endless quantity of substitutes for what they really want. And there you have the endless chase for, you know, the higher salary, the car, all of these things that can never, ever meet the hunger.

Lyla: And I think the way my elders would frame it is, we helped them feel the ancestors, because my elders taught me that we are not meant to just be alone in our bodies, but that often times we can merge with ancestors and that they can literally sit in our being with us and work with us to work at a loom, weaving, or to make an arrowhead, or to hold a child or to tell a story, and that in order for them to be able to sit in our being, there's a few conditions that have to be held, which are: nothing for the self--which is, not for money, not for fame; we can't have fear, they said, no fear--okay, that changes things a lot for most of us if we have no fear; and also, don't try to heal someone who's trying to hurt you, basically, is the other condition.

And we gave these corporate leaders a moment to have those conditions, because we were all sitting in rows. And I said, "Okay, everyone, just for a moment, let's sit in a circle. Stand in a circle." And probably for the first time in the history of that Area, they could all see each others' faces. And they could all look at each other, and that they were given a sacred bundle. And in that moment, the ancestors could be there. And they felt it. And giving them those opportunities--and now it's like, they just want more of it. Let's do some more of that! Let's help this group now, let's help *this* tribe, let's help *this* tribe. And to be able to give them that taste that they probably wouldn't have is a blessing. But it's still compromising my own dreams, in that I still haven't learned my language. Still haven't planted any corn. [Laughter] And so, it's, it's--I don't know what to say about it, honestly, being half in the system and half out, but it has its perks.

Charles: Yeah. Sometimes I just get the sense that I have a lot less say over my life than I like to think and that the choices that I think I'm making, I'm not actually making these choices. Like, I was *placed* here, maybe you were *placed* at that company, and that placement was guided by a transcendental wisdom that knew that your gifts, as they exist right now, would be best suited to that place. So if that's the case, then your duty is simply to give of those gifts as best you can, in whatever circumstance you find yourself. And I guess I don't want to get too fatalistic about it. I'm not saying that we never make choices in life, but I do think--in fact, I'm certain--that we delude ourselves a lot in thinking that we're choosing things that we're actually--I mean, really what I think is that the real choice is made long ago, that create--well, no, I'm not going to get too metaphysical about it.

But I guess for me it just brings up this attitude of, "What am I called to do wherever I find myself?" And then also to be grateful for the opportunity that I'm given that I couldn't have set up--like, you couldn't have planned that out, to be in that--three years ago, there's no way that

you could have written that play script, where you would be giving medicine bundles to a circle of corporate executives. I'm guessing it probably wouldn't have occurred to you. [Laughter] But it's a beautiful way to--I mean, it's a beautiful expression of your gifts, you know?

Lyla: Yeah. And one of my elders said, "It doesn't matter where you are. What matters is why you're there." And that *really* helped me. Because I was one of those people like, "Am I in the right place? Am I where I'm supposed to be? Am I supposed to be doing this? Or am I better off over there? Should I go over there?" And this elder said, "Doesn't matter where you are. What matters is why you are there. And if the reason you wake up in the morning is to be a part of something beautiful and compassionate, you're automatically going to end up in the right place. Your intention is going to bring you to a good place. And my sense was that the ancestors and the universe, if you will, was bringing me to the best place they could, given the prayers that I had. Like, "Well, you prayed to change the corporate world. This is about as good as it gets, right here!"

Charles: Could you say that sentence again?

Lyla: They brought me to the best place possible given the prayers that I had. And so my prayers are guiding it, and maybe there's something different I was created for or whatever, but the fact of the matter is I wanted to change the corporate world, and so they're like, "Okay, well, if that's what you want to do, let's see what we can whip up!" [Laughter] And that really is--there's no better place to be than in that circle with those executives, giving them medicine bundles out of an abalone shell and asking them how they felt being in a circle. And giving them a moment. And even if they can have that moment, it's going to give them something to compare the rest of their lives to. Like, "Well, this was okay, but that was *way* better. How do I get back *there*?" [Laughter]

Charles: It's like this little--sometimes I compare this to that burr in your shoe that you can't--or that "normal" never seems quite "normal" ever again.

Lyla: [Laughter] Yep, exactly. And I did see the way things changed in my little cubicle block. It was no longer acceptable to put each other down, because why do that when we could do this? And all of that sort of teasing that goes a little too far, it was like, "Just stop." And I was like, "Oh, thank God, because I just can't handle it." And it was a drop in the bucket of maybe what needs to happen in the corporate world, but as you and I were discussing earlier, that doesn't mean it's not meaningful for these people, in that I was a part of answering their prayers for something meaningful. And Creator was able to use me to that end.

Charles: You know, there's a kind of cynical leftist critique of all this stuff, and it's saying that bringing medicine bundles into the corporate workplace, bringing meditation into the corporate workplace, it kind of palliates the unease that comes from what they're doing in the world and the system they're a part of. And you're just making it a little bit easier for them to keep perpetrating what they're perpetrating on this planet. I don't agree with that critique, even though

I know that it is pointing out a danger in self-congratulation because, “We’re so spiritual around here.”

But if you actually take those practices at face value, then they’re going to change people. It is that anomalous data point, that burr in the shoe. And to say that these things can be practiced and not change anything--that is actually the colonialist mindset that holds those things as impotent. So it may not be immediately obvious, because the corporation is subject to immense pressures. And if you deviate too far from profit maximization, well, the shareholders, the board of directors, the bondholders--and even taking it back a level farther, you know, the pension fund--I mean, what are you going to do if your return on investment goes down? Your pensioners aren’t gonna have enough to eat. The whole system conspires to fight our humanity in a way. But I think that it’s not like the people in the corporate boardroom could, even if they wanted to, do that much different than they’re doing in that environment. But I think that the more people have these experiences, the less attached they’ll be to holding on to the system as it stands and maintaining it when it’s in crisis.

My brother, who’s a farmer, barely knows what the internet is--therefore has some good insights on things. He says the system’s gonna change when the bureaucrats get together to take care of the new crisis, and their heart isn’t in it, and they’re like, “Fuck it.” [Laughter] “You know, we could probably patch this thing together, but, fuck it, we don’t want to. It’s too much of a pain in the ass; my heart isn’t in it. I don’t feel like it. I don’t have that motivation.” And I think that when an institution or a system loses that psychic core of people really believing in it, and wanting it, and holding it as good, valuable--when it loses that core, then it becomes very fragile. And so the work you’re doing, I see it as part of the hollowing-out of that psychic core. So it may not bear immediate fruit, compared to a PR--compared to, like, a divestment campaign, or something to change a specific policy, you know--“We’re going to protest you, and boycott you until you stop doing this”--the results are not that obvious, but 10, 20, 30 years down the road, maybe even a hundred years down the road, you’re changing the ground conditions that this whole ecocidal mess is built on.

Lyla: Yes, and even beyond the showing these people--these people--showing our brothers and sisters compassion who work in the corporate world isn’t just about changing a corporate world. At a certain point, it’s about just showing compassion. And I think one story that illustrates that, which I was blessed to come across, is the story of the chief of what’s now called Puerto Rico. And the Spanish came, and this chief who was so peace-loving and so compassionate, and just a real fine leader, and led with humility, and was just a nice person, really brought in these Spanish and said, “Oh, thank you for coming. Here’s my home, here’s a meal; in fact, let’s go over to the next-door island; I want to introduce you.” So he brought them to Hispaniola and introduced them to these chiefs, and they were *so kind* to these people who came. And ultimately these same people exploited their kindness--massacred them all, raped the women, and, you know, the whole story.

But, I think if we were to ask this chief, “If you could do that over again, what would you do?” I almost guarantee you he would say, “I would do the exact same thing.” Because even if the

world is a monster, [laughter] that doesn't mean we stop showing compassion. I mean, what else are we gonna do? [Laughter] Be a monster back? And so showing them this compassion is really--it's taking care of our corner of the universe, basically.

Charles: We don't know the results of that. That could have sown a seed of gentleness in the Spanish, in the colonizers, that if it hadn't been sown, things would be even worse than they are today.

Lyla: And it also completely invalidated their entire movement in the Carribean. If the chief said, "Oh, well, get out of here," and they killed them and raped the women back, you know, maybe they had a right to do that, 'cause they were getting attacked, but it would change the narrative from this fact of the matter that these Spanish were truly brutalizing the people--from that, to a battle.

Charles: Right. It would have allowed an alternate narrative in--

Lyla: Yep, and justified it, which could have led to more massacres and more what-have-you.

Charles: Yeah, and I'd like to hold that side-by-side with the few, but probably relevant, examples where resistance was successful, and some kind of cultural integrity was maintained. None come to mind right now, but I know there's a few.

Lyla: Pueblo Revolt?

Charles: There's definitely--yeah. He wasn't trying to fight them by making them feel sorry for him. He was really sincere.

Lyla: Absolutely. Sometimes the only option we have is to pray for people and show them the kindness that Creator shows to us. And sometimes that's about as far as you can get with your progress. [Laughter] But it's what *you* are in control of. And so when we're going into these corporations and we're bringing the President of the West Area to Sun Dance, we're bringing the head of the legal department to Sun Dance ceremony, and we're bringing them to this space where everyone's fasting and dancing for the well-being of the Earth, and we have the head of legal go to the sacred tree and feel the ancestors so deeply--even if he doesn't go back to this company, change everything, make everything better for everyone, just the fact that we gave him that moment is enough. And we gave him a chance to connect with his creator was enough. And that's--in other words, I stop seeing them as a means to an end, but really just trying to give them this for the sake of giving them that.

Charles: Yeah. The results--you might say Creator is in charge of that.

Lyla: Yes. [Laughter]

Charles: That's not your department. But there's also kind of a faith that the seed *will* blossom in some way; we don't know what it is, but that God sees everything. Everything that we do has an effect that is in resonance with the intention with which it is acting.

Lyla: Exactly.

Charles: And I think every religion, on a deep level, frames this. In eastern religions, that's called karma. Everything we do bears an effect. And in western religions, they say God sees everything. We are never alone.

Lyla: Absolutely. And if your act is, quote-unquote, small, it is forever going to be your link to the story of creation. And that is shared by every being on Earth. And I feel like Buddha's work, and what Buddha did, and how he chose to live his life--even though he did it, it still belongs to me too, because it's woven into my being. It's woven into what I experience in this life. And Sitting Bull, and the way he decided to live his life and his commitment to nonviolence, his stern commitment to nonviolence, in the face of so *much* violence, that's something we all get to enjoy, whether we're in Asia or we're in Mexico.

And so that was another big turning point for me when I realized that even if my act is, quote-unquote, small, I have other acts, too, because in a sense Buddha's act *was* my act. [Laughter] And Sitting Bull's act was my act, because I'm a part of this ever-changing, fluctuating movement of people on this Earth. And I get to be a part of it. And therefore, as well, my good deeds are owned by others, too. And we can all share in this seemingly chaotic movement of intentions and actions.

But it's sort of like saying, "Well, this corner of the rug is smaller than this big pattern here, so it's less important." Like, no, it all works together to create the rug. And without any one piece, it would be incomplete. All of our pieces we contribute to this universe, to this world, are vital and necessary.

Charles: Yes, and adding to that kind of holographic understanding, that any piece of the rug contains an image of the entire rug. Rupert Sheldrake articulates this as "morphic resonance", you know. I've actually interviewed him on this podcast as well. And really, morphic resonance basically says that any change that happens in one place creates a field of change that enables that same change to happen more easily somewhere else. So any act of compassion strengthens the field of compassion. And you'll find, then, people across the world being more compassionate, too. You're creating a field of compassion, of peace, of love, of truth. And it's really the same thing that you're saying, you know?

Lyla: Yeah. And I have no way to prove what you just said, but I just feel so deeply that me helping one kid here in Tesuque Pueblo is changing the whole world. [Laughter] You know? And that it's contributing to the orchestra. And, kind of like when one person sings it makes it easier for another person to sing and to get on the right key. And it's harder to stay in key when you're singing all alone. But in a chorus, there's this--they call it the choral effect, where you just sing

better [laughter] when you're with other people. You kinda all flock like geese into the right notes. And, like I said, I can't prove this in any empirical sense, but I know that me being who I am in a state of compassion is enough. It is. It's enough. And not only is it enough for my people, and for my mother, my mother Earth, it's gonna help me be healthy. And it's going to give me the life that Creator wanted me to have in the first place.

Charles: Do you have a website or something people can find your poetry, or anything like that?

Lyla: Yeah, I do, actually. It's sodizin.net. And it's just poetry and just whatever thoughts are up.

Charles: All right. Thank you.

Ending: You've been listening to *A New and Ancient Story* with me, your host, Charles Eisenstein. To engage more deeply, you can join our community on newandancientstory.net, where we have live chats, forums, meetups, and all kinds of other tools for collaboration. If you want to find out more about my work, then visit my website, charleseisenstein.net.