

Climate Changed_ Am I the Right Person_ with Meg Wheatley

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SPEAKERS

Margaret Wheatley, The Many, Ben Yosua-Davis, Nicole Diroff, Debra Rienstra



Nicole Diroff 00:00

You are listening to Climate Changed, a podcast about pursuing faith, life, and love in a climate-changed world hosted by me, Nicole Diroff.



Ben Yosua-Davis 00:12

And me, Ben Yosua-Davis. Climate Changed features guests who deepen the conversation while also stirring the waters.



Nicole Diroff 00:20

The Climate Changed podcast is a project of The BTS Center.



Ben Yosua-Davis 00:25

Thank you for joining us for a deep and powerful conversation I had with author, speaker, and teacher Margaret Wheatley. Margaret, or Meg, as she prefers to be called, does not shy away from the harsh realities of climate change and its impacts.



Nicole Diroff 00:41

On this show, we seek to maintain the balance between the painful truth of climate change and the meaningful ways we can respond both individually and collectively. After Ben's conversation with Meg, you will hear Ben reflect on what she shared with our special guest

Debra Rienstra. Debra serves as professor of English at Calvin College is the author of the book *Refugia Faith*, and is a dear friend of The BTS Center.



Ben Yosua-Davis 01:12

As always, we will have a time for grounding and we will provide you with meaningful and achievable next steps. And I have to say doing this sort of work around climate change requires grounding in times of centering. For me that means that every morning I try to get out onto our porch looking out over our field before the kids get up to drink my cup of tea and read something as I wake up for the day.



Nicole Diroff 01:36

For me, it means engaging in a regular journaling practice where I can slow down, reflect, and make meaning. Another thing that helps me stay grounded is music. For today's episode, I'm pleased to introduce a song that was created as part of a collaboration between The BTS Center and The Many called "Is This How the World Ends?" The Many is an amazing group of musicians and liturgists who The BTS Center engaged to craft a series of online worship-filled experiences intended to honor collectively our ecological grief and lament. You can find out more about The Many and Lament with Earth in the show notes. And now *Is This How the World Ends* by The Many?



The Many 02:03

Verse 1 The sky is filled with fire tonight. The smoke fills our lungs. What are we doing? What have we done? What are we doing? What have we done? Verse 2 The water's running dark tonight. We drink in our ruin. What are we doing? What have we done? What are we doing? What have we done? Chorus We can't say we didn't know. We can't say we didn't see. Our tears don't mean a thing If we turn away again Is this how the world ends? Is this how the world ends? Verse 3 The city's washed in tears tonight. Hope is on the run. What are we doing? What have we done? What are we doing? What have we done? Chorus Bridge For the beauty of the earth For all life that lives on it Forgive us, help us speak the truth Help us love the way you do. Help us love, help us love, Help us love the way you do. Chorus



Ben Yosua-Davis 05:58

Thank you to The Many for the song, *Is This How the World Ends*. You can access videos and resources from The Many and learn more at their website, themanysarehere.com. I can't remember a pair of conversations I've been more excited to share than the ones you're about to hear right now. I'm speaking with two people who have perhaps most shaped the way I've done my work over the last two years. The first is Margaret Wheatley, a best selling author who is an absolute icon in the realm of organizational leadership. I remember reading her book *Leadership and the New Science* when I was a young adult, and a couple of years ago encountered *Who Do We Choose to Be?* a book that challenged me to reframe how I understand the "so what?" of my life and work for the times that we live in. I then had a dialogue about my conversation with Margaret with Debra Rienstra, whose book *Refugia Faith*

better describes the practice of Christianity in a climate-changed world than literally anything I've read. My conversations with both of them continue to shape and challenge me. And I hope they do the same for you as well. Could you paint us a picture of the future world that you hope we live in with as much detail as you want to?

M

Margaret Wheatley 07:15

Well, the future world has nothing to be hopeful about whatsoever. And with increasing evidence, I mean, the United Nations just issued their final, last frantic, desperate summons, to please collaborate among nation states, because we are in grave danger in the next few years of approaching 1.5 centigrade, temperature rise, but I hang out with a lot of climate scientists. And they're saying no, no, no, we already passed that. So the future that I see is one of increasing environmental destruction, increasing warfare among nations, because we have made the choice so evident with Ukraine war, to militarize against one another in these grand alliances. So there's no possibility of shifting from that. So I'm describing a very terrible future, because that's already been set in motion at the planetary, political, and within us personally, what we're experiencing as increased fear, anxiety, and outrage, despair, grief. So that's the cheerful part of me. And the inspiring part is, once we face reality, there's such good work to be done. And that work is spiritually based. It's been told to us over and over and over again, in all great spiritual traditions. We need to be together, humans can get through anything as long as we're together, we need to have much more kindness and generosity of spirit. And we need to support those who are struggling. Now that's a good life. I mean, it's not in western terms. It's not in global terms of how we've defined what a good life is, which is about growth, acquisition having more, but the future is here. And what it is requiring of us is amazing levels of courage to accept it, and then discover what is truly meaningful and joyful work, which is how we are together.



Ben Yosua-Davis 09:46

Oftentimes, in climate circles, there is this deep fear about telling the truth of our reality for a fear of kind of how people might respond. It has been my experience, however frequently is that honesty and with that grief, and lament, are part of productively engaging in the realities that we've been given so that we can come out on the other end in meaningful action.

M

Margaret Wheatley 10:11

Exactly, exactly. Denial is what has brought us here. Most people retreat with their denial into these entertainment bubbles, which, by the way, distraction, decadence focused on entertainment is what happens with every complex civilization in its last stages, people just withdrawing into entitlements and self pleasuring in terms of distractions and entertainment. But what you just described is the basis of all of my work, once you face reality, you can claim really, truly meaningful work, you can see what's meaningful, and it's meaningful in the terms of spiritual traditions, not in terms of our modern materialistic world. What I've been recently describing it as is that we're already on a path of contribution that's been our lives up to this point. Now we have to enter this deep, dreadful darkness. It's a forest of despair, really. But we stay on the path of seeking how can I contribute to what's going on. As we progress through that forest of darkness, what we find because we do stay on the path of wanting to serve

wanting to make a meaningful contribution, we come out of that darkness, we come out of our being completely disabled by grief and depression and outrage for what's happening, these are all been part of my path. I mean, I'm not speaking abstractly here, we come out of it into a sense of, okay, now I know what's going on. And I can define a meaningful contribution for me. And that is filled with promise of a different kind. I mean, more and more, I just think I want to sound like a minister, you know, a preacher, because we've been told what's important in life. And now we have to let go of all of those illusory dreams of what made for a meaningful life and find true meaning. And we have to first go through that dark passage, and come out in what I experience as energy, meaning, and many opportunities for joyful interactions with my fellow human beings.



Ben Yosua-Davis 12:53

What you share reminds me so much of the understanding of the dark night of the soul, which is so that's it, right. And we do come to this place where we learn that our commitment to live meaningfully does not have to be connected to outcome, which is really, really hard. I think for those of us in privileged, Western context, where oftentimes we can't like detach ethics from outcome, like the way we prove whether something was efficacious or worthwhile is whether it does the thing that we wanted it to do. So what happens when that's no longer the case, I think you're talking in many ways about what many of us experience when we think about this climate crisis. And there comes this existential moment where we go, Oh, my goodness, this thing is so much bigger than I am so much bigger than any amount of power or privilege I could ever amass. So if that's true, then what does it mean to live a meaningful life? What does it mean to do meaningful work in the face of this moment, which is shattering my illusions of control?



Margaret Wheatley 13:50

Thank you. That's it. That's it.



Ben Yosua-Davis 13:54

You mentioned that this is something that comes for you from personal experience. I'm wondering if you could tell us a story of a moment where you made this transition from despair to coming out kind of on the other side and connection.



Margaret Wheatley 14:09

I can identify it, because I've written about this one particular one it was when I was working with a spiritual teacher, who identified that my major identity was that I was here to save the world. And that sounds terribly grandiose, but I was actually working in very high corridors of power at the time, and I felt I had the right theory and the right training that I could really help change major systems. So this teachers gave me an I don't know I wouldn't call it an affirmation. I call it a de-affirmation, but it was, the world will save itself. And she told me you just repeat this over and over and over again. So I did that, but I didn't believe it, I would say, the world will save itself. Sure it will. I couldn't take myself out of the formula for saving the

world. And then finally, I did let go. And then when I announced to my colleagues, several of whom were younger, emerging leaders at the time, that I'm not interested in saving the world anymore. I'm interested in doing good work where we are with what we have. And they were outraged. They thought I was a dishonorable that I was just selfish by withdrawing my passion and purpose from saving the whole world. And it was truly difficult at the time and then liberating, because then what opens is Okay, where can I serve? What's going on here? And am I the one to contribute? Those are the two questions I guide, everyone who will listen to me, including everyone here to really approach every situation now with looking around as fully as you can gain as much information as you can pass your biases, judgments about who people are, or what's going on, or what's worked in the past and simply ask, what's needed here? What's needed here, if I see as clearly as I can, and then, because there's so many overwhelming needs, you have the second question, am I in the right place? Am I the right person to contribute to this need right now? So you do some personal discernment about the stability of your life of your mind, and whether you have enough support to really make an offering. But you do make that offering you already brought up with no expectations. You just know this is at the moment, seemingly, the best offering and offering is a critical word for me. We're offering ourselves we're offering our skills, at one level is called compassion without ambition. We see what is needed, we don't know if it's going to work. And then so you stay awake as you're doing the work. But it shifts from what do I think I need to feel fulfilled and purpose filled life, to what does the world need from me. And it's not the big world. It's the world of your community, your congregation, your school, your family, your team. And I call those islands of sanity now, because we're doing our very best to create sanity to create the conditions for people to express to be free of fear, and express, therefore our best human qualities of generosity, kindness, and creativity and community.



Ben Yosua-Davis 18:01

We work with a lot of folks who are pastors in small churches, or are small nonprofits who are doing really important work that just oftentimes is experienced as being utterly insufficient for the moment that we're at. I think you've talked some about the orientation, but what sort of kind of skills and daily habits or practices of attention do you recommend for leaders who are in those sorts of situations who are looking to reconnect with that sense of vocation and agency, what our culture is trying to kind of pull those things apart?



Margaret Wheatley 18:36

The first thing is, it's all insufficient. It's never enough. We just have to live with that constant sense of sorrow that we can't have more impact. But we can't, but we can turn to where we do have impact. I quote President Teddy Roosevelt quite a lot, who said, do what you can, where you are, with what you have. So the first practice is to turn our attention away. This is ironic coming out of my mouth, because I've had a whole career asking people to pay attention to the larger scene to the system's interdependencies going on. And now I'm asking people actually demanding, create an island of sanity where you are with what you have, and the people who are there with you. So the first thing is to redirect our attention to what we have and the people who are here. The second thing is to understand that people, when we're engaged in working together on something we care about, then a lot of our disagreements our biases our prejudices our judgments disappear. You put work at this center, you may have to come in and teach good listening, you may have to come in and do a little training about some skill of

discernment that's missing. But keep the work at the center. And you don't have to choose the work. You can have people come together and say, Okay, what's needed here? Where do we want to put all of our good intentions and our compassion, without ambition? What's what's calling to us within our own community? For me, if we did that, we're not going to change these global systems, there is not a prayer in anywhere that they can be changed, they are massively set off in their own direction, they are emergent systems, and you do not undo what has emerged. It's an impossibility. So they're leading us to our destruction. And it's evident every single day. I define sane leadership, as creating the conditions for people to discover or remember that they can be generous, creative, and kind. I mean, we can create the conditions as leaders, no matter how small or mid sized our island of sanity is, we can create the conditions so people rediscover what it means to be a fully functioning human being rather than a scared human animal in survival need. That work is abundant. I mean, it's if you just get your group together, and ask them not what's wrong, but what's possible. And that was a quote that changed my consulting life. When I read it in 1987, from Marvin Wiseboard I want to offer here he said, I used to go into a system and ask, okay, what's wrong? And how can we fix it? And I realised the right question is, what's possible here? And who cares? Who cares enough to do the work. So I do think the role of leadership right now is, first of all, creating conditions, extending the invitation, and then being incredibly patient, with people's reluctance to show up because people have really withdrawn and that's a survival behavior that is clearly in our reptilian brains. So we have to calm people down, we have to get them focused on Well, what is possible, what do you care about here, and then put them to work using participative processes, there's nothing better than dialogue and conversation for the initial work. And then you have to develop some good planning skills, you have to know where you might possibly have some good benefit from intervening in the system. And then you start where there's passion, interest, need. And then if it doesn't work, you try something else. You try something you keep experimenting, everything we do, including our lives needs to be thought of these days as an experiment.



Ben Yosua-Davis 23:19

One of the things I hear from younger generations for whom the climate crisis is going to be the birthright for them and their children and their children's children on to the nth generations is both profound anger at the way that previous generations messed this up. And fear and oftentimes, and I know sometimes I feel this myself, like, why is it anyone doing anything? And I'm curious for folks who are in that position of deep felt urgency and felt generational betrayal, where you find these teachings, which, which sound like very good news to me, but may sound less like good news to those who are like, well, who's gonna step up and fix this? How do you find those land? And what are those dialogues look like?



Margaret Wheatley 24:12

Well, this question always comes up because to be a young person in this world, is devastatingly terrible. First of all, they're very ill grounded if they're grounded at all, in a clear sense of community, shared identity, shared values. So they start out ungrounded in most cases, and then they find a new identity. Now the new identity may be activism, which is appropriate for people into their 20s I mean, that's where the idealism is resident in any culture in the young people. It's not where the wisdom is the wisdom is in the elders in traditional cultures. What I have found is there is no solution here to getting angrier and angrier at

demanding that the system be fixed. I've worked with enough young people now that they really do start to see, okay, we're not going to fix it at the level at which it needs to be fixed, which is global, which is corporate changes in corporate behavior, the end of nationalist self protective militarism, is not going to happen. And when they realize that my goal is the same as what I just said, look at your community, first of all, establish community that's happening in more and more places, I think it's fundamental to be really grounded literally in place with other people. But there's work to be done. I mean, you can create good agricultural practices, you can create quality schooling, you can create a deepening sense of practice, that gives you a stable mind. But doing that with other people is essential.



Ben Yosua-Davis 26:14

I wonder if you might have a blessing or a benediction or a sending forth word you might be able to offer for this conversation and for the people who are listening.



Margaret Wheatley 26:24

Thank you. I want to bless all of us that we may open to the world as it is, and discover how much it offers us with grace, and insight, and companionship.



Ben Yosua-Davis 26:46

So I'm thrilled to have as our dialogue partner for today's episode, Dr. Debra Rienstra, Debra, it's so good to have you here. Would you mind introducing yourself just briefly for our listeners?



Debra Rienstra 26:59

Hi, Ben. Yeah, I'm really excited to be here with you, too. I'm a big fan of what you all do at BTS. And I'm just thrilled to be with you today. So I'm a writer and a university professor. My field is English Literature and Creative Writing. And I've recently written a book called *Refugia Faith*, which is a book about climate change and faith, a kind of account of my own journey to figure out what it means to be a person of faith in a time of enormous upheaval and climate change. So I've been playing around with this concept of refugia, which is a biological concept. It's essentially where life and doers in times of big disturbance in the living world, refugia are places where biodiversity can retreat to persist in and potentially expand from in the midst of extreme disturbance. When I came across this idea, it immediately struck me as not only a powerful witness to how the natural world survives in a crisis, but a kind of metaphor that we could all think about, especially as people of faith. So I've really been playing with this idea of what would it mean to imagine ourselves as people of faith as the people of refugium? What if we were to think that our job is to find and nurture refugia not only in the natural world, but in our human organizations, in our churches and mosques and synagogues, in all of our human social aspects as well.



Ben Yosua-Davis 28:34

This concept just immediately came to mind when I was talking with Meg about this

This concept just immediately came to mind when I was talking with Meg, about this understanding of what it means to create islands of sanity when she first said that I went, Oh, wait, I've heard of this before. There's this concept called refugia. I'm curious then, for you, just as we begin talking about what Meg shared with us, you know, she talks about what it means to build islands of sanity as about being these places where you're working, where you are, with what you have with the people around you as you create conditions for them to emerge. And then you extend an invitation for people to join you and then practice patience as you wait for people to show up. What does it mean to cultivate refugia? And where do you see that happening?

D

Debra Rienstra 29:18

Yeah, so listening to Meg's conversation too that islands of sanity. It's a great phrase. And it strikes me that what she's talking about fits the definition of refugia really beautifully, but she's coming at it from a kind of organizational psychology point of view. I think she's really focused on human systems and groups. Refugia is more biological concept. So it's fun to see those merged to see the human social idea and the biological idea merge a little bit. What's appealing to people about the idea of refugia that the minute you know, that idea, you start to see them everywhere. People enjoy immediately coming up with examples. Oh, my congregation is a refugial space. Oh my my cottage, you know that I've cultivated this beautiful garden and that's my refugial space or, Oh, this group, this group downtown that meets for people who've struggled with addiction or, or something like that that's a refugial space. So people start to see them everywhere. The idea that those refugial spaces are honorable and important and a kind of survival tactic. That's what really strikes people. They didn't necessarily think, Ah, this is a strategy. This is a strategy for living through a time of disturbance. And even just to acknowledge that we're living in this time of enormous upheaval and disturbance and change is really helpful to people. They, I think, often assume, Oh, well, I guess this is normal. Why is it so hard? Well, it's because it's a time of upheaval. That's why. The values of growth and bigness and dominance, I think have come about in the Christian church world, for good reasons. I mean, people want to spread the gospel, and we want more people to live lives of following Jesus. And so there's like good reasons behind it. But I think we also get into this kind of rut that leads to not the virtues of refugia. But other priorities. Unfortunately, that's very hard on pastors, to try to pursue growth for growth's sake in the gigantic capital campaigns for the building, and it takes away from the capacities that a refugial space will build. And I think Meg talked about that, too. She emphasized that leaders should create spaces for generosity and creativity and kindness. And that's a whole different set of priorities for a leader than just to create growth and a kind of affluence, whether you construe that in terms of actual wealth, or some kind of church footprint in the community, is just a different set of virtues.



Ben Yosua-Davis 32:11

It really is. It's harder to, quote, grow a church, if you're in a context where fewer people think of church is a place to find meaning.

D

Debra Rienstra 32:23

One of the things that really struck me about Meg's conversation was this sense that it, it seemed like there was a time in her career, where she was really focused on this kind of big

scale, change the world work. I found that so impressive and admirable. And I thought about my own life and thought, I never ever thought I was in any position to walk the halls of power and change the world. The kind of sense that she's come to that these gigantic systems are never going to change. And I don't know if that's true, but I hope that's not true. But she would know more than I would. But this idea that the gigantic systems are never going to change. And instead, you know, we just we focus on doing the work, doing the good work that's aimed at those virtues that we're trying to cultivate in these small islands of sanity or refugial spaces. I guess that just struck me as yeah, that's, that's always been how my faith practice describes our role. It's fine to be small, it's important to be faithful. That's really the idea behind refugia too. Small is not insignificant. And I think that's another thing that people find encouraging about the whole refugia concept is that it makes that small space that you feel you can be a part of and manage, it makes that not insignificant, there's always the potential to connect and to grow. This sense that the end game is just the good work itself. And in the end, you know, as she said, It's all insufficient. Our little refugia spaces as best we can, we can expand and connect. But really, ultimately, the goal is to create those healthy spaces as a survival tactic, but also with this kind of hope, that there might be possible expanding and connecting and renewal that comes from these refugia spaces. Her approach reminded me of Mary Untier of Knots, you know, that famous image of the Virgin, where you see Mary with this whole, you know, tangle of knots. The idea is that your job is not to like, solve it all but to look down with a practice as Andrew Sullivan says, and just work on those knots. That's another metaphor for this right your your role is to just work on those knots where you are with people you have.



Ben Yosua-Davis 35:08

This line that you use "small is not insignificant" to me is so powerfully liberating. We actually use Meg's book with a group of nonprofit leaders as part of a research collaborative, we were leading this past year. We got together to discuss the book and discuss the you know, the way that she's kind of fronts this whole thing, everything you do is going to be insignificant, you can't change the world. And it was very interesting to watch the shape of the discussion, where it started in this place of anxiety and fear, but very quickly moved to a place of hope and relief, here is this burden that our culture has taught us to carry. And now we know we don't have to carry it anymore. We just have to look down and in your words, like untie the knots present in our context.



Debra Rienstra 36:00

Yeah. You know, when it comes to climate change, and other issues that we're dealing with now, it's important to sort of balance that, that sense of peace around smallness, and that sense of focus around refugia spaces, and the kind of agency that we experience in those spaces. I think it's important to balance those with efforts to connect those spaces. So the kind of small and local scale, with the big let's change the world scale, knowing that we're not in control of that, but just to to make those gestures outward, you know, in a biological context, a refugia space would have a tendency to want to spread and connect, that's what it would want to do. Whether it succeeds depends on conditions and everything. I wouldn't want to have the sense that we can just turn inward to a kind of quietism and do nothing. I'm just wired to have more like, it's going to work out, you know, sort of groundless optimism. I think it's just a temperament thing. And it's probably really good that we have people who are more toward the hopium scale of things. You want to be honest and grounded and dealing with facts here, but more toward that scale, and also people who are like, yeah, no, it's gonna be bad, we need

to adapt, it's probably useful to have people across that spectrum, because we really do need to be both mitigating and adapting. Right now, based on the modelling, you know, the many, many models that we have of the many, many things that could happen in the next decades, it's really important to operate some healthy place on that spectrum between doomism and hopium. And also to operate with a kind of balance between your fight you know, your local, knot that you're untying, and trying to connect on this bigger scale. Keep in mind that the knots we're untying are not only practical matters of like working with your local utility to promote community solar, you know, that kind of very practical engineering, technology kind of thing. But also, these more difficult, more elusive sort of virtue knots of living together as a community building those capacities of kindness, creativity, and generosity, and openness. Those are even more difficult. But faith communities are supposed to be good at that stuff. I mean, that's where we can be right leaders, you know, and say, this kind of culture of outrage and combatants, that is not what we stand for, as faith communities. We want to learn with all of you how to live into our faith commitments better, because everybody needs that not just those of us who are in faith communities, but all of us need the kind of moral leadership and example that we are supposed to be providing.



Ben Yosua-Davis 39:13

I think that's so true. And one of the things that I note a lot in my work is even working often in mainline and progressive Christian circles. There are many people who will, on the one hand state that they think that climate change is real, that it's important that we should do something about it. And then in the very next breath, say, I don't think that my faith or my congregation has anything particular or unique to offer the climate changed world that we're a part of. There's an extraordinary opportunity for leaders to help congregants connect the theological and spiritual dots between what's going on and the ways in fact that the frameworks of our faith and the practices of our faith actually have a lot that's genuinely unique to offer this moment, not in kind of a colonizing way. And that, hey, let's all just talk about climate change and then all the young people are going to come back to church again sort of way, which is a line that I've actually heard fairly frequently. There probably is some some truth to that. I've noticed that when you begin engaging with people's lived experience, and certainly climate anxiety is something that I hear universally and really intensely, that people might go, oh, maybe this this thing that I thought was as relevant as you know, grandma's old dusty slippers might be useful for us. More than that, what I've discovered is that the Christian theology and practice actually is something that can be offered as a gift to the wider climate movement. And I've noticed this, especially around concepts like hope, the Christian understanding of hope is significantly different than the American understanding of optimism. And normally, we think in our culture, that optimism and hope are the same thing, but they're not. So frequently, I want to say, especially to small congregations, that have often been taught to look at themselves as kind of a less than in our late stage, consumer capitalist culture that actually, you can have a really, really unique, positive vocation to offer your community and your world about what it means to human in this really challenging moment that we're in.



Debra Rienstra 41:20

Yeah, I wonder if it would be helpful for small faith groups, especially not to worry about not being big. Right, right. And not, you know, handwring over that. But to say, being small is a feature, not a bug. It allows us to practice community in the hard ways, and then give ourselves

to the larger community. So rather than like trying to drag people in to say, well, we can be the ones who go to the climate march and pray for the young people. I mean, wouldn't that be amazing? To think about the inventory of strengths that we have, which I think we, we don't really realize anymore. We've been so worried, as, I don't know, maybe mainlines. And certainly evangelicals about clawing back some kind of cultural dominance, but maybe the the gift is to be small and nimble and agile, and to bring that community strength, but also theological strength. And I think, as you say, you know, we just haven't, people haven't necessarily been trained to connect the dots there. But that was one of the things I was trying to do in Refugia Faith is say, what sort of theological resources have we got? Turns out we've got a lot, that are very relevant to this moment, I mean, you can look at the Scriptures. And notice how often God works through refugia. For one thing, like the Israelites, for example, or even the disciples is a sort of model where God uses what is hidden and apparently unimportant, to do amazing things.



Ben Yosua-Davis 43:05

With the key issues going on within the towns and cities in which they're located in are in key supportive roles with the wider movements, especially the climate movement, offering the resources that they have, so that people who are engaged in climate, from every kind of walk of life, including those who wouldn't profess any faith, can find support and nurture and comfort and wisdom from those who are holding this tradition that I know both of us hold so dear.



Debra Rienstra 43:31

Yeah, that model is in our scriptures. There's a rich ecological heritage, but we've sort of lost it in our at least in the American church, in our efforts to be individualistic and culturally dominant and all of those things. When we are trying to bring back some vision of what we were, we're forgetting the gifts that we have to give now. How do church communities find long term steady and stable ways of bringing climate work into their faith life, among other things? Once again, it's a difference between how can we get people in and what needs healing around here and how can we go out and help? I was struck too by one thing Meg said when when she mentioned that young people are ill grounded in community or identity. And I thought that hurts because that's probably true. And I wonder if a smaller church focused more on going out would actually be really helpful and in a way more helpful than the large church full of small children. By the way, if you ever go into a church, you know, a couple with small children if you if you visit a church people will just go insane



Ben Yosua-Davis 44:59

It's so true.



Debra Rienstra 45:02

Right? Have you done this? Oh my gosh, it's funny.



Ben Yosua-Davis 45:06

Yes. And they all love it. And so like your your three and a half year old is talking loudly asking questions running across the back of the sanctuary disrupting everyone's beloved silence because it's really weird people want families, but they don't want the conditions in which families would be would be welcome. And so quickly those Oh, boy, it's so good to have you turned to me like, Oh, great. Did you know we have a nursery?



Debra Rienstra 45:31

And it's true. You know, it is it's a sign of life, it's a sign of the future to have little kids around. So I totally get it.



Ben Yosua-Davis 45:40

I do think you point out something really important about youth, I don't feel qualified now to speak for people who, you know, our life experience formed them in just a very different cultural context than myself as a millennial. But I, I often look at the stories that my friends who are like in high school share with me and I go, Oh, my goodness, just my heart goes out for these folks who are living in a digital mediated age, which makes being an adolescent so much worse, who feel this sense of generational betrayal, as they begin to realize like, what the climate crisis is going to mean for them, and then oftentimes lack reference points, to make sense of what's going on in a way that isn't just purely materialist, or about power, and then also lack intergenerational relationships beyond their immediate family. And when you often add the tragedy that many congregations are set up in their lineage to actually offer a lot of those things, when you get right down to it actually, aren't that interested in making the changes that would be needed to build authentic relationships.



Debra Rienstra 46:46

Yeah, yeah, there's a real generational disconnect, as you said, and in a kind of loss of what is the story that you're trying to live into, I came of age in the 80s. And the story you were trying to live into was basically upward mobility. Everybody was supposed to get an MBA and you know, make lots of money and have luxurious life. To some extent, parents of my students now at Calvin University, kind of want their young people to live into that story, because they're parents, they want their kids to be okay. So get a degree that will get you a job, so you can support yourself, you know, it's this kind of economic model. On the one hand, the students feel that and on the other hand, they think, but the world, just, that story seems so inadequate to the world they're growing up in. So this idea of put work at the center that Meg talked about, they have a different view of what that work is. And so you're seeing so much activism with young people now. And it's, I think they're, they're finding the definition of work, to be this work to make things better and to kind of repair. Yeah, I mean, it is kind of a save the world thing. But I also don't think they, I think they have a very clear understanding of what they're up against these gigantic multinational corporations and these gigantic entrenched government systems, they understand their work has to be patient and persistent and together. But you know, that's an emerging story that only some people are catching on to. So I do think there's a real dearth of life story shape for people. And this is where faith can help as well, you know,



Ben Yosua-Davis 48:42

That whole phrase, you use the but the world is, I think, in some ways, the essence of the struggle. I sense for many of my younger friends, there's often this both this intense pressure to take these inherited expectations about what it means to be successful. And then you put them into conversation with the fact that this good life is being utterly deconstructed in a thousand different ways. And so what is the vocation for I mean, not just for young folks, but for any of us, when all these inherited stories we're now finding out just aren't true and aren't feasible anymore?



Debra Rienstra 49:19

Yeah, yeah. And Meg talked about that, too, that giving up the illusory dream, that life that we thought was meaningful, which turned out to have less meaning. Do you know?



Ben Yosua-Davis 49:31

That's really true, and that's for me, where concept like refugia is actually really important, because it gives a framework for people to begin to understand. What does a life well lived, look like?



Debra Rienstra 49:44

Yeah. Well, and you know, the idea of creating and nurturing these refugia spaces, there's going to be disappointments there too. I mean, islands of sanity refugia spaces. It sounds so fabulous when we're talking about it. As Meg was talking to about leaders who create generosity and kindness, and I had this little Calvinist alarm go off in my head, I don't know, you probably don't have a Calvinist alarm, but I do.



Ben Yosua-Davis 50:16

As a as a Methodist, that is not one of my issues.



Debra Rienstra 50:21

you're spared that one. My Calvinist alarm basically said, Yeah, but you know, people are horrible and depraved. And it's not all going to be so fabulous in these small communities and islands of sanity, which is true, you know, I mean, small community is hard work. It requires kenosis, you know, the giving of the self, the pouring out of the self, and I'm not big fan of that myself, I gotta say. So it's easy for me to talk about these things. But yeah, I mean, human community is hard. Actually, nature, community is hard, not all refugia work, you know, sometimes they just kind of fade out. But the downsides, I think are worth it, when you realize that this can be a really healthy survival tactic. And, you know, one of the things we can do is look to people who've had no choice but to create refugia spaces. I mean, if you think about the

Civil Rights Movement, a really good example of working on that local scale, while also keeping these big goals in mind. People suffered. I mean, any, any kind of work like this is going to require suffering. So I don't want to make it all sound like, yes, the solution to everything is islands of sanity or refugia. Yeah, people who know how to do this can tell us all the hard parts. And actually, they're, they're the people that we have to learn from the people who have had to survive. So indigenous people, and black Americans who've had to survive had to create safer spaces, you know, not entirely safe, nothing is entirely safe, but safer spaces, places where they could be sane together, places where they could practice joy, and gratitude, even amid the hard stuff, places where they could console and comfort each other and get strength for the journey. They are the teachers, now they know what to do. And those of us who've had these delusions of grandeur, about our ability to change the world. We're the ones that have to learn now.



Ben Yosua-Davis 52:30

Indeed. So Debra, I'm wondering, for any of our listeners who are wondering what to do next, could you offer a specific next step that they could take in response to this conversation.



Debra Rienstra 52:44

People in the climate movement, often talk about, do what you're good at, do what you love, and figure out a way to connect, I would say, if you're part of a faith community, find some like minded people in that faith community, and find a little very local project and find some other group to connect to, so that you've got two things going at once something very local and immediate and tangible. A great thing to do is renativize your landscape, because it's so tangible, it's easy to do, you can join up with the Homegrown National Park peoples, they can give you some instructions. So you know, just dig up some turf, and plant some native species. Research what needs to be planted where you live. It's just so tangible, and you feel like you have agency and it's fun. And you can do it with little kids or older people, especially expert garden people could learn this, anybody can do that. But then also start to learn about what the issues are in your region, what needs to be healed. And how can you and your faith community help. So that you start making those connections across boundaries, we're often so siloed in faith communities, and to make those connections across boundaries. That's where the joy comes, because you realize you might feel a little bit lonely in this work. But there are so many other people out there. And if you can just open the door and see those other people out there. It's so encouraging and life giving. And you can learn some of these capacities that we're trying to build in refugia spaces just by working with other people.



Ben Yosua-Davis 54:28

Well, Debra, I had this impulse that you would be the perfect conversation partner to bring into the dialogue I had with Meg and indeed I was right. And I just wanted to say thank you for bringing your wisdom and your frameworks to this conversation, but also helping us take what can feel like a very kind of heady concept and pull it right down to earth.



Debra Rienstra 54:47

It's been a pleasure. Thanks, Ben.



Ben Yosua-Davis 54:51

If you want to hear more from Meg or from Debra, there are places for you to go. Visit Meg's author page to find out more about her including a link to the second edition of *Who Do We Choose To Be* that just came out. You can check out Debra Rienstra at her author page, her excellent Substack newsletter and her marvellous podcast *Refugia Faith*. Links to all of these can be found in our show notes. We always share about next steps at the end of our episodes, but if changing the world seems like a comical idea after listening to these conversations, I invite you to narrow your scope to one action you can take. For instance, Meg and Debra both talk about the difference that we can make when we focus on the small, local, and contextual. Scientists and activists are starting to come to an almost universal agreement that if you want to create a resilient community, you have to start by cultivating relationships. So if you need a place to start, start with your neighbors. My go to is baking cookies or brownies. If you have a small child in your life, have them decorate the bag that those cookies or brownies go in and bring them over with you. No one is displeased when dessert shows up at their doorstep. And it can be the start of a relationship that may make a big difference for you, for them, and for the place where you live.

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Nicole Diroff 56:13

I love that image of you, Ben. As a next step, I invite you to experience your own agency in tangible ways, as a response to challenges that are indeed bigger than any of us. As you may know, last year, the US Congress passed the largest climate change legislation in American history. The Inflation Reduction Act, the IRA provides a pathway for individuals and communities to transition to clean energy. You could get up to \$10,000 in rebates. These include incentives to invest in sustainable home improvements, receive tax credits for electric vehicles, and add rooftop solar panels to your home, which is something my family is moving forward on right now. As a meaningful next step, I invite you to educate yourself on the many benefits, tax rebates and opportunities available through the IRA. Once you better understand how the IRA works, share that information with neighbors with workmates with members of your congregation. Spread the news. Taking these sorts of actions helps our government know we're paying attention and we are eager for them to do more. Look to our *Climate Changed* podcast show notes for links to learn more about the IRA and what you can do.



Ben Yosua-Davis 57:45

Thank you so much for joining us today for this episode of a climate changed podcast.

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Nicole Diroff 57:50

We would love to hear your thoughts and responses to our conversation. We would also welcome any suggestions you have for this show.



Ben Yosua-Davis 57:58

Feel free to email us at podcast@thebtscenter.org. That's podcast@thebtscenter.org



Nicole Diroff 58:08

Our podcast is produced by Peterson Toscano and is a project of The BTS Center in beautiful Portland, Maine.



Ben Yosua-Davis 58:16

Learn about the many resources we share in our regular online programs by visiting thebtscenter.org. That's thebtscenter.org. There you will also find our full show notes and a transcript for today's episode. Take care and may you find faith life and love in the midst of our climate-changed world