

Welcome to Turning Conscience Into Action, the Earth Charter podcast. Join Mirian Vilela, Earth Charter International Executive Director, in her fascinating conversations with great thinkers, scholars and activists from around the world who are working in the fields of sustainability, ethics, education and social transformation. Our purpose is to generate new insights on how to face current global challenges and inspire and form action. Today we are going to have a conversation with Gus Speth, who is the founder and former president of the World Resources Institute, WRI.

He was also co-founder of the Natural Resources Defense Council and RGC and senior advisor to President Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton. Gus Speth served as administrator of the United Nations Development Program, UNDP, and was dean of the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies at Yale University. I must say that I have made good use of your books, Gus, for myself and many of the courses that I have taught over the years. Thank you so much for joining us today. Well, Mirian, I'm glad to be with you.

I'm happy to be here. Yes. So I would like to start with a question because I have been following some of your speeches and writings and you have been making strong arguments on the need to promote a transformation in consciousness in American culture. Could you share with us what do you mean by that and why? Why do you talk so much about transformation of consciousness? Well, I think we are in the US and in maybe many other countries, countries that I got very familiar with when I was in the United Nations.

We're beset with a set of values and habits of thought that really don't reflect today's needs. They may have been appropriate for some earlier time, but they're not appropriate today. We think about rugged individualism as being, for example, something to be prized and people talk about rugged individualism in the US, but it really is a great burden today for things to be so much premised on an individualist approach rather than a communal approach and rather than a common approach and a whole approach that links us all together.

Individualism is a bad value for today's needs. Probably it has been always a bad value, but predominant. Yes. We think about ourselves all the time as the dominant species on the planet, as the top of the pyramid and that everything else is inferior to us. This anthropocentrism makes us neglect. Our role is part of the natural systems. We're close kinship to wild things. We need to get beyond this anthropocentrism, which always says that we're number one and we can do what we want to do and we can appropriate as much nature as we want to appropriate and in the process destroy an awful lot.

Another bad habit of thought that we have now is what you could call contemplocentrism, which is to put everything in the contemporary context and not think about the longer run. That's also killing us with the climate issue and the loss of biodiversity and other problems. I could go on like this, but there are a larger set of issues. Our materialism, our consumerism, our tribalism, these are all old values that no longer make sense today. We need a new consciousness, a new habits of thought. It needs to be a more spiritual approach to the world and a more integrated holistic approach to connecting with other life and non-life and beauty.

There are so many great things that are possible, but we need to slow down and enjoy them, really. Take advantage of the great things that are possible and focus on the non-material things of life. That's the change that I see as necessary and as I see it, that's the change that the Earth Charter was advocating as well. For that reason, I've quoted the length from the Earth Charter in two of my books. I was really delighted to learn more about what you've been doing and this 20th anniversary of the Earth Charter that we're now experiencing.

Yes, indeed. The whole worldview that is articulated in this chapter is an invitation for us to move away from materialism and too much focus on individualism. I would like to ask you to talk about a book that you published in 2004 called *The Red Sky at Morning America and the Global Crisis of Environments*. In that book, you explained why current approaches to critical global environment problems were not working. You then provided eight linked steps or you called them transitions, eight transitions to help us move towards a sustainable future.

Could you comment on what are those eight steps that you mentioned and identify in that book? Sure. I called it the eightfold way sometimes. I think these are not in any order of importance. In fact, the most important one might be the last one that I mentioned. Obviously, we need to worry and do more than we do about the large numbers of people on the planet. We know a lot about how to support mothers and families to allow them to reduce fertility rates, but the early projections that we were working with have been far exceeded in terms of global population growth.

Another thing is the need to get very serious about world poverty. I think with all the efforts that have been going on, we still are not succeeding and we don't have enough of the right tools being deployed, being made available to really help. If we expect on some of these global issues like climate to have the cooperation of much of the developing world, they need to feel a lot more secure that we are cooperating with them on their priorities, which are sustainable development and poverty reduction and sustainable livelihoods.

The third area is deep technological change. It's happening so much. It's happening so much and so fast. Deep technological change. It's not only happening fast. When I wrote this book a while ago, some things were beginning, but things like renewable energy have really taken off now. I suspect we're beginning to see a huge boom in electric automobiles, for example, electric transportation generally, but across a huge front of all types of activities, including agriculture, we shouldn't forget that.

There are major technological opportunities. You could think of them as technological or just techniques in agriculture. As long as there are benign technologies in agriculture. There are and we need to get serious about it. And then I think another area is in this what I call environmentally honest prices. We are now deeply subsidizing so many bad activities, in part direct subsidies as we subsidize the energy in the United States, fossil fuels in the United States. But we also have these indirect subsidies where companies are allowed to dump their waste products and their pollution into the environment.

They get a free place to put their waste. Unfortunately, we are on the receiving end of it. And so the prices ought to reflect the full cost of production, whether they're now in the market or not. And we know how to do that with economic tools. That's the principle of incorporating the environmental costs and the real costs of products. Environment and social costs. Exactly. Social too. We shouldn't forget that because often we environmentalists do forget that. I think the another area of the eight is consumption.

You know, we have a lot of superficial change in the area of consumption where people look for green products or try not to use plastic bags. And these things are important. I don't deny that they are important. But we need also to think about the aggregate amount of consumption and our commitment to forever growing it every year and doing, you know, shop till we drop and seeing consumerism. Consumerism is, you know, is a false premise that you know, we think we can meet our deep needs by, you know, non material needs by purchasing material things and people do that all the time every day.

And it's just totally out of control. It fuels, you know, growth that is destroying the environment. We need to find a way to have sustainable livelihoods to meet people's real needs and provide real opportunities without this endless commitment to growth. Well, it's because probably we have this mindset that has been fed into our world view that we need to consume to be happy. Exactly. And, and, you know, and then we measure this growth with with with the measurement GDP. Which is does not reflect real opportunity for people.

And, you know, we've had a lot of GDP growth, for example, in the United States and people's conditions have actually deteriorated. So, you know, part of this sustainable consumption idea is having good measures of progress and getting beyond the traditional GDP measure. I think another dimension, of course, is the one that you you work in directly. And that is knowledge and learning. Obviously, if people, the more informed people are, and the more they understand the world and other people and other cultures, and particularly the more they understand science, the better decisions are going to be.

And so when you have someone like our president, like the administration of President Trump in the United States, it is so dismissive of science, whether it's, you know, pandemic disease or climate change, this dismissive of the science. Well, you don't expect to get good policies then and move towards sustainability. Another dimension is governance. And we, we, and in the book that you mentioned, I was reflecting there on in this book mostly about international governance. So the focus was global environmental governance. And how do we achieve it.

And part of that is that we, we have a very inadequate system of reaching international agreements. Now, we have forged these huge treaties, which are not really working very well. A witness to climate treaty, a biodiversity treaty not working well. Very few of them, you know, some would say only one of the major ones is the ozone depletion agreement is working well. So we don't know, we aren't applying the best learning and the best understanding to reaching international agreements. And, and I think there are tools that we know of and I made a lot of recommendations in the book that you mentioned for improving the treaty process.

Part of it is to do something which we have neglected badly to do. We have major international institutions that work to govern commerce around the world. We have a major international agency that works on intellectual property rights. We have one that protects our aircraft from in the internationally international flights, one that deals with telecommunications and one that deals with trade major international institutions. And the what we've created for the environment internationally is just a pale reflection of the influence that these other types of institutions that deal with the economic issues have.

Interesting enough, the environment organization have less strength, less power than these other organizations you have mentioned. However, environment is crucial to the livelihoods and well-being of people from all over the world. Well, as you were saying, you would think that in the best of all worlds, we would have one of the most powerful international agencies would be out there fighting for the global environment. And supporting countries in their environmental work. And we don't. We have UNEP.

And UNEP is a fine agency with some very, very good people and a good track record in some areas. But it is a little peanut of an agency compared with say the World Health Organization or World Meteorological Organization. So it really, I commend them for what they do, but it's not up to the job. And I suspect they'd be the first to admit that they are not up to this problem that we have now with global environmental deterioration. And then, you know, we've talked a minute ago about the need for a spiritual transformation, a transformation in consciousness, where we begin to see the world anew.

And, and, and differently. And that is the last transition of the eight and it's a transition in, in, in culture and consciousness. And along the dimensions that I embraced before, when we started out. And I think, you know, one of the critical issues for people to, to, we have to address is, well, people say, well, cultural change, value shift. These are great. That's what we need. But it takes a long time and we don't know how to do it. Because, you know, it's very complicated. And, and, and we just have to work on other things.

And one of the points that, that I make a lot is that, no, that's not right. We know a lot about how culture changes. We know a lot about how values change and how we can help promote those processes now. So, I don't think we can wait on values to change. In order to start moving on a bunch of issues, which we need to, we've got to go with what we've got to some degree, for example. But I also don't think we're going to get very far in addressing these great global environmental challenges and social challenges.

We won't get very far unless values are changing, along with the, you know, policy changes, for example, the two will drive and reinforce each other. Absolutely. In your book, you say, or you, you affirm that this is the most fundamental transition of all is a transition of culture and consciousness. How do you think this can take place? Well, that's, that is the question. And I did try to look at that. And I asked a bunch of social psychologists. I said, well, what would lead to a kind of a cultural transformation?

And one answer that came back very frequently, well, a crisis. Crisis can drive deep rethinking. Crises can delegitimize the current system, for example, or delegitimize the government and, and, and make people think about an alternative and, and become more aware. So it's a sad thing. But, you know, to some degree, I think we, the world's big

changes are going to be crisis driven. I wish it weren't true, but it's already happening on climate. We see the climate changes causing crises around the world now.

And we see people finally beginning to take it more seriously. So there was a, another, another critical dimension of driving a value changes leadership. If we have wise leadership and people, you know, talking consistently and demonstrating the new values in their lives, it doesn't do for leaders to go out and preach one thing and then do another. It just discredits them. So they have to be real genuine about it. But leadership is so important. Good, good ethical leadership. Honest leadership. Related to leadership is that leaders can help tell a new story, a new narrative.

And we need, we need a new story, the old story about, you know, growth is good always American exceptionalism in our case that we are so great that the best way to happiness is to consume more and that happiness, consumerism fulfills our needs. These are all the old, the old myths, but we need a new story about a new national purpose, new international purposes. And, you know, I have a friend who's working now to build a movement of global citizenship. And, you know, and develop the idea that we have that there ought to be an international declaration of human duties to go with the declaration of human rights.

Well, the reality is that we are all part of not only the country where we were born, but we're also part of the planet. We were born on this single unique planet Earth that we come from. And as we have human rights, we also have duties and responsibilities to care for the planet. And therefore it's kind of this image of being part of the country where we come from but also being part of this planet Earth that entails responsibilities in rights. You put very well I and I think so we this would be part of a new story, a new, a new challenge, a new direction.

So you talked about the transition of culture in consciousness come when there's a huge crisis, when there's a good leadership, honest ethical leadership. And could we say what do you think about the role of education in helping this transition towards a new culture and culture consciousness. Yeah, well, I agree that that is so important and it can be both informal education as well as formal education. A lot of people, you know, in effect need to go back and learn some things that they missed the first time, including me.

But I think education and and and to be a new kind of education, right. Well, that would be very planetary citizenship education. Exactly. Another thing of course is religions. I think world religions can play a huge role in in driving your value change. And we're seeing more and more religious leaders stepping up to the plate and addressing these these bigger issues of cultural transformation. Social movements can be very important because social movements really are at their core consciousness raising events and they drive they make people think and whether they accomplish exactly what they set out to do they always make us think and make us wonder why this is happening what's going on.

And we can see this, certainly in the US with the revival of the of the civil rights movement today, occasioned by all of the police brutality and things and and movements around the world. And, you know, people are in the streets a lot. And that's where they should be. I'm a great believer in peaceful demonstrations and peaceful civil disobedience if it needed. And then lastly, the another source of value change can be the popping up of

models that inspire us. I mean, lots of localities around the world. Things are happening. People are developing innovative ways of doing things.

And good examples, good practices. Yes, good practices. Best practices really for, you know, in lots of. We may be dominated by big agribusiness, but there are a lot of things going on and in smaller farms around the world today, regenerative agriculture and other, you know, organics and other things that are taking, you know, making a real impact. And, you know, we'll have to move away from some diet that's so so much based on on animal animals and meat consumption. So there are a lot of ways to do these things. A lot of models of different types of enterprises of business enterprises that are probably there are a lot of models, but we need to give more visibility to those.

Good stories, good practice models. Yes, there are some, you know, there are some good websites that try to do that but but still it really is invisible to a lot of a lot of people. We don't. We were the great things are happening but but not that people. It's mostly known by the people who are doing them. So, so if you put this package together of things, you know, which I did in one of my books, *America the possible*. You know, I showed how these these various factors could interact to drive value change and cultural change and transformation.

And I even wrote a poem about it but my started writing poetry books now and I my second book of poems I wrote a poem about this so. It's wonderful. Anyhow, yeah, it's another way of getting to people's heart and mind. I think we've got to do a lot of work. Yeah. Okay, so now in 2008, you published another book called *the bridge at the edge of the world* capitalism, the environment and crossing from crisis to sustainability. In that book, you call for a new consciousness in a new world view. And you also talk about seed beads of change. What are these, could you share or give us a gist of your ideas in that book.

Well, I guess the place to start. Since we started with the environment. And if you ask people today, what is an environmental issue. They're likely to say climate or biodiversity loss, air pollution. But what if the what if an environmental issue, or is anything that is impeding or stopping environmental progress. Those should be environmental issues too, right. And if you look if you if you answer that question. Well, then you get into a series of of deeper issues about the way our, our economy works and our politics work.

If you have a politics is dominated by money, dominated by giant corporations, the most powerful actors in the political system or corporations. If if your democracy is dominated by corporations and money, well, you're not going to make a lot of environmental progress. If people are being deprived of opportunities to have a decent livelihood, and are scared to death about losing jobs and and being further marginalized, but they're not likely to be thinking a lot about global climate change, unless they have to.

So this vast social injustice in this society is a clear impediment to environmental action in progress. When I hear you talk about that it came to my mind, an environmental problem is our own mindset. Well, I was going to mention exactly that I mean if in fact you know your your your your public discourse is dominated by issues of growth and and and and you know and and we're constantly overwhelmed with advertisements. I mean we forget

how how how saturated our societies are with advertisements. And it wasn't that long ago that in the US there were some restrictions on advertising. For example, you couldn't really direct advertising at children.

Now it's just huge. I mean every and do the most the children are big targets. You know they've been so I think the the these these deeper issues of justice of power and and our own bad habits are real impediments. For example, environmental groups in the US rarely talk about consumerism. They rarely talk about changing, you know, attacking corporate power. They rarely talk about, you know, issues of justice, even though they might acknowledge that they're serious problems. They just don't address them and it's not part of environmentalism as as we know it. I think that situation is better in many places around the world than it is in the US and maybe in Europe.

Certainly in Latin America I think we see a lot of social environmental problems very linked in the more systemic integrated way. It's beginning to change here in the US I would say, but it's it's it's not really where it ought to be. So these are the in the book that you mentioned I looked at these issues of deeper change and and the and we've we've done another book actually that we just got out. And it's called the new systems reader. And it's about it has 28 essays in it about alternative political economy systems that would achieve much better results on in general, than the one we have now.

Of course, you know, for a lot of people it's pretty radical stuff. And they they think it's socialism or something else but it's, you have to look at these changes individually and and we need a, you know, we need alternative measures of progress. We need more democratic control of investment decisions. It's all now the banks and the big companies. You know, we need greater forms of bigger forms and big more companies that are run by workers and co ops of different types. But there's a lot of changes that that are needed. If we're going to deal on the long run with these great challenges and the types of the eight full way things that I mentioned, in a way that the outset, those could be viewed as as the initial steps, the things that need to be addressed and and the things that I'm been talking about most recently can be thought of system change issues, and they're going to take longer, and they're going to be harder, but they are just as necessary.

Absolutely. Walk on two legs, so to speak. And we certainly need to advance the transition to sustainability and press the accelerator to move faster towards that transition. The speed is a big issue because, you know, when the slow speed is a big issue. When I started working on these issues. I was really introduced to the climate issue. When I was in government in 1979. So over 40 years ago, scientists came to me and when I was in government and said you have to do something about the climate issue.

40 years ago, and we we took it to the president and we got a lot of newspaper coverage on it back then were reports flying around calling for action. Well that was in the Carter administration. And, you know, you know how much is happened, which is saying not happen in the ensuing 40 years. So now, you know, whereas 40 years ago we had time to do the thing right if we, you know, did, but now we have no time, we're behind we way way behind. And so it's, it's urgent. Now, these things that were once important are now urgent.

Absolutely. At the end of that book you published in 2008, you use a metaphor. You share a double metaphor. Like to see if you can remember that, but it's basically a metaphor of the bridge across the abyss. Which I would like to see if you can share with us what that that mean. Well, I'd be happy to try. It's basically you said something about the abyss that we can only be reached after we take the right path or something like that. Yes, well, I think, well, it's simple enough, I think. I'm afraid that we are headed towards an abyss if you want to call it that and it's basically think of think of the climate issue.

I mean, we're headed towards a huge global problem of destabilization of food supplies of living conditions, a loss of biodiversity and natural systems, heat waves, storms, droughts. It is already beginning and it's going to be, you know, really devastating if we don't do the right things in an urgent way. And so the abyss is issues like climate change and I couldn't talk about other things too. And the metaphor in the book was that there's, you know, if we could find a path around the abyss rather than going into it.

And what that involves taking up the kinds of things we've been talking about here today, you know, with urgency and seriousness, because we're not on that path now. And we're headed towards a devastating situation across many social and environmental issues. And I've used the climate issue because it's so pertinent and so people's minds, but there are others. And there's just this vast injustice in the world that needs to be addressed with the same kind of urgency. And, you know, and the climate issue is going to impact on already very deprived situations around the world.

And it's so, there's such an idea of intergenerational justice or injustice around the issue of climate change. So the generations to come are the ones who are going to suffer the most. Well, thank you for mentioning that because it's a passion of mine. I've been involved with a group of young people here in the US who have been suing the government, our federal government, for claiming that they've been deprived of their constitutional rights by the failure of the federal government to act responsibly.

And the federal government has not only not done anything much very positive to address the climate issue, but it's also done a lot to make it worse. And so these 21 young people five years ago sued the federal government to try to get them get the government's head straightened out and put and help put the country on a right track. The suit goes on without resolution. I'm afraid at this point, but this group, our children's trust has done a great job of representing young people in legal processes to fight for their climate rights.

Well, I think part of this new consciousness that we need to raise is the consciousness with regards to our responsibility with future generations. I think it's not there enough because not many people are aware of it. We don't even think about what responsibility with future generations. What does that mean? Like people, our eyesight is not long enough in the horizon. So talking about intergenerational justice seems to be something very abstract for many. Well, it became that there was a people who made a small joke. And it went like this.

Future generations. What have they done for us? It's wonderful. It's indeed. Thank you for sharing that. So you have been involved in all of these for so many years. Yes, more than 40 years. Imagine, have you changed anything in terms of your perspective in all of

that over these years? And what do you think is the most urgent need for humanity to move in a more concerted effort towards sustainability and climate action? Have you changed your perspective? No, I think my views have changed a great deal.

When we started out, for example, in 1970, with creating an environmental group, the Natural Resources Defense Council, which is now very much a global organization, we thought that we could get things done by working in Washington, mainly, working to implement existing laws that had come on, been recently enacted. And we would get this job done pretty quickly in a way. And we turned out to be really badly wrong. And I've slowly evolved in my thinking over the period since then to the idea that much deeper, more profound changes are needed in our system of politics and our system of economics, and that we pride ourselves in so much, but it's not doing the job.

And so it's been a process, I would say, of going for deeper change in my life. And I think now the deepest changes are the ones that we need to spend a lot more time and energy on. And it's good that we have a lot of the traditional environmentalism going forward. We need it badly right now to stop the US from backsliding. The Trump administration has attempted to roll back over 100 environmental rules. So we've been a real important process of trying to prevent that from happening. And I'm sure things like that are going on in other countries too, backsliding.

So that's important to keep fighting in the traditional ways, but we also need to find ways to drive deeper change so that we have a system which is really, in which good results are natural, in which good things happen easily and not with always such tremendous struggle. Indeed. Now our last question to you is, there is a famous sentence of yours that circulates in the internet, probably more than you think because it actually circulates in different languages also. But it's a very interesting sentence and I think it got popularized and you say, I used to think the top environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse and climate change.

I thought that with 30 years of good science, we could address those problems, but I was wrong. The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed and apathy. And to deal with those, we need the spiritual and cultural transformation and we scientists don't know how to do that. That's such a good sentence of yours that circulates around the various internet and I would like you to comment on that. Actually, when did you say that? Do you remember? Well, it's an interesting story. I mean, the first, except for one word, the story, the paragraph that you read and it is circulating around, except for one word, it is accurate. I said that and I meant it and I still mean it.

But it's got one word wrong and let me clarify that, clarify that right away. I said, we lawyers and scientists don't know how to do that. And because I'm a lawyer, I'm not a scientist. I could never say we scientists. So anyhow, that clarifying, with putting that aside, it's a very accurate statement of my view. When was the occasion you said that? This is the interesting part. I've written all these books and I expect everybody in the world to be reading them and quoting from them. But no, what everyone is reading and quoting is a statement I made at a small conference.

And one of the people there took it and quoted it in a book that he wrote. So it's in somebody else's book. It's not even in my own books. However, I did write a poem about it. You want me to read you the poem? Yes, sir. I think that's so interesting because people are really circulating that paragraph of yours because it's so inspiring, so much to the point. Well, here's the, here's the poem, but you're right. You're good to raise it and thank you. It's good to be quoted regardless, right? And but it's just too bad they got a little bit wrong.

The poem is called New Consciousness. Decades of discourse led by people like me, lawyers, scientists, economists, and we are stuck. They can't do what must be done, which is to reach the human heart. The deep problems of avarice, arrogance, and apathy. Dominant values, badly astray. What we need is not more analysis, but a spiritual awakening to a new consciousness. So let's bring on the preachers and the prophets, the poets and the philosophers, the psychologists and the psychiatrists. Let's bring on the writers and musicians, actors and artists.

Call them to strike the chords of our shared humanity, of our close kin to wild things. This is really wonderful. Thank you so much. It might be a good note to end on. Absolutely it is. Thank you for all the work you have done in what you have been doing to help us in this cultural shift in the awakening of a new consciousness for humanity. I think you have done a great contribution. Well, I wish it were bigger. We keep trying. That's about what we can do, right? You just got to keep, have to keep trying.

Let me ask just one more question about your own ethical dilemma. You took so many leadership positions in UNDP, WRI, and others. Probably you remember some difficult decisions and really ethical dilemmas you had to deal with. I think the hardest issues are always personnel issues. I think I learned a lot about human resources, human management during my experiences. Sometimes I'm sure at other people's expense. But that was, and I think, you know, another thing is, it's not, it's obvious, but it creeps up on you, is that when you're in a position, you tend to play the role that is created by all the circumstances around you.

And we all try to do well and succeed, but it usually is success within the context in which we are operating. And, you know, I think looking back on my life, if I had had more opportunities or I had taken more opportunities to step back and question the system I was working in, I would have been better. I'm not sure I would have been made any difference, but it would have, I would, I'd feel better about it now. So I think that's something we all have to be conscious of. We're usually called upon to, you know, succeed and do well in certain ways.

And it also, it's also a cautionary note about what types of jobs to take, because you don't want to put yourself in a position, you know, where you are constantly having to do things you really don't like or don't approve of. And I see so many people in government in that position from time to time. I think this is a good advice for the new generation of young people who want to be ethical leaders and taking your advice in terms of having that room of liberty to take a step back and sometimes question where we are.

Well, I'd like to think the younger generation is doing more of that than my generation did. Well, thank you so much, Gus, for your time and for sharing with us so much of your wisdom. It's been great talking to you and I had a fun time. Thank you for letting me sound off.

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