

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 informed action.

So hello, we have the pleasure of having Mark Hathaway here with us today.

Mark is one of the facilitators of our online program on Education for Sustainable Development with Earth Charter, in which he offers a course on transformative learning. Mark Hathaway is the co-author of the book *The Tau of Liberation*, in which he has a chapter that articulates what is world views and the great challenges that we have nowadays. And since he wrote that book, Mark has been researching quite a bit on ecological wisdom. And today I would like to start with you, with a conversation with you, Mark, on world views and the challenges that, the current challenge that we now have, social crisis and environmental crisis.

So how do you relate our world views and the crisis that we currently live? And also, where do our world views come from? Well, first off, thank you very much for having me today. I'm very happy to be here and talking. World views and the crisis, well, as you say, we have these kind of multiple inter-woven crises, everything from often widening gap between the rich and the poor, problems around violence in the world, the whole, what's often called an environmental crisis or the climate crisis, but really the basic systems that sustain and life on the planet are breaking down in many ways.

And we really are faced with an existential threat, not only as humans, but thousands of species disappearing each year and that accelerating. So we're really up against a pretty immense challenge in terms of how can we move toward a just, sustainable, peaceful world, which of course is what the Earth Charter is really about. I think in terms of world view, where does that come in? Often we think of these crises that say, let's take the example of climate change. Often we reduce that to some extent to a technological challenge.

And obviously, there are technological challenges. I mean, yes, we need to move away from oil. We need to generate oil electricity from the sun. We need to think about our transportation systems. But then you could think of it as an economic problem as well or a political problem. And it is all of those things. But at a deeper level, we could also say that all of these different crises, including climate change, are crises in our relationship, our relationships with one another as humans, but also with other species and with the wider planet.

How do we understand our place in this world? What is our role in this world? Are we here to dominate and manage it, mold it to our image? Well, so far that certainly hasn't worked out very well, has it? Or are we going to change the way we relate to the world, understand ourselves as part of a community of life? The Earth community, as the Earth Charter says, and to really live out of an experience of that interconnection and deep respect and an ethic of care that comes along with that. And I think unless we can shift

our experience and the way we perceive the world, it really is difficult for us to act in a way which is truly ethical and which really enables us even to address the crises.

Sometimes I think our lack of creativity too is that we think that as humans, since we got ourselves into this mess, that we have to, particularly around ecological regeneration, it's somehow we have to fix it. And yet the actual reality is that we as humans alone can't fix it. We need the wisdom and the technologies, if you want to even say, of other species to produce through great fertile soil or to help us take carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere. I mean no one trees do that much better than any technology that we have, for instance.

So it's really changing our attitude toward others, including other species that's going to help us actually move beyond and to find solutions to this crisis. So you talked about the crisis that we currently live, social crisis, ecological crisis, that the root causes of much of those crises that we are actually facing as humanity in different regions of the world has to do with the crisis of world views. And you said about the importance, unless we shift the way we perceive the world. So world views are related to the way we perceive the world.

And the question is how do we develop our world views? And how do we see the world through different lenses? How does it emerge? Yeah, I think the really important thing here is to realize that sometimes when we talk about world view, people seem to almost be talking about a philosophy, like a philosophical system, which isn't totally incorrect, but it's much more an implicit than an explicit philosophy. It's a bit more like if we were more to use a software analogy, it's like our software, it's like what we're working out of.

Now I don't think that's a perfect analogy either. But just to say that world views are more than intellectual assumptions about reality. They're more than kind of an intellectual system of any kind. They also have to do with how we perceive and even feel the world. Do we approach the world? And in this I really love the quote of Thomas Berry, when he talks about one world view, which is as a collection of objects, and the other is a communion of subjects. Now if we perceive the world, not only think about but actually perceive the world as objects for our personal use, then we're much more likely to exploit, especially objects to satisfy not only needs, but even desires.

Then we begin to, we look at a forest and we see it as a source of raw materials, of lumber or for paper or its use value, colors how we see it. Yeah, totally. And so we might walk through that forest and just be looking at, ah, those trees are nice and straight, those are going to be good to be cut down. Oh, look at that one's giant. We'll get lumber for, I don't know, five houses for that. But seeing that tree as being really a community, part of a community, an interconnected community, all the trees are communicating with one another.

All of them are creating habitat for other, for the birds, for the insects. I mean, you look at a tree and there's all kinds of life living in that tree. But in general, if we look at the world as that collection of objects for use, a whole set of values flows out of that. And I think the whole, whole phenomenon of consumerism too has to do with that, that the more we consume, the more we think we're going to be happy, even though when we actually look at research that doesn't seem to be true at all.

Because if in contrast, we really experience that we're living in a community, interconnected community of life that sustains us, that through its generosity provides what we need, the air we breathe, the water we drink, the food we eat. If we have a sense of gratitude for all that community of beings of which we are a part, then there's a natural ethical limit to what we're going to take. We're only going to, first off, we're only going to try to satisfy genuine human needs. And we're going to try to do that in the way that does the least harm possible.

So then an ethic of sufficiency, but also understanding if we're part of a community that our happiness, our well-being, flows out of our relationships. And to the extent that we have quality relationships, not only with other people, but certainly with other people. I think when we think about what genuinely brings us happiness in life, it's the people we love, maybe the pets we love, but also the place where we live. It's a beautiful place. It's a place. If I can go out and walk through even a nice park in the city, that gives me joy and happiness.

And so it's in that interconnectivity lies the worth of things and our happiness. But that then is really moving to another experience of the world. And I think it's a way, actually, when you look back in time, most traditional and indigenous people have experienced the world that way. And it's something that we lost at some point. Because we are experiencing the world in a different way now. People are still experiencing the world, but not so much in connection with nature. Yes. We're still experiencing the world, but just in a different way.

And therefore, our experience is helping to shape our minds in the way we perceive the world. It's just that it's in a different way. And therefore, we could probably say that one of the root causes of the crisis that we are currently living has to do with our disconnection with the natural world. Yes. We are having less experience with the natural world and more experience as consumers. And of course, this notion of disconnection with the essence of our lives. And of course, it's not as simple to say that we change our worldview and we change the world.

We also have to change the systems. I mean, if you're thinking of what you just said about this disconnection, if one is living in a city where there's lots of concrete, not a lot of plant life or animals, where even at night there's so much light that when you look up, you can't even see the stars anymore. It actually facilitates the consciousness of disconnection. And there are also messages we're receiving from about to consume more, I mean, all the advertising, all the things. Often our education systems are doing this too.

They're teaching us, you know, what you need to do is learn enough to get a good job to make lots of money so you can buy the stuff that you need. And if that's all education is, then it's not really doing what it needs to do. I mean, yes, we need to know, have a livelihood that allows us to live. But if we're not learning how to relate to other people, to if we're not learning, and I didn't learn this, I still don't know it very well. You know, I don't understand that the ecological interrelationships, the plants that are native to my area, if I don't even know how to grow my own food or do some of these very basic things, then I'm more and more alienated from that wider community of life.

You know, for me, if my food comes in a package out of the supermarket, I don't have the experience of picking the fruit off the tree or, you know, harvesting the potatoes from the ground or whatever it is, it's a very different experience. And so even there, you know, if I'm doing that with my own hands, I have some more sense of the generosity of the plants. And I have a very small garden, but when I go out and pick the raspberries off the bush, you know, I have the sense of the generosity of the plant gifting me these raspberries.

That's not what I have when I go into the store and buy it off the shelf. It's a big difference in the experience of eating or buying the fruits or the vegetables that we eat every day. Or even if you cook the food yourself or whether, you know, it just comes out of a package or something. So it's a different experience. It's that kind of experience that we are currently having that is shaping our mindsets, right? Yes. Yes, I do. So I would say it's quite worrisome to think that the majority of the world population is actually moving towards urban.

It's just that we are living towards an urbanized world. And that's also kind of leading to a less connection with the natural systems and nature. And therefore, we are just, we could be heading towards a different kind of civilization if we really only envision that more and more human beings will be living their lives so much apart from nature with that sense of disconnection. So it's like really, that's what is shaping the mindsets of the most of the kids or teenagers that are living urban settings.

Yeah. And not to say that urban has to be bad. I mean, we could re-envision our urban spaces. Think about how much space in our cities is taken up by roads for cars to drive on. What if we had really good mass transit systems and people used far fewer cars and all that land is freed up for community gardens? Just to give an example. One thing that did become really apparent in my research around ecological wisdom, for instance, is that not to say the only childhood experience is important, but for many of the people who I interviewed, they felt their ecological worldview really began with their experience as children of, for instance, playing outdoors.

Now it's interesting because some people had very wild places to be in. I mean, actually, you were one of those who talked about your experience playing in the forest and things. And there were quite a few people who had those kinds of experiences. But for some like, you know, for Edel Sullivan, it was playing on a vacant lot in New Jersey in kind of an industrial city. But he still had an experience of playing outside, playing outdoors and with plants and rocks and things like that. So but it was those kinds of free play kind of more so interestingly than structured kind of, you know, this is certain.

I'm not saying environmental education is bad by any means, but you know, that can be a compliment. But if you don't have some of the free play in nature, it's much more difficult. Now other people didn't have that as children and had it later in life. But I think then it's not only being outdoors. It's the quality of the experience of outdoors because what could be outdoors, you know, walking down the street looking at your telephone and you're not really having an experience of connection with the with the birds or the trees.

So then, you know, how can we develop the skills, what Laura Seawall calls the skill of ecological perception? How can we make sure that when we do go outdoors, even if it's for a few minutes that we're actually paying attention and trying to perceive the interconnections and trying to perceive a plant or an animal, not just as a thing or kind of part of a land of an abstract landscape, but rather as a being with its own subjectivity, with its own particularity, even being like a being that can teach us something that is communicating something to us.

And so there once again, it's not just having been outdoors. It's the quality of the experience we have when we're actually doing that. So you talked about skills, ecological perception, can you share a little bit more about what are those skills? And these are some of the findings of your own research. In this one, this particular thing comes from an ecopsychologist, Laura Seawall. And what she talked about was the importance of attention and practice in particular, but also imagination. And I'm just going to talk about that quickly.

If you look at neurophysiology and how our brains work, we form these neural connections. And there's, I think, thousands of millions of these in the human brain. And as kids, interestingly, we multiply these connections. This is why kids particularly have this amazing capacity of what's called neural plasticity to learn, languages perceive the world in different ways. It's incredible. But as adults, it becomes a bit more difficult because there's a process of neural pruning. We start favoring certain connections over others.

That's kind of like cementing our worldview. We get habits of thought or of perception, not just of thought, but of perception. And so we start seeing, hearing, perceiving the world in a certain way. Those become habits. And what research has shown is that paying attention is one of the key ways to start creating new neural pathways. So just paying attention, just why things like types of meditation, for instance, can be so important. And then to cement that, it's also practice. And a third element that I just want, which is really the extension of attention is imagination.

Imagination allows us to extend our attention to other scales of time and space. But particularly when you're with a tree, for instance, if you can't imagine, we can't know what a tree experiences. And I'd love to know what a tree actually experiences. That would be really cool. But unfortunately, I really can't know. But I can imagine, and that imagination, that attempt, that whole thing allows us to have empathy with the tree. And we actually also have mirror neurons that actually allow us to empathize with others.

So we actually have a natural inbuilt capacity for empathy. Now, in my research, I mean, some of these things did come out, certainly the importance of attention. There were some really interesting experiences of people who had deep encounters with another being, what I would call kind of intersubjective. Where it was almost like, it's not like they lost their own distinctiveness, but to where they really felt a deeper connection with another, with an animal, a plant. There are people who, when they go to a new place, a totally different ecosystem, for the first time, it's as though because they don't have the preconception, they see it.

They perceive it with kind of fresh eyes, fresh ears, and it opens them. That also happens sometimes when we go to a new culture, because a new culture has a different way of doing things. And it draws us out, and I think these things help us to break old habits of being, of perception, and to begin to explore new patterns, new ways that we could do this. Art can be a way for some people. Some people, it's art. Some people, it's meditation or rituals. There are so many different ways, really. For others, actually, it's traumas.

When you lose a loved one, and you reevaluate your life. Or you visit a place that is special to you in childhood, and it's no longer there. And you realize the value that that had. David Suzuki, I think it was walking, well, he talks a lot about Mars, she grew up, and then visiting when it's no longer there. It's being paved over, or walking through a rainforest on the west coast of Canada, and coming to a clear cut, and feeling the devastation of that. Again comes the experience. It's an experience, but it forces one to reevaluate things, and to kind of recognize how the value of the experience of what that forest was.

It's unfortunate sometimes that we have to lose something before we appreciate it, but I think all of us in different ways in our lives do experience loss, and if that can be an opportunity for growth, it depends how we take it. There's also the truth that sometimes we try to avoid change. I often talk about this in my talks about the three poisons of Buddhism, but one way can be to try to deny things. And I think when we look at something like climate change, that's one of the things that often happens.

It's a painful reality. It's easier just when we're fearful of something, when we're fearful of something, our natural reaction as persons is either to flee or to fight. That's kind of the classic. To cover it, avoid it. But some of these crises are so complex, we sometimes have difficulty knowing where to start. So the fight part is difficult, and the flee part, well, we're wrapped up, so we flee psychologically, and that's what denial is in many ways. Another way that we can deal with it is by trying to busy ourselves with other things as Joanna Macy would say.

That's more what in Buddhism they talk about, clinging, that it has to do with addictions or trying to fill a void. And consumerism, unfortunately in our society, one of the main ways of doing that is consume, go out and buy something, which actually makes the crisis worse. In general, these ways of trying to avoid pain actually make the pain worse. So if you try to avoid addressing climate change or poverty or whatever it is, they just get worse. So what we really need to do, someone like Joanna Macy, who I think is an incredible ecological educator and ecologist, we need to also find that the reason why we feel pain is because we are connected.

And so we need to share that pain and use it as an opportunity to form community because collectively we can do more than we can alone. If we're alone, and when I say collectively, I certainly mean with other people, but even expand that, circle out more and think about how can we work with the trees and the microbes and the soil and everything else to regenerate life. So at the beginning, you talked about the importance that worldviews play in the way we act and live on the world. And also on the importance to, I would say, to change our consciousness and the worldview we have.

So some of what you said, I think, would be elements that will help to stimulate the change, the shift of worldview. What are those elements that you think that helps us make the shift or change of our worldviews? I mean, once again, there are many. And I don't have, I won't remember all of them, but I mean, often the easiest framework for looking at this, I think, is Joanna Macy's work that reconnects, is I think it's a good place to start. I kind of play with it a bit. Just what I was saying now, don't start with fear.

Don't start in the place of fear. So if we're as, I think it has educators, if we're trying to scare people into action or to do it through guilt, often those backfire. But it's a tricky thing because we need information. We need to know that the crisis is serious. We need to know that. But what Joanna would say is that we have to start with, and this is my terminology more, self-transcendent emotions. I mean, she says, begin with gratitude. Gratitude is one of those, one of the self-transcendent emotions.

But awe and beauty, like awe and wonder at the cosmos. So even, and you know... Stimulate the sense of awe. Yes, and the Earth Charter is great at this in the preamble. It talks about this evolving universe, and when you actually look at that whole story of the universe, it's incredible. It's like a miracle. I mean, the emergence that happens, and the improbabilities of even that there are stars and planets, because it's like on a nice edge, or how life emerged, and then how life has developed this multiple diversity and figured out solutions to such difficult problems over the course of billions of years.

The Earth Charter articulates a particular worldview. Yes. Yes. And it is this one of connection. But it also begins with the sense of awe and beauty and wonder to stimulate care. And that's exactly right. That would fit right in with what Toronto Aces says. But in practice too, do things that help people feel that sense of connection. So yes, gratitude, awe, beauty, love, speak of the places, the people they love, why they care about them, why it's worth working then to make sure that life continues.

I mean, that has to be our motivation has to be out of care and love, and even out of the love of the joy and of all these things that we have. And then, and so that thing of learning to attend, to pay attention, it's easier to do, to begin in a place of beauty or of gratitude or begin there. That doesn't mean that we don't have to deal with the suffering though. I mean, she was saying the next thing we need to do is honor our pain for the world. And that has to do with realizing that the reason why we suffer is because we care.

And that's not a bad thing that we can feel the pain of others. That's a sign that we're actually interconnected. So instead of, you know, through fear and guilt actually causing us to disconnect, you try to use that to understand that the source of the pain is connection. So to build connection, build a sense of connectivity as opposed to that separation and world of objects try to instead communion of subjects. Then we can shift the shifting to new eyes. That's the worldview shift part. And part of that is even part of that continues with the attention and the practice, but I'd say also she uses a lot of imagination.

I think, you know, certainly I've seen the importance of this, particularly to kind of almost even travel through time to realize our connection with the past or the ancestors because to feel gratitude for all the community of life that's come before us that has allowed us to be here at this moment and our human ancestors. Then also a sense of responsibility

toward the future. So I was kind of saying this past week in some of my courses, it's like we need to learn how to be good ancestors. How can we learn to be good ancestors?

And I think that's a lot of what this helps to do to have a sense of that responsibility and care that extends not only both through space and through time. To realize it's not just me and my family, it's the whole world that we're all interconnected but also through time. And then also then the moving forth into practice. And I think that it's also true that it's often in doing things with other people that we build a sense of community. Or even working, I have a lot of interest in permaculture, which is this whole idea of regenerative agriculture and gardening, not just that but certainly that.

But working concretely with a place and plants, I haven't done that to the extent that I would like to my life, but I've had the honor to at least know people who have. And you see how places transform people when they interact over a long period of time. And how we recover a sense of place. Once again, our ancestors, I think, knew this. They often lived in a territory, they knew it intimately. And we've lost that sense of connection. In the indigenous peoples, the land each place is associated with a story, for instance, which is a teaching.

So the land is like a teacher. But most of us have lost that sense of connection. But I also meet people, you know, I've met people who have lived on a piece of land for even 30 years or something. And the land begins, all these things are wrapped up in memory and they've actually worked concretely. And I think that there is that kind of concrete practice we need to do. But also could be an activism. It could be something like working as a group and social change. And then the community that comes out of that are people who work in transition towns or people who work, you know, so many different kind of sustainability initiatives at the local level.

So Mark, we are almost towards going towards the end of our dialogue here, our conversation with you today. Can you talk a little bit more about what kind of worldview do we need? And what's the relevance, do you think, of Dershara has in terms of looking at worldviews, the current social, environmental, ecological crisis we currently live? What can be the role or the relevancy of Dershara on this current crisis we humanity live? How can we make use of it? Okay, well, it's always hard to articulate a worldview, precisely as it is an experience of the world.

As soon as we try to articulate it, we're talking in terms of concepts. We can still do that. But certainly I want to go back to what I was saying earlier about, you know, a world of objects, you know, warehouse of raw materials, or community of life, a community of which we're a part. And one of the things that came out in my research very, very clearly that everyone talked about was a sense of reverence and the sacred, which is interesting. And that's in their charter too about reverence for life, you know, it's there.

So I think whether, as I say, one part of the Earth Charter is that beauty of the preamble really, and that really I think in a very poetic way gives us an idea of these two worldviews, these two possibilities, these two different roads in which are we going to choose? You know, we need to choose another, and we've talked a bit today about maybe how we could

move to choosing this experience of not being separate but interconnected, of out of which flows a sense of care and love that leads to a spontaneous ethic.

I haven't actually said this today, but you know, this quote of Arne Nass, the founder of Deep Ecology, who said, you know, I'm not very interested in ethics or morals. I'm concerned about how we experience the world. And when he said that, it wasn't that he was saying he didn't care about ethical conduct. He is very concerned about that. What he I think was saying is that ethics can't be simply like an external law or a set of principles. We have to have the experience of the worldview so that that ethic flows out of us naturally.

He talked about doing beautiful actions, you know, so beautiful actions. Ethics emerge out of how we experience the world. Yes. Now I think in terms of the Earth Charter, it actually, as much as it can in a document, does that in terms of trying to start with the experience in the preamble and then kind of see what ethics flow out of that. I think the key thing about the ethics of the Earth Charter is this respecting care, right? That's the core. And around that goes the part about social justice, ecological integrity, and then democracy, peace, participation.

That also sees all those things as interrelated and inter, that really you can't have one without the other. You can't have any one of those three elements. You have to work on all three of those elements are part of a larger whole, which really is that center of care and respect, which I think relates more directly to the worldview. So I think the Earth Charter is as much as any document can communicate that kind of both the experience of the world and what kind of ethic, what it means in practical terms, like what would this mean?

And it almost doesn't quite get to the policy level, but it gives us lots of places where you could kind of see how that would flow into policy. But yeah, I think, you know, then when we're talking about the importance of the Earth Charter, isn't just the little written points, it's the larger vision of it. And it's not just what you're seeing is that the importance of the Earth Charter doesn't lie only on the each principle in a separate way. But the interconnectedness of the principles. So the relationship of the principles, the pre-em, the principles with the preamble, the whole, whole, wholeness.

So as much as we can do this in a written document, I think the Earth Charter does a good, but obviously, you know, I also think, you know, maybe it's a little bit like, I mean, I'm just thinking of someone like David Bowen who talked about the implicate and the explicate order that maybe what's written in the document is like the explicate order, but this whole implicate order, something kind of a little bit below the surface, that might even be more important, but it's, we can't get at it directly, but is trying to get at that so that this whole ethic makes sense.

And that just, well, of course, you know, and I think you get two people with very different views of the world. One would read the Earth Charter and say, yeah, this is pie in the sky. Like this is never, this is, that's not, you know, the world works on competition and, you know, survival of the strongest, not just the fittest, the strongest and, you know, we're here to make money and there's charters that have make much sense. This is going to be

like, and someone else who really comes out of an experience of the world where relationship and love and beauty and these things are their core, what matters to them, they will say, yeah, of course, this makes perfect sense.

Of course, you should be doing this. Why aren't we doing this? You know, why, why do we continue on a path which is causing suffering for the huge majority of people on this planet and almost all the other community of life?

You know, why would we want to continue on that path when we could choose another one that would be so much, you know, bring so much, not only reduce suffering, but actually bring so much more satisfaction and a much richer life. It's it's about that whole thing about the importance of being and having an ethic where we value the quality of life and what in Latin America, we often talk about, you know, this whole idea of living well, you know, not living with more, but living with enough and living well.

Yeah. So it comes down again to this notion that it depends on with which which angle do we reach, read even the Earth Charter. So we through which lenses do we see the world? No, but we could say that the Earth Charter articulates a world view that stimulates thinking and imagination. Yes. But of course, it will depend a lot on how each one of us read it, depending on where we come from, the experience we have had in the world and how how do we see the world, how do we perceive the world? And there are many, many different ways to come up embody or incarnate the vision of the world of the Earth Charter.

I mean, I think in different cultures and different places and different ecosystems, it's kind of different. Yeah. And part of that diversity, too, would be the strength. I don't think there's any one way of doing it. Yeah. Well, Mark, thank you so much for being here with us today for this session. I want to invite you to continue and I want to invite all our audience to continue to to join us in the series of podcasts around the issues of global ethics, the Earth Charter and world views. Thank you so much, Mark.

Thank you, Mirian.

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