

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.

Hello everyone. Today I'm happy to bring to you the voice of Rolf Winters, who is the Producer and Director of the Down to Earth documentary, which is a film that shares a bit of a five-year journey he undertook with his family in the search for communities that live in harmony with their natural surroundings.

The film brings to us the voice and knowledge from indigenous people, from diverse communities in different parts of the world. Rolf, thank you for being here with us. Thank you for inviting me. Can you briefly share with us the background of Down to Earth story and why did this emerge and what was your intention with it? Yeah. Well, the interesting thing is that it was an unplanned project. It was not preconceived. I actually have to take you a little bit back when I think the real process of Down to Earth started when I became a father and when I should say my wife and I, we became parents.

Down to Earth is very much a collaboration between me and my wife and ultimately also with my children. We are not filmmakers. I'm a business leadership consultant. My wife is an artist and a writer. But when we started our family in the beginning of the millennium, it had so much more impact on us than we anticipated. And I'm not talking in practical terms, but the idea that you actually give life to other individuals who are actually going to most likely outlive you and have to live with what you leave them, that thought really started to rock our existence.

Combined with what we saw around us in the real world, we lived in the heart of London and after that in the heart of Amsterdam, we were big city people. We loved it until we started the family and we started to feel more and more uncomfortable when the kids start to grow up and we had to think about school and education. And especially for me, who had the privilege to work with the highest educated people in the countries where I worked, you know, the people who had made it to executives and CEOs.

I realized that they had all lost something that my children had plenty of. And I'm talking about the intuitive essence and the ability to sense things that are not tangible. And I had to deal with these people in boardrooms who are just squared into their own little box and seemed to have lost those abilities. I really started the question, but I wanted to put my kids in school at all. So these things, worldly questions, where as the world going, what do we leave for our children, do we want to put our kids in school?

These are the founding questions of the journey that we went on. And we realized that even though we were critical of society, that we were very much part of society and that we had become conditioned as we all have been in our Western lifestyle. And that felt also very uncomfortable. So we got the idea to actually break away from society and find a place in nature and just start from scratch. Have our kids be at home, learn in nature, not necessarily in a school. And these were sort of the ideas we were visioning about.

And it was at that time that I was suggested by a colleague in the field of leadership to meet his friends. I said, who are your friends? And he said, it's a clan of Native Americans in Upper Michigan. Why would I have to meet them? He said, I've heard you talk about leadership. I've seen you work. And he said, I think there will be a phenomenal click with these people. And I just took the chance. I hopped on a plane and I didn't know where I was going to go because I had only had a short brief contact with these people.

But that week that I spent there was life changing. And it was after that week that I came back and we soon decided that if there's still people in this world who live that way of life, that connected life and have so much wisdom, then why wouldn't we go out there and experience that and learn from that? And so we made a pretty big U-turn there. We sold our house, sold the business, and took our oldest out of school, who had to already join school. And we went to the woods of Upper Michigan, you could say, because there's not much there.

It's near the Canadian border. And we started literally a life from scratch. With the idea is that if I could attice with society, then we can find out where we stand and what life really is about. And we maybe get a much better perspective of what's going on in the world. And yeah, it felt like a privilege. We had a house to sell. We had a business to sell. And we felt we had a five-year window of opportunity because our children were still young. And we felt that it was not the two irresponsible step to take them out of the school system when they were still so young.

And so you started this plan, you started this journey without much plan. No plan. No plan other than to learn. And I can only speak for myself, but to me that was not easy because it always worked, thinking about the next step and the next thing. And all of a sudden, there was no next thing. There was just a piece of woodlands. Yeah, OK, we build a house. That was exciting. I like that process. But there was nothing in my life at that moment that was planned. And my whole social and professional network went down to zero in a matter of months.

I've noticed if you don't answer emails, your inbox gets reduced very quickly. And so, yeah, it became a life from living in connection with nature, life living day by day. Yeah, have responsibility for getting that house built and creating a school program for the kids for what we thought was important for them. But mostly they would just be out in nature for most of the day and explore life for themselves. And that was an amazing experience. I still think back of these years as one of the biggest blessings in my life that we had to experience that our friends that we connected with were just great teachers.

And so there was no idea of making a film because that was your question. And the idea of making a film only came after two and a half years when we met there, the teacher of our teachers, basically, a man who lived a solitary life in the woods. A man we had heard many stories about, but we had never seen him because, you know, you had to go and visit. You had to be invited to visit him, basically. So that invitation came and we met this man. And I think the meeting of the man was the beginning of this seed of interest that we actually had to document some of the things that we experienced.

And I dare to say that I've never met anybody in my life of greater wisdom, greater humility as that man. And he ultimately became the main character in our film, which you now can watch on YouTube. But that was really the start of the film, the realization that there are still people out there who have a very different connection to the world around them. And I'm also speaking especially about the invention of the world around us. And who have actually such important insights for the rest of the world.

And, you know, wisdom that should not get lost or should only be for the few people that are able to meet these people's lives in real life. So you came across this wisdom in people with so much ideas or messages that were so important that you thought it's important to bring it to a large number of people. And that's how the Down to Earth idea, or the idea of the Down to Earth film emerged. It felt like a calling. It just felt something that, you know, we happened to witness, but it would have been selfish to just keep that for ourselves.

And to be honest, I was not so excited about the idea of making a film because I don't like technology. The idea that we actually had to take the step to learn how to do that. I was not too keen. And the other thing that happens when we started to talk with this man whose name was Novatten, we started to talk with him about potentially filming him. At first, took a long time before he answered that question altogether. And when he finally did, he said, but it's not just about me. You know, if I listen to you and I listen into your calling, he said, you will need to find other people like me as well.

And that was something that was starting to come through also in dreams and visions. And I think the biggest thing maybe that we learned in those three years before that was really living with what really comes through you. And listening to that inner voice and listening to the signals in the sand. And there were so many crazy signals in the sand that all pointed in the same direction that we felt this just has to be done. And so after we filmed him for during the period of maybe a year, we actually left Michigan and we traveled a year around the world with our three children who were then six, seven and nine.

And we visited and lived with indigenous and tribal communities around the world in search for these other wisdom keepers, earth keepers, as we call them. And the interesting thing about this project is that people who see the film think, oh, that's nice, you know, they knew who they were going to visit. We had no idea who we were going to visit because the people we wanted to reach, you can't trace them down online. There's no such a thing. You know, these people all live under the radar of a modern society.

So it was a very old fashioned approach of going there, showing up, making connection with those people who are considered the gatekeepers for these communities, who shield them in a way as well. And they would become our most important people that we worked with because they were, they were a trusted companion and interpreters that we needed to actually get into the communities. And it was interesting that before we undertook this journey, our biggest question was, can we actually do this with three young children?

Can we go into the Amazon? Can we go into the jungles of India? Can we go into the Kalahari Desert with three young children? Or is that irresponsible? Well, we did a lot of

research on the health and safety part, but we were also wondering what it would work that we actually would film whilst we had a family with us. And so the interesting thing is that instead of the children being a burden or a difficulty, they proved to be the entry point. They proved to be the door openers. Yeah, people open the door more easily to kids, to children and feel safer.

Absolutely. Because we travelled as a family, we were received as a family and perceived as a family. And we said from the start that we had intention to film something if they would feel that that was appropriate. But in most cases, we were first just invited as a family and spent sometimes weeks before the camera came out of the bag. Yeah, what comes to my mind is a family communicates a sense of community. And it's a community communicating with another community. It's kind of coming together.

It's very much like that, Mirian. It was a coming together family. And I still consider some of the people that we met as dear family. And it made it actually hard to film. Because at this stage, you don't want to take a camera out. You just want to have that shared presence and that shared moment with them. Now you spent five years travelling. And I would like us to maybe if we could talk a little bit about Indigenous people, world views in terms of what were your key learnings from Indigenous peoples, world views and ways of being?

Yeah, I've been asked that question many times. And every time I'm being asked, I have to think again, feeling what actually has impacted me the most. And I think what has impacted me the most is still to do with the way that they consider life and the purpose and the meaning of life.

Which is very different than I think 99% of the people that I know in our Western world. You see, if you have an understanding that we are just only a part of a long cycle in our lifetime here. And that we have been here so many times before and we will come back so many times after. And that you really connected in that cycle of life. Then death becomes a whole different thing than what we have made of it. It's actually not that big of a thing if I may say so.

But also, if that is the case, that is directly linked to what almost all Indigenous people see as the purpose of being here in this lifetime, which is to learn, to experience and to learn and to grow.

Not just grow in terms of, you know, as a person physically and mentally, but spiritually.

So it's about the evolving of our spirit. And if that's the case, then learning and experiencing and experimenting becomes the main objective of being here rather than collecting things and building fake securities.

And if that's the case, and that's the way you can perceive life and that you're actually part of the interconnected web of interbeing with other beings, not just people, but animals, their brothers and sisters, the plants. I mean, I'm here in the beautiful rainforest in Costa Rica for a reason because I was missing that.

If that's the way you perceive who you are and where you are, then all the decisions you're making in your life are different.

So that's probably the shortest answer I can give you to that question. There's much more to say to it, you know, on a personal level as well. But I think that is, that's by far the most powerful experience we've had, how these people all live, all of them. How they live and how they see life, how they perceive themselves as part of this large community of life.

In terms of leadership, I mean, if you look at all you have learned during these five years traveling and learning from them. But also if you connect it with your previous life and now your current life after that. And if we look at leadership, because that's a significant part of your life and the field of your interest, what are the vacuums and flaws that we may have with regards to how we envision good leadership? And what can we learn from the indigenous people's approach to leadership?

Well, I can be very explicit in everything.

The more I look at it and the more I being back in this world reflecting on it and working with people again in the field of leadership, in the field of leadership, the more I realize that in indigenous communities, if I have experienced it, almost everything that has to do with leadership is the opposite of what we are doing.

And I'm not saying different, I'm saying on purpose, boldly, the opposite of what we are doing. So such as what would be the... No, well, I'll give you a couple of examples. One of the most important examples is the first thing that was thrown at me when I had that first visit. They noticed that I talked with a bit of frustration about my role as a leadership consultant. And the chief at some moment sat me down and said, well, what is exactly your frustration in your work? It seems like you're doing really nice work with really interesting and important people. I said, yes, that's true.

He said, but the problem I'm having is that what I see is that all these people living in such a straight jacket of even though they might consider powerful, they actually have very limited powers when it comes down to creating a sustainable business and that their planning horizon becomes only short and short. That almost like one or two years ahead is now long-term thinking because most of the, especially companies who are under stock exchange, they live from quarter to quarter the executives. And it's horrible how short-term focused our world has become. And he was sitting there and looking at me and he said, do you know that we as leaders, that everything that we decide, every decision we take has to be good at least for seven generations ahead? And I was just like...

And I thought first there was like a conceptual thought. But throughout these five years, after that moment, I have seen that this is actually the way that they live. They're living seven generations ahead. I mean, seven is a number, of course, an important number to them and seven generations back. But what I was trying to say with my previous observation is that they really feel interconnected with all the ancestors, but also all those next generations to come. And again, if you feel like a small part in that totality, leadership is completely different than what we have created. And that comes with all the other things.

So when a leader is recognized at a young age, that's not like something to be celebrating about because everybody knows that when you recognize as a potential leader, that that is not just a role, that's a way of life. And that's 24 seven for the rest of your life.

Yes, serving and bearing responsibility for the entire community. And I want to give you one more example. And that has to do with a picking of these leaders, which often is often I would say, but it's a task for the elders and usually the grandmothers. So the grandmothers have this task because they spend a lot of time with the children to observe the little ones. And when they see the leadership traits, the very young age, they discuss that with the elders. And then these young people are often already put on a separate track. So where we actually put all the kids in the same school, having the same curriculum, and we just pushed them on the academic skills mostly. The ones that come out on top with the high IQ, they go on to study.

Again, there's a who comes out on top, and they get hired by whoever come in full of high potentials. What is happening in this whole process of actually people reaching a leadership position in our world? Well, I can say with 25 years coaching experience in that field, is that we do one thing really, really good. And that's building a massive ego.

Because that's my that's my livelihood, actually, you know, starting to peel these egos off and to make them more human again, and you know, getting to the authentic being.

This is not something just for us in the Western world. You know, developing ego happens is a human trait. And these indigenous people are very aware that that is not a great trait for a leader. So we are a good leader doesn't mean that you need to nourish a big ego.

But it's what happens in many cases. Yeah. It's actually quite hard. So would that be a flaw? Would that be a flaw in the leadership? Yeah, I mean, we can't just take it out on these people because it's the way that we have created society. That's how, you know, a pyramid shaped society to get there. You need quite a bit of stamina and push and sometimes some elbows to actually reach there. But what happens in the indigenous community? Who do you think are being recognized as the potential leaders when these grandmothers study these children? I think someone who is a good listener.

Yeah, the good listeners, the ones that have a sensitivity, a high sensitivity.

And that's that's the same everywhere I've been. That's what they're looking for. People who have that sense of connection and empathy for others. People who have that feeling for what's important for the group rather than for themselves. So the qualities of listening come automatic. So they they they selecting the highly sensitive ones. And that's exactly the ones that in our society often don't even manage to get through the school system. So precisely because they are too sensitive. Yeah, because they have troubles at school. They're not being understood. They sometimes even drugged out in certain societies. So what we can learn from the indigenous people's approach to leadership is a good leader from that perspective is a sensitive person, mindful, a good listener and empathetic human being. Absolutely.

And that's that is not something you can just learn by doing a course. You know, it's like you can't just lose or build ego through a course that is just building up through life experiences. And it's interesting. Yeah, we have a word leadership development.

But very few people know what development actually stands for, where that word comes from.

Developing is like unwrapping. That's what the word means. So it's peeling off. It's taking off the layers, unfolding. And so if you think about how they teach their leaders, they send them when they have reached like adolescent age, they always send them all into nature on a vision quest. But they do something to these useful potential leaders to find out who they really are. They find out what their path in life is. So we put a lot of effort in academics and adding knowledge and more knowledge and more knowledge. What they are doing is the opposite. So instead of outside in learning and development, it's an inside out approach, where the most important question for the leader is, who am I? And when I say who am I, who am I? What is my spirit? What am I to do here?

And they say if you have found that, then you know, you actually, a long way there to becoming a leader. And the opposite is also very true. The people that I have been coaching, who I didn't get very far with, were people who hadn't really figured out who they were.

They had followed the path which they thought they had to follow. And that's very different energetic fields. And so when you talk about leadership, and that's why I felt so compelled to learn from the indigenous people, and first and since the Native Americans, to me it was like a homecoming. Because I was always looking for those people who have that ability to create an energy field where others can flourish. Oh, that sounds good. People who have the ability to create an energy field so that others can flourish. That to me is the shortest explanation of how I see leadership. That's very good. Okay, learning.

So in terms of the kind of, in terms of the, if we think about in terms of the leadership we need for the current times in our modern society, what do we have to cultivate or nourish the most in the young generation? Well, you shouldn't be surprised what I'm going to tell you because it goes on to where we just were. You know, it's really helping them to feel completely confident at peace and imbalance with who they truly are. And that they can stand up for that. And that they can, that that's their source of inspiration. That's their source of direction. And that's their source of leadership. And that means that what we're doing in most of our schools, universities, is just scratching the surface.

It's not really about what we should be, should be doing and should be educating when we want to create the leaders for the future. And that's why it was really nice to have a time at your wonderful UP's university and spend the day there with the students and realize that that's very much something that you give space for, for these individuals to work on that, on that search for understanding and meaning what they are to do in this world and who they really are. So that is where everything starts for leadership. And then there's a lot of other things that we can talk about about how we are not being taught how that leadership is something that is much more about the little things than just about

somebody has great visions and strategies and John and tells people what to do. That's not what it's about.

I actually often say you have to stop thinking that you are the smartest in the room because that's usually how you get to a leadership position in our society. You're showing up and being smart and being seen by others as that's something somebody who can tell us where we need to go. But more importantly in our world today is that no leader can be expected to know exactly where to go. I mean there's a few visionaries who maybe the exception to the rule but in our fastly and rapidly changing world we need leaders who can truly create the space. What I just said for all the flourish but also all the co-create. It's about co-creation. So the whole idea that we have created that the leader at the top of the pyramid is basically the one who has to make the decisions.

That's just less and less a reality that we can build upon. I say less and less because in times before you could get away with that for a long time because the world was a little bit more predictable. But A. the world is less predictable. B. the world needs rapid change on all levels.

And so to come back to your previous question we should make sure that our youth doesn't forget to be youthful and to ask the difficult questions. And that's what I also think is one of the most important leadership skills still to be able to ask the most important questions that need to be asked. I have taught leaders by just leading through questions. Just through asking questions. Yeah what you just said about a leader being the person who offers the space for others to co-create and engage is in a way also the way I see the role of a teacher or an educator in that learning space. Rather than coming and filling in a space too much it's rather to give the space for the learners to co-create. So in terms of what we can learn.

You realize that when I talked about Nahuatl that I said the teacher. So for them the teacher is a leader and the leader is a teacher. It can't be separated. That's a wonderful point. So in terms of learning and processes of sharing knowledge and learning and cultivating learning what can we learn from the way in which indigenous people share their knowledge and how do they perceive the process of teaching and learning? Well you won't be surprised if I say that storytelling is number one and why storytelling? I had to really get used to that. I mean I love storytelling but that almost every teaching that was given was done by telling stories. I had to get used to it and long stories sometimes. So we would be sitting around the fire sometimes sessions for like 10 hours listen to all these stories.

But the essence of storytelling is that teaching is not telling what you need to believe.

Teaching is not telling to know to to telling you what to know and what to understand. But in their idea teaching is to share experiences and share these stories from which the other individual has to figure out what to take in and what to learn. Because then it's integrated in your own being and it's your lesson. And so they don't have an idea that the reality is like can be written out and say this is how reality is. Reality has as many perceptions as there are people in the room.

And when you learn that's what you learn these young people already from a young age. That is not like the teacher asks you a question it's wrong or right. Or you get an A, a B, a C or a D or E. No, it's about what do you see and then we can talk about it. So it's really about creating and cultivating an individual first for learning and seeing things in a certain way and then be able to relate that to how other people see it. So it's much less dogmatic and much more flexible learning I would say than what we are being brought up with in the West.

What you just said is almost the result of my 10 years of research on values-based education. So it's all encapsulated there in terms of the use of stories and storytelling, the importance of connection, human connection, the importance of asking questions and giving the space to raise important questions are key elements that I'm just finding it interesting because for me we see it from the point of view of a nurse chatter pedagogical approach and how to bring in or how to cultivate values through the process of teaching and learning.

But I'm just finding is like we are coming from different rivers and currents and we are finding such an important commonality. I'd like to give you a little example. It just comes up in my mind the first time that it really landed with me why it's so much more important to teach like this was when Nahuatl told a story about a bat and because a lot of the stories are about animal worlds and it's great the way that you know you can actually pull children in because they love stories about animals and you can tell it to very young people but the underlying lessons are so important and so much more conveyed to the individual.

So the story about the bat is that the bat wanted to find out there was a gathering in the woods and all these animals were there, all the land animals were there and he was there and he said well you don't belong here because you know you have wings and we are land animals so you have to go away and find your own people and then he went to the birds and the birds said well you have to go away because you know anything like a bird and so the story goes on so the bat doesn't belong anywhere.

And the beautiful morale of the story is that of course he fits everywhere but that you know the bat shouldn't be feeling let down because of the judgment of others and I mean this is what's happening in our society now I mean people who just don't fit in one book so another and you know it's about people judging others but do that with young children at that age,

I mean they tell these stories to kids that are four years old and that's a very very different approach to raising children and educating children even when we did ceremonies where there's adults things being discussed the children are not being pushed aside because they consider children have an automatic filter system that they take in what they need to take in and so that's how my children grew up and I tell you when they joined the school after five years growing up like that in the school they were worried that they were way behind but in terms of maturity they had a hard time taking a step back in a way because when you are used to be around with the different generations that's how it is in these communities and that's how you learn on the way you learn by being like an integrated community not just

Children at their own age in one class that's not how it works very interesting yeah well with this we have come to an end to our very insightful conversation thank you Roff for sharing with us your insights from your learning from your journey five-year journey visiting indigenous peoples communities from around the world which is also combined with your experience with regards to leadership and training and education so very inspiring thank you very much for joining us today it was a pleasure it's nice working together with you and your beautiful organization so I look forward to tomorrow of that.

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