

The Future Is Calling Us to Greatness

with Michael Dowd + 56 Experts



Igniting a Generation of Young People with Barbara Jefferson

Big ideas from this session:

- Learn about the amazing work of Generation Waking Up
- What young people often see (and know) that their elders typically don't
- How the generations can work together most effectively in service to the future

Michael: Barbara, thank you so much for joining this conversation on the *Future is Calling us to Greatness*.

Barbara: Thank you for having me.

Michael: Barbara, could you please start by just sharing with our viewers or listeners, give us a sense of who you are, what you are particularly passionate about or interested? I'll ask some specifics about your work here in a few minutes but if you could just help people know who Barbara Jefferson is and how you got to be where you are.

Barbara: Yes. Thank you. That's never an easy question for me to answer because there is so many things that I would love to tell you about and really so many experiences that have shaped who I am.

I will say that one, I grew up in Seattle, Washington where I was a young person who was incredibly engaged in school and sports and drama, and clubs. I learned from my father that the way to live a happy life was to really be engaged but with that engagement came awareness of all the issues that were happening in my community, in my family, things like addiction, violence and racism.

As a queer person of color, I personally experienced a lot of the impacts of oppression in society and that greatly affected my engagement. I went through a phase I think like a lot of young people of trying to come to terms with the problems and I came to identify myself as a solutionary through a number of opportunities that I had to put my problem solving skills to work in my community.

I am really passionate about being present to the reality of the world that as young people we are inheriting but at the world that we are facing as humanity, and the world that we created for ourselves, and to really putting our gifts, our power into practice towards solutions.

Michael: Cool, that's great. Actually, we've got time, so if there is anything else that you want to share, please feel free.

Barbara: Definitely. Also, growing up, there wasn't a lot of education around these things, so it was a very isolating sort of experience. There was no framework or a theoretical support to explain what it was that I was experiencing, what it was that I was seeing and not only that but why it was really happening.

That was both a crisis and an opportunity. It was something that thrust myself and I think a lot of other people into being hungry for answers and really diving into the darker side of life, if you will but in that came this incredible collaboration, cooperation and community of learning that I became a part of and I think that is also a big thing that I am passionate about is spaces of like-minded and not so like-minded people coming together to really tackle and get a grasp on what it is that we are really facing.

I am excited about this series that you have put together for that reason.

Michael: Yeah, me too. Thanks. In some ways, in many ways, it was the work that you and Joshua and others were doing with young people and with the next generations that I find particularly inspiring, both found particularly inspiring and continue to find inspiring because it's my baby boom generation, we have our responsibility, we have things we need to do and to the degree that we act with the future in mind that we truly fall in love with future generations, not just our own kids and grandkids but actually the kids and grandkids of all species and then be at work together and learn from the younger generations.

Could you share a little bit about some of the work that you do with Generation Waking Up and the programs that you work with, and that sort of thing?

Barbara: Yeah. Generation Waking Up really lights me up because young people are already so aware. A lot of us can recall as a young person having all this awareness and questions and we saw that things were not okay and we knew it but our parents told us to just be quieter in school, we learned how to just pay attention and so we were taught to not really respond.

We already have everything it takes, we were born into this world with everything it takes to be human, to be alive and to bring forth a very sustainable and just society. Getting to

connect with other young people that still have that in them already and to work together to co-power one another towards these solutions is exciting.

The work with Generation Waking Up is all about raising awareness with young people around issues of sustainability, justice and human thriving. We do a number of programs in schools, everything from assemblies that are multimedia presentations to weekend and week-long trainings where young people get to not only learn a lot more but get equipped with the skills to start addressing those issues in their communities or campuses, or even in their families.

I was so lucky to join Generation Waking Up at a point in my life where I just did not know what to do. I was a young person. I still consider myself to be pretty young but I connected up GenUp in my mid to early 20s and it was so profound to me that all of these young people had no idea what to do but we were so committed, we had that deep purpose about us.

That's what GenUp I think really ignites and reconnects young people to that sense of purpose and helps to begin to step towards clarity, commitment and projects that they can actually implement, and this year, let me say this because this is important, this year alone, it's only beginning of June now, we've already reached about 3,000 young people.

Michael: That's great. Is there a particular part of the world, part of the country that you are invited to more often or are they all over?

Barbara: For the most part, it's here in the US, around the country. The Midwest has been drawing us in closely lately and the Bay Area where we are based, the West Coast is definitely where a large part of our work happens but we've been in places like Dubai, New Zealand, Egypt. We do get invited to travel a bit further from time to time, as well.

Michael: That's great. I don't know myself, Joshua and I haven't talked about it and I haven't talked with you about it yet. I would love to hear a little bit more in terms of what is the heart and the soul of the message that you communicate to young people and how you train them?

Barbara: Our mission is really igniting young people to bring forth a thriving, just and sustainable world and part of that is the awareness piece. The other part of that is I think our core message and that is there is a unique role that you have to play and the future is calling you to that.

Your future is calling you to that but the future of humanity is calling you to be yourself fully and connect that to the solutions that are needed.

Michael: That's awesome. I am just taking notes because what it reminds is a way that Connie and I language this a lot is that there is something that's available to us as human beings when we get in touch with our own legacy consciousness, where we get in touch with and really meditate on and give some energy to how can our unique gifts and limitations be a blessing to the world, be a contribution to the future such that long after we've died that work still ripples out in some way.

A lot of young people in my experience and a lot of old people too, but especially young people don't necessarily have legacy consciousness because they are not thinking about their death. They are not thinking about their mortality, they are not thinking about their legacy either, just living life fully, as you do in your teens and 20s often and dealing with the challenges of everyday life.

It sounds like the work that you all are doing is really helping young people to get in touch with their own sense of legacy consciousness and their own sense of where their full self-expression can further that in healthy ways.

Barbara: That is one of the big questions that we pose in our work is what will our legacy be and as I dig into that question, I realize that it also pulls out the question of where is our power and for some, the question of what will our legacy be is difficult or even impossible to wrap our heads around because we don't necessarily have a sense of our own power or maybe in our circumstances in life we actually don't have very much power that we are granted by society.

That's also another area that we need to dig into more is the sense of what is our power, where are the gifts that we have, where are the opportunities that are available to us and how can we leverage those, whatever they may be? How can we see that as our opportunity for leadership?

Michael: That's awesome. Do you all work with other organizations? Do you connect or sometimes synergize with other organizations with a similar sense of mission or purpose?

Barbara: Definitely. Actually, right now we are gearing up for a three-day training here in Oakland. We are partnering with United Roots Oakland, which is a youth serving multimedia organization. They support youth in creating videos, recording music, just putting their creativity to use in that way, as well as Youth Seed, which is an organization that supports young people in social entrepreneurship.

They take low income youth or youth from usually underserved communities and give them business training and help them put their projects into action, so we will be partnering with both of them for this upcoming training.

In general, we like to collaborate and partner whenever there is opportunity. The richness that is available to us in doing that is one that I think holds the most power for transformation and we are all in this together. We are all playing a different part, so as often as we can really see that and move into that space, we do.

Michael: Awesome. A thought just occurred to me. Where do you find your own sources of inspiration? What is that nourishes and feeds your soul, your spirit, your vitality so that you can do this work in the world and do it from a place of – did you say possibilitarian? I forget what the name was.

Barbara: Solutionary.

Michael: Solutionary. Yes, I like that even better. Hold on, I am going to write that down, solutionary. Yes, what feeds and nourishes you in your own walk and in your own work?

Barbara: That's a good question and one that I am asking myself more. I think there is a lot of things that come into that. There is a deep sense within myself, a place that I am able to connect with that is my own consciousness, is my own moral compass, is my own sense of right and wrong, and I think my connection to that place is first and foremost where I draw my strength and resilience.

From there looking outward at the folks whose legacies I am just in awe and honor of. My family in particular, my great-grandmother. Her name is Ruth Washington. Native American, beautiful woman who just brought up a family in so much love despite the history and the legacy of destruction of her culture.

I think that being able to see the small things in great people in small ways I think those everyday moments are some of the things that really feel me, and then the rebels, like I just can't get enough of the people who speak their mind whether it makes us feel good or not.

The folks who are willing to push the boundaries and the envelop in the name of love, that gets my goose bumps going for sure, and music.

Michael: Really? What kind of music?

Barbara: Everything from wild Southern trap music, just heavy based, stuff that makes my body just like get wild. World music too, anything with a lot of percussion and base. I used to play the trumpet, so I love brass. I am starting to get a little bit more into jazz but music has a way of letting me let go of all the worry and just reconnect to the beauty.

Michael: Awesome. I know you've done some training with people that are near and dear to my heart. My two main mentors in my life, there are several others too but the two main ones are Joanna Macy and Thomas Barry who just died a few years ago.

 Say a little bit, if you would, about some of the training that you've done or some of the training that you do, the things that you are involved in, in addition to the GenUp?

Barbara: I love me Joanna Macy, I definitely do. I am actually today going to be heading out to lead a Work That Reconnects session for the 350 Fossil-Free Fellowship training and I've been moved, my personal life has been transformed by the Work That Reconnects and the body of work that Joanna has been stewarding, and I believe in it so deeply, the power of reconnecting us to our human responses.

 Like I said before, as children we were so aware of them. We had zero filters and the Work That Reconnects for me brings me back to that place where emotions are welcomed, where the truth-telling is honored and where we can also connect with that legacy consciousness that you were speaking to.

 I've trained with Joanna Macy as a part of the People of Color cohort. She has been dedicating a lot of her work to new groups of people of color to facilitate it, so I have been trained with that and have been leading sessions for youth but also leading sessions for people of color in the community as well.

Michael: It's great. I first began training with Joanna in the late 1980s and did I think a ten-day training and then several weekends, and so it was a daddy's pure joy two or three years ago, I think two years ago, when my daughter Miriam, who I know you know, when she spent a week in training with Joanna. To have my own daughter who shares just so many of my deepest values, also be able to be blessed by and train by Joanna was just one of the highlights of my life actually.

Barbara: I have a similar feeling, the opposite though. I brought my mom and two of my aunts to A Work That Reconnects workshop and that for me was that same feeling of my family, the people that I love the most are being touched by the work that I know the power of this.

 We were able to share some of the deepest moments we've ever shared.

Michael: I have no doubt.

Barbara: Yes. I think that's another driving force for me is my family. Every day, I ask myself, is my work actually making an impact on my family?

Michael: What a great question.

Barbara: If not, how much of what I am investing in everyone else should I be investing in my family?

Michael: That's a beautiful thought. I feel just a twinge, a sting of that I have not attended to that as deeply or as carefully as I could, so thank you, this is a conversation I think is making a difference, especially because in another six days I am going to be seeing my whole family because I am going to be performing the wedding of my niece and so the whole family is getting together.

That's awesome and it's really great that you were able to share and you do bring this work that you do in the world with your family as well. I noticed that it says you are accountable. I am looking on the web page and it says you are accountable for the Wake Up program. What are the various programs that GenUp has and what is that one specifically about?

Barbara: Right now, I'll share more about the Wake Up. Wake Up is our flagship program. We also have a new program that we have been rolling out that's called Wise Are Together. That's an event that happens in community that's an intergenerational conversation.

We also do daylong leadership trainings in schools. We bring young people together to help them kick off new clubs or projects around sustainability and social justice. We do smaller classroom presentations or presentations at conferences, and then as I spoke to before, our longer trainings.

A new program that everyone should check out is our Thrive fellowship. This is our first year kicking off a one-year program for young people who want to establish a project in their community and we set them up with a year of mentorship, coaches, webinars and the tools that they need to actually make it happen and implement it. We will be kicking that off in August.

The Wake Up is where we capture it all. It's where we tell the story of our generation, where we question what our legacy will be and where we start to look at the root causes and the opportunities ahead of us.

It is about a three-hour interactive program, set up with videos, activities, dialog, reflection time and people go through four questions. Who are we as a generation and as individuals? Where are we, like what is the state of the world right now? If we were all to just take a walk around the planet, what would we really see? What has to change and what is possible for the future, and then what do we do? What is that one small sweet step that we can towards a thriving, just and sustainable world?

That's a lot to do in a short period of time but with young people, it's dynamic, it's quick and we arrive at a place of recognizing that we do have some power and that we do have that unique contribution, and that's what the Wake Up is about.

Michael: That is fabulous. How do you all fund yourself? If there is somebody watching and listening saying, "Damn, this is exciting. I want to help make sure you guys have the money that you need." How are you supported?

Barbara: That person should go straight to the website and click on Donate, and a lot of our funding actually does come through that way. We have a monthly donor program called our Game Changers program, where people can make small donations, anywhere from \$5 to \$100/month or more.

We do house parties where we bring people together to learn about what we are up to that year but through a lot of individual donors, as well as our partnering organization, the Pachamama Alliance. A lot of our work has been adapted from the work that they have created over the last couple of decades, so they have been a great sponsor for us in the past.

We are really looking ahead at how to grow, how to grow ourselves, how to grow our reach and how to grow that body of donors. So we are always open to suggestions for how to create a broader reach. We have also started writing grants, as well, so that's been able to fund more of our fellowship training and our Wake Up program as well.

We get creative too.

Michael: How so?

Barbara: More and more crowd funding is taking off, so we will utilize that from time to time. We are just kicking one off to raise money for scholarship for a training, food donations from grocery stores or from farmers markets, things like that where are just a little bit more resourceful.

Michael: Interesting. One of the things, going back to our mutual appreciation for the Work That Reconnects, Joanna Macy and that sort of thing, Connie and I, as you probably know, travel all over North America, speaking in churches and colleges.

This year, we are supporting the great march for climate action from Los Angeles to DC and we sell, the main way that we support ourselves is we sell books and DVDs in the back of the room after our presentations. This year, we are selling, in addition to our own DVDs and my book, *Thank God for Evolution*, we are also selling what we consider just to be the cream of the crop, just the best of the best in terms of climate change and peak oil and how to hold this

stuff in a way that keeps people inspired and Joanna's book, *Active Hope*, she is actually the co-author of. I am blanking in this name, Chris Johnson, I think.

Their book, *Active Hope* is our best-selling book. More people buy that than any other thing that we sell, so it keeps us in gas and food money. What it does is it really gives people a sense of how to honor our despair, our fear, our anger, how to feel our connection with all of life and to the future generations, and then how to be inspired to be in action in the face of that just doing one little thing.

That's why I really appreciated when you were talking about your training is that you bring it down to what's the one sweet step or something like that you can do because I think that's so vital for maintaining a healthy hopeful, not pie in the sky hopeful but grounded active hope in the face of some pretty scary stuff that we are all looking at now.

Barbara: I actually came into my own type of work that reconnects when I was in college. I was actually on my way to school for engineering and at the last minute, I had this crisis or realization that I wasn't in touch with myself and that by going to study engineering I was going to get nowhere, I wasn't going to get any closer to that.

So I decided to go to acting school and in acting school, I was able to express and be in touch with all of those things that the Work That Reconnects allows you to be in touch with. At the time, I was at the end of my teenage years. I was going through the depression that a lot of us do as we are leaving home and figuring ourselves out.

I had a lot of pent up anger, frustration, sadness, confusion, apathy, you name it and I was able to give voice to those. I was able to let them flow freely in this acting studio and I came back to life, and so through the Work That Reconnects, we are able to really do that in ways that are safe and also in ways that really honor those things.

They are what make us human and for a lot of us, working really hard in the ways that we do, we are bombarded by horrific facts and images and fear of our future, and a lot of my friends are saying, "Maybe I should just use my privilege, move to another country and just get away from it all," but we need everybody.

We need everyone, so we need a way to be able to deal with those things because it's so overwhelming and in a lot of cases it's why a lot of people get burned out, overwhelmed and go back to a safe and easy way of living.

I don't know if there is really a safe and easy way of living these days but we need things like the Work That Reconnects, we need them.

Michael: Amen. If you were to give some advice or some heart coaching to say someone my age, I am 55, or somebody in their late 40s, 50s or early 60s that might be feeling just the weight of this awesome sense that we are at this terrifying time in human history, especially given climate change but some of the other big problems as well, what would you say to somebody not a young person, but somebody sort of a middle age that would be encouraging, supporting or in some way helpful?

Barbara: I am going to have to steal the words of Van Jones in this case.

Michael: Please, do.

Barbara: Someone asked him a similar question at a talk that I went to and he said, “You already know. The answer is inside of you. There is that voice that’s been speaking to you and maybe you haven’t been listening as closely to but it’s there and it knows exactly what we need to be doing. There is something that has been hooking and tugging at you.”

If you haven’t heard it for a while, it is time to spend some quiet time and listen because no one can tell you. I can’t tell you. For sure, I can give you some suggestions that I think will work for me but we are all in different circumstances and so it’s really about that voice within you on one hand.

On the other hand, the perspective of others who are not like you are so needed and as we are doing this work, it’s really good for us. It is strengthening for us to connect with others who are doing similar work and for us to be sharpening each other, but often that kind of gets us into these spaces of mono-culture, if you will, and you have to take the time to go and see what’s happening in the African-American community, what are those voices saying? What’s happening in the young folks, what are they saying? What’s happening with even the elders and the homes that we’ve tucked away? What voice is there and what perspectives are there? What’s happening on the reservation right now, what are they saying about the future right now?

I think that in addition to that voice that’s within us, we have to also be coming together to hear the voices that are all around us, because we all have a part to play and we all have a piece of wisdom that’s really necessary.

Michael: That’s great. That’s a fabulous response. You just articulated what I would – and I don’t mean this in any patronizing way but wisdom beyond your years, I am just really delighted with how you just responded. Thank you.

Barbara: You are welcome.

Michael: Anything that you would like to share around the climate change specifically and in general to anybody who would be watching or listening in on this conversation, what wisdom or just what heart advice would you share, in addition to what you've already been sharing?

Barbara: This is kind of along the same lines and I've been trying to get clear on this. I have a sense, I suspect that at the core, at the heart of what climate change is aiming to fight against are the same targets of a lot of other movements. If we actually get down to the root of it, we are talking about things like capitalism, colonialism. We are talking about things like greed and oppression that have been played out in certain ways with the environment as we see that people have so much power to be able to destroy things, but those places that they have destroyed, the deforestation, that's also a social justice issue.

That's also a food justice issue and I think that at this point, we have an incredible opportunity to reconnect to those deep values that we are all trying to steward and to come together, because our fights right now are separate and we are competing, in a sense.

Right now, it's like the climate change is the biggest most important thing happening to all of humanity but you go to a different community and they are saying a different thing, but we are all fighting against very similar things.

I am terrified by climate change and I am also aware that there is not going to be one great tornado that sweeps the whole planet and wipes us all out. Who is going to be impacted? Who is going to have the power to move to the top of the hill when the waters rise?

Those things come back to those social justice issues and so I think I am really aiming for the intersection. I think that the greatest work that can be done for all of us is at the intersection of not only saving the life, the biodiversity, the beauty of this planet but to see humans as an intrinsic part of that.

Michael: Beautiful. I love it. Anything else that you haven't shared that you are particularly passionate about or would love to share in this conversation? Actually, before you even say that, let me go there but then there is a question that Connie always likes me to ask, and so I will do that afterwards, but anything that you are particularly committed to or passionate about or anything else that you would like to share in addition to what you've already shared in this conversation?

Barbara: Yeah. Out of what I was just saying, I realized that cultural competency and diversity, and the ability to be a multicultural committed movement is not just an intention that you can set. It is work, it is a process. It requires a lot of learning and things like that.

I've had this new inspiration to dive deeply into that and to be a solution in that way, so I am passionate about that, about diversity and inclusion. I am really passionate about

the queer community and queer identity. I just think that there is so many evolutionary things are happening there that are under the radar, by and large.

Michael: Say a little bit more about that because I don't know what you mean.

Barbara: When it comes to the worldviews of the dominant culture that I think has brought us to where we are now in terms of climate change and in terms of vast inequalities, a lot of the worldviews are situated around dichotomies and dualities, and zero-sum game, and the queer community has been addressing those things through sexuality, not necessarily in terms of economics but through sexuality and through gender identity.

You have groups like Wicked Transcendent.

Michael: Wicked Transcendent.

Barbara: Wicked Transcendent, which is this group of people who are recognizing that the duality of man and woman, right and wrong, winner-loser, that is not serving us and they realize that as a human being there is so much more than that, and they have stepped into that with their full identity as their gender or as their sexuality.

I identify strongly with that group and I think that there is so much we can all be learning from all of our ability to do that.

Michael: Interesting. It is funny because this reminds me that when I was on your Generation Waking Up staff, reading a little bio there, you used a gender neutral pronoun that I had never seen. I had to actually go online, search it and find out what it means because it was my first encounter with it. Cool.

Barbara: Yes. I prefer to use the gender-neutral pronoun for that reason. I took a class and there was this invitation and request that everyone during the whole class use gender-neutral pronouns so that we could start to challenge how unnecessary it was for us to be identifying someone as a man or a woman all the time.

We don't identify their sexuality whenever we mention them but for some reason, we feel the need to identify their gender and that just shattered all of these old worldviews for me, and in my own identification as a gender-neutral person, those pronouns just fit me so well.

I have been questioning like am I a man, am I a woman? I have so many masculine traits but I have so many feminine traits, what am I? So I like to walk on the wild side and not have to answer that question.

Michael: Interesting, yes. It is again one of those places where we keep finding in culture, at least in 20th and 21st century, stretching beyond what has been thought or assumed or given to be the norm and this is where I find myself learning from your generation because it is new territory for me.

Here is the question that Connie always wants me to ask folks, which is if you were able to have a dinner conversation or a glass of wine or whatever, but some kind of where you are sharing a meal or sharing a drink and having a good conversation with any three people in human history, who would those be and why?

It could be even somebody who is alive today but who would be the three people that you would – and not necessarily that all of them would be together at the same time. It could be that, like a dinner party and the three people you would love to hear them and interact with each other or it could be just one on one.

Barbara: Wow. So, the first person that came to mind would be my ancestor, whose name I do not know, or the number of ancestors I guess, but one of my ancestors who traveled by boat to the US, shackled as a slave. I would want to sit down and know how they did it, how they chose life in that time.

Michael: Beautiful.

Barbara: Second, I would – he is alive but I've really been wanting to go on a hike with Van Jones and I would just love for him to also be at the table, as well. Third, I don't even know. I would want everyone at the table. I am going to say as my last person...

Michael: We could imagine that it happens ten times and you are just telling me about the third but there is others too.

Barbara: Yes. I would also want my great-grandmother who I mentioned at the beginning. Her wisdom and spirit. Definitely, and just that many, the females of my Blackfoot and Cherokee lineage, I would want one of the female medicine women to be at the table as well.

Michael: Beautiful. Barbara, thank you so much. This has been such a rich conversation and I so deeply honor you and the work that you are doing and if people want to learn more, is there any place other than the Generation Waking Up website that you would refer them to?

Barbara: That's the best place to learn about Generation Waking Up. You can also learn about the Work That Reconnects at theworkthatreconnects.org. To just learn more about me, you can email me and we can set up a time to talk more but yes, my email is Barbara@generationwakingup.org.

Michael: Great. When I see my daughter, I will tell you said hi and thanks again for your work.

Barbara: Please do yes, and have a great time at the family wedding.

Michael: I will. Thanks.

Barbara: Thank you.

Michael: Bye-bye.

Barbara: Bye.