

# The Future Is Calling Us to Greatness

with Michael Dowd + 56 Experts



## Resisting Violence to Women, the Planet, the Future

with Lierre Keith

Big ideas from this session:

- How passion for life and for the future can inspire Deep Green Resistance
- The Vegetarian Myth: Food, Justice, and Sustainability
- How to let your deepest loves call you to action

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Michael: Well, Lierre, thank you so much for being part of this conversation series, *The Future is Calling Us to Greatness*. I've been looking forward to this conversation for quite some time.

Lierre: Well, thank you for having me on.

Michael: I'm only recently familiar with your book on *The Vegetarian Myth*. I first encountered you through Deep Green Resistance. I'd love for you just at the beginning, in case folks who are watching or listening to this series are not familiar with you and your work—and this is not the place to be bashful—help us get who you are.

What are you most committed to? What are you most passionate about? What are you best known for? What are you most proud of? That sort of thing. Feel free to take five minutes or longer. Help us really understand who you are.

Lierre: I'm someone who has always been very impassioned about social justice and injustice, even from a very young age. I became a feminist when I was very young. I remember being seven years old and walking around the playground and asking all the other girls, "Are you into women's lib? Do you believe in women's lib?"

That was what we called it back then. My mother is a feminist. She went to Consciousness Raising in 1972 and explained the world to us. It was completely obvious to me what she was talking about, even at such a young age. I remember her explaining to my sister and I what was wrong with beauty pageants, which had a great punch line.

She got herself completely worked up, and at the end of it she said, “No one asks men to parade around on stage showing off their penises.” We were like, “Oh, my God.” It made absolute sense.

Michael: Yes, exactly.

Lierre: She explained to us why we couldn’t have war toys. My brother wanted a machine gun, and she told him no. The Vietnam war was raging, and she was very against the war. She explained to us what war was and why this was not a game. I understood that. This wasn’t something that I struggled with in my soul.

I could see that war was a horrible thing and that, no, it was not a game. I wanted it to end. My parents went to anti-war demonstrations and were engaged in that way. I feel like I absorbed a lot of really great stuff just from being born into the family that I was. I really appreciate that from my parents.

My mother also read us a lot of really great books out loud. It’s so important to read to children.

Michael: Oh, I know it.

Lierre: I know this sounds like a total offshoot, but it’s not. At this point in the culture, everyone is so addicted to their screens. These children will never develop an inner life. It’s nothing but distraction constantly, exterior. They will never be able to reach deep inside and have those experiences of the poetry and music and that wellspring of creativity and deep philosophical thought and connection to themselves and ultimately the cosmos. All of that is being destroyed.

Michael: Preach it, sister. You’re speaking my heart.

Lierre: Yes. I got so much of that from being read to. You get a mythic structure. My mother read us some fabulous books. We got *Narnia* and *The Lord of the Rings*. It was all about are you going to be the person who steps up to the plate and sacrifices, if sacrifice must happen? But are you going to do what’s right even if it looks like there’s no hope?

You still have to fight, because fighting is the right thing if there is injustice happening. I learned all of that when I was a kid. I feel like I just took it and ran with it. That’s sort of who I am and where I came from. As part of that journey, when I was 16, I became a . . .

Michael: Hang on just a second.

Lierre: Go ahead.

Michael: Before you go any further, I just want to honor your parents, because that's kick ass.

Lierre: They're very good people. There's more I could say. My dad is a refugee. He came from eastern Europe. His family, they had to flee when the Soviet Union took over—it was invaded by—they were from Latvia, from the Baltic nations. He had a very, very hard—I don't even know what words to use—gruesome, grim, just wretched childhood living in refugee camps and just watching people get killed, losing his whole family, all of this kind of stuff.

Still through that, there are still good people in the world. I don't know how people survive those experiences. I feel like such a privileged person. I've always had food. I've never watched my family get killed. I've never had to identify bodies in the street. There are just some experiences that they're so completely different than any of us have ever had.

I don't even know what the word healing means when that has been your childhood. But people do it, so there's something still about the human spirit that I think comes through. Anyway, all of that was also part of his resistance to the war and his resistance to sort of the power structures that made these things possible.

My parents are elderly now, but they still are the people they have always been. They didn't lose track of what was important in all of that.

Michael: I'm curious, did he take on the name Keith, or did you take that on?

Lierre: No, that's not my original last name. I changed my name when I was 18.

Michael: Oh, I see.

Lierre: For various reasons we don't need to get into.

Michael: Yes. No, that's fine.

Lierre: Yes. Anyway, so all of this leads me to when I was 16 I still had a very voracious curiosity about the world, about why things were such a mess. I had been set on that path early. I read a lot of really great feminist stuff at that point that I found. I also became a vegan. I met another teenage girl whose family, they were vegans.

It was the only information I had. It made sense. She starts to explain factory farming. I can see this is horrible. I start to absorb all that, and so I decided that this was the thing to do. I grew up in an urban environment, and I really had no idea that was not necessarily the best thing to do. It was the only option I saw at that point.

So I did it for 20 years. Long story short was I destroyed my health on the vegan diet, as many people have. There's this just tremendous moral collapse that you endure when the thing that you thought was the best thing possible stops working. You can't figure out why. Etiologically, this was supposed to be unassailable.

Yet I ended up with a degenerative disease, an autoimmune disease, on and on with the health problems, half of which cleared up the moment I started eating a more appropriate human diet. So clearly it didn't work, but why? Why didn't it work? It was supposed to work. So now I'm set on this journey of trying to explain to myself and to others why this was not the best thing to do.

Ultimately, I wrote my book, *The Vegetarian Myth*. What this meant was absorbing a whole bunch of other information, information that I had access to that whole time. But the problem with—when you're very impassioned, these things can become fundamentalist. You can end up with a very rigidified sort of etiology, even though you're being inspired by the best possible values.

I read once a Buddhist saying that even a correct belief, if held onto strongly enough, will become an incorrect belief. That to me summed up my whole life as a vegan. All this alternate information was out there, and I had engaged with it to some extent. But I couldn't really absorb it all because it was in conflict with my vegan belief system.

What I'm getting at here is the fact that agriculture is the most destructive thing that people have done to the planet. It's the primary wound, and that's the problem. The moment that people take up agriculture, they're on draw down, because it's an inherently destructive activity that blows through the entire biological community.

That's what it is. You take a piece of land. You clear every living thing off it, and I mean down to the bacteria, and then you plant it to human use. So it's biotic cleansing. We talk about ethnic cleansing, but agriculture is biotic cleansing. So that's the end of the whole world, and that's what happened. The planet has been skinned alive.

We've had 10,000 years, and we've trashed the planet. As a vegan I couldn't face that because that was supposed to be the good, nonviolent, peaceful food. That was loving the animals. It's not. It has destroyed 98% of the old growth forest and 99% of the prairies. There is basically no top soil left. That's what agriculture has done.

This was a terrible conflict with this idea I had that eating greens and beans was going to save the world. None of that turned out to be true. I had to reinvestigate everything I thought I knew and that is a very difficult process, emotionally, spiritually. You're sort of left in the rubble.

You're like, "Well, now who am I? If this didn't work, what does it mean about all these things I believe?"

It was a terrible couple of years. I ended up then accumulating more information. You read everything you can. You talk to everybody you can. You look at your own life. I had tried to garden as a vegan. It was a complete disaster, just even on the basic level of what you do with the slugs.

There's this whole story in my book about trying to rescue the slugs, which everybody remembers that story, because it's so funny. But this is what you're up against when you think that your life is possible without death, and it's not. That was the thing I had to face, and it was so hard. It was so hard.

So, anyway, I ended up writing this book, because I got bored having the same conversation, but on a bigger level I also wanted idealistic young people. I was speaking to my own self at 16 to say, "These values are exactly right." Anything that questions human hubris, anything that is about compassion or sustainability or trying to reintegrate human beings into that web of life, you're on the right track.

But this is just a way station, that you need more information to make a better decision and you need to understand that agriculture is this inherently destructive process. The human race is going to have to face up to this, because we're up against the wall right now. This is not a living pattern that has a future.

From the very beginning, the end was written into it. We were going to hit the wall eventually, and we have now hit that wall. We're eating fossil fuel. There's no soil left. I wanted all the young, idealistic, impassioned, radically leaning young people to have better information. That's really what I wanted.

The people who care the most, I want them to understand the scale of the problem. That's ultimately why I wrote that book. I went on to write *Deep Green Resistance* and other things. But that to me is the core of this, is trying to get people to understand the scale of the problem, because most people don't, not in this country anyway.

There are too many reasons for us not to understand it, because we're the ones who are benefiting from it. We live behind a military barricade so that we don't have to see the effects of this way of life. I want people to understand that. I want them to understand the damage, especially people who claim to want that knowledge.

I think they do. I think they really do understand that we're in a bad spot right now. We're at the cliff. We've got one generation left to fix this, so I want that to be introduced into the

conversation that people of conscience are having. What is the actual damage? Where did it start? What is it made of? What are these activities that are literally the destruction of the planet?

That really is agriculture. That's the beginning of it. Anyway, so that's I guess in a nutshell kind of what I'm doing.

Michael: Yes. No, I've got it. It's interesting, because my closest male friend, he's been my dearest male friend for the last 25 years—actually, close to 30 years now—he was a vegan for a number of years, a vegetarian for a number of years after that. Now he eats a primal diet, and he has been healthier and more fit and it's just amazing.

But I have not been exposed to sort of the thinking that you're now offering. When somebody would say—well, if they get what you're saying, and they say, "What's next?" where do you see a healthy future for humanity in terms of how do we relate to food?

Lierre: Okay. The number one thing we have to do is . . .

Michael: Also, I'm sorry, could you adjust your screen just a little bit? I'm looking sort of at the ceiling. There you go. That's better. That's much better. Okay.

Lierre: The main thing that we are going to have to do and quickly is repair what has been destroyed. Especially what we have to repair are the grasslands, the prairies. These have been destroyed by agriculture.

Michael: So you're talking about permaculture? How do we build the soil?

Lierre: Yes, well, if we let the grasses come home they will do it for us. That's their job. That is literally what they do to survive, is build top soil. Grasses are really good at that, way better than trees. I don't have anything against trees. I love trees. I live surrounded by redwoods. But the prairie grasses are the ones that are going to sequester that carbon.

Global warming actually started when people took up agriculture. The reason is because you clear all the grasses off the prairie, you've got bare soil, and now you're introducing lots of oxygen into that soil every time you plow, and all the microorganisms that keep soil alive, that are the living soil, will then burn for the organic matter.

What that means is they're releasing carbon, essentially. That's ultimately at the end of the day what's happening. If you look at graphs of carbon—we all know the little hockey stick. At the beginning of the industrial age, wow, look at all that carbon. If you back that up 10,000 years, the same amount of carbon has been released from the beginning of agriculture to the beginning of industrialization as has been released since industrialization to now.

Now, industrialization was absolutely an accelerant on this process, but it was not the beginning of this process. Okay, agriculture is the original extraction. Now we're extracting fossil fuel, but originally we were extracting fossil soil. All of that got burned up and put into the atmosphere. The only way we're going to get it back down is to let the grasses come back and do that.

The good news is that this could actually be done. If we had even 15 years, we could restore maybe 80% of the world's trashed out grasslands. That 15 years of grasses, those grasses could in fact sequester most of the carbon that has been released since the beginning of the industrial age. That's an extraordinary thing, but that's what grass does. It builds soil.

Michael: It's interesting. We're just now, Connie and I—my wife, Connie Barlow, is a science writer. We've been traveling North America for the last 12 years, speaking in churches and colleges and universities. Basically where science, inspiration, and sustainability intersect is our passion. We're listening to a book on audio right now called *The Soil Will Save Us*.

It's saying some of the same things that you're saying. It's like, "Wow, I just hadn't thought about it." I've been saying for quite some time to religious people, I'm saying that the second coming of Christ, mythically speaking, isn't some supernatural super hero coming down on the clouds. It's treating the soil as sacred.

When we treat the soil as sacred, we will be saviors of the future. Christ will have returned in all His glory, to use mythic language. But do you see—I mean, I see the potential, the likelihood, actually, of there being less than two billion people 100 years from now, just from drought and famine. Do you see that kind of a diet?

When you look out 100 or 200 years, assuming we survive climate change, which is not a given, what do you see a healthy relationship to food and the soil being? Is it hunter-gatherers? Or what do you see as the future?

Lierre: Human beings, or genus Homo, lived on this planet for two and a half million years. For the vast majority of that time, we were not monsters and destroyers. We were participants, like every other creature. What that means is there is intact biomes, intact biological communities. We take our nourishment from inside those communities and in the taking of that nourishment, we actually make life stronger.

We make the web of life more resilient and more lush and denser with life. This is what every other species does. Just to walk people through this, let's take the salmon as an example. I live here in northern California. The salmon should be here. There should be 10 million salmon. There are 10,000. That's the level of reduction. They're on the brink.

But what happens is the salmon, it's a great nutrient pump. They come up from the ocean. They bring all these nutrients with them in their bodies, literally. That's what their bodies are, are vitamin pills for the forest essentially. They come up the streams, up the rivers, and what happens? The apex predators eat them.

You have bears. You have eagles. You have foxes. All these creatures feed on the salmon. What they do is they disperse those resources. They disperse those nutrients into the forest. In the process of being eaten—oh, those evil bears. They're so mean. They're eating the fish. They're killing the fish.

Well, in the process of eating, they distribute those resources into the forest. Now the forest is fed. Because the forest is fed, it means that the rivers are healthy. Those deep roots of the plants, of the trees, they are the ones that keep the soil from washing into those rivers and destroying the rivers.

It's the first thing that happens in agriculture, is the rivers are destroyed, because there's nothing holding the soil in place. The trees also keep the rivers shaded so that the temperature doesn't get too hot. The moment you remove that cover, most of the fish are gone because the water is simply too hot for them.

Because the salmon give their lives to the apex predators who distribute the resources who make the trees healthy, now the river is healthy. Now the salmon have a home called the river. In the process of being eaten, the salmon in fact make their home better for everybody, including themselves. This is the cycle of life.

If you take just the bears and say oh, they're so mean for eating the salmon, you're not seeing the bigger picture, which is that in being eaten, they are making the world better for themselves and everyone else. This is true for every single living creature. It's not evil apex predators against the poor prey. It's all of us. It's all of us.

It's the same. We have the same role to play as the bears. There are salmon people. Their way of life is dependent on the salmon. If you participate as humble supplicants to this process, you take what's needed for you and yours, but you're very careful about that, because you know if you take too much, it's all over, and everyone will starve, including the bears, including the forest, including the fish, and life is dust.

But if you do that in a humble way and you realize that you are dependent on this vast web of relationships and you enter that as the humble supplicant, this could go on forever. The Tolowa lived on this land for 12,000 years, maybe longer, who knows, but at least that long, and didn't hurt it.



They had an actual sustainable relationship with the land by being humble participants. They didn't destroy it. When the first Europeans got here, the place was paradise. Just by every account it was amazing. Every 15 minutes—if you sat by a river, every 15 minutes you would see a grizzly bear.

This should be an incredible moment of mourning to say this out loud, because California grizzly bears are extinct. They're gone, in less than 200 years. They're on the flag of California still, but they're gone. There's not a single one left. That's what the European settlers did, by dominating rather than participating.

All of this repair has to happen, and it means especially those grasslands. That really was what we should be focusing on. That means bringing back the appropriate remnants. Without remnants, the grassland is turned to desert. The appropriate remnants for the great planes are the bison. There are only maybe 1,600 purebred bison left at this point.

Most of them are at Yellowstone. They are under assault every single year. What's happening to the bison is just horrifying. You could sit on a rock for four days and watch the herd thunder by 200 years ago. That's how many bison there were, maybe 60 million. That's plenty of food for people, but they need to be restored to that land.

The grasses need to be restored to them. They need to all make that home together. If we simply got out of the way, that would happen naturally. We could make it happen a lot faster. There are certainly ways that that could happen. Right now all of the subsidies in the United States are going to completely the wrong things.

Even setting aside the military, which is just one great big subsidy, all of the subsidies now go to the most destructive foods that have ever existed, and that's wheat and corn and soy, which can't be done without destroying those biotic communities. It should be going instead to restoring the prairie and making bison, bringing the bison back.

There are some wonderful plans. If you've never read about the buffalo commons, I would highly recommend reading up on that. This is a plan to turn most of the Midwest into exactly that, a home for the bison once more. That would revive—go ahead.

Michael: I just read John Michael Greer's latest post. It was on buffalo wind. He was talking about exactly that.

Lierre: Yes, and I just heard Mike Mease speak two nights ago. He is the leader of the Buffalo Field Campaign. They protect the bison at Yellowstone every year. He does amazing work. But he was talking about how some of the indigenous people, who are buffalo people, who depend on the buffalo, their word for buffalo literally translates "everything."

Michael: Wow. Wow.

Lierre: Yes. That is the relationship we should have to our food, to these incredible creatures that feed us. They are everything.

Michael: Yes.

Lierre: So that is the relationship that we need to have again, is repairing, restoring, and then rejoining, rejoining as participants in those biotic communities, rather than as these destroyers that oppose ourselves across the land. It's not a plan with a future anyway. We were bound to run out of soil, and now we're running out of water.

They're using oil drilling equipment now to get water out of the Ogallala Aquifer, because there's no water left. That's what agriculture does. It drops the water table. It's all gone. We're going to have to face these facts if we have any hope of heading toward true sustainability while keeping civic order and basic human rights in place.

Otherwise, we're looking at these just horrible failed state scenarios that we're already seeing around the world of ethnic and religious and tribal strife and misogyny and genocide and all the horrors that face us on the news every day. Certainly people are doing their best to survive, but it doesn't have to get that bad.

We could take control of this if people would face the depth of the problem, the scale of the problem, and actually look at the solutions then to those problems. I don't think it's too late. I think this could be done. But it means we really have to reinvent the way that we are looking at this, because right now I don't see the environmental movement doing that.

It is a great source of grief for me, because I don't understand why we can't just face the facts. We're not going to get where we need to go unless we face those facts. I understand the level of grief that's involved in this. Scientists are debating whether it's a quarter or third or half of all mammals going extinct by the year 2050.

To think of a world without elephants, to think of a world without giraffes or giant cats, or amphibians as a concept may be extinct. All of them. There are already parts of China where there are no more flowering plants, and it's because all the pollinators have been driven extinct. That's 500 million years of evolution that's simply over.

There's a level of grief here. I understand people's reluctance to face this, but we've got to take our hearts out of cold storage, because until we face the scale of the problem we're never going to come up with the solutions that scale up to meet that problem.

Michael: Yes. Amen. Take our hearts of cold storage. I love that. If somebody really gets what you're saying and they take into their heart and say, "How can I help further moving in the right direction," what would you advise? What would you suggest?

Lierre: There are definitely policy changes that have to happen now to make all this happen. The first question for anybody is, what are your gifts? What are your talents? What's your passion? What is the thing you want to do the most in the world? That's not the question that I can answer for anyone.

Whatever your gifts are, whatever your passions are, you can apply them. If you're somebody who is a really great songwriter, we need inspirational songs. If you're somebody who loves children, God knows children need to be taught a better way. We need a completely different kind of schooling.

I think we all know that the public school system is essentially one of the most brutal institutions that's ever been created. We all hated it, and yet children still have to go to it. Every day they're brutalized into conformity. We all know that this is a bad thing. All of that needs to happen in terms of—if you love children, create better schools.

Create free schools, home schooling, all of that, schooling that's directed by the children's passion and their love for each other and their love for the planet, all of that. Better values needs to happen. It's just that no matter where your passion lies, there's something to be done. I'm not trying to take anybody out of this equation.

No matter what it is, there's a way to apply it to the emergency that we face. But I would say there are a bunch of interlocking systems that have really created this monster of destruction. You have civilization, which is this agricultural way of life. It's based on draw down. It's based on extractive activities.

It's people living in, well, ultimately cities. That's what the word civilization means. But what that actually means on the ground is that they're living in concentrations such that they require the importation of resources. They've used up their own, and that means they have to go out and get food and water and energy from other places.

So that's the problem. You've got this power center that's surrounded by colonies. That is the pattern of civilization now for 10,000 years. Ultimately it collapses, and that's always when the top soil gives out. It's between 1,800 and 2,000 years. No civilization lasts longer than that. They used to be more like human scale civilization.

Rome could only get so big. The reason was because they weren't using fossil fuel yet. The military supply lines had to be done with pack animals. They could only get the

supplies so far and the military orders could only be sent so quickly back and forth, back to the power center, back out to the hinterlands.

Eventually it reached its own limit. Then it would collapse. Then the people living inside would scatter back out into what was called wilderness, but it was really just indigenous people living as they always had, and so there was some way for it to recover. Rome was also never going to get over the Alps, and it couldn't get across vast oceans.

They simply didn't have the technology to do that. Well, that's over. The whole thing has gone global. Now they've got fossil fuel. They can go everywhere, and they have. So there's nothing left. There's nowhere for us to disperse back into. There's no ecosystem left. There are not even family farms left.

At least during the Depression, lots of people could go back to the family farm. They were only one generation removed from actual land. That's over. Less than two percent of the US population actually lives on a farm. The US Department of Labor calls it a statistically insignificant occupation, farming, because so few people are involved.

Anyway, there's nowhere for us to go. That's one of the big problems of civilization. We need to name it. We need to see what the destruction is. That needs to be faced. All of that land has to be prepared, and we need to be getting our food from inside those repaired ecological communities. That's a vast amount of work. That's number one.

Number two is capitalism. This just fuels the fire. A lot of people name capitalism as the beginning of the problem. It's not. We already had 10,000 years of destruction before capitalism. Entire civilizations had already come and gone. Capitalism is again an accelerant, because this is an economic system that says what's important is the accumulation of wealth.

It takes living creatures and communities, turns them into dead commodities, and then accumulates those into private wealth. Obviously this is not a planet with a future. You can't take a finite planet and turn it into endless dead commodities and still have a living planet. So that's true. We need to face capitalism.

We need a completely different economic model. Those models have existed before. I don't think this is actually that hard. Up until 1832 there were other models. A lot of historians think 1832 is basically the point past which labor and land are completely commodified. So at that point the world is capitalist.

But up to that point people had all other different kinds of economic arrangements that involved very heavily having moral restraints on what people did economically. Even in the Middle Ages you can read about the guilds. These were people who were involved in whatever the activity was, so shoemaking or farming or pick your whatever, weaving, the spinners and the weavers.

They would sit down in a council and decide, well, what's a fair wage? Everybody needs to survive. What is a fair wage? What's a fair wage for somebody who is just entering the profession who is essentially an apprentice? At what point does that apprentice become a skilled—somebody who might own his or her own shop?

What's a fair wage for them to get for a pound of wool, for a pound of whatever fabric they're making? Everybody would decide, "This is fair. This is not. This is usury. This is too much. This is exploitation." They would set a fair price, and then everybody was expected to agree with that. What is wrong with this system?

This seems perfectly reasonable to me. How much do we need? What do people need to survive? Let's make a decision as a community. This to me seems like a very, very rational way to figure out how to get everybody's needs met. There's a great feminist writer, Maria Mies, who is German. A lot of her work has been translated into English.

She talks about growing up in a small village environment in Germany before World War II and how there were people who would grind the grain that the farmers were making. It was just accepted that there would always be some people who had fallen on hard times, or for whatever reason wouldn't be able to pay the people who owned the mill, the millers.

At the end of the day they would grind it anyway, because you can't let people in your community starve. It was just accepted, because if you didn't do that, if you let that whole family starve, nobody would speak to you anymore.

Michael: Yes, exactly.

Lierre: You would get a knock on the door from the clergy, from the other leaders of the community, like, "You can't let this family starve." It was just completely unacceptable, to the point where it was unthinkable. It was just sort of accepted 10% of what you do is just going to be because we're human and we take care of each other.

You're going to fall on hard times. People are going to make mistakes. Whatever happened, happened, but you can't let people starve who are your neighbors. Again, all this was dismantled by capitalism, because the highest best use of anybody anything was just profit. My point really is that for most of human history we didn't live with those values.

We had all kinds of constraints on our behavior as individuals, as communities. It was about just making sure everybody was okay, basically, that you weren't going to let people starve. We could go back to that very simply. This does not seem like a hard sell to me. Capitalism is another one of those.

I said there were three branches of this, civilization, capitalism, and the third one is patriarchy. Riane Eisler talks about the dominator model of societies. I think she's exactly right. You have this model where men are supposed to be better than women and can exploit women and see women as subhuman. This can be applied anywhere.

Once you have that psychological model of othering—every militarized culture needs this, because you have to have soldiers who are capable of dehumanizing whoever it is they're conquering. You've got certainly racism and all the exploitation there. White people are better than people of color. The rich are better than the poor.

All of that has to be set in place, and then it has to be institutionalized. Then the violence becomes almost invisible, because you've got institutions doing it instead. One really great example from ancient history is how ghettos were created in cities. You have all the soldiers coming home from World War II and you have the GI bill.

What the GI bill said was white soldiers can get loans to buy their own houses. Black soldiers cannot. What this meant was all the white families got to own their own houses. This is a huge step up in the American dream. You now own your own house. You've got some security. You can now start putting money away for other things, like your children's education.

It's this whole step up. The first rung on the ladder is being able to own your own home. Black soldiers were denied that. It was very clear. This is not paranoia. It's in the bill. Anybody can read it. What it meant was white people left the cities and owned their own houses, and black people were left to rot. Then they were red lined.

All the communities where black people lived, the bankers and the real estate agents literally drew red lines around and said, "We're not going to make loans to these people. Even if they do own the property, we're not going to let them make it any better. We're not going to give them money to repair the roof. If you need a home loan, too bad. You're going to live in a slum."

So they created slums by doing all of this. This is the invisible violence. This is the structural violence. This is no way to let us off the hook. We need to always, of course, think about our privilege, think about the ways we may be dishonorable to other people. We may have absorbed these terrible messages.

That all has to happen, but the real message here is that it's structural. There are institutions that control this, that give white people all that power and that disempower huge groups of people. It's the same thing with men having power over women. All of this is stuff that we have to look at, that we have to examine.

What is at the core of this? Why are groups of people othered? Why are they made into objects for exploitation? Who benefits? Who is being hurt? How are they being hurt? Then we're the lynchpins. How do we pull the plug on power?

I think those are the three different sort of systems that have all come together to create this really monstrous global kind of devouring monster that has really pushed us to the brink of this sort of environmental catastrophe that we're now facing. I don't remember what your question was.

Michael: I don't either, but I'm loving it. You're just going with it. One of the things that's occurring to me is the tragic irony, is that as James Howard Kunstler says, suburbia is the greatest misallocation of human resources in history. Well, the other book that I'm reading right now in addition to *Deep Green Resistance* and *The Soil Will Save Us*—there are three books I'm reading—is Naomi Klein's new book, *This Changes Everything*.

I'm just absolutely loving this book. It's just like one of the best books I've read. Say a little bit about *Deep Green Resistance*, and also your other book, *Earth at Risk*. Help us understand, because one of the things that you're known for is resistance to violence against women, resistance to violence against the Earth, the planet, resistance against violence to the future. Speak to that in any way that you want to.

Lierre: With *Deep Green Resistance*, we wanted to lay out in very clear terms the institutions that are in fact making that destruction happen. Again, we talk about civilization as that primary wound to the planet, that agriculture cannot be sustained, that any way of life that's based on extractive activities ultimately is going to hit zero.

You can't extract—these materials are finite, so whether it's metal, whether it's oil, whether it's coal, eventually—they don't reproduce. So at the end of the day it's over. We have certainly treated all these biomes in the same way. Civilization treats trees and water and soil as if they can just be extracted forever, rather than just taking a sustainable amount, because it's based on draw down.

It's based on what's called overshoot. There's that, and that combines with capitalism, and that combines with patriarchy to make this really sort of global monstrous system that is just devouring everything in sight. We wanted to lay that out in really clear terms. This is the depth of the problem. This is the scale of the problem.

This is why the solutions that are being offered to us by the big green supposedly ecological environmental organizations, they don't match the scale of the problem. Something very strange happened to the environmental movement. Somewhere in the 1980's it stopped being about saving the creatures and the places that we love and it became instead saving this way of life by whatever means necessary.

Instead of trying to stop the destruction of the planet, it has now become, well, how do we continue to fuel the destruction of the planet in the best way possible? It has flipped from prairies and forests and rivers and salmon and grizzly bears and wolves need our love and need our attention and they need us to see them as brothers and sisters because we're all part of this together.

Now it's we need to keep extracting all of that, destroying all of that, consuming all of that, but how are we going to fuel it, because we can't keep using fossil fuel. Maybe if we just use wind power and solar power, we can continue to have this way of life. I don't understand what happened to this movement that I loved and was a part of.

It has become something unrecognizable to me. I don't get it. This is a profound contradiction at the heart of what is now the environmental movement. You can't continue to fuel the destruction and say that you're trying to stop the destruction. You either care about these places and these creatures and you want to stop that, or you don't.

The Occupy movement made that great claim about the 1% and the 99%. It's just a great slogan, because it's immediately apparent that that's true. There is 1% that's pretty much getting everything, and then 99%, the rest of us, are in thrall. We're essentially serfs to the 1%. That's true. Then the division comes.

Is your goal—okay, so add to that, 98% of the old growth forests are gone, and 99% of the world's prairies are gone. It's not just 99% of the humans. It's 99% of the planet as well. The question is, that last 1% of the planet that's left, is your goal to divide that up equally between the people, or is your goal to stop the destruction while there's still something left at all?

That's my goal. It seems to me that a lot of people who claim to be environmentalists, their goal is something else. It's to take what's left and keep devouring it, but just divide it up more equally. I don't see that as a net plus. I just don't. Now, we can also get into all the problems with why solar and wind are not going to work.

They don't scale up. They are ultimately extractive activities themselves. You can't make those kinds of high tech, the solar panels and the wind turbines and all of that, without having things like rare Earth mining. If you go to China where they're doing the rare Earth mining, you will find 60 mile long lakes of literally just lakes of poison.

Everybody in the area has pancreatic cancer. When they have said, "We don't want this done to our land," the environmental activists there are literally tortured by their government for trying to stop this. This is no better than fossil fuel. You have to destroy the land where this is done. I don't know if you've ever seen a mine, but it's just hellacious.



It looks just like the tar sands, only what you're getting out instead is rare Earth metals. This is what you have to have in order to build solar panels and wind turbines. This is what those technologies depend on. These are just as extractive as fossil fuels. There is no future in this, people. This way of life is over. There was never a future in it.

You can't consume at this rate. The level of energy—the average American, if it had to be gotten from humans, to consume at this rate we would each have 200 slaves. That's how much power is involved in the average American's consumption. Up until very recently in human history, only emperors had that kind of power at their disposal.

You're not going to fuel this with solar and wind. The only way to even make those technologies possible is the exact same destruction as fossil fuel. They talk about wanting to turn vast amounts of desert and arid areas into these great big solar collectors. Those are incredibly fragile ecosystems.

You've got animals that are already just on the brink of extinction trying to live their lives there. This spells the end of them. It's just over for the prairie grouse and the swift fox and these other creatures that need a home. You can't just take it over and fill it with solar panels. Then really horrifying things, when birds fly over those panels, their wings fry right off their bodies.

It's just massive destruction again, and for what? So that we can continue to consume the planet? I just don't understand it. So ultimately at the end of the day, the only way of life that's sustainable is a way of life that's sustainable. It can't be based on extraction. It has to be based on our participation.

So, yes, what that means is hunter-gatherers are absolutely sustainable. They did it for two and a half million years and everything was fine. Then there are other sort of variations on that, so pastoralism. You could say that's a little bit different, but it's basically the same idea. Horticulture, certainly, is a very similar idea.

What those ways of life have in common is that there's a perennial polyculture that remains intact, and then we take our food out of that, just from that. Very different than agriculture, a very separate activity. Agriculture is destroying that biome and then just planting these very few crops for humans.

Those are annual monocultures, which is completely the opposite of a perennial polyculture, so that's the difference. I would say that those three ways of life have proven to be sustainable, because they leave that biome intact. Agriculture, no. There's no way to do this that doesn't destroy everything, because that's what it is.

When I look at the future, that's the future that we've got. What that also means is that the human population over the next two or three generations, it will be reduced one way or the other. The only two options we've got are this collapse happens and there are just dramatic amounts of human suffering, as well as other creatures suffering on top of that.

We've all had those images in our heads of Mad Max and Bladerunner and these terrible dystopian kinds of futures. It could go there. It has already gone there in some places around the world. We could also stop it. There is no biological reason for this to continue. We know where babies come from. It's not actually a great, big mystery.

The people who overshoot are the agriculturists. This is the problem, because it's based on draw down. You don't realize that you've overshot your land bases, the carrying capacity of your land base, so the population keeps growing until basically the very last day, and then the whole thing collapses. That's the pattern of civilization.

Hunter-gatherers are very good at keeping their populations in check, because if you overshoot even the tiniest bit, you're hungry almost immediately. Everyone knows what the ratio is of adults to dependent children and how to keep that ratio in check. The other thing about this is that I don't see this as people against the planet.

I see this as people with the planet. The number one thing you can do to drop the population anywhere around the planet is to teach a girl to read. That's the number one thing that reduces the population. What this means is that if women and girls have even the tiniest bit of power and control over their lives, the population drops naturally.

Literally, one-half of the births every year on this planet were either unplanned or unwanted, half of them. All you have to do is give women some control over their bodies and over their lives, and we could cut the population in half in one generation. That's all that's involved. If we care about human rights, we should care about this anyway.

These are things we should be doing anyway, because women and girls count as human. As it turns out, it's the only way we're going to save the planet. This is why I think if you're an environmentalist, you have to be a feminist. If you're a feminist, you have to be a peace activist. If you're a peace activist, you have to be an environmentalist.

You have to understand, these wars aren't happening just because people are mean and evil. It's because we have a way of life that's based on draw down. We are the empire at the center of the conquered colonies and we're extracting those resources, because it's based on draw down. Once you get that this is the material arrangement, that's what has to stop, then we will have peace.

Michael: It's interesting, because also 1% are able to keep our instincts working against us. We have instincts for sugar, salt, and fat. We have instincts for sensation, for titillation, for all

the things that we're evolutionarily programmed to pay attention to. The 1% are able to appeal to that, and so our instincts are killing us. We're distracted, we're addicted, and everything else.

Lierre: Well, the counterbalance is that I think we also have an instinct to love our children.

Michael: Yes.

Lierre: So if people can put that first. There's nothing like a mother bear out to protect her young. It's the same thing. I don't even have children, but the children who are in my life, it's just I would do anything to keep them safe. I think another thing that can really inspire people—well, Naomi Klein. She talks about that in the last chapter.

Now she has this child, and everything takes on—the emergency is just heightened that much more, because it's like, “Oh, my God, my children. What kind of a future have they got?” There might not be oxygen in 100 years. That's how bad things are getting. Whatever it is it takes to sort of kick that into gear, people, whatever you love, it is under assault. That's why we have to fight.

Michael: Yes. I keep a picture of my granddaughter by my computer, because she is the future calling us to greatness.

Lierre: Yes.

Michael: Well, anything you'd like to say on this theme? The title of this conversation series is *The Future is Calling Us to Greatness*. You've already been talking about that, but anything else you want to say on that line?

Lierre: We've got two future options available to us, and one is the end of everything. There have never been humans who have faced that. They certainly have faced plenty of hardships, and they may have faced genocide, the end of their people. We've never had to face the end of every living thing.

This is what I mean about taking our hearts out of cold storage. A lot of people don't have it in them to face what we are up against. I understand that. But for those of us who do have whatever that is, courage, strength, sheer stubbornness, love—I don't know what is the right word for this, but if you have the constitution to do that, I've basically got two pleas.

One is to face the scale of the problem, and the other is to consider what is it going to take to stop the destruction while there is still something left. I have been faced with a fair amount of moral agony over the last 10 years, because I'm someone who wants to believe that all of this can and should be done strictly using nonviolence.

That could happen. If a million people decided to shut down the oil economy, it could be done tomorrow. There's no question. We could shut this party down by midnight using human blockades. My problem is I don't see the numbers, and we're running out of time. This has made me have to reexamine what's necessary to make nonviolence work and do we have it.

I can't back away from my moral agency because of my moral agony, and I know a lot of people, we are all in this position at this point if we face the scale of the destruction. I don't have any great answers. I don't. I just think we all need to consider whether it's time to step up in terms of the resistance that we are capable of and the kinds of resistance activities that may be necessary to save our planet.

I don't say this with any joy. I really don't. Like I said, it has been a tremendous moral agony for me. But I think it's time that we have to at least put all the options on the table and see what's possible. I still think this can be done without any harm to humans or other living beings. But I think it's time to think about whether it's time for a more militant response to the destruction of our planet.

This is every living thing. It's not just us humans. It's everything. It's the future of everything. This is a really horrifying position to be in. But we didn't make this problem. History has brought us here and now abandoned us, and we have to find our way through this moral wilderness.

Michael: Yes. Yes. Well, I've got a question that I've been asking all my guests in this series, and it almost sounds trite in the context of this conversation, but I'll ask it anyway, because it has brought up some pretty interesting and unpredictable responses.

If you had the opportunity to have a dinner party with any three people in human history or one on one, a hike or over a glass of wine or beer or coffee or whatever, but if you could have a conversation, either all four of you together or one on one with any three people in human history, who would those three people be, and why would you choose them?

Lierre: Wow. I would choose—God, there are so many good ones to choose from.

Michael: I know.

Lierre: I think I would choose—some of them are still alive. Can I choose people who are still alive?

Michael: Absolutely. Absolutely.

Lierre: Okay, so I would choose Gene Sharp, who is still alive, and he's probably the foremost theorist on nonviolent direct action. He's responsible for evolutions around the world. I would love to talk to him. I would love to have my friend Derek Jenson there, who talks about how civilization is inherently unsustainable and why we need more militant tactics.

Then I would maybe choose—I think I would choose Andrea Dworkin, who is one of my feminist heroes. She died about 10 years ago. I did know her a little bit in real life. She was an amazing person. But I would want somebody there who also has gone through that kind of moral agony about—somebody who believes so strongly in nonviolence and had to come around to thinking it may not work for all of us, that we may have to take up more militant tactics.

She was very clear about the level of male sadism against women on this planet and just the depths of that horror and what is it going to take to stop that. In the meantime, every day the bodies are piling up. So I think those are the three people that I would want to talk together, mostly because I think all three of them understand the depth of the problem.

All three of them grapple very much with the moral complexities of violence versus nonviolence and what that means to us as individuals, what it might mean to our spirits and our souls to have to consider these things, but also the necessity for action that's actually going to be effective. I think that would be my dinner party. I would cook.

Michael: I'd like to be invited. Well, Lierre, this has been absolutely amazing. I so appreciate the work you're doing in the world, who you are, what you're committed to. I just really am grateful that you were able to be a part of this series. Any last things . . .

Lierre: This is a great idea, so thank you so much for inviting me. You've got a great lineup of people. I can hardly wait.

Michael: Thanks. Yes. In fact, I'm going to be talking to Derek here this week.

Lierre: Oh, good.

Michael: I interviewed Bill McKibben the other day. He was amazing. I can't get through to Naomi Klein. She's probably got such a full schedule this fall anyway. I would love to have her as part of this, but I don't think it's going to happen. Any last things that you'd like to say?

Lierre: This is really the last moment for us, for our planet, so whatever it is you love, you've got to fight for it.

Michael: Yes. Amen. If people want to go more deeply into your work, where would you recommend they go?

Lierre: My website, and that's easy to find, except that's kind of a joke, because you have to know how to spell my name. It's LierreKeith.com. If you can't remember my name, you can actually just look up *The Vegetarian Myth*. I'm the only one who wrote a book called that, so that you will definitely find. It's easier to spell.

Michael: That's great. Well, thank you so much. The next time that we're anywhere near northern California, I promise I'll let you know ahead of time, because I'd love to meet you in person.

Lierre: Okay. Very good.

Michael: Great. Thanks.

Lierre: All right. Thanks so much.

Michael: Bye.

Lierre: Okay. Bye.