

Michael: Michael, thank you so much for joining in this conversation series, *The Future is Calling Us to Greatness*.

Michael B.: Thank you, Michael. It's great to be with you.

Michael: Since we've got a bandwidth issue, when I am listening to you, I'll probably turn off my video. I am mentioning this also so that viewers and listeners can know what's up, just to save on bandwidth, and when I speak, I'll try to remember to come back on the video.

At the start, one of the things I've been asking all my guests is to first share a little bit of your story, who you are, what are you known for, what are you particularly passionate about that, so that our viewers and listeners can really get a sense of who you are, if they are not already familiar with you.

Michael B.: Sure. For the last nine years, I have been involved in an organization, which my partner Lynette Marie Hanthorn and I co-founded, now called Local Food Shift Group, which has been focused on re-localization. When we started nine years ago, we were very concerned about the peaking of fossil fuel supplies on the planet and the relationship between all of that to climate change and environmental degradation and so on.

We realized we needed to start working towards the re-localization of our community and into that process, a couple of years, we realized that the most urgent priority in re-localization was food, that it was essential that our communities begin to learn localizing their food supply as much as possible. That has really been our focus for the last seven years and it's led us into a much deeper understanding of the issues globally that affect us and our local communities, and how we as humans build intelligent co-creative, regenerative, healing responses to what's happening in our world today.

My particular passion, I guess, is understanding what activates individuals around these issues and what forces give us callings in life, if you live, present us with missions that are much bigger and much more challenging than we may have ever rationally chosen. Somehow, the universe has pointed the fickle finger of faith at us and called us out of into greater levels of engagement.

Michael: That's great. Actually, I wanted you to lean a little bit more into this sense of calling and mission, because I think you are right, so many people are awakening to a sense of mission or calling. Anything else do you want to

say about that?

Michael B.: I think it's obvious for those who are looking that more people perhaps than ever are awakening to a sense of calling or mission, in response to the very great challenges that we face on the planet today. To me, this is one of the most encouraging things that's happening on the planet. This is what Paul Hawken talked about in *Blessed Unrest* that these individuals who are being activated at this time represent what he called the planet's immune system kicking in.

That is an interesting way of looking at it. I don't think though that it's just a reaction to what's going on. What I have come to feel and to understand a little bit is that that the forces of evolution itself, the evolutionary thrust, if you will, is moving through people today in a more transparent way than perhaps we have ever seen before in the history of the planet.

That is pretty profound and if indeed that's what's going on, then it's confirmation certainly that we as a species, as a planetary civilization are reaching or are at some sort of evolutionary threshold here. Things can certainly go multiple different directions from here, but we are at an evolutionary crossroads.

I could even say that the angels of evolution are with us during this time. There is a lot at stake on this planet and so I think we are, because of all these different factors, learning a lot about who we are as human beings and as species, and simultaneously, as you have been demonstrating and lots of other people, starting with Pierre de Chardin and others, we are learning a lot about evolution, how evolution works, how evolution unfolds and how we can align ourselves with that evolutionary thrust.

One of the things that is apparent to me that most people who are called in these times are not coming from a place of ego or ambition. There is something much deeper at work. It's sometimes very disorienting and it's especially disorienting when we get in the way of that with our ego or with our ambition.

I think that we are at a time where we are learning or what we're beginning to get a sense of is this – I'll call it a spiritual path of being an evolutionary catalyst, which really means aligning with and cooperating with this evolutionary thrust and learning how to serve that, rather than our own will, our own desire. It's essentially serving the will and the desire of the universe itself.

Michael: In a locale, one of the things that I deeply appreciated about your work for years is your focus on what you and other are calling re-localization and in your work with transition towns, being engaged in the Boulder, Colorado area in a way that is really trying to awaken and unite, and solidify people around what are the issues of sustainability, what are the issues where we are vulnerable and where can we support each other.

Because you've got experience in that, is there anything that you could say about – I know a lot of people have heard about transition towns but they may not know a lot about that, if you could say a little bit about both your experience and what you see as the promise there, and then what you see are the challenges there?

Michael B.: That's a lot. First of all, I would say the place based issues is really important. We've heard the statement about all politics is local. In a sense, I think, all evolution is local too.

Michael: Yes, exactly.

Michael B.: Evolutionary shifts occur at the smallest, most local level and spread out from there. They always start somewhere and with someone in this case, because we are really talking about evolution of consciousness, evolution of culture, evolution of an intelligent species of life.

About the transition movement, the transition town movement or transition movement began in about 2006. It was the second global re-localization effort that was developed. The first one was with the Post-carbon Institute, which Richard Heinberg is now a senior fellow of.

Michael: I had a great interview with Richard.

Michael B.: Good. He is definitely an evolutionary catalyst. The transition movement was founded by Rob Hopkins. The early beginnings were in Kinsale, Ireland, where he was a permaculture teacher at a community college. He took his work to Totnes, England, a little market town of eight thousand people in Southwest England, where he began looking at how that community could organize itself around learning how to meet its most essential needs locally, which is basically how he defines re-localization or more commonly now, localization.

He had no intention of creating a movement. He just was looking at his own community, but there were many of us and many people in the UK, and some of us in other parts of the world that were eavesdropping on

what he was doing by the internet and when it became apparent that he was possibly creating a model for the process of localizing a community, other people began emulating what he was doing, even before he started presenting it as a model.

Long story short, it turned into a movement. It became increasingly formalized and there are now several hundred groups and communities around the world that are attempting in various ways to emulate that model or to evolve that model. Of course, Rob is obviously an evolutionary catalyst himself and has really touched the lives of many people throughout the world, and many communities have been deeply impacted by the transition movement.

I would say that we got pretty excited about what Rob was creating in Totnes. I went over the UK and spent some time there, met with him, watched what was going on there. I needed to know if it was real, if the rumors were true and if the effort was in any way sustainable. We had seen the previous re-localization movement through Post-Carbon Institute be unsustainable, it was clearly failing.

I got pretty excited and helped bring the transition movement to this country. Our organization was the first officially recognized transition initiative in the US and we created Transition US, as well, as a national hub for the movement in this country and now, I don't know how many initiatives there are in this country, but it's probably around a hundred and fifty.

Our organization has – I wouldn't say that we have distanced ourselves from the transition movement in recent years, but we have distinguished ourselves by focusing solely on localizing our food supply. For a long time, our name was Transition Colorado as an organization, but we changed to Local Food Shift Group, partly because every conversation I had with someone new about all this stuff, before I could talk about local food, I had to explain to people what the transition movement was. I just wanted to get right down to it.

Michael: That makes total sense, because really, when you talk about transition towns and the larger vision, it can encompass so much and that can be overwhelming. You are right, when it comes down to what we really need to survive, there is just nothing more basic than food. I absolutely love John Michael Greer and his chapter on food in *The Ecotechnic Future*. I wish I had it memorized. I don't have a copy of it in front of me right now.

It's just this classic first paragraph that people forget how important food is and then other things really don't matter if that's not there, and we are about to get that lesson in horse doctor's doses, he said.

Michael B.: The potential is certainly there for that. We hope that we can build local food systems as an alternative to the global industrialized, corporatized food system quickly enough so that we don't have to come to the realization here that starvation is not just a third world phenomenon. If we don't move fairly quickly, we will run into challenges.

Maybe I can bridge a couple of issues here. One is by saying that my observation is that the transition movement in this country has not really taken hold as a movement. It's not cohered as a coherent movement. Partly, I think because it came out of a culture in the UK, where community is much more prevalent than it is here. It really is a community based model and to do anything in this country that is community based is very difficult, because the foundation of community in this country has been so completely torn asunder. We are going to have to rebuild them from scratch.

Michael: Or, in some cases, Connie has been making this point with me lately, my wife, she's been saying that in some cases, it's just never existed because in Europe and so much of the world, you've got multiple generations that are able to tell stories and pass on wisdom of how to live with the land, the water and the natural world in a way that doesn't diminish the quality of that for future generations.

You've got these stories, this wisdom, these traditions passed on and here, we've had this eternal frontier. You make due and you exhaust the land and exhaust what we call the environment, and then you move on. We don't have that multi-generational wisdom and we have this, "Go west, young man," mentality. Now, of course, there is no more places to go to, and I think this idea that we are going to terraform Mars or go to some other planet is just collective insanity. It's just crazy.

I remember Thomas Berry, my great mentor, saying that to put much effort or energy into space travel and colonizing other places in the world before we come into right relationship with the air, the water, the soil and the life in this planet, he called it blasphemy. I thought it was a very interesting language.

Michael B.: Yeah, that's good. Plus, along the way, we virtually obliterated the people, the Natives here that we could have learned from.

Michael: Exactly. Michael, as you look out – I am just curious – this big picture, what do you see? Obviously, if we get our shit together quick and put a fair price on carbon and get the whole power of the market in order, we are going to at least be doing the right thing and doing it hopefully fast enough that we can avoid the worst calamities.

I am just curious, when you look out twenty, forty, sixty, a hundred years and beyond, how serious or urgent do you see our situation being? What do you imagine that we can expect in our lifetimes, both best case and worst case scenario?

Michael B.: I read a story couple of years ago about someone who had been a student of Buckminster Fuller. In Bucky's late years, before he died, the student asked Bucky. "Bucky, when you look out into the future, what do you see?" Bucky said, "Unprecedented hardship." I think something along the lines is pretty close to what we can expect.

I think it's pretty clear now that the human response to climate change and other issues on the planet, it's gone too far for us to prevent much of the worst case. I do not anticipate that we will see near-term extinction for human species, as quite a number of very intelligent people do. I don't think that we'll get there, but I think it will be close.

Michael: Kind of like almost a species near-death experience.

Michael B.: Exactly. That's what I think. We are in for a hard, rude awakening. We have missed our opportunity to prevent disaster. Now, all we can do is learn how to adapt as best we can and to dig down deep inside ourselves collectively and learn what we have to give to the future, what our legacy as a species can and should be.

I've often thought about this. What is it that's about the human species that needs to be preserved for the long term teaching, and I think that we ought to be talking about all of this, but that conversation, it seems, has not yet quite started. I think that given what we have learned about climate change in particular, because climate change, global warming is becoming the looming storm that we're getting already a taste of.

I think it will become overwhelming and because there is essentially a forty-year lag between cause and effect, we still have to experience the devastation that we have created the planet over the last forty years. In that time, we have burned more fossil fuels than in all the previous time of

human history.

There is a lot of climate karma in the pipeline, if you will. There are many different projections, from the UN's, ITCC's very conservative estimate to other people like Guy McPherson and the Arctic Methane Group. You see a wide diversity of projections, but when you boil it all down, what I see is that for instance, in the food production, global food production capacity is likely to be reduced by twenty to thirty percent over the next twenty to thirty years.

Michael: Yes.

Michael B.: That's catastrophic. That's hundreds of millions, if not billions of people facing starvation. Twenty to thirty years is very little time to prepare. It's an all-out emergency, but as you and I have both experienced in our lives, when you can see an emergency that other people cannot see, because it's still somewhere over the horizon, it's not yet fully visible to everyone, it's very difficult to get people to focus on it.

Michael: Yeah, exactly. One of the reasons why I wanted to have this conversation series with people like you is that more and more people are waking up to the realities of peak oil and peak everything, as Richard Heinberg says, and climate change and the species extinction, so many other things that are related to that, including the growing gap between the rich and the poor that exacerbates and causes itself untold suffering and injustice.

How do you and Lynette Marie stay inspired. What allows you to continue waking up to participate in this great work, to do the work that you are doing and to stay, if not optimistic, at least hopeful enough or inspired enough to contribute your time, your energy, your gifts toward helping to foster some kind of a healthy future, even if we have, as I agree with Bucky Fuller, unprecedented hardship on the horizon?

What wakes you up? What inspires the two of you?

Michael B.: I would say the first thing is that it's the people that we meet who are evolutionary catalysts, who are awakening in I would call unlikely circumstances. They are often disoriented, as I mentioned, but something very deep and profound is moving them and so I find all of that very encouraging.

At the same time, as I also mentioned, we are learning so much about evolution itself. We haven't had access to this kind of perspective until

very recently and I think we are just at the beginning of that understanding. That feeling of learning that we are experiencing, which is truly transformational is part of what keeps us all going, I think, through difficult times.

Our perspective on things is just changing so radically. Hundred years ago or so, our best scientific proclamation about reality was there was but one galaxy in the universe. That was just a hundred years ago. Now, in such a short period of time, we understand that there are hundreds of millions of galaxies, perhaps even a trillion of galaxies in the universe and we are also discovering that this might not even be the only universe.

Our perspective is expanding so greatly, so we are just getting enrolled in kindergarten here. The other thing that's happening simultaneously with all of that is our understanding of time and time horizon is shifting. We are learning that life is not just about – even for us individually – life is not just about the sixty, seventy, eighty or ninety years or so that we get to spend on this planet. Life goes on.

Our life continues in what may be most intriguing about many of the evolutionary catalysts who are showing up today is a deep and profound and sometimes very confusing sense that we've gone through this drill before. This is familiar to us. We know something about this process. When a planet or a society, or a culture reaches this point where it's hard up against its limits and must make an evolutionary leap or face possible extinction, I think that it's possible that we have actually experienced this process before, whether it's this planet or this lifetime, or who knows, but there is something in us that knows what needs to happen.

We are going through the process of learning how to pay attention to that part of us that knows. When we get glimpses of that or experiences of that, that makes all the rest easy to deal with, because we know the core of life from the universe itself that is moving in us, we know that that is a part of us in a real experiential way, and that makes the whole thing worthwhile.

Michael: It's interesting that you should bring that up, because just this morning, earlier today, Connie and I had a conversation about the radical difference. If you think that your self stops at the edge of your skin, what Alan Watts called the skin encapsulated ego, then you are going to have a radically different thinking about death and mortality, crisis and challenge than if you know that your self enlarges.

Basically yes, there is what some would call it your ego self or my skin

encapsulated self, but then there is my continental self that I am a part of this body of what Connie and I call NORA. We don't call this continent the North America, we personify it as NORA, and then part of Gaia and part of the Milky Way, and part of what we call the universe, and again, whether there is multiple universes or whatever, but our sense of self.

If you identify with the evolutionary impulse, if you identify with this billions of years flow of time, matter, energy and then in consciousness, then there is at least for me and for both of us, Connie and I, there is not that sense of fear about our impending death and there is the sense that in some very real sense, we have experienced and our ancestors, including our ancient pre-human ancestors continue to live in us, in our DNA, in our energy and that they have experienced all the crises that is common to humanity and common to life, and then in some very real sense, if we can tap into our deepest nature, we might be able to find wisdom and resolve and patience, and courage to do the heroic thing, to make sacrifices on behalf of the future to work together with people of very different belief systems in the service of a common vision.

The common vision of helping evolution continue in a healthy way in this solar system and helping life continue to have the diversity that we know is vital to the health of the body of life and to at least help some remnant of humanity survive into the future and that we don't lose the incredible contributions that have been gained over the last five thousand years or more.

Michael B.: It may be that survival is not a requirement. I got very interested in the idea of the supernova. Brian Swimme talks about how if supernova is essentially a star reaching a point in its revolution, where it sacrifices itself, implodes and explodes to create elements that make the next level of evolution, more complex elements possible.

A few years ago, there were several of us involved in the transition movement in this country. I spent some time at the Genesis Farm with Sister Miriam MacGillis. I spent three days exploring what really needed to happen in the transition movement and this idea popped up. This question popped up in the conversation, which made most people uncomfortable, which was, "Are we a species that is attempting to commit suicide?" Of course, there is a lot of evidence for that, but --

Michael: Certainly, I would not say that we are trying to consciously do it, but we may inadvertently be doing it.

Michael B.: Yeah, but because I've been studying Swimme's *Powers of the Universe* around that time and thinking a lot about the story of the Tiamat, the supernova that really gave birth, as the story goes, to our own solar system, I started thinking, maybe just possibly, the human species is preparing to go supernova. That might be a different take on this that surviving as we are now may not be the goal.

Maybe, we are something like a transitional species that gives birth to something much greater in our own conscious sacrifice, if you will. Now, I am not asserting that that's the truth, but I found that that was a useful to look at the dynamics of our situation and it helped me to relax in this situation and not worry so much about survival, per se.

Michael: It's funny, there is two things that come to mind as you shared that. One of them is that Connie and I have several movie series that we watch just so many times and they become our mythic foundation. The Matrix Trilogy, we love. We've watched V for Vendetta many times, but our favorite movie, probably of all, is called Super Volcano. It was done by the BBC and the Discovery Channel.

In fact, if you just go to the Discovery Channel website, you can order the DVD. It's called Super Volcano and it's about Yellowstone and the fact that Yellowstone is one of about a dozen super volcanoes in the world and somewhere in the world, roughly every fifty to a hundred thousand years, a super volcano goes off.

A super volcano isn't like a normal volcano. It's two or three thousand Mount St-Helens all at once and it's pretty cataclysmic. It doesn't necessarily tie into mass extinctions, because it's usually a remnant of most species that make it through, but the last time that any super volcano in the world went off in human history was seventy-two thousand years ago, Toba in Indonesia.

We now know through genetic analysis that there they call it the human bottleneck, there was human genetic diversity and then seventy-two thousand years ago, because of Toba, it's quite possible that no more than seven or eight thousand human beings survived in the world, and then of course, all the diversity since then.

America's super volcano is Yellowstone and Yellowstone has blown roughly every six hundred thousand years for the last two million years and it's been six hundred and forty thousand years since Yellowstone has blown. We've watched this movie in part because whenever we start

thinking that the world is going to hell in a hand basket, it's like we are just shaking our heads, we remind ourselves, Yellowstone could blow and it just reframes everything and allows us to relax and do the work that we are doing.

That was one thing, but the other thing that what you were just sharing reminded me of is that Connie is one of the world's experts in what's called convergent evolution or parallel evolution, where the same thing emerges over and over again. In fact, anybody listening to this conversation can just put *Let There Be Sight*, Connie Barlow and she has these dozens of examples of conversion evolution.

Eyesight emerged over two dozen times in different lineages independently. Universe was going to see itself. No matter how many times you run the tape back and you run it out, you are always going to have eyesight, and you are probably going to have some creature that comes to know that it knows.

Connie sometimes says, not just humorously that even if we destroy ourselves and humanity goes extinct, if she were a gambling woman, her money would be on raccoons to be the next self-reflective intelligence. It was so fascinating because just about five or six months ago, I was reading on John Michael Greer's blog, *The Archdruid Report*, he had a post from a couple of years ago on his vision of the next ten billion years, and I think it was.

It was interesting. He thinks that humanity will last, at most, a million years, because most species don't last beyond two-three million years and he thinks following us, the next self-reflective intelligence on earth, he also said, was likely to be raccoons and then he painted that they wouldn't last more than a few million years. Then he said crows would be the third self-reflective intelligence, and their existential crisis would be when the crows go to the moon and they discover that some earth species beat them there.

That kind of long term perspective is emotionally – for many of us, at least – allows me to sometimes somewhat humorously, but also seriously relax and trust in the process of evolution, trust in the process of emergence, trust in the process of creativity.

Michael B.: Exactly. What's clear to me is that this evolutionary thrust that we refer to, this arrow of evolution, it's unstoppable. There is no such thing as defeat for the evolution. They will prevail and they may run into roadblocks but

they always find a way, ultimately.

Sight shows up eventually. Self-reflective intelligence shows up eventually, and way beyond that, at levels that we can't even imagine. I wanted to share with you a recurring dream that I started having when I was five or six years old, that has been great cause for reflection over the years, not that I understand it.

The theme of the dream is that I am living in an advanced, a prosperous society that's essentially built on a very large island, maybe as large as Australia is, and in this society, a very sophisticated technology plays a central role in the economy of that society.

Now, there is no poverty, there is no social strife. Everything is peaceful and characterized by order, at least on the surface, but somehow, I become aware. I am adult in this movie. I become aware that the core technology on which this society depends is very unstable, dangerously unstable and will quickly become destructive.

I can see that unless we abandon this miraculous technology that we worked so hard to develop that we risk utter annihilation. I set about to warn the leaders of the nation, no one will pay any attention to me, but I instead turn to the people themselves, I speak publicly. I write, I publish, and no one is paying attention, as if the society is blind and deaf.

What finally happens, realizing that there is nothing I can do to stop what's going to happen, I find myself on the southern shore of this island, calling for people to join me in a small boat that I have waiting to carry us away. Only a few people come, like four or five people, and at the last second, before everything goes dark, we push this little boat out to sea.

As I look back, the island erupts and sinks beneath the waves and everything and everybody is completely gone, except for those of us in this little boat.

Michael: You've had this dream repeatedly throughout your life?

Michael B.: Yeah, and for many years, I felt that I had failed profoundly in this situation, and it's really haunted me. It was too symbolic of what I was experiencing in my life. I could see what a lot of other people couldn't see, but eventually, I started thinking about the other people in that boat and I started thinking that maybe that wasn't a failure. Maybe I misinterpreted what was happening at the end. Maybe what I was doing was recruiting

people, not just escaping, but recruiting. Maybe even I was the one who was being recruited.

When I find myself in front of a room full of people these days, I think about the people in the room and if some of them might have been on that boat.

Michael: Absolutely fascinating. One of the questions, Michael that Connie has asked me to ask all my guests in this series is a little bit off the wall, but it's also been fun, because I purposely don't tell anybody about it ahead of time.

That is that if you could have either a one on one conversation or a dinner party with any three people in human history, either a one on one over a cup of coffee, a beer, a glass of wine or a meal or a dinner party where all four of you are together over a meal or whatever, who would those three people be and why would you choose them?

Michael B.: One is a person that I wasn't sure existed until just recently and his name is Cyril James Skidmore. He wrote a very extraordinary book and published it very quietly on the internet, not through any kind of way that we would usually recognize his publishing, but he made it available on the internet about ten years ago, called *The Truth: The Universe is a Growing God*. It's the most extraordinary thing that I have read that I knew that another human being wrote.

He is essentially saying that perhaps god didn't create this universe. Maybe where the universe is going is the creation of a fully conscious god and that we are in the process of creating this god together, and I am not characterizing it very well but the thought in that gave me a different understanding of spiritual evolution than I had had before. He is definitely one person, Cyril James Skidmore.

I just got a message from him recently that let me know that he actually exists on the planet, I wasn't sure.

Michael: Sometimes, especially particularly provocative or insightful, or radical writings are written under a pseudonym and so sometimes we don't know.

Michael B.: It may not be his real name. I've been unable to learn anything about him, except what he has written, which is quite extraordinary. I would say John David Garcia is another one who he is deceased. I never got to meet him. He died several years ago. He wrote a book called *Creative*

*Transformation: A Practical Guide for Maximizing Creativity*. Very poorly titled, but he created an evolutionary ethic.

He is one of the few evolutionary ethicists that I was ever aware of and I think it's very unfortunate that his work is virtually unknown. It's been central for my own life, certainly. I did get to talk to him on the telephone a couple of times a couple of years before he died, but I never got to meet him and would love to spend several days with him.

He used to offer a weeklong workshop up in Oregon for which he would put you up at no charge, house you, feed you, and put you through the workshop. His sole requirement was that you had read his book and understood it.

Michael: Back, seven-eight-nine years ago, when Connie and I stayed with you and Lynette Marie, I think you recommended him at that time and I did explore him a little bit. This is just coming back to me now.

Michael B.: Yeah. The other person I think would be Arthur M. Young who wrote a book called *The Reflexive Universe: The Evolution of Consciousness*, which was published in the 70s and he was ahead of his time. He is also deceased. I never got to meet him, but I would like to spend some time with him about updating his book.

The model of evolution of the universe that he presented at that time is quite extraordinary, way ahead of his time and so Lynette Marie and I have been working on updating that and using it as a guide in our own work.

The food localization work that we are doing is our laboratory for the path of being an evolutionary catalyst, the spiritual path of emergence, if you will.

Michael: That's great. Any last things that you would like to say or share with this community of people around the theme of the past is rooting for us and the future is calling us to greatness, and then how can people learn more? Where should people go to learn more about your work?

Michael B.: I am in the process of writing a book now. The working title is *The Local Food Shift: How Humanity Will Itself in Uncertain Times*. Much of these perspectives will be embedded in that book, I hope that will be out by the middle of next year. I wish I had something right at the tip of my tongue as the parting shot, but I would just like to suggest that we are at the very beginning of understanding who we are.

Yes, it's a very difficult and challenging time, but those are the kinds of times when evolutionary breakthroughs always occur. Those of us who are feeling the deep current of the calling and mission need to honor those and learn how to allow those to be expressed in the world, because they represent who we truly are.

Michael: Yeah. Amen. Michael, just blessings on you. Love and blessings to you and Lynette Marie, and your work. Great to reconnect here and next here we are out in the Boulder area, I promise we will get together.

Michael B.: Great. Thank you so much, Michael. It's been great talking with you today.