

Michael: Nikki, I've been looking forward to this conversation for quite a while. Drew Dillinger just raved about you and looking over your bio in your Green for All website, it was not just insightful, but inspiring.

What I have been doing with all my guests is at the start, just inviting them to share whatever you are led to share and don't be bashful. Help us know who you are, what your particular passions or interests are and how you came to this conversation, theme around *The Future is Calling us to Greatness?*

Nikki: What that means is inspired on this path to greatness. It definitely started with my family, I'll say that. My great-grandfather was one of the first black men in Black Face in the south. Alan Jones and his seven brown babies. My grandfather was in a blues quartet, called the Delta Rhythm Boys that has a world record or something like that, for the most soundtracks collaborated on.

He was fierce. He spoke nine languages, sang in nine languages. I feel like when it comes to greatness, I am in good company, when it comes to the people in my family and a lot of the artist side of me. That version of greatness is what does it take to tell our story at a time when we're still being hung from trees. What does it take to have the kind of courage to love who you want to love.

That's my grandfather's side. My maternal grandmother, she was half black and half white, and born in 1922, when [inaudible 00:02:01] still illegal. Her parents were a white a man and a black woman, who got married in Mexico, because they couldn't get married here, defied all the odds, left and fled Louisiana because they were dedicated to loving each other.

My great-grandfather was put in prison quite a bit, when my grandmother was younger, just because he had black children and a black wife, and so I feel like, for me, greatness is rooted in my family story. It's rooted in people who were brave enough to be who they were, no matter what society said, at the risk of death, to love at the risk of being put to death.

Michael: To hear that kind of personal story, one of the things I've often said is that the past is rooting for us, our ancestors are rooting for us, in the sense that the future is evoking our greatness, evoking our service. I've never heard anybody with the kind of personal story that you just shared.

Could you also share just a little bit about your professional involvements

as an executive-director of Green for All? How did you come to that and what have been some of the things you've been involved in? Give us a short bio, help us really get who you are.

Nikki: Yes. That's me personally, in terms of what inspired me to think bigger and when it comes to how I got involved in social justice, my father was a super radical, back when he was at UC Santa Cruz. When he thought about what he could do to really change the world as a black man, what occurred to him was being a father, because so many black men just can't stay around to raise their children.

I grew up with seven older foster brothers and that became two group homes, and that became a foster family agency that my parents still run together, to this day. I was one of those kids that got activated really early, because I had to ask really hard questions. Why are there so many kids whose parents can't raise them? What were the social conditions that led to them not being able to raise their children? Why are more black and brown kids taken? Where aren't there any white kids in the agency?

Just all these questions about class, about privilege, about race, and so I think it never occurred to me that I could do a job that was just to make money, because I just wasn't raised like that. I was an activist kid from way back.

The environment and sustainability hit me, I think, because my mom was also one of those people [inaudible 00:04:44] was the first way that I got involved with the environment, because my mom told all these stories about her diet when she was pregnant, her diet when she was trying to get pregnant, her diet when she was breastfeeding, our diets when we were little.

It was so important to her that the food that we put into our bodies was the absolute healthiest that it could be. I was inspired by that, and I think it made me look at my environmental surroundings a bit differently. Then, I became interested in sustainability, moved into the Los Angeles Eco Village, got a CSA Box for the first time, realized that there was a whole swap of fruits and vegetables that I didn't even know existed.

When I went to college and started learning about all of this, I saw that sustainability was this much larger concept of food and transportation and waste and water and electricity, and all of this. I became a student activist and tried to split time between the California Students Sustainability Coalition and the African Student Union, and was lucky enough to meet

Van Jones, and discover Green for All at a time when I was trying to figure out how to be both black and an environmentalist at the same time.

There has been these parallel tracks for me of climate change and food systems, and that's been the bulk of my career, being at Green for All, when it first started, going to Slow Food USA, being the executive-director of People's Grocery here in Oakland and doing economic development and public health work around food systems, and now being back at Green for All, where I can really do the good work when it comes to how climate change and food systems, and waste and water, and all of the other sustainability sectors interact.

Michael: That's fabulous. Help us, for those of us who don't know, help us really get what Green for All is all about. What is the work that you are doing? You just obviously touched on it, but help us have a better sense of the mission and purpose, and vision of Green for All.

Nikki: Green for All is a national nonprofit organization. We're headquartered here in Oakland, with an office in DC. Our mission is to build a green economy strong enough to let the people [inaudible 00:07:14]. For the last six years, we've done infrastructure work and energy efficiency, water infrastructure and transportation. We've done policy work around the Climate Bill in 2009 and 2010, and more recently on executive orders.

We are working on this year the EPA's carbon rule with the President's Resiliency Task Force. We've done communications work. We try to put out a lot of videos, a lot of collateral, go on tour with different musical artists, really try to make sure that popular culture understands climate changes from a vulnerable community's perspective, and then finally, [inaudible 00:07:47].

We have a fellowship program and a college ambassador program, as well. We get activists together and try to build the green economy movement.

Michael: That's fabulous. I think that's just, as you know, and as I am sure you feel, this is some of the most important work happening on the planet. All of the different aspects of sustainability, especially in communities where for a variety of reasons, often from decades long issues, challenges, discrimination and this sort of thing, there needs to be a way that we can do the right thing, that we are invited and empowered as young people of all ages to do the right thing and to support our local communities and moves in the direction of sustainability, using less energy, driving less, composting, recycling.

This is some of the work that I did in Portland, Oregon for five years was I helped neighbors. I was the campaign director of the Global Action Plan Eco Team program in Portland and my job was to essentially help neighbors come together, five to eight households at a time, and support each other in using less water, driving less, composting, recycling, basically all the different aspects of living a more earth-friendly, sustainable lifestyle, but also building trust and a greater sense of community with their neighbors.

This is long before the planet change and long before the awareness that we now have and the work that you are doing that is just vital. I was encouraged today. I read something in the *New York Times* today about sixty percent of Americans now agree that putting a fee or dividend, or a tax on carbon, as long as what we do with the money is good, like supporting sustainability endeavors and dividend back to the people, fifty-six to sixty percent of Americans are for it. I find that encouraging.

Nikki: Yeah, it's very encouraging.

Michael: Nikki, one of the things that I am always curious about and I've been asking my guests in this series is what is that allows you to look at the challenges, the big challenges of our time? Peak oil, global warming, the growing gap between the rich and the poor, species extinction and so on. What allows you, what wakes you up inspired to play your role, to do your part? Where do you find hope and inspiration to stay in action?

Nikki: It's a good question. I think what inspires me on a very real level is my spiritual practice, which is pretty rooted in ancestor practice. I have always been very curious about the people in my family that came before me, and whenever I feel overwhelmed or whenever I think I can't do it, I think about how my ancestors who were slaves must have felt, being torn from their homes in Africa, being brought across an ocean, not knowing whether or not they were going to survive.

Once an African-American consciousness developed, once we were brought here, not knowing whether we were just all going to be killed one day because they no longer needed our labor. We existed in a state of limbo when it came to just not even being considered human. Nothing that I go through now is comparable to not being considered a human being next to another human being.

It was a completely unprecedented time in the American history, and so I

think that I am here now, because there were women who decided not to kill themselves after they were raped by slave masters and had all of their children sold away from them. I am here now, because the slave that ran away who was captured and had his feet cut off decided not to kill himself and still decided to live with whoever he decided to love.

There is hundreds of people who chose life in incredibly dire situations to make sure that I could be here. I think about that every day and it is definitely what drives me. That's the biggest thing that drives me.

Michael: Thank you so much for sharing that. I often am inviting people, in fact, in the evening program that I will be doing tonight, I conclude with a guided meditation where I invite people to imagine ancestors in the past who struggled and suffered, and sacrificed. If it hadn't been for their struggle or suffering, or sacrifice that you wouldn't even be alive today.

I've never had anyone articulate it more powerfully than you just did, your personal spiritual practice around that. Thank you.

I suspect many of us, even those of us of tremendous privilege or born into privilege in this culture, you don't have to go too far back in history to realize that all of us have ancestors that chose life rather than death similarly to situations, rape and all the different kinds of atrocities that have occurred that humans have done to humans over the years.

In my own Christian tradition, I consider myself a Christian-naturalist, an evidential Christian, but in my own tradition, there has often been lost that deep connection to the collateral witnesses, the ancestors and what they went through, and allowing that to inspire us today, as well as to inspire us to be of service or to be a blessing, or to be a contribution to future generations. Thank you for saying all that.

One of the questions that I've been asking that is playful, it is fun, but also it's been interesting to see what it solicited in my various guests, and I purposely don't let you know about it ahead of time just so that you can think about it is that if you got to invite to a dinner party where all four of you together, the three of them and you or a one on one, a meal, over a glass of wine or a cup of coffee or whatever, any three people in human history, either at a dinner party where all four of you were there together or in a one on one setting, who would those three people be? Who would you invite to have that meal or glass of wine or whatever conversation with and why would you choose them?

Nikki: I would invite the first Homo sapien. I would invite Jesus, if he was real, if there was a historical Jesus and I would invite --

Michael: They could even be alive today.

Nikki: The third would be an artist from history that has influenced us deeply. Billie Holiday. Yeah. Why, is the question?

Michael: Yes, exactly.

Nikki: I would want to talk to the first Homo sapien about what it felt like to notice that he or she was different from the Neanderthal and Australopithecus brothers and sisters that were around. Did he or she know that they were the beginning of a new species? I would really just want to know how this individual thought and felt. What was the root of how we became who we are and how did this person live their life, and what could we learn about the way that that person lived their life that could inform how we can be better.

I would want to talk to Jesus about really what he thinks, his opinion of what's become of Christianity. Is he proud of us? What would he prefer that we do and what actually happened? Was he just a teacher and all this stuff and hype got blown way out of proportion? Just this resetting of the game.

Then Billie Holiday to be my sister listening to the two of them, thinking about her as a modern example of someone who was in a lot of pain, who learned how to use her gifts and her voice to crack through that pain for others, even when she couldn't herself, and also, so I could just give her a hug.

Part of the artist background that I have is that strange [inaudible 00:17:37] back when she was in the South. I think it came out in 1935 or right around then and it's credited with starting the civil rights movement in a lot of ways to a lot of scholars, but it flies under the radar because it happened so much earlier.

Michael: What was the title of it?

Nikki: Strange Fruit.

Michael: Right.

Nikki: It was the first of its kind. No one was singing about that, no one was talking about it back when she did that song. It created the music that became the soundtrack to the biggest social movement that African-Americans have had in this country. I would want to honor her, I think.

Michael: This is great. I am curious, when you speak to young people, as I am sure you get the opportunity to do quite a bit, if they are just freaked out about the bad news, if they are really present to the challenges that we are facing. How do you encourage them? What would you say to a young person?

Yes, I guess I have two questions. One is for the younger generations, say the under thirty crowd, and then another one for the over sixty crowd. What do you think is the most important thing to communicate to young people, especially those that are overwhelmed and fearful, understandably so? Then, separate from that, what do you think are some of the most important or the most important thing to say to somebody in their senior years?

Nikki: For the under thirty crowd that's overwhelmed, I would say it is vital to celebrate every day, to dance, to sing, to acknowledge what is working, because it's the only way that you are going to stay together. I would also say that you don't have to be a prey of selling out or that thing that happens to older folks, their parents, when they see them selling out or just not taking things so seriously, that that's actually the gift of biology and maturity.

You don't experience the angst and you don't experience the things as intensely as you do when you are a young person and that doesn't mean that we are going to hell in a hand basket. It just means that your job is to remind us of that passion, so go hard. Go hard or go home, because that's your job.

To the over sixty crowd, I would say, it's bifurcated to me, because I feel like there is part of the over sixty crowd that created this situation, knowing that it wasn't going to work but getting theirs anyway. To them, I would probably say be accountable for you did and you knew that the projections weren't going to make it past the time that you retired, and you did it anyway. That's actually not okay. You need to help us. You need to help us by giving us an accurate vision of what happened and not letting history re-write itself.

To the over sixty crowd that was not given opportunities and that has spent

their whole life fighting for things and are now seeing us be able to take advantage of them, I would say, thank you. Thank you for doing what you did and we are going to make sure that you live out the rest of your life in peace.

Michael: That's beautiful. It's interesting, Nikki, I've probably had about twenty conversations already, but there is something about the quality of this conversation that's bringing me into my heart in a way that I perhaps haven't allowed myself to go in some of the others. Thank you very much for that.

To being to wind down, what do you see being done that inspires you, that's a good thing, that either some of the things you are personally involved in, but what are some of the things that are currently being done that you think are right, that are good, that are in the right direction? Maybe we need to do a little bit more, or a little bit better but it's a good thing, and then what are the things that we are not yet attending to that clearly we need to, in the next five to ten years?

Nikki: [Inaudible 00:22:13]. I don't think that we are tending to the fact that we have more opportunity now than we've ever had, because things are so bad. Basically, we've let's things get this bad, because we are a society of convenience and even if the ninety-nine percent only have ten percent of the wealth, that ten percent is so good that most of us have jobs and health care, or just enough. We have enough to not feel like we need to go break some windows.

I would say that we need more marches, we need more occupiers, we need more urgency and we need more inspiration to actually take to the streets and demand what it is that we are worth, and we need more motivation to not participate in things that are not good for us.

Michael: Yes, that's great. I delivered a TEDx talk a couple of years ago. I know you've done one yourself, on evolution of psychology and brain science. One of the things that a lot of people are unaware of is just how we end up sabotaging ourselves, because our instincts evolved to serve us in a world that we no longer live in and yet, we are now surrounded by things that are alluring to us in concentrated forms that they are practically irresistible.

First of all, honoring that reality and then having the structures of support to help us live in deepest integrity, that is to live in right relationship reality and as I sometimes say, integrity is not a solo sport, we need each other to do that, as most of the traditions and recovery programs and

things like that have known.

On this theme, Nikki, anything else that you would like to share in terms of this theme that the past is rooting for us, the future is calling us to greatness, and then how do people learn more about your work and support it?

Nikki: I think when it comes to the future is calling us to greatness, for me, it's really rooted in the people. It's the kids that aren't here yet and the grandkids and the great-grandkids that aren't here yet. For the last hundred years, we made the world. We've increased the human population by six times. We've put satellites in space that have never existed before. We have made machines. We've made radios.

I think one of the reasons why I get so grounded in that is because of my grandmother. She passed away a couple of years ago, at ninety years old. This is the grandmother I mentioned earlier. She was born in 1922. Her family had the first running toilet on their block. I would call her every Wednesday and every Sunday to pray with her. Listening to her prayers, I could feel what it was to carry the weight of ninety years for her, like these ninety years.

It was exhausting to see what humanity had made in those ninety years and we've gotten ourselves, in a hundred years, to the point where our species could be extinct because of our behavior. What the hell? So, I think when it comes to the future is calling us to greatness, that future is, "All right, bozos! We have to completely remake the planet, but can you do it in a way that makes things better and doesn't risk your own extinction, yahoos?"

I feel like there is this almost kick in the head that's coming from the future. It's like, "Okay, you've proven that you're smart, but there is a difference between knowledge and wisdom and you are still in the knowledge phase right now. If you don't get to wisdom, you might not make it."

Michael: Yes, exactly.

Nikki: What are you going to do?

Michael: Exactly. I remember Brian Swimme talking some years ago about the fact that we have macro-phase knowledge and macro-phase power. We now have power at the scale of the planet, but we are operating with micro-

phase wisdom. We desperately need to learn from the larger body of life, the wisdom of the entire community life in terms of how we be as a human species in a way that doesn't toxify the air, the water and the soil, and heat the planet so that our forms of life can't even thrive any longer.

You are bringing me back to all that.

Nikki: It's true, and that's what I would say about the future is calling us to greatness. If you want to learn more about Green for All, www.GreenforAll.org.

Michael: Fabulous. Nikki, thank you so much. Thank you for this conversation. Thank you for bringing me into my own heart in a deeper way than I sometimes allow and just thank you for the work that you are doing. The work that you at Green for All is doing and what you've been doing over the years is just, as I said earlier, really some of the most important work on the planet.

I am honored and I am delighted to have made this connection and I hope this is just the beginning of a long term collegial and friendship. Thank you.

Nikki: Thank you. I really appreciate it.