

## Tim DeChristopher

### Interviewed by Michael Dowd in the series, *The Future is Calling Us to Greatness*

Michael: Well Tim, thanks so much for being part of this conversation series, *The Future is Calling Us to Greatness*. I've been looking forward to having this time to spend with you and hear your story, for a long time.

Tim: Well thanks for having me.

Michael: So, Tim, one of the things...you are really a symbol for the kind of passionate—the kind of non-violent—action that I think so many young people, but also some folks my age (I'm 55) and older, really see as necessary to shift the direction that this industrial society is on. And so I've been asking all my guests in this series to begin by simply introducing yourself, help us get who you are, but also, since your story is so fascinating, take as much time as you'd like to just help us all understand what you've been through these last some years and, sort of, where you're at now.

Tim: Ok. Well I'm Tim DeChristopher. I'm a climate activist. I, ah, got very focussed on climate change around 2007, and was seeing that the climate movement at that point looked very different than all the other successful social movements in our country's history, that I'd been studying, and I'd been seeing that there was a need to actually confront those in power rather than trying to appease those in power. And so, by late 2008 I was looking for opportunities to do that. And I found a good enough opportunity to do that in a Bureau of Land Management auction that was being held at the very end of the Bush administration, and in that auction they were auctioning off land right outside of Arches and Canyonlands national parks to be drilled for oil and gas development. And there were a lot of objections to that auction, partly because it was such sensitive lands, right next to national parks, partly because it was much bigger than previous auctions because they were just trying to get everything out the door before Bush left office. And also partly because the public had been locked out of the decision-making process for this public property. So I decided I was going to go there and do what I could. And so I showed up, and went to go inside. And they said, "Are you here for the auction?" And I said, "Well, yes I am." And they said, "Are you here to be a bidder?" And I said, "Well yes I am," thinking that that would get me inside and then I could see what I could do to be effective. But then once I got inside and saw how the auction was working, I realized that I could actually have a major impact by bidding, that the bid card they gave me could allow me to actually significantly disrupt this auction, and possibly keep things up in the air long enough that a new

administration could come in and actually overturn this.

Michael: Mm-hmm.

Tim: And so I, you know, I had been preparing for quite a while to take that level of action, to know what it might look like, but I'd already built up a commitment that I was ready to do something bold to stand in the way of the climate crisis.

Michael: Tim, if I could just interrupt, share a little just about how your mom was an inspiration, in terms of her model.

Tim: Yeah, um, when I was growing up my mom was an activist in West Virginia, fighting the coal companies in the early days of mountaintop removal. Um, and so she definitely instilled in me this idea that activism is what people outside of an official power structure do to still have an impact on the world.

Michael: Mm-hmm. That's great.

Tim: And so I grew up with that kind of perspective.

Michael: Mm-hmm.

Tim: And so I grew up with that kind of perspective. Um, and so I was looking for opportunities to do that. And so I was sitting there in this auction and decided this was my time, and so I started bidding, uh, at first to drive up the prices, and was fairly successful with that. There were a lot of parcels that were going for \$10 an acre, \$12 an acre, stuff like that, and I was able to drive them up to \$200, \$240 an acre, and the oil companies that I was bidding against were still going strong at that price, um, 'cause they knew that they were getting this stuff for pennies on the dollar.

Michael: Yeah.

Tim: So, ah, I did that for a while and then still felt like I actually needed to be doing more, that the oil companies were still winning these, that they still knew that it was a good deal even at \$200 an acre. And so then I actually started going all-in and winning parcels.

Michael: Mm-hmm.

Tim: And I won 14 in a row before they finally stopped the auction and took me outside...

Michael: *(Chuckling.)*

Tim: ...and asked me what I was doing and what my intentions were. And I said my intention is to stand in the way of this auction in any way that I can, because I think that it's a fraud against the American people and a threat to my future. Um, so at that point they took me into custody and that kicked off a very long legal process that lasted about 2½ years.

Michael: Mmm.

Tim: Um, and, in the course of that time I ended up starting an organization called Peaceful Uprising that pulled together a lot of other folks that shared this perspective on the climate crisis and were trying to mobilize and empower people in the same way. And we continued doing a lot of activism in that time.

Michael: And even during your trial wasn't there, I mean, it seemed, following just the news reports, that it really galvanized a lot of activists to come to your support and be there, and that sort of thing.

Tim: Yeah. Yeah, it really got a tremendous amount of support. There were about 3000 people outside of the trial, I think. Um, people from all over the country came. Um, you know, and we had some big name folks that were, um, that were speaking outside of there and singing outside of there—like Darryl Hannah and Peter Yarrow from Peter, Paul and Mary; Alex Ebert and Edward Sharpe and the Magnetic Zeroes. And I'd have gotten a lot of support from Bill McKibben, and James Hansen, and folks like that, um, Terry Tempest Williams.

Michael: Mm-hmm.

Tim: Yeah, so it did galvanize a lot of people. You know, one of the things that we realized early on that actually came from something that Terry Tempest Williams wrote about this, ah, she said the prosecution of me was all about intimidation—it was about intimidating people into being obedient. And she said the best response to intimidation is joy and resolve.

Michael: Mmm.

Tim: And, so that became sort of our motto, then...

Michael: Wow. Wow.

Tim: ...of what we were trying to project. You know, and so that's why people were singing the entire time...

Michael: Yeah.

Tim: ...outside of the trial, because they wanted to show that joy and resolve in the face of intimidation, to show that they weren't gonna back down. And I think that was largely successful. People held that space, um, in front of the courthouse. Um, you know, and, um, the atmosphere in front of the courthouse changed over the several days of the trial.

Michael: Mm-hmm.

Tim: You know, on the first day, after the trial had been delayed so many times, you know, it was very public that we were organizing around it. And so the police department had organized well ahead of time with the Department of Homeland Security and the U.S. Marshalls. And so the three of them had this joint response, um, where they really militarized the zone.

Michael: Wow!

Tim: I mean they had people with assault rifles on the steps of the courthouse, um, and barricades all over the place. Um, and so there was this tension on the first day, sort of looking for that confrontation. But as people continued to display that joy and resolve, um, singing and making it very clear what they were about, not watering down their message in any way, um, showing that they were very strong in their principles...

Michael: Mm-hmm.

Tim: ...um, but their principles were non-violent ones.

Michael: Mm-hmm.

Tim: And so that became clear, and that actually shifted the context and the conflict there, um, and there was definitely less tension then by the end of the trial.

Michael: Mm-hmm.

Tim: But I was ultimately convicted of two felonies.

Michael: Well, I understand that your lawyers weren't even able to bring in your motives—the climate change and things like that. Is that right?

Tim: Yeah, that's right, we weren't allowed to talk about climate change, we weren't

allowed to talk about the laws that the government broke in holding this auction in the first place.

Michael: Mm-hmm.

Tim: The judge said that if we talked about the government breaking laws that it would just confuse the jury and that they couldn't handle that. Um, so, you know, it exposed this real disrespect for democracy and citizens.

Michael: I, uh, uh, uh, yeah, I mean, I've been a minister for, you know, 25 years, and I call it evil: pursuing our own self-interest, whether we're an individual or a corporation, knowing that in doing so we are harming the quality of life for the future. If that, if the word evil has any meaning in a modern world, post-modern world, it's got to include that.

Tim: Yeah. Absolutely. Um, you know, for me really the defining moment in that whole process, in the entire legal process, um, was a point that happened in the jury selection of the trial. Um, during that there was a big jury pool, ah, because it was a high profile public case, um, and partway through that process both the prosecutor and the judge found out that a substantial proportion of the jurors had gotten a flier before they came into the courthouse on the first day, when they were first reporting, from the Fully Informed Jurors Association. Um, it was a pamphlet that didn't mention anything about my case, but it talked about why we have juries. It talked about the role of the jury as the conscience of the community.

Michael: Mm-hmm.

Tim: Um, it talked about how juries should feel empowered to make any decision that they want, um, you know, regardless of what the judge tells them they have to do. Um, and the prosecutor absolutely lost it...

Michael: *(Chuckling.)*

Tim: ...at this. It was the only time in the whole process I saw him lose his cool, and we had to go into the judge's chambers for a meeting, um, with my defense team and the prosecution and the judge. Um, and the prosecutor was almost shaking when he was reading from this, because he was so angry.

Michael: Mm-hmm.

Tim: And he was saying this notion of voting your conscience, it's out in space. Um, and he was terrified. He was actually scared of this. And he wanted them to declare a mistrial and get a whole new jury pool. But rather than do that, the judge called

the potential jurors to his chambers one at a time. And so they were sitting there at the end of the table, ah, across from this judge, with my legal team on one side, and me, and the prosecution on the other side, and the judge would say to them, ah, “Now you need to understand that it’s not your job to decide what’s right or wrong. Your job is to listen to what I say the law says, and you have to enforce it, even if you think it’s morally wrong. Can you do that? Can you do what I ask you today?” And unless they said yes they weren’t on the jury.

Michael: Oh my God. (*Big laugh.*)

Tim: And I sat there, I sat there and watched one person after another say, “Yes your honor. I’ll do whatever you tell me to do, even if I think it’s morally wrong.”

Michael: What the fuck?! (*Both laugh.*)

Tim: And, you know, I was sitting in the seat closest to the juror, and I could tell that they meant it. And so it was this real moment of clarity for me, to watch people who were totally out of their element—nobody had been in that kind of situation before, and, you know, they come into this militarized, huge courthouse, through several security screenings, into this ornate court room, with the judge sitting up above them in his robes, speaking to them in very patriarchal kind of ways. And they just bought it, that it wasn’t their job to decide what’s right or wrong, because it seemed so easy to say, um, you know, I don’t have to consider what’s morally right or wrong, I’m just following instructions from this authority figure.

Michael: Why is it this reminds me of, you know, Germany in the Second World War

Time: Right.

Michael: ...or, uh, Stanley—is it Stanley Milgram’s experiments, you know, about authority? I mean, this is just crazy!

Tim: Yeah, and, you know, that’s the thought that I had, at the time, as well. You know, watching, um, watching those people let go of their own moral authority. It was the first time that I feel like I really understood how something like the Holocaust, or a genocide, could happen...

Michael: Mm-hmm.

Tim: ...where a whole society full of people are willing to sacrifice their own moral authority. Um, and, and yet, at the same time, I also saw the prosecutor freaking out, because people had been told that they could use their conscience.

Michael: Ah-huh.

Tim: He was the U.S. Attorney. He had the entire force of the United States government behind him, and yet he was terrified at the notion of citizens using their conscience.

Michael: Mm-hmm.

Tim: Um, and so I saw this huge dichotomy...

Michael: *(Whispering: Wow!)*

Tim: ... hinging on the power of conscience...

Michael: Mm-hmm.

Tim: ...where, when people let go of their conscience and abandon their own moral authority that any atrocity was possible. Um, but when people had faith in their own moral authority, and the shared moral authority of their community, there was no power, no force, that couldn't be impacted by that.

Michael: Yeah.

Tim: Um, and so that was a real defining moment for me. It was one of the reasons that, um, probably the biggest reason that I decided to go to Divinity School, was seeing that this was really, fundamentally a spiritual issue about whether or not we have faith in our moral authority, and particularly looking at where we're headed with the climate crisis. Um, you know, if we go down that path of a lot of our civilization unraveling with people who don't have faith in their own moral authority, and who think they have to do whatever they're told, regardless of whether they think it's morally wrong, um, that's pretty scary.

Michael: Yeah.

Tim: And it's radically different than some sort of collapse in which people have faith in their moral authority to shape the kind of society that they want, ah, according to their values and their principles. Um, those are two radically different outcomes...

Michael: Mm-hmm.

Tim: ...um, from the same sort of physical result of a high degree of climate change.

Michael: Mm-hmm.

Tim: And, so that's what pushed me down this path. Um, so I did end up spending two years in prison after getting convicted of these two felonies. But immediately after that I, um, started at Harvard Divinity School, which is where I'm at now.

Michael: Mm-hmm. Yeah, yeah. No, I'm actually glad that you've got it right behind you, you can see that. Because Connie, my wife Connie Barlow, is a science writer, and we've been traveling all over North America for the last 12 years speaking about science, inspiration, and sustainability, and have spoken to like 2000 groups, including hundreds—probably more than 1500—churches. And, um, you know, good, bad, great, and evil—these primary moral categories—have in all cultures been defined by how we impact others and how that ripples out to the future: you know, if I do something that's helpful to you or to the future, I've done a good thing; if I do something that's harmful others or harm the future, I've done a bad thing. If I sacrifice to be a blessing to others or to the future, I've done a great thing or heroic thing; but if I self-centeredly serve my own needs—screw others, to hell with the future—I've done an evil thing.

Tim: Mm-hmm.

Michael: And this is not moral rocket science; we don't need Ten Commandments to tell us. And Connie and I both believe that until the religious communities really start stepping up and speaking with moral authority—I mean, I love the book, uh, *Moral Ground*, by Kathleen Dean Moore...

Tim: Right.

Michael: ...because it brings so many moral voices from around the world, and different traditions, but this is, you know, pre-eminently a moral issue, arguably the greatest moral issue in human history, and I don't see us making the kinds of, uh, necessary political and economic changes the next decade or two, which is when we have to make huge changes before totally irreversible—I mean some things have already become irreversible, but before catastrophic irreversible change is locked in—I don't see that happening, unless the religious communities become a hell of a lot more prophetic, and speak on behalf of reality—whether we use secular or divine names for reality—but speak on behalf of reality, and do so with unflinching authority.

Tim: Mm-hmm.

Michael: That's why I'm so glad that you're going to seminary. And I wanted to ask a question that Connie actually asked me to ask you. She said, you know: What do you think about, sort of, the role of religion in say the coming decade or two? And

what's being done in the religious communities that inspire you, if anything, and what still needs to be done and what will you be trying to do?

Tim: Um, well, I think, um, there's a decent amount being done—or at least a decent amount being talked about. Um, uh, just a couple of weeks ago, the weekend of the climate march in New York City, um, also going on in New York City at that time, at Union Theological Seminary, was a conference of religious leaders from around the world there to focus on climate change. Um, and I was a part of that, that conference. Um, you know, and people were talking about this as, um, the prime, or *one* of the prime moral issues of our time...

Michael: Mm-hmm.

Tim: ...and why there needs to be a religious response to it, and that sort of thing. Um, but they were talking about it in largely the same way that, um, religious thinkers, um and religious leaders, and even religious organizations, have been talking about the ecological crisis as a moral issue, um, since the 1970s...

Michael: Exactly.

Tim: ...when the World Council of Churches was putting out, um, you know some really forward-looking statements that are still very salient today. Um, so those statements have been happening for a while, um, you know, but the thing is we know what it looks like when religious leaders and religious organizations really act like something is a moral issue. You know, we've got plenty of pictures of that in our history, um, of people acting really boldly, of churches acting really boldly. Uh, and that's still not happening...

Michael: Right.

Tim: ...on climate change.

Michael: Right.

Tim: Um, you know, we've got some great academics that are making great statements about religion and climate change, um, but we don't have, um, the really prophetic leaders, um, like, ah, the Southern Christian Leadership Council, or, um the Berrigan brothers...

Michael: Mm-hmm.

Tim: ...ah, or all those great examples that we have in history.

Michael: Yeah.

Tim: Um, we're still not getting that kind of leadership, which is what I think we need.

Michael: Yeah. I completely agree. Ah, in the mid-90s I was the religious organizer for the National Environmental Trust, based in Washington D.C. I worked with Phil Clapp, who died a few years ago—major, massively effective environmental lobbyist. And my job was to basically organize the religious leadership of the United States around key environmental issues that were coming up in Congress. So I worked with Jewish rabbis, Catholic priests, Protestant clergy, and Evangelical and Unitarian clergy on issues that were coming up for a vote in Congress. And I completely agree with you—I mean, there's a lot of really good, wonderful things that have been said and have been said for decades, but we're not “singing like a movement.” That's one of the things I love that I found on your website, that we will become a movement when we sing like a movement, and the role of song to unite us and to help us see each other as sort of a large, multi-cellular organism, insisting on change, in the direction of, in this case, intergenerational justice.

Tim: Mm-hmm. Yeah, you know, the role of song is something that I've been focussed on for a while. Um, when we started Peaceful Uprising, at the beginning of 2009, we started it with, sort of, the vague goal of trying to get the climate movement to act more like a social movement, and less like just a group of lobbyists.

Michael: Mm-hmm.

Tim: And so two specific pieces of that that we had in mind was bringing in civil disobedience, as a tactic and a strategy, uh, and also bringing in music into the movement. Uh, and so those were two of the big things that we were pushing for. Um, you know, and now, looking back on that, 6½ years later, um, I never could have expected that we would have been more successful at bringing civil disobedience into the movement than bringing music. *(Both laugh.)* You know, that this rather comfortable movement would be more willing to get arrested than to sing together. *(Both laugh.)* But I really think that that's the result. There has been a massive shift in the mainstream embrace of civil disobedience, at least to some extent, you know, at least sort of the superficial kind of, um, photo-op style of civil disobedience. Um. Ah. But, you know, ah, there's still no climate organization that I know of that have all kinds of staff that—I don't know of any one that has a music coordinator.

Michael: Mmm. Right.

Tim: Um, you know, there is still no, um, real value on music in this movement.

Michael: Mm-hmm.

Tim: And I think it's one of the many things that, um, helps to build the kind of empowerment...

Michael: Yes.

Tim: ...that we really need.

Michael: Mm-hmm.

Tim: Um, you know, we're going up against really big forces in this movement. You know, when we're honest about, um what it means to be a climate justice movement, ah, it means that our goals entail costing the richest and most ruthless industries in the world trillions of dollars...

Michael: Mm-hmm.

Tim: ...in lost future profits.

Michael: Yes.

Tim: And costing some really ruthless individuals in that industry billions of dollars in personal, ah, lost profits...

Michael: Mm-hmm.

Tim: ...in the future. And they are going to push back at some point, you know? Particularly if we're at all successful at wresting our public institutions, ah, and our government, away from those folks that are controlling it right now...

Michael: Mm-hmm.

Tim: ...um, and they're not able to use the legal system as a weapon against us. Um, you know, they'll find other ways.

Michael: Mm-hmm.

Tim: Ah, you know, and there will be consequences, ah, in this struggle, in the same way that there have been in the ground-breaking social movements in our past. Um, you know, so we need, we need a pretty high level of trust, um, and empowerment, um, and a strong foundation to be building that movement off of.

Michael: Yeah.

Tim: Um, and, and, you know, music is one of those things that, um, pulls us together in very real and tangible ways.

Michael: Mm-hmm.

Tim: You know, we didn't, we didn't evolve to feel powerful, to feel part of something bigger than ourselves, because of names on a list, because of avatars on a screen, ah, you know, or, or numbers on a petition. Um, we evolved to feel powerful as a group because of the people around us that we could see, and feel, and hear, and smell, and touch. You know, the people that we can sing with, and march with.

Michael: Yup.

Tim: And, ah, you know, I think that's part of why every culture around the world has had singing as a part of its tradition...

Michael: Mm-hmm.

Tim: ...because there's something powerful about literally harmonizing with the people around you. Um, you know, lifting your voice into something, um, much bigger and more beautiful than you could create on your own.

Michael: Yes.

Tim: That's what organizing is all about, really.

Michael: Yup. Yeah. Amen. I mean, one of the things that I'll, I'll want to, you know, long after this series airs, um, I'm gonna want to be in communication with you around this topic, specifically, because Connie and I, this year, as you may know, have been teaching along the route—teaching and preaching along the route—of the Great March for Climate Action, so we've had a hundred speaking engagements lined up between L.A. and D.C. Uh, we're now in Pittsburgh, sort of the final stretch coming, you know, with the aim of arriving in Washington D.C. on November 1. Um, and, I've been finding myself speaking at these public rallies and getting bolder and bolder in what I say, and also wishing that we had more attention that had been given to the kinds of chants and the kinds of songs that help people feel that they're a part of a movement...

Tim: Yeah.

Michael: ...and that touch the soul, that move the heart, that move the emotions, just in

terms of the power of the music.

Tim            Yeah.

Michael:      ...and that touch the soul, that move the heart, that move the emotions, just in terms of the power of the music.

Tim:            Yep.

Michael:      So I'll want to be in communication with you and probably, uh, you know, brainstorming who are some of the best, ah, ah, sort of social justice singer-songwriters out there, and perhaps enroll them, ah, over the course of the next months and years, um, to really contribute to this. Because, I completely agree—it's not gonna happen in a major way, the kind of way that, you know, Naomi Klein talks about in her latest book, you know, *This Changes Everything*.

Tim:            Mm-hmm.

Michael:      Um, it's just not gonna happen to that degree without the artists and especially the music makers, the singers and the songwriters.

Tim:            Yup. Yeah, absolutely. Yeah, I've been building up a network of those folks.

Michael:      Yeah.

Tim:            Yeah, I think it's definitely an important thing. Um, you know, and I've also looks at sort of why we lost music. Um, I think part of it is that, um, people can show up for a one day rally and learn a three-word chant in about ten seconds, and they can do the three-word chant then, and they can go home, um, and, you know, read about it in the news. Um, but to be able to sing together...

Michael:      Right.

Tim:            ...in public, it takes practice..

Michael:      Yeah.

Tim:            you've got to get together ahead of time.

Michael:      Yup.

Tim:            Um, you know, you've got to spend time together, and that's part of where the empowerment is that's gonna get you through the tougher stuff.

Michael: Yeah. Yeah. No, I completely agree. Well, Tim, help us get a better feel—I mean, you’ve already shared some, but—Peaceful Uprising. I consider Peaceful Uprising, and 350.org, and, you know, The Deep Green Resistance folks, you know, those of you who are really pushing the edge, both in terms of the prophetic call to put your bodies on the line, to put your, ah, your voices on the line, to, um, to do more than just talk and sign petitions and, and, ah, click, you know, things on a website. Help us get a better feel both for what Peaceful Uprising has been doing and what you imagine, sort of, in the next five years.

Tim: Um, well, you know, we sort of started Peaceful Uprising as an experimental group. Um, and, um, and, you know, we started with an understanding that what the climate movement had been doing wasn’t working at that point. Um, and, so we started a bit to experiment and try to do something else. And we didn’t know, um, exactly what it was gonna take...

Michael: Mm-hmm.

Tim: ...um, and so we started it with that degree of openness, um, but we had some principles that, um, that we felt like, ah, resonated through social movement history, um, about the power of human stories, um, and the need to share our stories and connect with people on a human level...

Michael: Mm-hmm.

Tim: ...um, about the need to confront those in power and the need to pressure them rather than appease those in power. And so we carried those sort of principles through, um, and tried a lot of different things.

Michael: Mm-hmm.

Tim: Peaceful Uprising actually existed for a year-and-a-half, just as what we called each other. Um, *(both laugh)* there was no formal structure.

Michael: Sure.

Tim: There was no formal structure. Ah, we weren’t technically a real organization for that first year-and-a-half. Um, you know, which in some ways allowed us to do, um, some things that, ah, that a lot of other organizations can’t do. I mean, ah, we, we basically launched a congressional campaign against our blue dog

congressman, there in Utah, um, and mobilized folks from a lot of different social movements there in Utah, um, to do this grassroots campaign. And we could do that because we weren't a real organization. *(Both laugh.)* So there was nothing wrong with us just as a group of people, um, waging that kind of campaign.

Michael: Sure.

Tim: Um, ah, but we, I think from the beginning we tried to connect sort of the, um, the community building and resilience piece of this...

Michael: Mm-hmm.

Tim: ...with the broader perspective and the resistance to injustice piece of this. Um, so, so we've always tried to combine building a strong community there locally in Utah...

Michael: Mm-hmm.

Tim: ...and supporting one another in deep ways, and building the kind of local structures that, ah, are gonna make our community more resilient...

Michael: Mm-hmm.

Tim: ...but also going to where the front lines of where of injustice were, um, and standing in the way of the fossil fuel industry, um, so working together with the folks in West Virginia, um, or in Black Mesa, or um, fighting off the first tar sands mine in the United States, in eastern Utah, um, which has now become the biggest campaign that Peaceful Uprising has been working on...

Michael: Mm-hmm.

Tim: ...for the past few years. Um, so, over that course of time our leadership structure evolved several times, and sort of our challenge evolved, as well. I'd say for the first few years of Peaceful Uprising, um, I'd have to admit that our real target wasn't actually the fossil fuel industry, and it wasn't really politicians or government leaders. Our target was actually the environmental movement.

Michael: Oh yeah. Sure.

Tim: We were actually waging a campaign, um, targeting the climate movement, um, trying to get it to think more like a movement.

Michael: Yes.

Tim: Um, and over the course of those few years, um, things did shift pretty radically, um, you know, and, and, there were a lot of factors going in to that. You know, part of that was that the, that the appeasement strategy of big green groups, um, failed pretty catastrophically in 2009, with the cap and trade bill...

Michael: Mm-hmm.

Tim: ...that, um, that those big green groups had spent over \$700 million dollars of foundation money, um, from 2007 to 2009, um, pushing that agenda, um, in opposition to the grassroots of the movement...

Michael: Right.

Tim: ...who, from the beginning, told them we don't support this...

Michael: Right.

Tim: ...we think this is a step in the wrong direction. Um, you know, they didn't listen, and they said, "We know what's politically feasible, we know how to get things done in Washington, you've got to do it our way," and they sort of kept everybody in line with that. Um, and then they failed miserably, and it turned out they didn't really know..

Michael: Right.

Tim: ...how to get things done in Washington. Um, and so I think that empowered a surge in the climate justice side of the movement, um, and the grassroots side of the movement. Um, and so that, that shifted pretty radically, and, um, and our goal as an organization became less about trying to change the movement than joining the front lines of that movement, where the real leadership was coming from...

Michael: Mm-hmm.

Tim: ...um, from those marginalized communities, um, from indigenous communities that were leading the way...

Michael: Mm-hmm.

Tim: ...over the past couple of years in the climate movement. Um, and so it became a lot of work about, um, exploring what solidarity looks like...

Michael: Mm-hmm.

Tim: ...because, once um, once a decent chunk of a movement turned away from that strategy of appeasing those in power and trying to create a cleaner greener version of the world that we have now and it opened up to a bigger vision of a truly healthy and just world, we found a lot of allies...

Michael: Yeah, sure.

Tim: ...that were also working for a radically different and just world that never really wanted to be a part of a movement for a cleaner greener version of the world we have now. That was inspiring, ah, to those folks. Um, so, with all these new allies joining the movement, um, I think Peaceful Uprising over the past few years has tried to explore what that solidarity really looks like, and how that actually works. Um, and there's certainly been a lot of growing pains...

Michael: Mm-hmm.

Tim: ...in that chapter of the movement, um, as that has been explored with folks. Um, and, and I haven't been really involved in the leadership of Peaceful Uprising since the time that I got locked up in 2011.

Michael: Yeah.

Tim: ...Um, and, you know, pretty soon after I got released, I moved out here to Massachusetts to go to Harvard Divinity School.

Michael: Mm-hmm.

Tim: So, you know, it's continued to evolve, um, on its own.

Michael: Mm-hmm.

Tim: Um, you know, and it's charting its own course at this point. Um, you know, which I think, uh, which I think is good. You know, I think we need, um, a lot more experimentation in the movement.

Michael: Mm-hmm.

Tim: ...Um, you know, and they're doing things that I don't necessarily agree with

everything. Um, and I think that's good, too. Um, you know, I think that the movement will have to, um, go beyond what I'm comfortable with, like (*Cell phone ringing*)...

Michael: Sorry about that. Keep going.

Tim: ...For the movement to continue growing and evolving, um, you know it has to go to places that make those of us that used to be the front line of the movement, um, uncomfortable. Um, and, you know, we'll see how that plays out.

Michael: Yeah.

Tim: But I'd say that they're continuing to experiment at this point.

Michael: Yeah, yeah. Well, and I would imagine, I mean, having gone through, you know, Divinity School myself, ah, and then pastored three churches over the course of a decade, I know that, you know, you don't have a hell of a lot of time for other sorts of studies. I mean, you're, at least if—I'm assuming that you're sort of going full time, and will you be graduating, like in 2016? What's your time frame?

Tim: Yeah. Yeah, I'll be graduating in 2016. Um, I'm going full time, but I am juggling that with, ah, a handful of other projects.

Michael: That's great.

Tim: You know, I'm continuing to organize, um, a lot of ah, what I've been doing—sort of my role in the movement since I got released—is supporting other folks who have engaged in civil disobedience, particularly those that want to take their case to trial.

Michael: Yeah. Yeah. That's great.

Tim: So, you know, I was last year working with the folks from Michigan that, that got substantial charges for standing in the way of the Enbridge pipeline construction. Um, one of those folks is actually, um, in court today.

Michael: Oh wow.

Tim: Um, his case has been dismissed twice, and keeps getting re-prosecuted. Um, ah, so he's, he's still looking at going to trial.

Michael: Mm-hmm.

Tim: Um, that's Chris Wahmhoff there in Michigan, in Kalamazoo. Um, and, I've also been working with a couple of folks here in Massachusetts that, in 2013, anchored a lobster boat in front of the Brayton Point coal-fired power plant and blockaded a shipment of West Virginia coal from being delivered there.

Michael: Mm-hmm.

Tim: Um, they ended up taking their case to trial. Um, and, and we'd been organizing for a while and gotten a lot of public support, um, had a lot of clergy members there at their trial. Um, and, and as we had sort of this big presence in the courtroom, that sort of thing, the morning of their, their trial, the D.A. sort of just started taking over the prosecution, and, um, pulled everybody aside and, um, and ah, made it clear that he was dropping all the charges, um, and just reducing it to a civil infraction. Um, and, and so then that got cleared up in the courtroom and everything was dropped, um, and then we went outside—you know, where we had a big gathering of supporters, we had media, um—and then this D.A. comes out and says that, ah, he's dropping the charges out of concern for all the children that would be impacted by climate change. Um, and, I mean: blew my mind.

Michael: Yeah!

Tim: It was pretty amazing. Ah, and then he gave this speech about how there has been a serious failure of political leadership on climate change...that necessitates this kind of action. Um, ah, and it was, it was really incredible. He actually held up Bill McKibben's article from *Rolling Stone* and said, "I'll be marching in two week—and he was. You know, and he's continued to do interviews, um, talking about this ever since. Um, he's done speaking gigs with Ken and Jay, the two activists that were on the lobster boat.

Michael: Mm-hmm. Wow!

Tim: You know, and took a really bold stand on climate change. And he's now, um, sort of one of the most aggressive politicians in the country all of the sudden...on climate change.

Michael: Wow!

Tim: And, you know I think he was pushed into that...by, um, this act of civil disobedience...that was done in a very bold and uncompromising sort of way, but also in an open enough way that invited this guy in... invited a potential adversary to become an ally.

Michael: Yes. Exactly.

Tim: So I'm now working with those folks on launching a climate disobedience center that's a support and resource center for folks that do engage in civil disobedience. We're also looking to pull off some of our own actions. So, I'm working on that. I'm also working with Unitarian Universalists nationally. My (*inaudible*) for Divinity School this year is working with the UU College of Social Justice...that is doing a joint project with the UUA, and the UU Service Committee, called, "Commit to Respond," that is a climate justice initiative that they're launching in 2015 where, for a month, all those organizations are gonna focus just on climate change. And that month is a time where they're asking individuals and congregations to make commitments of what they're going to be doing over the next two years

Michael: Yeah.

Tim: Um, and that month is a time where they're asking individuals in congregations to make commitments of what they're going to be doing over the next two years. So it's meant to kick off two years of climate activism. And it's centered around the three pillars, or what I'm calling the three legs of the stool, because you need all three of them in order to have a balanced movement—of growing the movement, growing the capacity for change; advancing human rights for marginalized communities and impacted communities; and shifting emissions and reducing carbon emissions and moving towards renewable energy. There's been a decent amount of climate activism within Unitarian Universalism, particularly in recent years, but a lot of that is focussed just on that, um, reducing emissions, on sort of the green consumerism side of things. And, so we're looking to expand that, to unify those efforts, and to propel them forward. So, my part of that is organizing the climate justice training next summer for Unitarian Universalists, particularly for young adults. There'll be an intensive training that not only trains them in, sort of, the basics of climate justice organizing, but also really grounds them in UU theology and philosophy around climate change, uh, around dealing with grief, which I think is something that's been under-explored in the climate movement, and ignored to our own peril.

Michael: Exactly. I mean Joanna Macy's one of my dearest friends and mentors, sort of in that older sister way. She's...uh...the importance of being in touch with your despair, your grief, your anguish.

Tim: Mm-hmm. Yeah, and I think particularly for young people that are going to have to deal with the most severe impacts of this, um, they're gonna have to prepare themselves for this—emotionally and spiritually—and have a real solid foundation on which they're standing to fight this struggle.

Michael: Yes. Yeah. Amen. Well, please see Connie and I as allies in this because we've, as I mentioned in an email I sent you, we've spoken in more Unitarian Universalist churches than anybody, ever. Uh, we've literally spoken to about half the denomination—of the probably 1400-1500 churches that we've spoken in, 500 of them are Unitarian Universalists, which is almost half the denomination. And we just stayed at the home, just last year, at the home of Jan Dash, who's one of the main climate voices within the UUA. Part of it because the Unitarian Universalists have been, sort of, on the growing edge of many peace and justice movements over the years, and certainly they have a grounding in science, and in the reality of intergenerational justice. Well, this is awesome. I want to ask you one sort of off the wall question, that Connie has invited me to ask all my guests. And it's generated some really interesting response. And that is, if you had the opportunity, Tim, of having a conversation, like at a dinner party, with any three people in human history—so three people and you—or, uh, one-on-one, you take a hike or go get a glass of beer or wine or whatever, or a meal, with any three people in history, who would those three people be and why would you choose them?

Tim: Hmm... The first one that comes to mind is Martin Luther King, because I think he was one of our greatest prophetic voices. And not just in a way of speaking truth to power, but in the way of really boldly confronting that truth himself, and, um, really courageously asking his congregation and his community to face up to that truth as well. You know, I've been listening to a lot of his sermons recently, and they're, in some ways, the hardest to listen to sermons that I've ever heard anyone preach.

Michael: In what sense?

Tim: In the sense that, you know, a lot of the issue-based sermons that I hear today, they'll have this trajectory of, sort of, the negative side of things where they sort of take you down and then bring you back up, right? And, you know, it's like five minutes of bad news and then, sort of, oh, the positive side of this, of how we can turn it around. And listening to some of Dr. King's sermons, particularly ones like, "A Knock at Midnight," he'll go in to that bad news, and then he'll go deeper, and then he'll go deeper, and then he'll go deeper, you know? And 30 minutes into the sermon, um, he's going deeper into, you know, more bad news, um, and sort of deeper despair, and really holds people there for a long time. I mean, 40 minutes into a sermon before there's any good news.

Michael: *(Chuckles.)*

Tim: Um, and, you know, thinking about that from the context of a minister, you know, it takes a lot of courage to hold people there.

Michael: Yes.

Tim: ...to say, "We've got to sit with this." You know? To have the courage that anybody's gonna come back the next week. *(Both chuckling.)* You know, so, I think I would love to talk to him about how you have that kind of courage, not just speaking truth to power but to your own community.

Michael: Yes, exactly.

Tim: And, uh, and to make your own community that uncomfortable, I guess. So he would be at the top of my list. Boy, I've got two more, huh?

Michael: *(Chuckles.)* Yeah, and I know that tomorrow morning you'll wake up and you'll think, "Oh!"

Tim: Um, another one would be Alice Paul, who has been one of my role models for a while, as she was one of the later leaders of the women's suffrage movement, who came along at a time when the movement, for a couple of decades at that point, had been, um, had been pretty safe, and pretty polite—they had been begging for their rights for a couple of decades, and doing a lot of education, um, building up a lot of folks in the middle, folks who said, "Yeah, well maybe women should have some more rights one day." And Alice Paul came along and said, "We shouldn't be begging for our rights, we should be demanding our rights." And started leading the movement in some really bold and radical actions, um, especially for the time, and especially for women engaging in them. Um, and so the country was sort of shocked with these images of women getting arrested and beaten up by cops outside the White House, and dragged off to jail and force-fed in jail when they went on hunger strike. And it was pretty shocking for the nation. And I think the impact of that was that there wasn't this comfortable middle ground any more, where people could say, "Yeah, one day." But it was a stark choice between the continued violence against women—which was now the status quo, um, in a more obvious way than it had been before—or rights right now, voting right now. And she forced the country into a choice. And they came down on the side of suffrage, and they won a constitutional amendment in a very short amount of time, from a point where people thought there was no way that they would do it within the next 10, 20 years. Uh, you know, I think that was in some ways a gamble, right? But one that I think has a lot of parallels to where we're at now, where the environmental movement has been polite now, and has done a lot of decent education, and has built up a lot of mass in the middle of people who say, "Yeah, we should have clean air, and clean water, and yeah, we should move away from fossil fuels one day." You know? But, by and large, the country still hasn't been forced into a choice between a radical shift away from fossil fuels and the continued violence against the young...

Michael: Yes.

Tim: ...which is what climate change really is...

Michael: (*Interrupting.*) Yes, I like that: “violence against the young.”

Tim: ...It’s just done in a subtle way. I think part of the role of civil disobedience is that it dramatizes subtle violence. Um, you know, when people, I think at a certain point, when they looked at segregation, um, a lot of comfortable white people said, “Oh, it’s just different water fountains. What’s the big deal? It’s not like it’s actual violence against people.” But then, when they were confronted with images of people being beaten up at lunch counters, it dramatized the issue, and showed that that violence was real, that it was always implicit in the system. You know, so I think we’re in a position now where we’ve got enough moderated support that if we push them into making that choice, I do think a lot of the country would come down on the side of climate justice.

Michael: Mm-hmm. Boy, I want to be in on that dinner or hike or whatever, ‘cause I’d like to pick her brain, too.

Tim: Yeah. Um...and I’d say the third would be Wangari Maathai. You know I know quite a few folks that knew her personally, and were deeply impacted by her and deeply inspired by her. You know, and I think she did something pretty amazing in her movement, of taking people who had no reason to feel powerful, um—a huge community of people that were disempowered in a lot of ways—and found a way to empower them and get them to do really bold things. Uh, and led, really, a holistic movement, a movement that wasn’t sort of an isolated environmental movement, and created community that really helped people in holistic ways, um, and fought at that intersectionality of oppression, which a lot of folks talk about, but not many folks put it in to practice as well as people like Wangari Maathai did.

Michael: Yeah. Wow. Those are great; all three of them are great. Well, Tim, this has absolutely been fabulous. I guess I have one last question, which is, who do you feel are your closest colleagues? Like who nourishes you? Where do you draw inspiration from—people either inside or outside this movement? What sustains you? What wakes you up on a day by day, week by week basis, to do the work you do, and sort of who are your closest colleagues or sources of inspiration?

Tim: Um, in some ways that’s tougher for me than the historical question. Um, you know, Terry Tempest Williams is somebody that has become a very close friend for me and a really powerful inspiration. Um, there were a handful of folks in Peaceful Uprising that served as that for me, for a long time, and still do, but we’re all sort

of scattered around the country now—folks like Ashley Anderson, and Dillon Schneider, and Lauren Wood. Um, you know, they still provide that for me when I can be around them, but that's not as often as it used to be. And I continually meet those folks when I travel around the country, you know. And Jay O'Hara, one of the guys that was on the lobster boat, is somebody that I connect with a lot. He's a Quaker that has a real strong spiritual foundation for the work that he does, and has that deep understanding of where this work is grounded, and also total respect for how scary this work is. Um, you know I think, one of the ways that I often feel alienated from a lot of the climate movement is that a lot of folks aren't willing to admit that we are fighting against some really big evil here, you know, that we are fighting against really big, powerful forces, um, that at some point are gonna start playing dirty. And we're fighting against those forces in a way that we're trying to recognize the intersectionality of a lot of other forms of oppression and injustice, as well. Um, which means that—when we're serious about what we're doing with climate change, with climate justice—it means that we're choosing to tangle and putting ourselves in the path of that really big evil. And, to me it's discouraging when I see people deny that and pretend like, oh this is gonna be easy and it's gonna be convenient, and we'll just try to make it positive and optimistic for folks. Um, I actually find that kind of despairing, because underlying that is the perspective that we're not strong enough to handle the real truth of this, and that in order to be hopeful we have to avoid part of the truth. And I find it much more encouraging, um, when folks can base their hope off of our ability to tackle hard truths together, and to recognize just how big of a task we're actually fighting here. And so I tend to connect and get my replenishment and inspiration from the other folks who are willing to engage honestly with just how big of a struggle this really is.

Michael: Yeah, well you've probably got more than enough to read, just given your course load, I'm sure, but two books that, if you haven't already read, I cannot recommend too highly, I just think that they're two of the best books on exactly this topic. One of them I'm only a few chapters into it, but I'm loving it so far, *Deep Green Resistance*, but the other one is Naomi Klein's brand new book, *This Changes Everything*. I just finished listening to it on audio—it has a fabulous reader, whoever the woman is who reads it is just incredible. So, about 50 times in the course of the book—this is what the cover looks like here—about 50 times in the course of this book I thought to myself, “Oh my gosh, I want to quote her.” And so I had to buy the hard cover so I could listen to it again and read it and mark it up, but it's exactly on this topic here.

Tim: Yeah, I haven't read Naomi's book yet, but she'll be here in town actually speaking at my local UU church in Cambridge this Thursday.

Michael: That's great. Well, if you—a she's so booked this fall, I so wanted to have her and I

still want to have her as part of this series, but I don't have her direct email address—so if this has been a positive experience or you'd like to recommend that she respond, I'd love to have her as part of this because I just think that she's one of the crucial voices on this topic at this point. And this book is unflinching, this book is phenomenal, I think you're just going to love it.

Tim: Yup. And, I have read *Deep Green Resistance*; I read that while I was in prison actually. And, uh, found that I think I'm coming from a very drastically different philosophical perspective.

Michael: *(Interrupting.)* Yeah, no I agree, I'm coming from a non-violent perspective myself, and I think that ultimately those who take the more radical edge, um, are, risk, potentially, actually causing the entrenchment to be worse. I mean, one of the things that we've seen....

Tim: *(Interrupting.)* Well, I would challenge, though, uh, I would challenge the assumption that violence is more radical than non-violence. Um, I don't believe that that's true. I think that the climate crisis is serious enough that we should be doing the most radical and strongest thing that we can possibly do—which I very deeply believe is non-violence.

Michael: Wow, that's great.

Tim: I think, um, that if the folks embracing the tactics of violence got more serious and got more committed they would end up with non-violence. I believe that both philosophically and strategically. You know, when we look at who our opponent is in this, it's our government and the corporations that control it.

Michael: Right.

Tim: You know, and I often ask people, "If you had to have *some* kind of competition against Garry Kasparov, the great grand master chess champion, um, but you got to determine what that competition would be—but it was a high-stakes competition, with everything you care about on the line—would you choose chess? Probably not, right?"

Michael: *(Chuckles.)*

Tim: If you had to have *some* kind of competition against Garry Kasparov, you'd race him, or play Trivial Pursuit, or anything other than chess, right? 'Cause he's the best in the world, the best ever, at chess. And our opponent in this, the government and its corporate masters, are the greatest force of violence in the history of

violence.

Michael: *Whispering:* Wow.

Tim: They have mastered that game better than anyone *ever*. And to go down that path is to play their game, which is why most infiltrators in social movements try to get us to be violent. Most infiltrators talk exactly like the folks in *Deep Green Resistance* do.

Michael: *Whispering:* Wow.

Tim: Because they want us to get on their game. Because they can just crush us with that, and no one will care.

Michael: Wow! Tim—I am so grateful that you’re saying this. This is just kick-ass.

Tim: *(Silence.)* Yeah.

Michael: Wow. I mean, up until this conversation, what I’ve been thinking was that, in the same way that Earth First was able to, in some ways, redefine the middle on some issues, that the Deep Green Resistance movement may be doing that as well. Um, I don’t know, because my only encounter with them is this book, and, like I say, I’m three chapters in. And, um, I did have an amazing conversation, as part of this series, with Lierre Keith, and I’ve got a scheduled conversation with Derrick Jensen here in a few days. But I so appreciate what you just articulated. I think that is a fabulous perspective, and I’ll be using that analogy, I assure you.

Tim: Yeah. And, you know, before reading the book I thought that I just disagreed with them on that tactical issue. Um, but once I read it, I realized that it’s actually a much deeper philosophical difference that I have with them. Um, you know, and they say pretty clearly in the introduction to that book—um, I remember the part that Derrick Jensen wrote, where he said, “I’ve looked all around our society and not seen a single thing that I think is redeemable.” And that line really shocked me. And I wondered if he really meant it. Because, for me, the whole point of this struggle is that I think there’s so much about our society that is redeemable, so much that is worth holding on to.

Michael: Mm-hmm. Yeah, I’m with you.

Tim: Um, so many of the people around me that I think are worth fighting for, so much of the beauty in our world that I think is worth fighting for, so much of our culture and our music and our art, is worth holding on to, and not just letting it go.

Michael: Mm-hmm. Yeah.

Tim: And, you know, when I heard him say that he didn't see anything that is redeemable, you know, one of my first thoughts was that, does he not see himself as part of society? Or does he not think that he's redeemable?

Michael: Yeah, I don't remember that line. The passage that I remember was where he said, sort of, ah, whenever this stops—whether through ecological collapse or economic collapse or the, you know, the efforts of brave women/ men and women—he's got this litany: they're not gonna care about this, they're not gonna care about that, they're not gonna care about this, what ultimately they're gonna care about is whether they have, you know, a liveable planet and clear air and water to drink, and that sort of thing. And that's the piece that stuck with me. So, I'd have to go back and see. I mean, I suspect you're probably right, he wrote that, I mean if you're saying so. But I just don't—that didn't jump out at me in the way that that other passage did. Well I agree with you, both on the strategic and the tactical, um, as well as the philosophical approach. I mean I've been a, sort of, the form of Christianity I've felt most aligned with for decades was Anabaptism, and Ron Sider was one of my mentors back when I went to seminary at Palmer Theological Seminary—it's now called Palmer. In fact I finished up at Andover-Newton in Boston. And so, the non-violent approach has been one that I've, has been a part of my own soul and my own approach. Um, um, which is why I appreciate what you're doing and also Jim Hansen, and Bill McKibben/ 350.org, and others, as well. Well Tim, if people want to go more deeply, I mean, I just am so blessed by this conversation and I'm sure everyone else will be as they watch this. Um, if people wanted to go more deeply into your work and these ideas, what would be the one or two places that you'd send them?

Tim: Um, I mean, with some of my efforts right now, there is a new website that we've just launched for the Commit to Respond initiative that is just being populated right now that I think is [www.commit2respond.org](http://www.commit2respond.org). Uh, we don't have anything up and running yet for the Climate Disobedience Center, but we hope to later this fall. And, you know, for me, I'm sort of in a period of transition right now. Uh, not quite half-way through Divinity school. My ideas are evolving pretty rapidly, my analysis is continually shifting and hopefully getting deeper. So I'm not really pretty producing a lot on my own, um, at least not in any sort of permanent form. So, I'm just trying to engage with a lot of communities and doing a decent bit of speaking and that sort of thing, where my ideas can continue to evolve in conversation. So, yeah, I don't have anything out there on my own at this point.

Michael: Cool. Well, the Peaceful Uprising website I found useful.

Tim: Like I said, I haven't had any real involvement with them for quite a while.

Michael: Sure. Well, one of the things that I just want to, sort of, conclude on this note, because you quote—at least in the article there—Ed Abbey, Edward Abbey, saying, “Sentiment without action is the ruin of the soul.” And then you also offered, even beyond that, “Principled action is the salvation of the soul.” And just yesterday I preached at a First Unitarian church in Pittsburgh, and one of the three points that I made is that we find our salvation as we become a blessing to the future, as we become the salvific force for the future. So, and then, just today is when I read that quote of yours, so I thought, wow, that’s kind of interesting timing.

Tim: Yep.

Michael: Well, Tim, thank you so much. Blessings on your studies, on your life, and your speaking. And the next time that Connie and I are either in the Boston area, if you’re still there, or out in Nevada the next time we get out there, but I’ll definitely look you up. Because I’d love to get together and just meet you in person. I see you as one of the people that future generations—I mean, this whole series, *The Future is Calling Us to Greatness*—and I see you as one of the people, one of the voices and one of the hearts, uh, and minds involved in this that, truly, future generations will look back with tremendous gratitude for what you’re doing and for what you will continue to do. So thank you.

Tim: Well thank you. If you’re still there at the end of the Great Climate March, when they come into D.C., as part of the FERC actions that are happening that week, I’ll probably be down there in D.C.

Michael: Ok. Cool. Yeah, well, after we get off this I’ll give you my contact information, like cell phone or whatever, because we’ll be actually in the D.C. area for almost two weeks.

Tim: Ok.

Michael: Cool. Thank you Tim.

Tim: Thank you.

Michael: Blessings.

Tim: Yup.

Michael: Bye-bye.