

ABRIDGED AND EDITED TRANSCRIPT OF:

Under Gaia's Skin

20th Annual Edward and Nancy Dodge Lecture

Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future

April 15, 2021

By Jay Naidoo

In December, 1854, Chief Seattle, of the Suquamish and Duwamish tribes, wrote a letter in which he said, *“The President in Washington sends word that he wishes to buy our land. But how can you buy or sell the sky? The land? The idea is strange to us. If we do not own the freshness of the air and the sparkle of the water, how can you buy them? Every part of the earth is sacred to my people. Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every meadow, every humming insect. All are holy in the memory and experience of my people.”*

Imagine the first white settlers arriving in the “New World” and seeing the magnificence of everything: the rivers, the mountains, the verdant forests, the thunder of millions of bison crossing the plains. Imagine if, when they encountered the indigenous people who had lived here for millennia in harmony with the “Great Mother,” they had said in humility and respect — “We come in peace. We have come here to share our life with you. But we have also come to learn from you. Your belief systems. Your god. Your way of living.”

What might the United States look like today?

We would not have had slavery. But human arrogance prevailed. The outcome—Genocide. Slavery. Colonization. Erasure of indigenous knowledge, language, beliefs and values. And bondage to the dominant Western culture. I have listened to the testimony of many friends in the First Nations Elders in Canada. They talk of the slogan they grew up with, not unlike the USA. Tens of thousands of young children in indigenous communities torn from their parents’ arms and forced into “Residential Schools.” The single-minded goal was to “Kill the Savage in order to save the Man.”

How do we deal with the legacy of dispossession? Reconciliation is not a one-way street. Acknowledgment is important. So is an apology. But how do we heal the wound? Whether that is a wound of superiority or inferiority, it’s the same wound. And redress is not just material compensation and reparations either. Or even the right to vote. It’s about whether we see the OTHER. Do I listen with my heart to the voices of the OTHER? Do I try to understand the language, the culture, the ceremonies and belief system of the OTHER?

Some years ago I joined a sweat lodge convened by an Algonquin Elder and shaman from Quebec. We were fourteen men. I was the only “darkie.” It was a profound experience. We learned the meaning of the peace-pipe ceremonies. The significance of white sage in communicating with the ancestors. The powerful role of tobacco in ceremony in indigenous culture. It went beyond understanding. Experiencing. Connecting to the wisdom of the land. And that wisdom is what we all need today to restore our relationship and balance with Mother Earth.

Nelson Mandela often said, the education we need must take us from the ego-centred mind besotted with cravings, desires and attachments, to the compassion, forgiveness and love of

the heart, the seat of the soul. That's what 27 years in prison, 18 of which were spent in a cell 12 × 8 feet, did for him. It took him on the most important and painful journey from the head to the heart.

As a youngster of 15, I went to listen to a great hero, Steve Biko. In a crowded church hall, he declared, "You have nothing to lose but your chains." He said, "The mind of the oppressed is the main weapon in the hands of the oppressor." It coincided with the burgeoning civil rights protests led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and the militant rhetoric of Malcom X and Angela Davis, and the mass resistance on US campuses to the Vietnam War.

And that metamorphosis ignited the Soweto uprisings, which mobilized millions of us. It was 1976. Victory was within our grasp. And then we were smashed. We went back to the drawing boards.

We needed to build a global solidarity of person-to-person action. And so we went back and organized for the next two decades, building a phalanx of grassroots movements. Here in the US, students rallied, demanding disinvestments from US companies in South Africa. Unionists, especially the Coalition of Black Trade Unions, defied their own leadership to support us. And the US government was forced to act and support sanctions. The powerful racial elite in South Africa was paralyzed. And that created the space for a negotiated settlement that put President Nelson Mandela in power as the first democratically elected leader of South Africa.

Today Humanity now stands at a crossroads. One path leads to despair, growing inequality, conflict and implosion. Another is the choice to rethink, reimagine, and reorganize everything. I know that change is inevitable. In fact, it is the only constant. It is the natural cycle of the Universe.

Now is the time for a just transition to a fairer sharing of the world.

The question is, What is to be done? We live in a world that is more connected, binding people and planet into one global system with one destiny. The digital revolution heralded a new phase of civilization, one that can weave a fabric of human values that evolve us to a greater consciousness. To live in harmony. To build an intelligent co-operation with each other. Is that not natural? Magical?

I see a Great Transition birthing. The green shoots are all around us. Young people are asking questions and searching for new answers. And gratefully they are not listening to the self-appointed gurus. Our elites in government, politics, business, the 1% clubs in Davos, the aristocracy of civil society and academia. The system is broken. It cannot be fixed. There is no band-aid solution. And there is no script, worn out ideology or messiah to follow. We are truly on our own. And that is the most wonderful opportunity that has opened up. And if you really open your eyes, it will be the most exciting rollercoaster adventure since our humble beginnings living in caves 200,000 years ago.

Mandela, famously said, "No one is born hating another person because of the colour of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite." He was right.

My advice. Question everyone. Question everything.

There is no room for melancholy. Steve Biko did not give me a business plan. I thank God he didn't have some PowerPoint presentation. Or money. So we didn't spend most of the time filling in "log-frames" for some bean counter in some air-conditioned office in some major western capital. He inspired us to DARE. To be bold. To be prepared to give our lives for our freedom. He gave us a direction. Not a road map. Our compass was our passion. Our invincibility was our youth. And we built an army of passionate volunteers.

The Fight against Hunger

For more than a decade, I worked alongside leaders from across the governmental, UN multilateral systems, private sector and civil society sectors to address malnutrition facing two billion people in the world. We were trying to find long-lasting and meaningful solutions to hunger through means such as fortification of industrialized processed foods. We did our best. But the wound of exclusion and poverty constantly repeated the cycle. We have to tackle the root causes. We have to heal the wounds caused by HUMAN GREED AND ARROGANCE.

So, is our Food System Broken?

Our food system is certainly broken. The industrial chemical driven agricultural model has its roots in chemical warfare coming out of WW2. We have waged a war on soil for the last 70 years. Since the 1970s we have lost one third of our Earth's topsoil. How we deal with soil health will determine the future of all life on our earth. Change the microclimate and you end up changing the macro-climate. The UN reports that all our remaining topsoil will be gone in 60 years. We know that poor land management leads to a deepening of poverty, a rise of hunger and social unrest. Any historian can trace major conflicts in our human journey to food shortages.

In the US 70% of crop land is used for animal feed, corn beans, soy, because of subsidies. Much of food aid, often disguised as humanitarian aid, is dumped in Africa and crushes our efforts to grow a sustainable smallholder farming base.

Malnutrition is the single greatest threat to child survival. Each year, 3.1 million children die from hunger-related causes—a staggering 45% of all child deaths globally. But there are solutions to malnutrition.

Can Africa be a Laboratory for a new model of Regenerative Agriculture?

YES. Ninety percent of food in sub-Saharan Africa is grown by women. Yet we are the epicentre of world hunger. Nearly 240 million people are undernourished. And nearly half living in poverty. And nearly 60% of the remaining cultivatable and arable land is in Africa.

When I talk to women smallholder farmers who grow our food in Africa, they know what has to be done. Unlock legal title in ownership to them. Invest in microfinance facilitation that helps them build their seed banks. Nurseries, irrigation and support fairer prices for their crops on the market. Hunger disappears and Africa will be the global hub of healthy food. Malnutrition would evaporate because women and mothers will invest in the health and education of their children. As my wife often reminds me, "Invest in a man and you educate an individual. Invest in a woman and you educate a community and nation."

I once asked my daughter Shanti whether I would ever become a grandfather.

She asked me whether it was right to bring a child into this world. It was the right question. I had no answer. Anyway she did fall pregnant and gave us our grandson Kana, who is two years old. And when Shanti finished her degree in business communications, she promptly abandoned her pursuit of a corporate career and set up an NGO called SevenGenerations. Based on an ancient Iroquois tribal philosophy of the seventh generation principle that the decisions we make today should result in a sustainable world seven generations into the future.

An ancient Native American proverb says, “We do not inherit the world from our ancestors. We borrow it from our children.” We are all temporary stewards of the land.

The Pursuit of a Regenerative Model of Agriculture is one of the most important ways in which we heal ourselves and heal our relationship with our Mother Earth.

If agricultural uniformity and the “one-size-fits-all” approach of chemical fertilization and monocultures were the benchmark of twentieth century agriculture, then biodiversity, appreciation of distinct identities of soil and climate profiles will define 21st century agriculture.

I have worked alongside the Naandi Foundation in India which has co-created this at scale with thousands of tribal farmers in 700 villages in Araku Valley in northern Andhra Pradesh. I have seen the progression from a system where seeds have to be procured for each season; soil has to be prepared afresh for every season; overuse of external chemicals has destroyed natural microbial activity in the soil; where plants are stressed; where water is extracted continually to meet increasing irrigation needs. Where the farmer is disempowered. Having to purchase higher quantities of chemical inputs each season, at ever increasing prices. Where profits are concentrated in the hands of a few powerful men.

The Regenerative model applied over the last decade has decreased external inputs dramatically. It repairs our relationships with other species. It nurtures water retention. It strengthens nutrient health of the soil. It keeps the carbon in the ground. It restores our interconnection with the Earth. We give back to the Earth for the ABUNDANCE she shares with us. And Farmer families are at the centre of the food system. They have independence. They have DIGNITY. And are partners with Nature.

As Mandela often reminded us, “Everything seems impossible until it is done.” In Africa we say that “if you want to go fast go alone. If you want to go far go together.”

And remind ourselves of the earnest appeal in Chief Seattle letter to President Franklin Pierce in 1854, *“The earth does not belong to man, man belongs to the earth. All things are connected like the blood that unites us all. Man did not weave the web of life, he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself. ... We ARE all brothers after all.”*

WE LIVE UNDER GAIA’S SKIN

What we need today is Justice. Fairness. Decency. Not power. Hate. And Fear. That is the struggle of your generation. So go out and build your voice, agency and tsunami of Hope to overwhelm our despair and helplessness. Sekunjalo ke Nako! Now is the time. Now is the time for your generation. The Alpha Generation. Generation Z. And those still to be born. Elderly people like me will stand behind you in our thousands. Shoulder to Shoulder.