

FULL TRANSCRIPT OF:

**Under Gaia's Skin**

*20th Annual Edward and Nancy Dodge Lecture*

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*In December, 1854, Chief Seattle, Susquamish tribe, 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."*

It is as relevant today as it was 167 years ago. Almost as long as the Industrial Revolution. In which time our human activities have increased the greenhouse effect that has caused the average global temperature to rise by 1 degree Celsius. Giving rise to the ecological emergency, we face today what threatens our very existence as a species.

Imagine a conversation when the first white settlers led by Columbus arrived in the "new world" when they saw the magnificence of everything. The wide-flowing rivers, the snow-capped mountains reaching to the heavens, the verdant forests, thundering throb of millions of bison crossing the plains. Imagine if they encountered the indigenous people who had lived here for Millenia in harmony with the "Great Mother". And they 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?**

I speculate the bedrock of a more compassionate and caring country. We would not have had slavery. You could have been the laboratory that weaves the fabric of wisdom of all our magnificent human diversity. The merging of the different streams of human endeavour and perseverance that strengthened intelligent co-operation instead of divisive fear. You would not be feared for your weaponized power but admired for your free and entrepreneurial human spirit. And the world would not have to endure another rising geopolitical rivalry today between the US, China and Russia. That would needlessly distract us from the pressing challenges we face. And probably drive another arms race.

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 here 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—"Kill the Savage in order to save the Man."

John Hopkins University has nobly acknowledged that it is built on land dispossessed from the Piscataway Tribe. As in South Africa, we faced a similar dilemma. 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, across the border from you. We were fourteen men. I was the only "darkie." Thirteen other white Canadian men. It was a profound experience. Inspired us all. To learn the significance of Native American culture. 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. It was feeling. Experiencing. Connecting to the wisdom of the land. Something we all have to do. And the faculty that teaches us that we are of the land is not in the university lecture theatres. They live as part of Mother Nature. Not apart from her. And that wisdom is what we all need today to restore our relationship and balance with Mother Earth.

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 was 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.

South Africa, my own brutalizing experience, taught me much about the human psyche. How do we deal with the deep divides between black and white? The messiness of "identity politics."

There are no simple answers or quick-fix solutions. I grew up where you were defined by colour. Black or white. White was pure. Black was inferior. I even believed I was inferior. And it made me angry. Angry with myself. Angry with my parents. It ate into my soul. And I was mired in its cesspool. A look. A sign — “No non-whites.” A security guard in a shop following you. From micro-aggressions to the big racism of being evicted from our home at four years old. That was my lived experience. Reconciliation is putting yourself in the shoes of the OTHER.

But those heady days of the late sixties, fuelled with the invincibility of youth rising up globally to challenge the status quo, I, a youngster of 15 went to listen to a great hero, Steve Biko. In a crowded church hall, he lit my flame of activism that still burns brightly today, “You have nothing to lose but your chains,” he declared. “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 Martin Luther King. The militant rhetoric of Malcom X and Angela Davis. And the mass resistance on US campuses to the “illegal” Vietnam War. We cheered when Muhammad Ali slayed his opponents. He was one of us. He inspired us. We were in the ring with him — “Float like a butterfly. Sting like a bee,” became our motto.

And that metamorphosis ignited the Soweto Uprisings which sparked the mobilization of millions of us. It was 1976. We were triumphant. Victory was within our grasp. And then we were smashed. We went back to the drawing boards. And we understood that we had left behind our parents, the workers, the rural villages, women and grandmothers.

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 mass grassroots movements. Here in the US, students rallied. Demanding disinvestments from US companies investing in SA. Unionists, especially the Coalition of Black Trade Unions, defied their own leadership to support us. And your 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 we are in the eye of a perfect storm, hurtling at a breakneck speed into the wall of an economic, political, social, and ecological catastrophe. Covid-19 knows no borders, carries no passport. We can say that there is a vaccine, but not that “we all” have a vaccine. People with money and power have a vaccine. **A mere 16% of the global population holds 60% of all available vaccines.** The health crisis coincides with that of crisis of legitimacy in governance and

leadership, the very basis of our societal organization. It is abundantly clear that the status quo is broken. **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. It starts with you. And you. And you.

**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 was to embrace the indivisibility of our humanity and our stewardship of our planet. To build the pathways of hope and opportunity for our future generations. And to 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 and all we share our planet with. 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 and hiding from predators close to 200,000 years ago.

The digital revolution in the past two decades has changed the way we live, work, communicate, learn, inform and educate ourselves. But it is a double-edged sword. A poisonous potion that can be manipulated by powerful, vested economic and political interests. Like you see here in the US. It can polarize communities and nations. Or be an antidote that has made us more connected than any other generation before. And build bridges that cross the divides that have kept us apart.

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. **So how do we fix up this mess?**

### **My advice. Question everyone. Question everything.**

It's a virus of greed that is the biggest threat to humanity and our world. Not COVID-19. The UNSG Antonio Guterres says that the wealth of the richest has increased \$5 trillion in the past year. He urged Governments to consider a wealth tax on those who have profited during the pandemic and to ensure that the funds go to where it is needed the most. We all know it will not happen. It did not happen during the 2008 financial crisis that brought the world economy to its knees. Because the czars of Wall Street were too powerful. **Too big to allow failing.** And wielded too much power. Even more today.

So we know change that would create a **“New World”** that we desperately need will not come from the top. But change will come if we stand up and organize and demand it. There is no room for melancholy. A penchant that says I don't know what to do. That's laziness. 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. Trying to find long-lasting and meaningful solutions to hunger through means such as fortification of industrialized processed foods. Working with great organizations and individuals like Martin Bloem, my brother, my friend and head of the Center for a Livable Future, here at the Johns Hopkins University. 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 the WW2. The same process to create bombs were used to produce chemical fertilizers. **It has waged a war on soil for the last 70 years.** It is an extension of an ideology of white superiority that has morphed into the arrogance of human superiority. Agriculture is no longer about planetary or human well-being. It's about the pursuit of profits at all costs. Before even life itself. Like “Big Pharma” and the COVID-19 vaccine. Since the 1970s we have lost one **third of our Earth's topsoil.** When we damage soil, we give off carbon. We destroy our

underground water sources. We release huge amounts of carbon dioxide. The result is desertification that displaces 40 million people every year. How we deal with soil health will determine the future of all life on our earth. Because soil health, climate and plants are all interconnected. Change the microclimate and you end up changing the macro-climate. And that's what's happening right now. A perfect storm has been brewing that will unleash a tsunami that will shake the foundations of our existence. 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 caused by our omission or commission.

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. It is the US taxpayer who is funding these lobbies and also funding global warming. A healthy farming ecosystem does not need subsidies.

**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. Yet our natural and mineral resources fuel a global economy. 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. But they are trapped by **patriarchy. Hierarchy. Bureaucracy and corruption.** 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 looked at me for a long time. And then 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. It made her want to fight even more fiercely for a better world for her son.**

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. Not the misguided masters who exercise dominion. We have to heal 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 twenty-first 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. I work in line with the natural laws. 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. The soil-plant-microbe interactions result in enormous amount of health benefits to humankind. Not only are they producing food, they are also consuming the food—they are a self-contained circle. And because of the centrality of their role, they are also the “**barometer**” of how the food system is functioning.

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.” If we want to go far in our journey as Humanity maybe it’s a good thing to leave behind our petty individualism. Competitiveness. Our perverse sense of exceptionalism and nationalism.

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. One thing we know: our god is also your god. The earth is precious to him and to harm the earth is to heap contempt on its creator. Your destiny is a mystery to us. One thing we know—there is only one God. No man, be he a Red man or White man, can be apart. 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.**