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DR. JENNIFER ATKINSON

Transcript: "Climate Justice, Eco-Grief, and the Role of Storytellers"

Sarah Greenman:

Hello and welcome to Collaborative Alchemy. My name is Sarah Greenman and I'm a creative Alchemist, artist, storyteller, writer, and facilitator. I believe that your creativity is a gift, meant to be wielded with great love and joy. It is a bone-deep tool for justice, healing and regulatory collective liberation. Collaborative Alchemy is a series of conversations with artists, thought leaders, activists, farmers, educators, creatives, and other polymaths, where we tell our stories, expand our histories, and hold space for new ways of being.

My guest today is Dr. Jennifer Atkinson, a senior lecturer in environmental humanities at the University of Washington and Bothell. Her seminars on eco grief and climate anxiety, which explore the emotional toll of climate change and environmental loss, have been featured in the Los Angeles Times, the Washington Post Seattle Times, NBC News, Medium, and you may have heard her recently on NPR. Jennifer works with teams of activists, psychologists, artists, scientists, and community groups to provide resources for navigating the emotional dimensions of our climate crisis. And she recently received a grant from the Rachel Carson Center in Munich to co-facilitate an interdisciplinary project called An Existential Toolkit for Climate Justice Educators. Jennifer is also the author of *Gardenland: Nature, Fantasy, and Everyday Practice*. This is a book that explores American garden literature as a fantasy genre, where people enact desires for community, social justice, joyful labor, and contact with nature, which, oh my goodness, we sure need right now in the time of global pandemic, and our country's social justice uprising and racial reckoning.

I'm so excited to welcome you to the show. And I also need to tell everyone who's listening, for full transparency, Jennifer is also my beautiful, amazing step-sister. So I would love to hear about your work. Tell me a little bit about your work.

Jennifer Atkinson:

Yeah, Well, my background is in the humanities. I have an undergraduate and PhD in English literature. But I've always been really interested in our relation to the natural world. And I thought I wanted to go into biology in college. And I remember my freshman year, sitting in a class with 300 students in a lecture hall, and hearing about climate change for the first time, which was in 1995. And I was absolutely

devastated by what I was learning. And I was seeing the impending death and demise of so much that I loved and held sacred.

And I think there were two things that came out of that moment. One was this sense that I didn't know if I had the capacity, if I had the emotional capacity to withstand an entire career of watching what I loved die and disappear. And I think the other thing that came out of that was the way that that information was shared with me, it was so technical, and it wasn't told to me as a story of loss and grief so much as it was of a breakdown in the systems that we need to survive and thrive only as people. It wasn't really a story about what these other communities, other life communities and kin were losing. What did it mean for the forest themselves? What did it mean for the creatures that lived there?

And so, I turned away from that and into literature, and I was very hungry for the way that we have been telling stories about our relation to the natural world. And that, to me, just seemed a more emotionally sustainable path.

But then I found my way back into working with students that were coming from the sciences, as an educator in an interdisciplinary arts and sciences program. So I've been teaching courses on environmental humanities that are exploring these relationships to the non-human communities through literature and the arts, and poetry and film.

And what I was seeing with the students that were coming in to have these conversations about the sciences was how much they would open up in these classes and come alive, and be able to express their interest in working in biology, out of this kind of impulse that was arising out of their childhood. They were kind of reconnecting with a sense of wonder and play and magic in the natural world.

And it's not to say that the sciences can't... I think the sciences actually do in many ways, communicate that sense of wonder, and are able to activate that in our imagination. But I also think that the scientific discourse, the way that that has been professionalized has in many ways stigmatized the ability for students and for researchers and professionals to talk about their personal relationship to what is happening at this moment, this incredible, incredible loss and tragedy.

And I think that's especially true for women who are already seen within those spaces as possibly hyper emotional. And so for them to voice grief... In a professional setting, as a researcher was...

Sarah Greenman:

I see. Yes, yes.

Jennifer Atkinson:

And so I wanted to create a space for students who are in the field, to have those really necessary discussions, which A, just seemed necessary for them to preserve their own humanity.

Sarah Greenman:

It's a process, right?

Jennifer Atkinson:

Yeah. But also, in learning to navigate and learning to process the loss that they were experiencing in watching their life's work in some ways, deteriorate or change, or be compromised or assaulted, to stay in those spaces and not make the decision that I had made, which I don't necessarily think of it like I had turned away from it, but I had found another space in which I could do that work.

Sarah Greenman:

That it could fit.

Jennifer Atkinson:

Right. But what I was hearing from students wasn't that, oh, well, I'm going to keep doing this work, but I'm going to turn to the humanities, or I'm going to turn to the arts. What they were saying is I don't want to work in an environmental field at all, because it's too devastating. And so that, to me, just seemed a huge red flag and an alarm, that the way that the sciences are facilitating these conversations for students and young people, and for the general public, is such an apocalyptic narrative.

Sarah Greenman:

I hear you talking, though, about resilience, right? Like how do we remain resilient when we are facing our time? I think Joanna Macy talks about that actually in The Great Turning, that we have to face our time, and we have to have tools to face our time. So when you made this space available for these students and for these researchers, where they could not only access their own grief, but talk about it and develop resilience and tools, what did you find? I mean, were people interested? And did your class fill up? Was there an audience for you in that, and especially in an educational academic space, like University of Washington?

Jennifer Atkinson:

Yeah. Well, it was really funny because I thought it was possibly a really hair-brained idea to offer this class-

Sarah Greenman:

All good ideas, I hope, are hair-brained ideas.

Jennifer Atkinson:

I remember the Dean of my department, and bless him, he greenlighted this. But he shook his head and just, I think he thought it was going to be an absolute bust. Because the sound of it, I mean, eco grief or climate despair, it's not very inviting. It's the world that we already live in. And so who wants to dive deeper into that? But as it turned out, the class absolutely filled overnight when it was first listed. And then I had colleagues and I had researchers from other campuses contacting me and asking me if they could sit in. And I had people who were elders from our community who worked in religious spaces or in faith-based groups or in community organizing, wanting to join. Because I think that there's still something about it, and this is now four or five years on where I think the vocabulary has become a little bit more recognized and acknowledged. But there's still something about it that seems... There's a stigma around... I think I've been doing it long enough now that I can't really understand why there's a stigma around it anymore.

Sarah Greenman:

I think there's a stigma around grief.

Jennifer Atkinson:

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Sarah Greenman:

I mean, not just eco grief, but I don't know that we're a culture that knows how to grieve. And grieving to me is such an active, necessary process that everybody goes through. But I think if you're a grief denier... You can be a climate denier, but if you're a grief denier, I mean, how are you processing anything that happens in your life?

You know that my work very much centers around storytelling, and I use art and writing and playwriting and theater and facilitation to do that. But you mentioned storytelling, that there are some narratives that your students and that people you work with are sort of getting back in touch with. There's like a re-wilding that's happening, where they're remembering the awe and wonder and beauty that they brought as a young person to biology and to ecology. And I want to hear more about why you think that's important, why that piece of the puzzle is important.

Jennifer Atkinson:

I think to tell stories is to give a life or to recognize the life of others. If we don't tell the story of the soil, if we don't tell the story of bodies of water, or other creatures, or other communities, or other humans, to a certain extent, they remain objects. They're not protagonists, they're not subjects. And particularly within the Western tradition, our storytelling tradition, and if we go back to the classic novel in Western Europe and in the United States, it's so anthropocentric, it's so much about humans.

I remember first reading Walden when I didn't actually read Walden until I was an undergraduate in college. And I was really struck by how... Thoreau, in many ways, was criticized for being this overgrown child that never really grew up. But I think to an extent, that's the magic of the book. He is like a child who's gone out to live in the woods and is having conversations with the wind, and is making this epic story, or telling this epic story of the ants fighting in the grass. He's having a conversation with the pond, and he's responding to it, and he's listening to it. And it becomes the central character in his work. And that really hadn't been done before. I mean, Native American cultures have been doing that for immemorial.

Sarah Greenman:

Yeah, forever.

Jennifer Atkinson:

But we haven't been centering their stories, so we don't have facility with that kind of seeing and that kind of knowing.

Sarah Greenman:

Yeah, yeah. That's beautiful. How do you think storytelling can affect the sciences? Because I think we, as a society, sort of separate those things. We don't think about it as arts and sciences anymore. We just think about it as the arts, or we think about it as the sciences. And we don't see where the beauty of the crossover is. Something I'm really interested in is the idea of the polymath, the Davinci's of the world. He's not the only one of course, but there are so many Renaissance people, and they have a really wide, broad knowledge base. They're interested in a lot of things. Well, like you are. I consider you a polymath. You started in one place, you went to another place, you're working in humanities and literature. You're working with psychologists and artists and scientists. I'm really interested in making the case for the polymath, to sort of expose my bias. But where do you see that sort of storytelling or the arts as being really important to the sciences?

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Jennifer Atkinson:

It's funny that you ask that because I haven't thought as much about the way that the arts impact the sciences. I thought more about the way that the arts expand the conversations that have for too long, centered the sciences, or in which the sciences have been centered. And I think of this just because I worked so much on climate change. That's the big problem that I've been working with. And the story of climate change has been a scientific story from the very beginning. That's the way we tell it. We tell it with that hockey stick graph, where you can see all of the numbers running up the side of the page.

And I think that's an important story to tell. And I think those visualizations of the story are incredibly important. If we want to talk about atmospheric carbon, and we want to talk about the mechanisms of methane release, that's imperative, that we know that.

But we have known that story now for two decades, three decades, arguably, and longer, and really the facts are so well-established. I think what's astounding right now is even people within the sciences are coming out and saying this, that we don't need more scientific research at this moment. What we need is for people, we need the storytellers now to convince us to act on what the sciences has been telling us for decades.

Sarah Greenman:

That so comports with my idea of why storytelling is so important. I think stories lead culture. And I think that if it's not happening on our stages and it's not happening in our books, then it's not happening in the world. I mean, it is in the underground, but it's not openly, publicly adopted mainstream culture, unless it's really being embraced in the arts.

There are very few people I find, that are taking their art to the sciences, and having a climate discussion with their art. There's a really incredible playwright named Tira Palmquist, and many of her plays have a climate aspect. One of them is called Two Degrees, and it's about a climate scientist who's doing ice samples, and talking about carbon. And I love that she has mixed relationship and story and the mythology of the theater with... And she just made climate change really sexy. So I think that there's a real call that needs to go out to artists about please bring your work to us and help us understand why this pivot, this great turning needs to happen fast.

My new series, as we're looking at it, it's called Singularity, which is mostly based on Stephen Hawking's singularity theory about the big bang. But it's also about how arts and sciences go together. It's largely based on Murray Howe's poem called Singularity about Stephen Hawking. So I'm referencing the science, and then I'm referencing some art about the science and creating some sort of visual centers for us to have conversations about what it means to change, what it means to know something, and then do something.

I'm so open to giving grace for people who don't know. If you don't know, you don't know. But once you do know, what do you do now? And when I think about a call to artists, in your wildest imaginings, what would that look like if artists embraced climate change as a theme, a foundational theme of their work, what would that look like in our culture to you?

Jennifer Atkinson:

I think the most powerful thing that the arts can bring to the climate conversation is not so much about educating the public about what climate change is, or what kind of impact it's going to have. And I say that partly because I think that the generation that is going to have the greatest impact on this is now the generation that is really moving into positions of power, millennials, late millennials, gen Z, and we do not need to convince them that climate change is real.

Sarah Greenman:

They're like, come with me, please. You're right.

Jennifer Atkinson:

It's true. I think where they need help and where we all need help is to imagine what that future could look like, because we've been telling the apocalyptic story for so long that we're paralyzed, we're paralyzed in the face of our own impending doom, and the collapse of so much that we love, and all of this beauty and wonder. And it has become impossible after repeating that apocalyptic story for an entire generation, to imagine what a world, a flourishing future, could actually look like.

I mean, the students that I work with can't imagine. When you ask them to tell a story, or to write a short account of what would it look like to be thriving in your own future, what would it look like to live in a world where there is abundance and what we might consider having achieved success in 30 years, what would that look like, and they're able to tell that story. They completely freeze. If you ask them what is the future going to look like? They're very facile in telling the story of degradation. But that's the only one they've encountered.

And so when I look at your series, the thing that I love about it is it's able to imagine... And I wouldn't even necessarily say it's about the future. It really is about the present moment as well, and what we aren't seeing in the present moment, which is the cohabitation of all of these different forms of life. The fact that snails and bees and whales and constellations and trees and people are part of this world, and are characters in this world. And then humans are part of that as well, but they're not the centerpiece of it, they're just another character. And I think that that actually elevates the human at the same time as it elevates all of these other smaller, seemingly insignificant creatures, that we're more noble. And that's what I'm seeing within these images. We're more noble because of the presence and flourishing of all of these other forms of life. I think the arts have always been able to make that visible, but this is a moment where that just seems more urgent than ever.

Sarah Greenman:

Yeah, I feel like we're being called, called to it. Thank you so much for your time today. And I love that just as we're finishing up, there's wind chimes that are coming in. So thank you so much.

Jennifer Atkinson:

This has been so much fun. Thank you for sharing your artwork.

Sarah Greenman:

This podcast was made possible with love, support, and micro donations from my community at patreon.com\Sarah Greenman. You can also find more of my work on my website at sarahgreenman.com. Thank you so much for listening.