



LINDA JOY CORDTZ

Transcript: “Nature as Creative Partner”

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 Linda Joy Cordtz. Formed by the Wyoming landscape and raised near Boise, Idaho, Linda Cordtz is a poet and farmer living in the high desert of Eastern Oregon, in a place called Eagle Valley. For the past 16 years, Linda and her partner, Robert, have stewarded a five-acre organic orchard of 1,180 fruit trees.

They grow 18 varieties of peaches, green and red Bartlett pears, cherries, four varieties of European and Asian pears, five different apricot varieties, plums, prune trees, and 12 varieties of apples, as well as a few walnut and hazelnut trees. Linda says that farming has brought her to the realization that she is part of a vast living environment that the web of life's bounty holds the key to our future. She writes, "If you grow food, you grow life, and in understanding this, we find where we belong - nestled between trees, plants, insects, and animals, humbled by the beauty, formed by the work, and filled with gratitude." My conversation with Linda took place on October 11th, sitting at a folding table over a bowl of hot cobbler in the heart of the orchard. And as is always the way with Linda, she began by interviewing me.

Linda Joy Cordtz:

Sarah, how are you?

Sarah Greenman:

I'm good. This is the weirdest thing to say in this moment, because I feel like the world is sort of falling apart and we're as close to a scary election and just a lot is happening, and I feel pretty good. I feel weirdly helpful. I feel like people are kind of waking up.

Linda Joy Cordtz:

Well, Sandy gave us the book early on. It's called *The Murmur of Bees*. It was written about the Mexican revolution and the flu pandemic in Mexico. So people have gone through this before.

Sarah Greenman:

Yeah. We're not the first.

Linda Joy Cordtz:

I'm worried about not so much my mind, because I'm old enough to know what I need to go back to, and it's like a foundation that works for me.

Sarah Greenman:

And what is that, that you want to go back to, that you know that you need to go back to?

Linda Joy Cordtz:

Well, things like meditating, giving yourself permission, the elasticity to... This is what this time has created for everybody, but it also brings up all the stuff you haven't dealt with because we can't click on or go to the movies or go to dinner, our whole routine is changed. It's brilliant. I think whatever happened had a very wise take on everything.

Sarah Greenman:

This is a poem from Linda's forthcoming book of poetry entitled *Walking in the Orchard*, and this poem is called "There's a Bowl of Plenty."

*There is a bowl of plenty on the porch of dawn
waiting to be shared with you.
Bless all differences and repair the ghostly veil.
Sit with the untimely, frightening weight of things
lost and found.
Know that nothing given in love
is ever discovered or damned,
only purified and rendered perfect.*

Linda Joy Cordtz:

They're after the walnuts.

Sarah Greenman:

So is your dog.

Linda Joy Cordtz:

The turkeys can swallow them whole, and their gizzard grinds up the shell and everything.

Sarah Greenman:

No way. That's amazing. I've not heard that. Well, you talk about a spiritual practice. I mean, is meditation a spiritual practice for you?

Linda Joy Cordtz:

Farming.

Sarah Greenman:

Say more about that.

Linda Joy Cordtz:

Sarah, was it yesterday? Day before yesterday, Robert was telling me that the Goatheads, Horneados, up in front of the willows. I go up there and I go, "When did this happen?" So Robert and I picked 50 pounds of Goathead vines. And as I was doing it, you see this kind of grape figure and it's very plump, and I'm looking at it, but what it does is it breaks apart into these seed heads. And I kept doing this and I didn't have gloves. I finally got a shovel because they were that big, instead of this little hand spade. And I just kept going. Nature... Look at this. There's no water. It's the county road. They're run over, and they're thriving. And with no gloves, I think it was the connection that I was so awestruck about their ability to be here when I'm not. I said, "Robert, look in the gravel," and there was hundreds of seeds in the gravel. So what's so nice about this plant that once it comes up, if you get it, a little tiny yellow flower, you can just pinch it off. It's one of the easiest weeds, but once it goes crazy, like it did, we'll be doing this for years. So that is meditation.

Sarah Greenman:

So you bring up nature and its cycles as sort of a meditative... Or farming as a meditative spiritual practice, and I'm wondering, how does the earth's cycle work with you as a farmer? I mean as part of your spiritual practice, the calendar of the year, this wheel of the year?

Linda Joy Cordtz:

Well, Sarah, it's the blessing that brought me here because I was envisioning this being a step-parent, "Oh, I got this." And then five years into being a step parent, I'm like, "I so don't got this." And I thought that was challenging and it was, but it was a different way. This is... We're all in. Our retirement money, everything, the kitchen sink, everything, your heart and soul, your anguish, your tears, your laughter, everything is here. And I was under the misconception that if you follow the steps A, B and C, you'll get a result. Your partner is nature and she will always show you the most unbelievable bounty. And then whisk everything away and it's equal. There's no... It just is. And it took me a long time, like when you're wrestling with one of your siblings when you're little and is like, "Are you going to say uncle?" And it was like, it took me years. And now you can just be part. We're sitting here and we are a small part, everything that is.

Sarah Greenman:

POEM: My prayers have changed over the years. They used to be fresh and sure, falling off the pages of someone else's book. Now I air them outside. I see that they are old and faded. Some, torn and tattered in the breeze. Most of them have been answered; some not luckily. I pick a few off the ground, untie others caught in the barbed wire of this life and set them free. I climb the hills and shout out to the clouds that surround me in the mystery of prayer. When did you first start writing and taking this experience to the page?

Linda Joy Cordtz:

When I was in sixth grade, I did a poem, and then I didn't write for a long time. And my grandmother in Horseshoe Bend, Idaho, I was five years old, I remember her reading to me in front of an oil stove that had a little glass plate in it. And she read to her kids when they... We're in a mining camp. So it was classical literature. Hiawatha, whatever she felt like reading. So I think I heard that. And then as a teenager, I listened... It was so important for me to listen to music and listen to lyrics. And so there's my teachers, and I don't think I started really writing till we were here.

Sarah Greenman:

Do you have a writing ritual or something that takes you to the page every day? Or is it more sporadic than that, like when the mood strikes you?

Linda Joy Cordtz:

I think now because of harvest, everything is kind of been put on hold, and then 2020 for everybody is its own version episode of The Twilight Zone. And I think when I go back to writing, because of all this, it'll be very different. This year has blessed us with being home and having two gardens and being able to lacto-ferment and dry stuff. And that's incredible. So it's changed us all. And so we look in the mirror and say, "What is that change?"

Sarah Greenman:

What do you feel coming for you as part of that transformation?

Linda Joy Cordtz:

Just being, not trying to make it happen.

Sarah Greenman:

Tell me more about what you feel "just being" means?

Linda Joy Cordtz:

After a long day of physical exercise, there's so many things you... Having a farm, there's so many things you have to do. This morning, I got up. It was 70 degrees in the walk-in cooler because I turned on the fans, but not the compressor. You're always on until everything is sold, and it stops you, and you also... We're ready to stop. We were talking about the cold weather, looking forward to it. I was raised in four different seasons. That's why I'm comfortable here. Sarah, we're all part of this, and it gets quiet. You get quiet enough to let it run through you and give back to you, and you do the same. And I think being very, very tired, there's a sense of peace and accomplishment, but also this year, it has one for the record books. I noticed a walnut that had been hail damaged. I think we all have a little bit of that this year.

Sarah Greenman:

A little hail damage.

Linda Joy Cordtz:

A little hail damage.

Sarah Greenman:

I know the apples got slammed with hail this year. You've had a lot of hail damage out here.

Linda Joy Cordtz:

Yeah.

Sarah Greenman:

What happens when you lose entire crops out here? I know it's happened to you before, and it's happened this year with some of the hail damage.

Linda Joy Cordtz:

Well, you sit across from your partner at a kitchen table and you... You don't have a meeting. You can't postpone it. You can't buy futures in it. You have to deal with the here and now and make the best of it. And sometimes it can be a blessing years later. You just don't know. And it's taking the situation and creating from it something new, and that's what we all have to do, but it's individual. And then finding a community that can say, "What can we do?" instead of getting lost, and so many things that try to take our attention away from now.

Sarah Greenman:

That's interesting that you bring up attention. Mary Oliver talks about how giving something attention is a kind of prayer, and attentiveness and being able to pay attention with empathy, with real listening is kind of the job of the poet. Do you think being out here has made space for your own attentiveness, your own attention?

Linda Joy Cordtz:

I think I'm coming back to the 12-year-old girl that I really liked. I wore sweatshirts and Levi's. I had tennis shoes and my bicycle. I played basketball. I was outside and I was free. And I feel at 67 free again to just be content and not wanting anything. I have things to do, and just being present in those things is so reassuring. And the silence that the pandemic has brought to this valley, it rings in your ears and it gives you a chance to be grateful and look around and reach out and to listen.

Sarah Greenman:

There's a poem you wrote two winter solstices ago about winter forcing you to stop, and I remember being so blown away by that idea. Do you feel like there are things out here that when you're hooked up to these four seasons, as you say, that you're forced to do, that you just have to stop or you have to go?

Linda Joy Cordtz:

Well, harvest, it's gearing up and it's like a crescendo. You start pruning in January and then thinning, and then comes a time when you can stop. But if I go out on the swing and face south 5:30 in the morning, I can hear the deer in the dark eating the apples that I threw over. At daylight, here comes the turkeys. We live in a high desert and people say there's nothing here, but there's everything here. And it's that feeling of finding a place for yourself, but that sanctuary of the mind and the body and the soul, we've lost it. I think we're being called back. I stepped out the back door. It was 4:30 and I heard coyotes, and I listened to all of them and they were hilarious, highs and lows and flats and just laughter. That's so magical, and that magic is around for all of us if you get quiet and settled.

It is cold, silent, and wonderfully dark

*as I sit outside on the old swing,
letting this stillness settle in.
The skeleton branches surround me their boney canopy,
a cathedral of stars
and the creek in the background, a chorus.*

*Harvest, a dry whirlwind of aching memories,
like the sound's underfoot.
Time is passing faster than I know,
and it leaves lines carved on a face I don't recognize anymore.
I have more questions than answers at this time in my life,
and the greatest comfort lies in the secret hours before dawn.*

*Sanity fills the frigid air and comforts me
for I am not lost but found.*

Sarah Greenman:

Talk to me more about this idea of land as co-creator with you, because that's what I hear you pointing at, is that you are in a space of listening, this listening you're talking about, this quieting. That information that you're getting from mama nature is in kind of a dance with you and how you write. I mean, I see it in every single poem you've ever shared with me. There's always this massive natural element and this conversation that you're having with your surroundings.

Linda Joy Cordtz:

I just feel like I'm a student, and you can point to almost any living thing, it's there to teach you if you walk beside it for seasons on end. Nature is such a tour de force, and the globe has been a solid chunk of ice and still there's creatures that survived. Are we going to be able to change? And if there are people I know and love that can't change, then that's okay too. The question is, can you change? And instead of looking out and wanting everybody to change, change yourself, and nature changes every minute. We've got tiny spiders that are sailing into the wind this time of year, and if the sun was shining along the fence, you could see thousands of these spiders sailing away. And part of me feels like that, Sarah. Part of me feels all of the things that I see, I just feel part, and that for me is reassuring and nurturing.

Sarah Greenman:

Is that also part of the freedom you were talking about feeling now?

Linda Joy Cordtz:

Just that you are in a place where you're not trying to impress or produce.

Sarah Greenman:

I've only seen the spiders do that with the sunlight hitting them once, and it was like, I couldn't see a hidden world. And then suddenly the sun was shining the right way, and this invisible world was made

known to me. I was like, "Oh my God. There are thousands of spiders in the sky right now." And as someone with arachnophobia, I was like, "No, no, no, no, no. This cannot be."

Linda Joy Cordtz:

Robert's mom sent him a book, and that's where he found out about the turkeys that can swallow whole walnuts. The wrens, the little house wrens that are so plain, their feathers are iridescent to other birds.

Sarah Greenman:

Truly?

Linda Joy Cordtz:

So there's so much that we're not part of because we have taken ourselves away, and I think that journey for me was important. And so now a 12-year-old girl had everything. I have everything I needed. It's just waking up to that being again.

Sarah Greenman:

What a chance. What a gift. What would this world look like if we were all able to wake up to that self? What would that do?

Linda Joy Cordtz:

It'd be the change that we all talk about, but that change is hard when you're faced with the mirror. You have to change, not the other person.

Sarah Greenman:

We live in a world right now where it's always about the other. I see that in our politics and in our news, and it's now in our interpersonal relationships, and it's this affliction kind of.

Linda Joy Cordtz:

We want easy answers and it's a journey, Sarah.

Sarah Greenman:

POEM: Winter is cuddling in bed with the dog. She is in no rush to find spring. The cold and snow makes us all slow down. Bundle up and watch our steps lest we fall, but we all do fall. That is, we get lost in our fairytales only to find ourselves devoid of a compass. The ground is a good starting place. Remember what is paramount and rise simply to the occasion of life. Look for color. Listen to music. What makes you want to dance and hold hands with the child within? The miracle is in the now. Open it. No one is watching. Fall like you mean it. Rise like the sun and run just for the fun of it.

Sarah Greenman:

I was shocked when I first came here that there was so much microbial activity. When I saw the mushrooms and I saw all the different kinds of ground cover that you have here, I thought this does not look like any orchard. I'm from Central California, right? Bakersfield, but I'm used to those kind of really bare ground almond tree orchards. I mean, I've never been in an orchard that looks like this.

Linda Joy Cordtz:

It took us three years to get it organic, and that was because of the nitrogen, synthetic nitrogen that was used in the glyphosphate. So basically the glyphosphate sequester the nutriments. We had to inoculate those nutriments back into the soil, And also the woody debris, every year after we were pruning, we grind it up, and you can rebuild the soil like you can rebuild yourself. It takes time and focus, and I need to feel whole again. And that's why the mushrooms are back. The forest floor that you want for an orchard is like being out in the woods. And when mushrooms return, when spiders are there, when insects are there and birds, then you've helped restore that balance that was taken away, and that's what we've allowed to happen to this culture. We've lost balance.

Sarah Greenman:

I see you put so much of your learning into your writing and into your poems. I wonder sometimes if your poetry is... If you *poem* the way you *farm*, and you *farm* the way you *poem*.

Linda Joy Cordtz:

Sarah, you flatter me, and I don't know. It's been a gift to me to start writing and not see what was bad or wrong or needed change. It's just look what is right now in front of your eyes, such a celebration of fireworks, of peak season, the color of ripe cherries on a tree or the way the water freezes down by the creek in the middle of winter, the coldest spot in the valley. You're just part of the creation of the world and celebrating it. And I'm trying to define for me something different than how I was raised as to what prayer is for me. And it's a real personal expression, and I'm understanding that it can be almost anything - words, no words, color, the breeze that goes by my face. And just keeping myself in that place is going to keep me sane, and that's what I'm trying to do with lots and lots of humor.

Sarah Greenman:

Linda, thank you so much.

Linda Joy Cordtz:

Oh, Sarah. Thank you. Wonderful to have you here, as always.

Sarah Greenman:

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