

In Our Element – with Linda France

Episode 2: Water

TRANSCRIPT

Linda France:

In Our Element, a poet's inquiry into climate change. Episode Two: Earth.

Linda France:

Recently, I came across a traditional saying from Serbia: 'be humble for you are made of dung. Be noble for you are made of stars.' I love that balance and paradox, the way it holds contradictory things to be true at the same time.

'Earthling'

May you seek out dirt
May you never go unsoiled
Relish the reek of manure
May your dry places be blessed with rain
May whatever you plant grow
Let your life be compost
Feeding the earth as she feeds you
Know yourself kin
May you bend to her laws
Not try to make her bow to yours
Raise your beds, garden your forests
Take care with fire
And when the time comes
May you settle softly as dust

Linda France:

Aren't we all earthlings? There's no doubting that we depend on the earth element for the food we need to stay alive. Environmental activist Fanza Nashiva tells us we have sacrificed better quality in the food we grow and eat for supposedly higher yields that meanwhile demand more and more water to compensate for soil erosion and compaction, which in turn leads to floods and plant and human diseases using artificial often toxic chemicals to enrich soils and kill insects rather than working with the Earth's natural ability to balance itself with the helpful intercessions of insect life.

Linda France:

We are going to the compost heap now.

Andrew Davenport:

All roads lead to the compost. So we've got some different bins going on here. And so I call this our soil-assisted compost bins.

Linda France:

Soil scientists have discovered over 50,000 different soil types across the world. According to gardener Monty Don, the soil is as complicated as the human body and should be treated with the same respect. A point made 4,000 years ago in the Sanskrit sacred scriptures, The Vedas, where it says, 'In this handful of soil is your future. Take care of it, and it will take care of you. Destroy it, and it will destroy you.'

Andrew Davenport:

You're feeding the organisms in the soil. You're feeding the living soil, and you get worms, beetles, and the fungus there, the bacteria is there. All your other organisms build on that. The war in the soil, it's life and death it really is. And the end result is the humus. The dead bodies of all the creatures, all the insects. And all their poo... Am I allowed to say poo? (laughter)

Linda France:

The word humus - essentially decomposed organic matter - comes from the same root as human and humility, and forgetting to take proper care of something so fundamental as the earth itself, the source of all the food that makes and maintains our own physical bodies, have we forgotten our humanity and also the humility that arises from knowing we are only a small part of a complex web of natural processes? Accounting for nearly a third of our global carbon emissions, food and farming is the top priority in addressing the issue of climate change and managing a just transition to a more sustainable future.

Andrew Davenport:

I'm Andrew Davenport. We run a plant nursery and a garden, which we opened to the public. It's run on sustainable and organic principles. The other side to my business is composting. I wrote a book about quick return composting. We get into late June and the garden probably is getting into its real stride now. Everywhere you go, you'll see a mulch, you won't see any bare soil in this garden and that's hugely important. Normally I would get the garden mulched by the end of March because your mulches suppress the germination of the seeds. So your weeding is eliminated. And then you're putting the moisture into the soil with a mulch, and then you've got the benefits of your plants - your plants love it, because they're growing in a healthy living soil. And that soil is being fed. And the organisms that are attracted to the root zones of plants, because plants release these things called exudates, like secretions, and nearly all plants do it.

Andrew Davenport:

Some have very significant effects. The secretions from common valerian, they seem to attract worms around their root zone, and worms will cycle nutrients. Worm poo is very, very good. They increase the amount of minerals available to plants in good percentages. But mainly bacteria and fungi. They're going to do the work around the root zones as well because bacteria and fungi will be breaking down the organic matter that you're putting back to the soil. They initially tie it up inside themselves, but then something has to come along and eat them and release the nutrients. And they make a lot of nitrogen available for plants. So when you do all this mulching and adding compost or manure, you're feeding the organisms. You're not feeding the plants, feed the organisms, the living soil.

Linda France:

The soil, indeed, Andrew's whole garden here in Northumberland is very much buzzing with life. You can't help but feel more connected to the everyday miracle that's happening all around you. Deborah McGregor is an associate professor at York University in Canada, and works in environmental justice. She is also Anishinaabe and Whitefish River first nation, and has a profound connection with the living earth rooted in her Anishinabek concept of creation.

Deborah McGregor:

In the story, literally, people came from the land itself. That's literally where we come from and the process is ongoing. When you think of creation, it sounds like a noun, but it's actually really a verb. It's this constant unfolding process of the earth, living its life and doing what it needs to do to support other life. And therefore you're always responsive to that. Paying attention, seeing what's going on, being able to listen and probably not just listening. You're kind of listening with your whole body.

Deborah McGregor:

It's not just listening, with your ears and hearing the sounds that are coming. It's listening with the whole body and then sitting with it. It's a relationship of reciprocity, so we influence one another, for the Anishinabek - other people have other concepts. For us that's *mino-bimaaduziwin* - having a good life, the art of living well. And not just live well for humanity, what do we need to do so humanity can survive, but we also need to think about what does that look like in relation to the earth? It means directly connecting with the natural world. And that concept is informed by the natural world itself. And I think that's partly where the hope is. Start using our imagination, start imagining what it's like to be different in the world and what that relationship is with the earth.

Linda France:

Our lives are full of distractions. So we can't see what's in front of our noses or what's in the deepest parts of ourselves. Talking with Pulitzer prize-winning poet, Jorie Graham in America, I asked her how she saw the climate crisis.

Jorie Graham:

I would say it's a crisis of imagination, but the word imagination is not often used in its more expansive and profound sense. We think of it as meaning the invented or the imaginary, but the imagination, as Coleridge would say, is something which brings the whole soul of man or woman into activity. It is not just an awakening of body and mind at the same time, but we have intuition. We have an ability to, if we wanted to, feel the living nature of all the rest of creation around us, which from the microscopic to the large animal and plant life, dwarfs human life on this planet.

Jorie Graham:

And if we were to awaken that sense in us, which can feel the alongside-ness of that much life to feel, intuit, see, and imagine that we can enter into conscious relation with, or some kind of relation with, the non-human, which involves visualization. It involves apprehension. It involves even a kind of terror at being small in relation to the rest of what is living around us. We might be afraid of killing it all.

Deborah McGregor:

There needs to be a dramatic change, a dramatic transformation. What makes indigenous climate studies or thinking a bit different is that indigenous peoples have had to face our annihilation and continued annihilation before, but here we are. But what it means is that indigenous peoples and ishtomic peoples have figured out how to survive through that. And our stories are instructive. What do we need to do to avoid destruction that we know is coming? And they tell us what we need to do. Usually ego is a big part of it. Greed, those kinds of things don't serve processes of creation and recreation very well.

Deborah McGregor:

Usually it's trying to get people to reconnect back to the earth itself. That's usually what it is. It's 'this is how you need to behave properly in relation to the earth'. You need to be able to get that connection back. It's usually because there's a loss of connection that people do this. They're not listening anymore. They're abusing plants and animals, they are not following guidance that helps you regenerate and recreate the earth itself. Our stories speak to that. So I think about some of the stories and I go, that's kind of what's happening now, but the question is whether people are cluing in to what's happening and that change and transformation is actually required in order to continue this reciprocal, unfolding, co-creative process with the earth.

Andrew Davenport:

I was given a book by my father-in-law called A Symposium of Organic Husbandry, written in 1948 I think. He said, "oh, I've just got this little gardening book for you." And then I read it and there was all these good things about the founder members of the soil association, because it all had been set up a couple of years by then. The same problems existed then, or they could foresee what was going on, what was going to happen with the climate. They knew what was going on with the soil and the degradation of the soils. That had gone back in the 1920s and the dustbowls of America and the degradation of the soils. So it's nothing new it's been going on for a few centuries, bad practices not putting the organic matter back. And if we break that link, if we break that, what is the ancient rule of return that ancient civilizations have just done? And that's how they survived and had fertile soils...

Linda France:

What a fantastic present. That really sowed a seed, didn't it? In terms of your awareness and your life.

Andrew Davenport:

So, in that book was an article by Maye Bruce. And Maye Bruce was one of the founder members of the Soil Association, along with Lady Eve Balfour. There's this connectivity between the health of the soil, the health of the plants that grow in that soil and then the health of the people or the animals that eat those plants. We are inextricably linked by that chain. And Maye Bruce said, give back life to the soil and abolished disease in plants, animal and man, and that is true today is when it was said back in the 1940s.

Linda France:

A book that changed the way I respond to the earth is Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass*, a wonderful conversation between western botany and indigenous understanding about how much humans can learn from paying attention to plants. Jorie Graham.

Jorie Graham:

One of the things that we've replaced is this magical capacity to feel at home in a complex universe in which we are not only not alone, but not fundamental. We've replaced it with a technology which has been building since the agricultural revolution, which is not that long ago – and it certainly has accelerated dramatically in our moment at present – our technology, which is entirely created to separate us from the fundamental capacity to imagine that we are part of life and are not life itself.

Jorie Graham:

And that I think is the most important characteristic that the imagination bestows upon people who inhabit it. You don't have to be an artist to use the imagination. What we have done by privileging information over wisdom, by privileging the acquisition of data over the acquisition of intimations and wisdom through direct participation with the earth is part of what has led to our ability to blindly destroy the very place and only home that we have.

Deborah McGregor:

The new convention on biodiversity is how do we live in harmony with the earth? And even when I look at that, I'm thinking, okay, that's ideal. But one of its underlying assumptions that I find problematic is still a binary between humans and nature right?

Linda France:

Deborah McGregor again.

Deborah McGregor:

First of all, you've got to try to imagine that we're actually literally part of the same thing that it's actually not, or the big push on nature based solutions, which indigenous peoples probably have been saying, but not calling it nature based solutions for a long time. But even that still there's this underlying assumption of this binary. I think what indigenous peoples can do is just show that there's a different way to be in the world. Because right now there's a real lack of imagination or the sphere about what that looks like. There's a lot of fear. If I don't have this, what do I have then? It's well, there's a whole bunch of people in the world who don't have that. And they're still here and still trying to provide the leadership and inspiration – maybe that's a better word – inspiration for imagination to see that there's a different way of being in the world.

Deborah McGregor:

There's different values that come into play. Another idea of change is 'we all need to have electric cars.' I thought, isn't the point that we're supposed to think we don't need one? Maybe we're going to do other things. And maybe we just don't travel all over the world like we did. That's kind of the idea of a solution, right? Which is just kind of a tweaking to me of the status quo rather than, really sending it off on a different course. There's other knowledge, other laws, other governance systems that can help people at least imagine.

Linda France:

Deep ecology recognizes all life as a sacred circle where everything matters depending on everything else. Nothing is separate. What if we opened our imaginations to look and listen,

more closely? Poetry makes us stop. It slows us down and helps us listen, see and process our experience. So let's end with one of Jorie Graham's poems called simply 'Poem'.

Jorie Graham:

The reason the poem is untitled – it's not even called untitled, it's just a name for what it is, it just happens to be a poem – because there is no hierarchy. When the earth has the last word you're back in the non-hierarchical.

The earth said
remember me.
The earth said
don't let go,

said it one day
when I was
accidentally
listening, I

heard it, I felt it
like temperature,
all said in a
whisper – build to-

morrow, make right be-
fall, you are not
free, other scenes
are not taking

place, time is not filled,
time is not late, there is
a thing the emptiness
needs as you need

emptiness, it
shrinks from light again &
again, although all things
are present, a

fact a day a
bird that warps the
arithmetic of per-
fection with its

arc, passing again &
again in the evening
air, in the pre-
vailing wind, making no

mistake – yr in-
difference is yr
principal beauty
the mind says all the

time – I hear it – I
hear it every-
where. The earth
said remember

me. I am the
earth it said. Re-
member me.

Linda France:

Jorie Graham, ending our Earth episode. In Our Element was presented by me, Linda France. It is a Sonderbug production with New Writing North, supported by the Audio Content Fund and Arts Council England in association with Newcastle University. Thank you for listening.