

In Our Element – with Linda France

Episode 10: Regeneration

TRANSCRIPT

Linda France:

In Our Element, a poet's inquiry into climate change.

Linda France:

Episode 10: Regeneration.

Joshua Green:

[Singing]

Linda France:

After exploring all the elements and seeing how interconnected they are, and how in the same way, every single strand of the climate crisis touches some aspect of our daily lives, where do we go next? How can we be the change we want to see? What does active hope and resistance actually look like?

Linda France:

You can still hear me?

John Kinsella:

Yes, I can hear you, clearly. And can you hear me?

Linda France:

I can hear you. Yeah, yeah.

Linda France:

I wanted to talk to the poet John Kinsella, in Western Australia, who's been living, writing and campaigning for many decades.

Linda France:

Hello there, John, hello.

John Kinsella:

Nice to say hello, yes.

Linda France:

I know. I know. In this slight bizarre fashion through these copper wires of yours.

John Kinsella:

Yeah, well, it's copper that's been around probably for 40 years.

Linda France:

Yeah.

John Kinsella:

What's there should last as long as possible. I think we should be pulling back, detechnologizing. Technology where it's essential for people's wellbeing is very different from, the new computer, the new car, the new... And so on. I'm anti-consumerist. I do believe we need to minimize our consumption. I believe in total redistribution of wealth. All people should have the same. I do believe that there shouldn't be such thing as millionaires and billionaires. I don't believe that's a feasible way to exist. It only will lead to concentrations of not only power and wealth, but of ill usage of the world and the biosphere. It's basically, wealth is an abuse of the biosphere. So yeah. I come from that quite radical position and I understand that people find this hard to take and I suppose it comes down to: don't read my poetry. That's fine. I accept that. I think we all have to speak as we feel. That's how I feel and thus I speak.

Linda France:

John Kinsella is not alone. The Welsh poet, Menna Elfyn also has a long history of campaigning and resisting.

Menna Elfyn:

So I came into poetry as a kind of response to the Vietnam war, and in the '60s that opened my eyes. I became a pacifist and a language activist. I campaigned not only for the language, but also for nuclear disarmament, the anti-apartheid movement. We were actually on the ground hoping to make things better and I think it's part of being Welsh. Being in a country that has had to fight for the right to live one's life in Welsh, in the Welsh language, and it all, I suppose, grows from that. That you're aware of other people's rights being denied. And the kind of battles that we fought in the '60s, they change all the time. And so much is hidden and that's what poets do, is bring it out to the open. Give it light. We are searching for light and understanding. We don't know the answers and we have to live the questions.

Linda France:

Back in Western Australia, poet Charmaine Papertalk Green agrees poetry has a role to play.

Charmaine Papertalk Green:

Poetry is very, very powerful. You can write poems. You can put them in a book or you can read them at a poetry reading. You're not forcing anything on anyone, and they can take away the messages that they want. Your words and the messages, you are letting out into the universe to float to someone's ears. So we are all in it together but what we do and what's enough and what isn't enough, those are the sort of questions we have to ask ourselves and it doesn't matter who we are. We've all got a role to play.

Linda France:

John tells me how he lends his words to speak on behalf of environmental causes; on the page, at the barricades and on the ground on so called development sites.

John Kinsella:

I've been involved in hundreds and hundreds of environmental events and processes over my lifetime and each one is important as the other, but many of them don't succeed. I've been involved in a few that have, but many don't and you've just got to keep trying. Down in the city of Perth, there's the Beeliar Wetlands. Incredible remnant wetlands in the city and the conservative government started putting a highway through this. When the bulldozers came and when it was really, the crunch began, many people just sort of materialized and were there. And people were consulting with Aboriginal elders because so many different people committed themselves. They did stop the highway and they're re-vegetating the damaged area, which was just horrendous. It was a crime against humanity as well as against nature. So, the bulldozer poem was written at the height of this. I'm a pacifist, a very committed pacifist but I do believe that poetry is there to be used in the most verbal way possible and this is one of those poems.

'The Bulldozer Poem'

Bulldozers rend flesh. Bulldozers make devils
of good people. Bulldozers are compelled to do
as they are told. Bulldozers grimace when they

tear the earth's skin – from earth they came.
Bulldozers are made by people who *also* want new
mobile phones to play games on, *and* to feed families.

Bulldozers are observant of phenomena – decisions
are taken out of their hands. They are full of perceptions.
They will hear our please and struggle against their masters.

Bulldozers slice & dice, bulldozers tenderise, bulldozers
reshape the sandpit, make *grrriing* noises, kids' motorskills.
Bulldozers slice the snake in half so it chases its own tail,

writing in front of its face. Bulldozers are vigorous
percussionists, sounding the snap and boom of hollows
caving in, feathers of the cockatoos a whisper in the roar.

Bulldozers deny the existence of Aether, though they know
deep down in their pistons, deep in their levers, that all
is spheres and heavens and voices of ancestors worry

at their peace. Bulldozers recognise final causes, and embrace
outcomes that put them out of work. There's always more
scrub to delete, surely . . . surely? *O continuous tracked tractor,*

*O S and U blades, each to his orders, his skillset. Communal
as D9 Dozers (whose buckets uplift to asteroids waiting
to be quarried). O bulldozer! your history! O those Holt tractors*

working the paddocks, O the first slow tanks crushing

the battlefield. The interconnectedness of Being. Philosopher!
O your Makers – Cummings and Caterpillar – O great *Cat*

we grew up in their thrall whether we knew it or not – playing
sports where the woodlands grew, where you rode in after
the great trees had been removed. You innovate and flatten.

We must know your worldliness – working with companies
to make a world of endless horizons. It's a team effort, excoriating
an eco-system. Not even you can tackle an old-growth tall tree alone.

But we know your power, your pedigree, your sheer bloody
mindedness. Sorry, forgive us, we should keep this civil, O dozer!
In you is a cosmology – we have yelled the names of bandicoots

and possums, of kangaroos and echidnas, of honeyeaters
and the day-sleeping tawny frogmouth you kill in its silence.
And now we stand before you, supplicant and yet resistant,

asking you to hear us over your war-cry, over your work
ethic being played for all it's worth. Hear us, hear *me* –
don't laugh at our bathos, take us seriously, forgive

our inarticulateness, our scrabbling for words as you crush
us, the world as we know it, the hands that fed you, that made you.
Listen not to those officials who have taken advantage

of their position, who have turned their offices to hate
the world and smile, kissing the tiny hands of babies
that you can barely hear as your engines roar with power.

But you don't see the exquisite colour of the world, bulldozer –
green is your irritant. We understand, bulldozer, we do –
it is fear that compels you, rippling through eternity,
embracing the inorganics of modernity.

Linda France:

John's wholehearted commitment recognizes a responsibility to speak on behalf of the land, the more than human world. Like him, Charmaine, Menna and many others, we can keep on living the questions, listening to different perspectives and understanding how connectedness runs through all our lives. A method Professor Richard Dawson of Newcastle University applies to his own work.

Richard Dawson:

Engineering on its own is insufficient and it has to recognize the interplay between what we build, what we put in the ground, the environment around it, and the people that use those engineering systems. It's within a much wider social and environmental context. With every day that goes by, we are building more things. It's like accruing of debt and rather than pay our way

out of it, we're actually adding to that debt and climate change is increasing the rate of interest that we pay on that debt. And it will take time and it is difficult to make sweeping changes to our lifestyles. So where I really think the government can do more is actually starting to give us options to do things differently. We can tell people, get on your bike, cycle to work. That's easily said, but the last thing you really want to do is get on your bike and then have to push your way around the congested road network, where there's not space for you to cycle safely. Changing the infrastructure, making a commitment to that and a lot of other stuff will start to follow because people will see the change.

Linda France:

At this point, change is inevitable. It's up to us to decide which way we want it to go and choose that every day.

Deborah McGregor:

Where's the hope in all of this?

Linda France:

In Canada, Deborah McGregor is Anishinaabek and Whitefish River First Nation, and a climate justice academic.

Deborah McGregor:

Part of like our way of thinking as Anishinaabek is that there's always hope, and what we're often asking for is the strength to be able to deal with what's coming, right? What do we need to do to build our strength? I guess people would call that resilience. People have the capacity to do beautiful, imaginative things and you have to believe in that too. For sure, we're destructive and a lot of our stories speak to that, but we also have the capacity to do amazing things as well and I think that's partly where the hope is. And we need to, I think focus on that a bit more and we need to pop out of a very particular way of thinking and understanding the world, going beyond the linear and hierarchical and I think art's one of the ways of doing that.

Linda France:

From a more joined-up, holistic way of living, we might find art and science needn't be so very different. All the elements are what we are, and our imaginations can be nourished by a sense of intimacy and mutuality. Buddhist monk, Ajahn Sucitto.

Ajahn Sucitto:

Imaging is part of our heritage. We've been doing that since people painted on the cave walls. We've been imaging. That's part of what it is to be a human being. You access depth, meaning, purpose, mystery, life, death, birth, pain, joy, you access it at an imaginal level. Poetry, the word comes from poiesis: to create, to make, to fashion, it's a very conscious fashioning. That's associated with depth like with a depth experience, which you might say, the heart experience, the experience of the inner consciousness. And you bring that fore, and it speaks because there's a certain potency of that which arises from the depth. The potency of the image means it often speaks more than the words say, because they carry the potency of something pulled up from the depth.

Linda France:

We can choose now to risk going beneath the surface of things and beyond the literal. John Kinsella.

John Kinsella:

Poetic language is the way I express myself. It's a tool I have, but it's a tool of privilege and it's inarticulate. The more I can explain my position, the more I can articulate what I think and how I go about doing what I do, the more inarticulate I really am in the ways that count. The great silences, the great language of intimacy, of caring for other people and for creatures around you, and the vegetation, all the rest of it, is actually not the language of explanation. It's the language of presence. The real speech that matters is when I'm outside and, like I was working this morning, and ... and the ring neck parrots were around me and I was listening to them and there was a whole level of articulation going on that I was desperately trying to connect with. Then what intrudes is a line of poetry. It comes in. It has to be written. I think that poets can speak and make their work useful in the moment of dire need but I don't think it's the ultimate answer. I think it's part of something moving towards an answer.

Linda France:

In a time of immense uncertainty, vulnerability and change, we might be more aware of where and how we live. Charmaine Papertalk Green, who belongs to the Yamaji Aboriginal Nation, reflects on changes brought by the pandemic.

Charmaine Papertalk Green:

Now, because we've had really good rains, we're in wildflower season, the land is carpeted in wildflowers. I've always described this season as country singing to us and making us really happy because where I come from, it's really harsh land. It's just a harsh environment. With COVID-19, it seems that the local non-aboriginal people have suddenly found all these wildflowers. They're having picnics out there, there's hundreds of them out there. Places we've been going for thousands of years. I was looking at it and thinking, "Well, maybe this is happening because we're locked to the rest of Australia. We can't travel. We can't go to places overseas. We can't go to the other states, and maybe the locals have found their wildflowers." So, it was really nice. They just looked so happy, which was a... I think it's a really nice reconnection.

Charmaine Papertalk Green:

'Rain Clouds' Arrival'

The arrival of rain clouds
To be welcomed and embraced
For the balance of life
Is wrapped within
Nature's way nothing else
Precious rain to kiss
The face of country
Filling drinking cups of life
Bringing presents to the cycle of growth

And living bush foods flourish
Wildflowers pop up to say hello
Allowing the land to smile
Moving deep over country
To awaken the seeds
To awaken the land
To emerge within rain clouds
Brings more than a sense of renewal,
Refreshing and sustaining
Tracks and memories
Across the land
Across the country
Hold their place

Linda France:

When we know we belong to something that arises from the human perspective and goes beyond it, we're more likely to treat each other and the land with respect and make better choices. Richard Dawson, again.

Richard Dawson:

The landscape's changing. Changing weather conditions are influencing that, but I think that still the dominant force is humanity. Our choices about reservoir construction, farming, forestation deforestation. These are all huge human drivers of change and choices we are making and each one of those often individual choices adds up and creates huge landscape change and that has an impact on a lot of other things. I think a lot of the changes that are needed, they will hopefully lead to something quite different. The decarbonization of our energy supply will change the infrastructure that we have in our cities, improving the way we manage water within our cities. We should start to see better use of green spaces to help with that and I think that will hopefully restore some of that green and pleasant land if you like.

Linda France:

Even though we might think we have no agency, everything we do, every choice we make has a consequence. Ajahn Sucitto describes how we can be part of a fit-for-purpose positive spiral; the chain of cause and effect.

Ajahn Sucitto:

Karma. I'm sure people are aware of that term. Karma doesn't begin with physical actions it begins with the mental actions. So when you begin to look into the roots of your mental behavior, say: Is there aggression? Is there domination? Is there greed? Am I lying? Deceiving myself? Escaping from reality? Just look at that and check it. Don't let it take over. And you can begin actually to clean out those mental roots as being, not just harmful for other but distasteful to oneself, because you can feel them gripping the heart. Now, if you clean that out, then what's going to happen is your actions and your speech and your perspectives will be increasingly endowed with a quality of love and kindness, compassion, living simply, respect for life, respect for others, nonviolence. And this is how the loop begins. It starts right there. And... well, if you are doing it and you're speaking it and you're looking good with it, likelihood is other people are

going to pick it up. So this begins to change things and you've got to recognize, nobody's got to blank slate. You're either part of the solution or part of the problem.

Linda France:

Poet and playwright, Inua Ellams, has figured out his own way of creating a positive feedback loop.

Inua Ellams:

I try to be practical in what I do and how I meet things, or the small wrongs I feel I can right, or I can address in my work. And I think of it in the shortest of terms: what I can 'control' and what I can measure. And this is because the alternative and the scale of change is so vast. I try to break it into small bits and think, what can I do? And I have conversations with my friends sometimes and I hope that they will achieve similar things. Try and make the world a better place, six feet from you or three feet from you. So just think about the air around you. What can you do to make your life better and those around you within a radius? And if you can do so and everyone else does similar things, then we would make the world big. So hope expands that far from me, three or six feet. Then the six feet becomes 12 feet becomes 24, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. So that's where my hope expands to.

Linda France:

Although imbalance and injustice are deeply entrenched, imagining and enacting an alternative is the beginning of regeneration, starting to build different, more whole earth friendly structures.

John Kinsella:

What's so distressing when you hear about the absolute degradation, destruction of the environment - you've got these very rich people who make vast profits out of mining and so on and then they have their largess, they give a bit back. That kind of odious philanthropy in which people think, oh, they're very generous people. When they've stolen everything in the first place and damaged everything. It's such hypocrisy. But we do have the potential not to be as them. We have the potential not to purchase and participate in the goods they manufacture. We have many choices. Let's not go and buy that new telephone or let's not and let's not and let's not. The potential is in the choice. A lot of people are deprived of choice. Privilege is a huge thing in choice and a lot of people, they have to do this or they have to do that because choice has been taken from them but where there is choice, then surely that's what we should be doing. And therefore, by doing that, you actually lessen your own privilege and accord a bit more to someone else and that evens out a bit more. Equal distribution of wealth.

Deborah McGregor:

We don't think about how we're going to keep taking. Every day, you want to train people to think about, 'What am I going to give? What am I going to offer that's going to help the earth flourish? As opposed to consuming at the expense of other life.

Linda France:

Deborah McGregor is also interested in the role our most tender selves, our hearts, can play in guiding our actions on climate.

Deborah McGregor:

I'll often hear this from elders. They go, "Speak from your heart" And again, some of the images, the art, shows - let's say within a treaty process or a council - you'll see the heart within the picture. The lines come from the heart, because that's the center of everything. And then it could go up through the mind and then out to the world and connecting to other people but it's also the images show the connection of the heart. That's a lot harder to do, especially the more educated, I guess you could say, you get because you're so inside your head. Everything is so abstract and conceptual that the actual embodied experience becomes a lot harder to realize. Unfortunately, we do train that out of people. 'Your intuition and your heart knowledge, that's not as valid as what I want you to remember from page 56 of this environmental science book or from this history book.' That's what you're going to get rewarded for, not for how you feel about what's happening to the planet. It's very hard to get people off phones and off the virtual world in order to be able to connect again to the natural world. Wherever people are and wherever they can start.

Linda France:

Ajahn Sucitto recommends a similar openhearted clarity.

Ajahn Sucitto:

The way you'll feel better is to begin to cultivate your own heart and let go of what is not yours. You start to feel better the less you are hanging onto this, that, and the other, planning the future, worrying about the past, comparing yourself with other people, criticizing this, that and the other, nagging yourself, beating yourself up. The less you do that, you'll feel better. That's called purification. [Laughs] You carry that out and then you look at that in the world around you. You see - let creatures be who they are. You let them be. There's room for all of us. In some ways, a worm is more important than a human being on this planet so give it some respect. You don't have to like them, but let it be. Lots of space for it. We don't have to take over every inch of this planet. It's got to be wrong. If you do that, nature will take care of itself. If we do that, nature's fine. But you stop messing with it, it's going to grow fine and this is the way we deal with our fundamental human egocentricity and obsessiveness, which does us no good and damages our own hearts, our relationships and society and the planet. Deal with that, things'll work out.

Buddha himself was, he was born under a tree, lived in the forests, got enlightened under a tree and passed away under a tree. So it's deeply, deeply connected to the natural world because this body is the natural world. This is where it belongs.

Linda France:

The world and all its words and all its weathers are inside us too. The matter we are made of is also what matters for the Earth's regeneration. If we only try to remember to live life on its own terms, with respect for difference, imperfection and connectedness, we can let that unfolding process be our element, planting the seeds for a more nourishing future. I'm going to leave you with a poem called 'Nature Based Solutions'. Imagine the title very much in air quotes.

Linda France:

'Nature Based Solutions'

At the webinar propped on my kitchen table
the minister asks us to consider (third in a list
of six) *nature based solutions* to the crisis
we find ourselves in for the very reason
phrases like this are scattered like straws and clutched
at, smoke rising from a house on fire. In this *window*
to act, he calls it, a *positive inflection point*, I try to think
of a single thing that isn't based within nature –
if that means part of us all and where we live, us
humans and our fellow creatures, flowers and trees,
moss and mushrooms, not forgetting lichen, the dirt
under my fingernails, invisible flora blooming
in my gut. Above my head there's a tap-tap-tapping
like the woodpecker who sometimes mistakes our house
for a tree. The roofer's fixing leaks round the chimney
and in the gully between me and my neighbour.
He took over his father's business but wouldn't want
his son to: his body's shot to hell he says from all
the clambering and crouching and clinging he has to do
on roofs all over the county. He's making a consummate job
of it, anti-clockwise, handling every slate with such care
they could be the armour of Marianne Moore's *near artichoke*,
the pangolin, *scale lapping scale with spruce-cone regularity*.
Up here the wind and the rain puff out their cheeks
but we'll be okay now the roofer's doing what he does.
He reminds me I have some nature based solutions
of my own. I open my mouth and start speaking
passionflower, all the words coming out like nails,
pollen-dusted verbs and vowels mending what is broken,
spreading seeds and changing with the weather.

Linda France:

My poem, 'Nature Based Solutions', ending the final Regeneration episode of our series, In Our Element. It was produced by Philipa Gearing for Sonderbug Productions, in association with New Writing North and Newcastle University, supported by the Audio Content Fund and Arts Council England.

Joshua Green:

[Singing]

Linda France:

The music was composed and performed by Joshua Green and it's been presented by me, Linda France.

Joshua Green:

[Singing]

Linda France:

Thank you, very much, for listening.