

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([00:00](#)):

This is A Matter of Degrees, stories for the climate curious. I'm Dr. Katharine Wilkinson. It's just me today, bringing you a special episode, a live conversation I had a few weeks back, before the election, with my good friend and collaborator, Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson. A lot has shifted since then. I know folks are grieving, processing, preparing for what's ahead. Me too. One of the questions I'm holding in this moment is what is still true? For me, the need to build community is a key answer. Another is the imperative of imagining the futures we do want even, and especially when they seem most out of reach. And that's at the heart of this conversation with Ayana. She's a marine biologist, policy expert, writer. We first met back in 2018 and connected pretty immediately around women's leadership on climate. And that shared passion led us to co-edit the All We Can Save anthology, a collection of essays, poetry, and art from 60 women who are leading the movement.

([01:24](#)):

And it turned out that book wanted to be more than a book because there is a leadership crisis at the heart of the climate crisis. So Ayana and I co-founded the All We Can Save Project, the nonprofit I lead that is focused on nurturing the leadership we need for that future we want. People, after all, are the beating heart of climate possibility. Ayana recently released a new book, What If We Get It Right? Visions of Climate Futures. She and I sat down to talk about that book at the Carter Center in Atlanta. Now, a quick note on venue. The Carter Center holds a special place, not just in my hometown, but in the environmental movement. It was founded by Jimmy and Rosalyn Carter. During his presidency, Carter protected more than 100 million acres of land in Alaska.

([02:26](#)):

He created the Department of Energy, promoted renewables, even installed solar panels on the White House. And he loved, quite famously, a warm cardigan in winter. That center is both a monument and a continuation of President Carter's environmental and humanitarian legacy, climate action before we even had a name for it. All of that made the Carter Center feel like the perfect place for Ayana and me to discuss possibility, transformation, courage amidst the climate crisis. And in the wake of the election results. It feels right to regroup in the leadership of those who came before most of us in this work, who helped to forge paths where there were none. President Carter's commitment to the human good, his gumption to keep at the work over decades, they feel to me like light and more light is certainly what we need in this moment and in the days ahead. So with that, dear listeners, let's head a few weeks back in time to the Carter Center.

([03:45](#)):

Let's get into it.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([03:46](#)):

Okay. I'll follow your lead.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([03:49](#)):

Well, let's talk about your question because I, one of my hypothesis is that the questions we hold about the climate crisis are often a really good compass for navigation of where we should go next. And I actually haven't asked you when this question started to grow in you.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([04:09](#)):

I don't know is the short answer. Like the book was originally gonna be called, What Do We Become, How Humans Survive Humanity, which apparently sounded ominous <laugh>, and people wouldn't maybe buy it. Uh, which would've gone actually quite well if one of the covers that we considered for All We Can Save with like dark clouds. I thought it was a sunrise. Other people were like, it looks like soot and fire <laugh> and like, very bad.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([04:36](#)):

I mean, it was 2020. So, you know.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([04:38](#)):

So that was the first title, which was also a question. And then, um, Away From the Brink, which we, I had considered for my book, we considered briefly for All We Can Save. That ended up being the title of the last chapter of this book. That's just a phrase that I'm really enamored with. Like, what would it look like to move away from this brink that we're on in terms of the climate crisis?

([05:02](#)):

But again, I was sort of advised that it was still, it was still apocalyptic, just pretending to be backing away from the apocalypse. But of course, the idea of this book is like, what do we wanna work towards? Where do we wanna go? Like, what is the future piece of this? So yeah, I, I truly have no idea. But once I came up with it, I was like, oh, yeah, that seems positive. But also, um, there's a question mark. So it's not, people assume that it's optimistic, but I'm not an optimist. I hate to break it to you. I'm a realist, a scientist, all these other -ists. But like, we certainly could get it more right than we are now. I guess, like what if we get it as right as possible would be like the very accurate description of like, <laugh> my take in this book. Also, not that catchy anyway. Titles are hard.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([05:56](#)):

Titles are hard, but questions are, there's an invitation.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([06:01](#)):

Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([06:02](#)):

Right? That's implicit in a question.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([06:04](#)):

Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([06:04](#)):

And I think that's the vibe of your work is like inviting people in, inviting participation. And I, so I think it's really appropriate actually that it's a question. Um.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([06:17](#)):

Well, I love to hear it put that way. Thank you.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([06:19](#)):

Yeah. Um, but then the book itself is also full of questions, which I love. I mean, I don't know if there's any kind of counts out there in the chat GPT land of like, which, which has the most questions. But I feel like this book might be right up there. 'cause it's lots of you asking questions to an extraordinary

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([06:39](#)):

Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([06:40](#)):

Kind of smorgasbord of climate leaders

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([06:42](#)):

Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([06:43](#)):

And posing different versions of the what if question. So I'm curious, like what's your take on questions? Like what makes for good generative?

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([06:55](#)):

Well, I think.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([06:56](#)):

Questions.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([06:57](#)):

First of all, I like much prefer being the interviewer. I mean, I loved hosting How To Save a Planet Podcast. 'cause it just was so fun to get to ask these interesting people questions. The reason that this book is, it's 20 interviews essentially because I came up with a title question and then was like, who am I to answer this question? Not in like a out of insecurity.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([07:21](#)):

Yeah.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([07:22](#)):

But because like, how could any one person answer a question this big about the future of life on this planet? And so I think it's just, you know, some amount of humility made me realize that I either had to do this as like a dissertation style project where I read everything I could find all the different perspectives on it, and then tried to do some sort of distillation, crystallization of all of these other writings and then present it back to you in some sort of hopefully poetic-ish prose. And I thought, I don't wanna write that book <laugh> and probably I wouldn't even wanna read it. Yeah. It just felt like it was gonna be a glorified textbook.

([08:09](#)):

And then my editor saw me, um, he was coming to these events, Chris Jackson from One World, he was coming to these events I was hosting in Brooklyn at this arts institution called Pioneer Works, where I would interview, for example, Dr. Kate Marvel, NASA climate scientist, and Rhiana Gunn-Wright, who is a lead author of The Green New Deal and are just complimentary experts, right? So an ocean farmer and an ocean fisherman or someone working on plastics pollution reduction on a nonprofit side and on a, on a scientific side. And so it was having all these conversations and my editor was like, oh, this is the book. The thing that you can do that's special is like, tell us who we should be listening to and then help us understand like what the heck they're saying. Anyway, one thing led to another, and you know, 10 interviews became 20, just like our 20 essays for All We Can Save, became like 40.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([09:01](#)):

Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([09:01](#)):

Until this was ripped out of my hands. But I guess I'm just more comfortable asking questions than answering them. And I was gonna write an introduction to each section of the book and I really didn't wanna do it <laugh>. So each section has like three interviews and maybe an essay by me and a poem or some quotes and stuff like that. Similar in structure, vaguely, generally, to All We Can Save.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([09:25](#)):

Yeah.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([09:25](#)):

And so I thought that the easiest way out would just be to frame the section through the questions that I thought captured the topics we were covering. What if climate adaptation is beautiful? What if we dream at a landscape scale? What if we value culture as a form of resilience? What if we deconstruct instead of demolish? Right?

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([09:46](#)):

Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([09:46](#)):

I thought that would just be much more provocative and engaging than like, and in this section we are going to talk about how climate adaptation could be beautiful. Yeah.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([09:56](#)):

Well I think it really works.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([09:58](#)):

Thanks.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([09:59](#)):

Um, now I remember when we were working on the begin

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([10:04](#)):

Mm-Hmm.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([10:04](#)):

Of All We Can Save. And I was feeling similarly daunted by, you know, the summary that a beginning should do.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([10:11](#)):

It's so boring. Like the introduction to every big book summarizes everything that's about to happen and all the chapters. And I'm just like, why?

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([10:17](#)):

I know. And I was like, surprised. I wrote a prose poem. <laugh>.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([10:20](#)):

Yes. <laugh>.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([10:22](#)):

How do you feel about this <laugh>? No overview. So, you know, sometimes the things you don't wanna do end up taking you in

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([10:29](#)):

That was the hack.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([10:29](#)):

Really, really good directions.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([10:30](#)):

I'm so glad that you opened the conversation with this question about questions because one of the things that I feel like is a gift that you have is the way that you see questions as or can create questions that are both generative and generous. I would say, I mean, you want Katharine to ask you questions 'cause often there's like a compliment hidden in the question <laugh>, and there's like room to play and explore. And it's not a leading question in a bad way. And one of the things that I think has given all we can save such a beautiful and long life as a book, I mean this is like the four year anniversary

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([11:11](#)):

True

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([11:12](#)):

Is the circles concept that you created. So this reading guide to guide people through all 10 sections of the book with these generous questions. So I kind of wanna ask the same question back to you. Like, what is your relationship with questions and how have you seen that be effective for our first born?

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([11:30](#)):

Oh, um, see, she wants to be the interviewer.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([11:34](#)):

I do.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([11:34](#)):

This is you, you know, as, uh, our colleague Amy at the project always says, you know, give a mouse a cookie <laugh>.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([11:41](#)):

Um, I mean, who doesn't want a cookie?

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([11:43](#)):

Here we are. Um, yeah, I think I just really believe in the power of questions. I think we're not always very thoughtful about the questions that we ask. And I think especially on a topic like the climate crisis that spans from soul to systems change and everything in between.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([12:04](#)):

Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([12:04](#)):

There's so much to interrogate, right? There's so much to explore and there's so much, there's just so much unknown territory, right?

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([12:13](#)):

Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([12:13](#)):

I think in ourselves, in the world around us, in the landscape of solutions and accelerators for change in, you know, what the future will look like and who we need to be to live into the future that we want. Um, so I think

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([12:32](#)):

Maybe I should write the what do we become book?

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([12:34](#)):

Yeah, yeah.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([12:35](#)):

Maybe we should write it together.

This transcript was exported on Dec 04, 2024 - view latest version [here](#).

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([12:36](#)):

Maybe we should do it to together maybe another project. <laugh>. Dun dun.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([12:40](#)):

I, I cringe to say these things out loud because words become things with us.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([12:45](#)):

Again, if there's a Google doc, then you'll know it is real <laugh>. Yep. Um, and the circles, they all hold three generous questions that sort of follow Marshall Ganz's story of self, story of us story.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([13:01](#)):

Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([13:02](#)):

of now. So they kind of start close in, they move towards community and then kind of towards action in the world. And what's amazing, I think, is that people really want to have that kind of dialogue, right. But often we don't get the invitation or we don't get the structure for it. Um, and I think that's part of why circles kind of went and are still going. I mean, there are circles that still are doing things together four years later

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([13:28](#)):

Absolutely. They've become like book clubs that are doing other climate and other reading other climate books together.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([13:33](#)):

Yep.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([13:33](#)):

They've become action circles.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([13:36](#)):

There's apparently an a group of 350 or so women in sustainability in Atlanta that grew out of a circle.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([13:43](#)):

Wow.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([13:44](#)):

You know?

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([13:44](#)):

That's amazing. Yeah. I met two women at, um, a book signing in Portland who met doing a All We Can Save circle together on Zoom while living in different countries. It was someone who, um, like announced

I guess through our Instagram that they wanted to host a circle or like, somehow we helped them find people to be in a circle with.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([14:09](#)):

Yeah.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([14:09](#)):

And they became best friends and they came to my book signing together and they're like, we're still doing this. We're doing this stuff. Um, and one of them like made me a piece of art of a parrot fish, which is a fish that I really like.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([14:21](#)):

You do like a parrot fish.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([14:23](#)):

And the whole thing is just, I have to say people who like All We Can Save are like the sweetest people. Just a bunch of like mushy do-gooders, <laugh>. It's the best, it's the best

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([14:32](#)):

Favorite genre of humans

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([14:35](#)):

I know.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([14:36](#)):

Um, yeah. But so one of the things this, and now I am gonna tuck in one of these compliments.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([14:42](#)):

Oh no. Okay. I'm guarding myself.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([14:43](#)):

That I, that I really appreciate about this book and how you approached it is I think we are at like a species wide massive learning moment.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([14:54](#)):

Mm-Hmm. <affirmative> Some sort of inflection.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([14:54](#)):

Right? Some sort of inflection. Like, I mean, my God, if we're not going to embrace the learning moment, you know, probably we're not gonna maybe be a successful species, but you really model, uh, I think kind of how to take up the mantle of learning in this time and asking questions that you're like, holy shit, I'm actually not sure how to answer that.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([15:17](#)):

Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([15:18](#)):

And then going with curiosity and rigor and beginning to gather some answers and knit them together. So I'm curious if you, if it felt like a learning journey

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([15:29](#)):

Oh, totally.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([15:29](#)):

To you.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([15:30](#)):

Yeah. Yeah. I mean, so there's 20 interviews in the book and everyone I interviewed was someone I had already known

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([15:38](#)):

Yeah.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([15:39](#)):

For years, if not a decade or more. So there's like a real rapport there. And I feel like I was able to have very different conversations because they weren't strangers.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([15:49](#)):

Mm.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([15:50](#)):

There's a very different energy to the conversations in this book than if it's like a news interview I've, I've heard, which really warms my heart that it kind of feels like you're overhearing a dinner conversation, a dinner party conversation or something like that of like friends trying to grapple with things together, maybe over some wine and just, you know, getting a little salty and spicy with the whole thing. Um, and so it was really a lot of fun. And of course they're highly edited so, you know, I'd have like a 50 page transcript that I'd cut down to like 15 pages.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([16:22](#)):

Thank you.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([16:23](#)):

Yes, you're welcome. <laugh>. I mean it's so thick already <laugh>. Um, but yeah, so this was in large part an editing project in a way. Like what is the essence of each of these things?

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([16:35](#)):

Mm-Hmm.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([16:36](#)):

And arguing with my editor over like, which jokes I was allowed to keep, he's is like, this is not actually

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([16:41](#)):

Too many

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([16:41](#)):

funny <laugh>. Um, I beg to differ. This is hilarious. <laugh>, I think I've absolutely lost track of your question.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([16:53](#)):

Learning journey.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([16:54](#)):

Oh yeah. Such a journey. Um, so I think, I mean I did these interviews over the course of maybe six months.

([17:02](#)):

And so it was really interesting having that be a longer process. Basically I wrote the book in nine months and then edited it in nine months and then planned the tour for a few months. Um,

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([17:13](#)):

I feel like any good learning journey has moments where you're like, woo, this is a little, I'm like at an edge that I didn't really necessarily want

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([17:22](#)):

Mm-Hmm.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([17:22](#)):

To come to.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([17:24](#)):

Yeah.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([17:24](#)):

Did you have those in the process?

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([17:26](#)):

The chapter on artificial intelligence. I'm just not into it. Like I wish we could uninvent it honestly, but like that's not gonna happen. And so to be a person who's like, can we just put this cat back in the bag please? But also I know that that's not possible.

([17:47](#)):

And so really trying to come to grips with okay, like if this is a thing that's gonna be around, what's the best possible scenario for it, uh, was yeah, definitely an edge for me. And so the person I interviewed about that was Mustafa Suleyman who was the co-founder of DeepMind, one of the first big AI companies that sold to Google. And then he went, worked at Google as their head of AI policy and products or something like that for a while. And now he's head of AI at Microsoft, but he used to be like a facilitator and is good friends with Al Gore because he helped with climate negotiations. So he kind of understands my world and I was trying to understand his, and I was just like,

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([18:31](#)):

He definitely says things that I'm like, what?

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([18:34](#)):

And honestly I took like a little bit of editor's prerogative. I'm like, it would take so many footnotes to explain this that we're just gonna cut it. Um, 'cause you have to cut, you know, 60% of the interview anyway. And so the stuff on like, like how AI is gonna help with agriculture and like genetic engineering and stuff, I was like, yeah, we're not gonna cover that in this book <laugh>

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([18:57](#)):

Cutting room floor.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([18:58](#)):

Yeah.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([18:59](#)):

Yeah. Who was the wonkiest person you interviewed?

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([19:03](#)):

Kelly Sims Gallagher's pretty wonky. She does international climate policy. So in the nineties when she was looking at the data coming out of China, she was like, oh, China's gonna be the big deal in the future of greenhouse gas emissions.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([19:17](#)):

Yeah.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([19:17](#)):

I'm going to move to China and learn Chinese and like we're gonna figure this out. Which right, to see the writing on the wall and then take a leap like that. I will just forever be in awe of her.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([19:28](#)):

Totally.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([19:28](#)):

Um, she ended up in the White House in the Obama administration helping to broker that first US China deal on climate where each country made their own commitments to what they were gonna do on emissions and setting a goal for that. Um, and that unlocked the Paris agreement, which was based on these nationally determined contributions where every country just decided what they were gonna commit to. And then all the countries made their separate commitments. Um, and then that became essentially the Paris Agreement. Very wonky, but also absolutely critical. And just learning from her the importance of monitoring and making sure that less wealthy countries have the capacity to understand is are their policies working?

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([20:16](#)):

Yeah.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([20:17](#)):

'cause they're down for it. But like, if you don't have the capacity to measure the impacts of the policies that you're investing so much in implementing, especially with scarce resources you can't afford

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([20:29](#)):

Yeah.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([20:29](#)):

To not check how well it's going and making sure you're, um, investing in just the right ways and not missing like a major source of emissions, et cetera.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([20:39](#)):

Yeah.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([20:39](#)):

So yeah, that one's, it's wonky international policy stuff, but also very practical. And you know, I, I asked follow up questions so anyone who's interested can certainly follow it. But yeah. In the glorious weeds of of it all.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([20:54](#)):

Mm. Which conversation left you feeling the most inspired, lit up?

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([21:00](#)):

I know you told me you were maybe gonna ask about like which one was the most woowoo? Is this the new version of that question?

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([21:06](#)):

Yeah, it's a slightly different version because I think, but if you wanna answer the woo question

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([21:08](#)):

Because I think it's related.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([21:10](#)):

Huh.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([21:11](#)):

Um, which is odd for me 'cause I'm usually like, oh, with the woo, that's too much

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([21:15](#)):

Too woo.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([21:16](#)):

Okay. Yeah. Like I like crystals are pretty, but what are we doing here? It was actually Bren Smith, this like super salty former commercial fishermen who worked, you know, out in the grand banks out in Alaska, um, was basically part of overfishing and watched the fisheries he grew up in collapsing and was like, I don't, I don't wanna do that. I don't wanna be on that side of history, but I do wanna make a living on the water. I cannot be a cubicle kind of guy. And so he realized that he could farm the ocean and so he's become one of the pioneers of what he calls regenerative ocean farming.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([22:00](#)):

Yeah.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([22:01](#)):

Of seaweed and oysters and scallops and mussels and clams, all that kind of good stuff. And co-founded an organization called GreenWave that is training thousands of people how to do this and helping to create the markets for that seaweed and helping to, you know, encourage the policy development, which is something my team at Urban Ocean Lab, this policy think tank that I co-founded, um, has been working on too, right. The thing that I found inspiring about that conversation was how he describes the potential for regenerative ocean farming to revitalize the waterfronts of places that have been really hollowed out by the collapse of fisheries to have this new coastal economy that's built more on a co-op model where people are really sharing in the benefits as this grows where there's not this huge corporate consolidation where it's many small farms dotting the coast instead of these massive conglomerates. And where it's not just all of the coastlines becoming extremely expensive condos and privatized.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([23:09](#)):

Yeah.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([23:09](#)):

Just preserving this culture of making a living from the ocean. And I found that to be a really exciting vision. And at the same time I had never heard Bren talk about his feelings before this interview.

([23:26](#)):

And part of that is because he has a daughter now and he's really thinking about her future and the future in a different way.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([23:33](#)):

Yeah.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([23:34](#)):

He said, I'm trying to foster my tolerance for ambiguity the unknown, living with the hope of a better future. We gotta enjoy this journey because part of not knowing where it's gonna is that every day we need solidarity and we need love for each other and we need to laugh and have joy. And that's not normally the way I speak. And I wouldn't have spoken that way years ago to which I responded, no, you're salty. I've never heard you talk about feelings before. And he said, climate has changed me a little the way I feel about the world and want to interact with folks. Like the toxicity we see in our culture, folks attacking each other and trying to tear each other down. That's not how I wanna die. Let's live and die without regret.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([24:19](#)):

Mm-Hmm.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([24:20](#)):

And I was just like, amen. Sign me up for that. Right?

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([24:23](#)):

Totally.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([24:26](#)):

And the other thing he said about feelings, which again, like

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([24:32](#)):

Not the interview you thought you were gonna have.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([24:34](#)):

No, he said, speaking from the culture I grew up in, we're going to have to say goodbye to some things we hold close to our heart. For me that's chasing fish, being on the high seas. That search and the hunt is hard for me to say goodbye to, but it is what I have to give up to make a better world for my kid. I suspect everybody on the planet is gonna have their own version of something like that. It's cultural things we're going to have to give up and those are the most painful.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([25:03](#)):

Mm.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([25:03](#)):

We need to look in and admit to ourselves that we are climate deniers and ask ourselves what do I need to change?

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([25:12](#)):

Mm.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([25:13](#)):

And I was just like, oh yes.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([25:17](#)):

Yeah.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([25:17](#)):

Exactly that. And then he goes on to talk about working class environmentalism and how we've totally written it off and let it be this elitist thing.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([25:27](#)):

Yeah.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([25:27](#)):

But he's like, no, it's not about left-wing and progressives and the cultural left. It's real and it's been there for generations and we need to honor it and bring it to the center. And so this very clear vision of what if we get it right for the future of working waterfronts

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([25:43](#)):

Yeah.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([25:43](#)):

And coastal economies. Um, and one that's grounded in blue collar environmentalism and also in love for the future. I was just like, that's the inspiration and the woowoo at the same time.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([25:57](#)):

It's got the implementation and the heart.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([26:00](#)):

Exactly. And the strategy. Like he's actually working on making that dream real.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([26:06](#)):

Well and I feel like there's, you know, there's become this like zeitgeist of like, don't tell people they're gonna have to give anything up.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([26:12](#)):

Uhhuh.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([26:13](#)):

Right?

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([26:13](#)):

Yeah.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([26:14](#)):

And it's like, okay, come on <laugh>. Like, how many people just gave up their homes? Like that's not the kind of giving up you want to have to do, but like this idea of we will just somehow swap some things out and continue as is

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([26:28](#)):

Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([26:28](#)):

feels, it just feels like lying to people, you know? And I think Bren's provocation of like, what is it that we need to give up that like

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([26:39](#)):

Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([26:40](#)):

we love and we don't wanna give up.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([26:42](#)):

Yeah.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([26:42](#)):

But when we see the big picture, we understand the necessity of it.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([26:48](#)):

Mm-Hmm. <affirmative> and, and the way that he describes it in particular as cultural

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([26:53](#)):

Yeah.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([26:53](#)):

I think is very real. Right?

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([26:55](#)):

Yeah.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([26:55](#)):

Um, we think about the houses we live in and the cars we drive and how much energy we use and all of that stuff.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([27:00](#)):

Yeah.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([27:01](#)):

And the types of transportation that we use and what we eat and all of that. Like

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([27:05](#)):

Yeah.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([27:05](#)):

The southern barbecue, the like in huge piles of red meat as like the cultural norm.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([27:14](#)):

I mean, you're talking to someone who's survived in the south as a vegetarian for 25 years, so like I know <laugh>, I know.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([27:25](#)):

You know, um, and all of this kind of stuff. Right?

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([27:25](#)):

Yeah.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([27:25](#)):

It's just, we're just like gripping onto it even tighter I think because people know in their hearts that it's unsustainable.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([27:35](#)):

Yeah.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([27:35](#)):

And so I think this is to me like one of the biggest questions is how, whether and how our culture will adapt to the fact that our climate has changed. Because if we're not dealing with that part of it, then we're not gonna be able to move fast enough if culture is holding us in the past, and I think that it was actually reading your, um, draw down review that in some sense like crystallized that for me because you described culture as an accelerant or accelerator

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Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([28:11](#)):

Mm-Hmm.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([28:11](#)):

Of our ability to implement climate solutions.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([28:14](#)):

Yeah.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([28:14](#)):

And it just feels like if politicians are wussy and actually followers and not leaders, which they mostly are

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([28:21](#)):

Jimmy Carter aside, many of them seem to be <laugh>.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([28:25](#)):

Absolutely. So if they're trying to do the thing that will get them reelected

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([28:31](#)):

Yeah.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([28:31](#)):

And not piss off too many lobbyists and donors, we need to change the cultural context within which they're making those decisions.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([28:39](#)):

Totally.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([28:39](#)):

Um, and so that's why I've been doing this book tour and having the types of conversations and events that I have is because like this needs to be placed like within the cultural context.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([28:52](#)):

Totally.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([28:53](#)):

So thank you for helping me notice that very clearly.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([28:57](#)):

Well, and thank you Donella Meadows because her understanding of leverage points in complex systems helped me. And she mostly talks about paradigms, but really culture is the holder of paradigms. Right? Like culture is the holder of our mindsets, our values, our beliefs that really do set the context for

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([29:20](#)):

Yeah.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([29:20](#)):

For everything else.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([29:22](#)):

Yeah.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([29:23](#)):

And it's where, you know, I think we found so much like just immediate kindred connection when we met, which was communication about climate. Storytelling about climate is not like a nice to have thing. Like that is the most powerful vehicle for cultural change.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([29:42](#)):

Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>. Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([29:42](#)):

Um, so you know, books, books matter.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([29:46](#)):

Oh books still matter.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([29:48](#)):

They still matter.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([29:48](#)):

Excellent news.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([29:50](#)):

Yeah. <laugh>.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([29:52](#)):

Yeah. I think it's good. There's a section in this book called culture is the Context.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([29:56](#)):

Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([29:57](#)):

Actually what are the what if questions in that one? That might be fun.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([30:00](#)):

Let's have a couple of those.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([30:01](#)):

What if new storytelling matches our new reality? What if films acknowledge climate as the context? What if the news is 50% climate instead of 1%, which it currently is 0.9% of TV news minutes. Um, what if journalists focus on solutions? What if disposability is out and durability and repair is in what if we collaborate across generations? What if we view climate action as a moral imperative? I started by interviewing two Hollywood executives and being like, where are the stories you guys?

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([30:35](#)):

Yeah.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([30:36](#)):

We don't need more depressing documentaries. We need like the meet cute romcom at the composting facility and we need the like

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([30:44](#)):

Where all love blossoms

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([30:45](#)):

extremely hot solar installer instead of like, the pool boy is so eighties. Like give me the hot solar installer.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([30:53](#)):

I'm sorry, is that a heat pump <laugh>?

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([30:59](#)):

Well, yes. I'm so happy to see you.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([31:01](#)):

Um, maybe this is the next project we do.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([31:04](#)):

Oh my god. Can we write a romcom together? Oh, for the love of God. Um, this is what we need. Right? How many sort of like couples have spats at the EV charging station? 'cause your goddamn husband didn't charge it before your road trip. You know, <laugh> like all of this is just, these are normal parts of life now.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([31:26](#)):

Yeah.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([31:26](#)):

Like I've definitely checked people out in the bike lane at a red light. <laugh>, why is this not in a movie <laugh>? Right. Um, and so I just feel like what I want to see is storytelling that reflects our new reality.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([31:40](#)):

Yeah.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([31:40](#)):

And has a sense of humor about it while focusing on solutions.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([31:45](#)):

Let's talk about joy.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([31:47](#)):

Okay.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([31:47](#)):

Because, you know, rom-coms, it's, it's one of the things you bring to this particular climate party, which is not really known for its joy vibes.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([31:56](#)):

Mm-Hmm.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([31:56](#)):

Talk to us about joy. Tell us what was especially joyful in this project.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([32:03](#)):

You described it as like the climate party. And when I talked to high school kids and they're so earnest about their environmental clubs and I just adore them and they're like, why, why weren't more people joining my club? I'm like, I don't know. Are your meetings any fun <laugh>? Like you have to throw a better party or no one's gonna come. Like literally you have to throw the better party. In All We Can Save, we use the word invitation. Like if you've been waiting for an invitation, like please consider this to be it.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([32:32](#)):

Yeah.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([32:33](#)):

The first word in the introduction of this book is welcome because I really wanted this to be like a come on in we need you kind of energy. Um, and so if you're gonna invite people in, like you're gonna have to be a good host. Right. That's why there's one autobiographical chapter in the book. 'cause I'm like, okay, if I'm your host, like I should give you a little bit of something about like my biases and how I'm approaching this. That's why there's art in the book.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([33:03](#)):

Mm.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([33:03](#)):

Right. That's why the inside of the back cover is my anti apocalypse mix tape, which I spent like 80 hours probably <laugh> on. That's that

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([33:14](#)):

Knowing you, that sounds right. <laugh>

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([33:16](#)):

Like really had to get all the right songs in exactly the right order of the arc of all the emotions I described it as, um, anthems for victory, love songs to earth, tunes for tenacity, and sexy implementation vibes. Um, that's everything you basically need to know about <laugh> my approach to climate work, like implementation is the sexiest thing. Like show me a practical problem solver and I swoon <laugh>. Um, but we don't actually have climate anthems, really.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([33:49](#)):

Yeah.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([33:50](#)):

This is so different from the civil rights movement.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([33:52](#)):

Yeah.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([33:52](#)):

Right? Like I've been thinking a lot about the legacy of the civil rights movement and the joy and solidarity that comes from having such a deep cultural and religious foundation.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([34:05](#)):

Yeah.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([34:06](#)):

We just don't have that. Like climate marches are often very silent 'cause we don't have the songs and you get tired of being like, what do we want climate justice, when do we want it? Now.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([34:18](#)):

Now

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([34:18](#)):

Now. And believe me, I do want it now,

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([34:22](#)):

But it's not that catchy.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([34:23](#)):

But it's not very melodic, you know? And so I basically had to appropriate like repurpose love songs to be as if they were about loving this planet. I dunno, I had a lot of fun with that. But I became the art director for the book. I stepped in and like did the layouts because it really matters to me how we present information.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([34:44](#)):

Yeah.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([34:45](#)):

So after these blue double spread pages, there's these lists of 10 problems and 10 possibilities for each section. The minuses and the pluses. 'cause I very firmly believe that it's irresponsible to talk about the problems without right in the same breath talking about the solutions. Like where we can go from here. There's so much we can do to make it better that it just feels irresponsible not to talk about that.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([35:12](#)):

Yeah. I mean I've been thinking about, I've been thinking about it a lot this week and thinking about, you know, in Georgia we in the last two years have become the number one state for clean energy.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([35:26](#)):

Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([35:26](#)):

Jobs and investment.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([35:27](#)):

Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([35:28](#)):

So we have this like possibility growing on the one side.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([35:32](#)):

Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([35:32](#)):

And then, you know, these unprecedented storms ripping through and so this like peril on one side possibility, right, and like the capacity to stay active and engaged and imagining like in that gap, right?

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([35:51](#)):

Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([35:51](#)):

In this like pinch that we're in between those two things that are like so true at the same, at the same time.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([35:58](#)):

Yeah. And I think so often the climate conversation is framed as that polarity as apocalypse or we solve climate change and we can't solve it. Like it's already changed. It will continue to change.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([36:15](#)):

Yeah.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([36:15](#)):

We're still emitting more greenhouse gases a year. And so that's the context, right? But there's any number of possible futures and I actually find it really liberating that there's not just like one thing that we either get it right or we don't.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([36:31](#)):

Mm.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([36:31](#)):

It's not like there's a moment when we get to stop trying because it's over. It's just every day, like how can I make this better than it would otherwise have been? Which I think helps, certainly helps me keep going because you realize you're just one person. You can't actually, like, you're not a savior. The problem's too big. I've been really thinking about, I know you will relate to this. I've been thinking about climate change as like the biggest group project.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([36:59](#)):

Mm.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([37:00](#)):

And as like two dorky kids

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([37:02](#)):

Do not love a group project

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([37:03](#)):

who pulled way too much weight in group projects in grade school. Like you can carry a group project when it's like three eighth graders. You cannot carry a group project when it is the future of life on earth. And so that's why it's all about the invitation and the welcome and the like, come in, we need you. Please find your role in this.

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Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([37:24](#)):

Thank you.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([37:25](#)):

Thank you. What a treat. Thank you Dr. Katharine K. Wilkinson <laugh>.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([37:35](#)):

Thank you Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson. Um, thank you for coming to Atlanta on this tour.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson ([37:40](#)):

I wouldn't miss it on this tour.

Dr. Leah Stokes ([37:46](#)):

A Matter of Degrees is co-hosted by me, Dr. Leah Stokes

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([37:50](#)):

and me Dr. Katharine Wilkinson.

Dr. Leah Stokes ([37:52](#)):

We are a production made in partnership with FRQNCY Media, the 2035 Initiative at UC Santa Barbara, and the All We Can Save project.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([38:01](#)):

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Dr. Leah Stokes ([38:19](#)):

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Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([38:27](#)):

Script writing, fact checking, communication and production support are by Lucas Boyd, Alex DiLeo, Quinn Lewis, Christin Palmstrom, and Anusha Singh.

Dr. Leah Stokes ([38:36](#)):

At FRQNCY Media, Michelle Khouri is our executive producer. Lizzie Stewart is our producer and Claire Bidigare-Curtis is our editor and sound designer.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([38:46](#)):

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Rose Wong designed our show art, Sean Marquand composed our theme song and additional music came from Blue Dot Sessions.

Dr. Leah Stokes ([38:52](#)):

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Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([39:03](#)):

And stay tuned for more stories for the climate curious.