

The Great Simplification

Nate Hagens (00:00:02):

You're listening to The Great Simplification with Nate Hagens, that's me. On this show, we try to explore and simplify what's happening with energy, the economy, the environment, and our society. Together with scientists, experts, and leaders, this show is about understanding the bird's eye view of how everything fits together, where we go from here, and what we can do about it as a society and as individuals.

Nate Hagens (00:00:33):

Vicki Robin is an advocate for social change and innovation. She has her own podcast, What Could Possibly Go Right? And has authored two books, Your Money or Your Life, and Blessing the Hands that Feed Us. She works to inspire others to be financially independent and to take control of their own lives to create more meaningful and fulfilling experiences. She also promotes eating local, being the creator and first participant in the 10-mile diet challenge in her community, where she spent 30 days eating only food produced within 10 miles of her home. These are the types of practices that are currently against the grain of conventional society, and I think are going to become more and more important in the future that's arriving: The Great Simplification. Vicki's experience and voice are a powerful force for spreading these ideas. I hope you enjoy this week's conversation with Vicki Robin.

Nate Hagens (00:01:45):

Vicki, good to see you.

Vicki Robin (00:01:47):

Good to see you too, Nate.

Nate Hagens (00:01:49):

We have one thing in common in the pre-episode chatter. We both have snow coming our way today. You in Washington, me in Wisconsin.

Vicki Robin (00:01:58):

Right. We had snow last night. It's melting very fast right now in the sun. Yeah. And no, we have a lot more in common. A lot more in common. I think we've been barking up the same tree for 20 or 30 years.

Nate Hagens (00:02:14):

And no one is listening, or very few are listening. Although more people are listening now. No, actually you're right. You have millions of followers. Your book, Your Money or Your Life, is a classic. And-

Vicki Robin (00:02:30):

It is.

Nate Hagens (00:02:30):

The Great Simplification

... it helps spawn a movement towards financial independence. Even the acronym FIRE, Financial Independence Retire Early. So let's start there. Let's talk about that. What did you hope that that book would accomplish? Why did you write it? What were your hopes for that? And what ended up happening?

Vicki Robin (00:02:49):

So it's like a self-help systems thinking book that teaches a nine-step program that was developed by my co-author, Joe Dominguez. And we taught it for quite a number of years, basically to people who had a yen for a higher purpose, but were completely clueless about money. So we were trying to empower that subculture. And then, in 1989, I went to a conference on... The first conference in the United States on sustainable development. And that's where I realized that lowering consumption in North America was probably the most important thing we could do in order to avert disasters.

Vicki Robin (00:03:34):

I often tell the story of all of the... There was the world commission, environmental and development, they traveled the world, they got testimony. We're on a collision course between the economy and the natural world. What do we do about it? And every commissioner who spoke at that conference said the biggest problem is the level in pattern of consumption in North America. And then they would shrug, like nobody could do anything about that. And we taught that program as a seminar and then as a tape course. And we taught it to probably about 10,000 people, and I'd surveyed them because I was very interested in the impact. And we found that people, on average, if they followed this program, within six months, they'd lowered their consumption by 20% and were happier. And that was my data point. I'm not a big social scientist, I'm an intuitive person. So all I needed was two data points. Consumerism is ruining the world and Your Money Your Life... Well, the program, the nine-step program, could change that.

Vicki Robin (00:04:42):

And because of that, I got a passion. I had never experienced in my life. We're sitting on the solution to the biggest problem on the planet. And so pretty soon we had a contract to write the book. And the publicist at and Viking somehow got us on Oprah. And then right after we were on Oprah, we were a New York Times bestseller. Because she held up the book and she said, "This is a fabulous book. It will change her life." She has many authors she doesn't say that about. So that was the launch.

Vicki Robin (00:05:15):

And so I was on a mission for a decade because we decided we're going to lower consumption in North America by... We're going to live within the planetary means by the year 2000. That was the goal. We were positively insane and dedicated. And so that launch, and also we were arrogant, but we were great. We decided we're going to write a bestseller. Why do this? We want this book to be everywhere because we have to change everyone. And so we just said it's going to be a bestseller. And it was. And it still is, oh my God. Last week I checked sales, it was almost 1500 books last week.

The Great Simplification

Nate Hagens (00:06:04):

Wow.

Vicki Robin (00:06:04):

It's just a phenomenon.

Nate Hagens (00:06:05):

Well, this is one of the reasons, one of the many reasons I wanted to have you on the show because Your Money or Your Life is really an anecdote, not just for individuals looking for financial independence, but for our entire economic system, is Your Money or Your Life. And so what are some of the core precepts in the book and your teachings that could be applicable to people today? Which is... When was the book written?

Vicki Robin (00:06:35):

It came out in '92.

Nate Hagens (00:06:36):

Okay. So 30 years ago.

Vicki Robin (00:06:39):

I know. But I did an update in... Wait, I just say, I did an update in 2008 and that soared because that's when I discovered the FIRE community. And back to your original question, the intention was to lower consumption in North America. And when I discovered the... And we didn't do that.

Nate Hagens (00:06:58):

You ran smack into the superorganism and central banks is what happened.

Vicki Robin (00:07:02):

Exactly. Exactly. We did not take into account, I call them the overlords, that's not a nice name, but I call... The system that is completely resistant to change because... Anyway, yeah, so I think that one of the core ideas in Your Money Your Life that really flips it for people is we say that we think of money as scarce, in somebody else's control, something that eats up our lives, something that defines our success and our status. We've hooked money to all human needs. I have a need... And it used to be, before money, there's I have a need and I have a have competencies to meet my needs. And I have a relationship with the world around me and I have the capacity to do that. And then in the money economy, we've completely hooked people.

Vicki Robin (00:08:01):

I say, "We're drinking milk from a poisoned sow, but it's the only sow in town." So one of the basic teachings is that money isn't what everybody says it is. It isn't status, it isn't control, because you can

The Great Simplification

have those things without money. So it's not an absolute definition, but our definition is that money is something that you trade the hours of your life for, for whatever reason. And so that gives you a personal understanding, not a social and comparative understanding.

Nate Hagens (00:08:31):

I was looking at your website, *Your Money or Your Life*, last night. It has a parallel to my recent work, which is that energy... All of our money is a claim on energy and materials. No matter what we spend money on, it's a call on energy and resources. And so I say money is a claim on energy, and you say that money is a claim on life energy.

Vicki Robin (00:08:56):

Your personal life energy and the life energy of the planet. It's a lean on the resources of the Earth.

Nate Hagens (00:09:03):

So what is debt then? What are we doing with your nomenclature there when we issue debt?

Vicki Robin (00:09:10):

It's a claim on your future resources. Yeah. It's a claim on your future. And conveniently we don't understand that. We just think, "Oh, we'll just pay the minimum." And it's also, I think, a strategy to continue to expand the economy, if you will. Because if people only lived within their means, the game would be over. Especially in this incredible wealth gap we have now where people on the bottom, they're struggling.

Nate Hagens (00:09:41):

Right. So *Your Money or Your Life* would take on much different connotations depending on who was reading it. People in the lower 40, 50% of our society are just massively strapped, and the top 1% have digits coming out of their ears in their bank accounts. So how... Do you address that at all? Can people that have very tight financial situation still benefit from your book and your advice?

Vicki Robin (00:10:15):

I think... I've always said that it is not a book for the bottom 20%, the people who are really hand-to-mouth. Although there can be benefit because some of the desperation and low status of being in the bottom 20% drives people to spend money on things that will give them the appearance of status, because just to hold your head up. Because one of the quotes that I found early on was, "Men [sic], men and women do not desire to be rich, they want to be richer than other men." And that "People are satisfied with their lot if they feel it is fair in comparison with their reference group." And that could be the people in their neighborhood, it could be people in their profession. So the level of unfairness is a big driver and it continues to be a driver of consumption of the wrong things.

Vicki Robin (00:11:18):

The Great Simplification

And also if you don't have public transportation and the only place you can get to is the Jiffy Mart, the system is rigged against us. And I think in the period of Your Money Your Life... I wrote Your Money Your Life on a IBM 286, a really early pendrive. And so back when we wrote the book, and when we had the experience that led us to the book, there was no Internet, there was no cell phone. We were addressing consumerism in an environment where there was still a great deal of choice. And the wealth gap was not like it is today. So the bottom 20%, yeah, if you can learn something from the book, but you may not even have time to read it. And then I did realize that the top 20% don't care they can waste money and it doesn't matter.

Vicki Robin (00:12:13):

So I would always say we're this middle 60%, that's who we're addressing, and helping people in that demographic to break the spell of the consumer society and to reauthorize themselves in their own lives. I used to say I'm a green libertarian. It's really about personal responsibility. But it's not like we're going to make problems for you and then you individuals can solve the problems that the wealthier, the industrial system has created. But it is grabbing your situation by the horns. And this idea of money is life energy, and then we do a calculation and we had people calculate, what are they trading an hour of their life for? And they never think about this. It's not just your nominal salary, but it's all the extra expenses of your job, all you're commuting, etc. Of course now we're not commuting as much, but there's expenses to be able to work. And then there's extra time that you spend. It's so interesting to talk about this at this time when people are not going back to the workplace.

Vicki Robin (00:13:26):

But anyway, the calculation was for people to see that the cost and time and money of having a job reduces their hourly wage to a real hourly wage that is often a third to a quarter of your nominal wage. And so once you see that, you start to realize that you're saving your life by being frugal and conscious rather than you're rewarding yourself for hard work by being a consumer. And that transformation is the biggest thing.

Vicki Robin (00:14:01):

And so I think there is an aspect to this whole system where if you can wake up to the game is not worth the candle, to me that's the linchpin. And then the other thing... The other question we have people ask, because we say all your expenses translate them into hours, so you see what it's costing you in the flesh of your life. The new boots that you got for \$120, if you realize that your real hourly wage is \$10 an hour, that's 12 hours of your life. And once you see that you're defending yourself against a system that is trying to pull you into it.

Nate Hagens (00:14:44):

Is that because when you translate your life energy... Your consumptive choices into life energy, that all of a sudden that dollar sign, or those little digits, or those little pieces of paper have an emotional attachment to them suddenly in your brain, instead of just a digit? Which is why Las Vegas makes

The Great Simplification

these nice little color chips worth \$500 or \$100, because we have no emotional attachment to what that is.

Vicki Robin (00:15:15):

Right.

Nate Hagens (00:15:15):

Is that what you tried to do? And that's how it helps people realize, oh my gosh, do I really want to spend 36 hours of my work on this thing that's not going to give me that much happiness or fulfillment?

Vicki Robin (00:15:28):

We're trying to give people if you will, an emotional attachment to their lives. We're reduced to a nub of nothing. I am not worth anything unless I have this toothpaste, those boots, I'm... Our self worth in this society doesn't really come from our work. Because for most people... Not all people. Not all people. There's a lot of people who have tremendous pride in their capacities and their integrity in their work and stuff like that. My life would be happier if I had these things.

Vicki Robin (00:16:08):

And so it's basically it also reassigns happiness so that I'm not doing anything to people, we're just giving them a system of analysis. It's like a whole system, just track your money and then ask yourself the question, "Is the money I'm spending bringing me happiness in commensurate with the life energy I invested?" It's all in service to liberation from the thrall of consumerism. It's like waking up. That's been... That's the spiritual purpose. And then the material purpose of the book was to lower consumption in North America, and consequently the world, to stop the machine.

Nate Hagens (00:16:53):

Well, you might be able to infer why I was so interested to talk with you because this podcast is called The Great Simplification. And you and I, you currently, me historically, were on the board of Post Carbon Institute where we're looking at post carbon growth economy transition. And I believe that we have kicked the can for two generations at least. And there's a financial economic material bill coming due. And that we, as a culture, probably going to have to do with 30% less across the board in the coming decade. Eventually not going to be able to issue credit in this amount to continue to play this expanding game of musical chairs. So I think we are going to have to look around in your community in Washington, where I live here in Wisconsin, Minnesota, everyone's going to, on average, have 30% less, give or take.

Nate Hagens (00:17:57):

That's, by the way, exactly the number from 1929 to 1934 is how much our GDP dropped in the United States. I think something like that is coming again. And one of the reasons for this podcast is we are going to have to figure out ways, as individuals and as a culture, to navigate that. And so I think some of the recommendations you had 30 years ago and today will apply because most of our culture is... We

The Great Simplification

are richer than kings and queens of old in our material throughput, but we're not happier. And a lot of people that have a lot of wealth, and believe me I know this because I used to manage money for high net worth families, are miserable. Not all of them, but this is at the key is how do we individually move outside of the consumer culture, the superorganism, the marketing-driven media that says, "You suck, but if you buy this product you'll be better."

Nate Hagens (00:19:03):

And so, what are two or three of the core tenants that you wrote in your book and you still espouse that would be applicable to this culture-wide transition, if you will?

Vicki Robin (00:19:16):

Yeah. One of the reasons that I updated Your Money Your Life in 2018 was to be able to challenge the conflating of money with wealth. Wealth comes from the same source as wellbeing. And I'm sure you're familiar with the idea of multiple forms of wealth. That you're-

Nate Hagens (00:19:36):

Yeah, absolutely.

Vicki Robin (00:19:38):

... your skills and capacities. And if you are constrained financially and you have a spirit of adventure which is one important thing. Rather than going, "I'm a victim," which you are, you're a victim of a system that does not really take your wellbeing to heart. But you go... You just develop a ferocity like, "They're not going to get me. I'm going to figure this out." And so I have found that living in a limited income forced me to be more competent. And I learned all sorts of things that I wouldn't have as the daughter of a doctor.

Vicki Robin (00:20:21):

I built a motorcycle from a box parts. I rebuilt the engine in my Toyota land cruiser. I just... I've learned to grow a garden and build. And I love my competencies. I'm not arrogant, like ha ha ha, because you have to keep updating things. But I used to say, "Don't throw money at it, throw competency at it." Sew your competencies.

Vicki Robin (00:20:45):

And also your networks one of the dynamics of the consumer culture is every time they can create... Break a bond between humans, they can insert a product. Like a divorce equals two refrigerators and two stoves and two houses. So the bonds of the human community, which is our essential wealth. It's not just family, but it's place, it's not just humans, it's the trees, that's wealth. And your emotional maturity, the work that you do, the inner work you do, is wealth because you have a sovereignty, a emotional and intellectual sovereignty, that extricates you from what I would say is a bamboozle. So your relational capacity is your capacity to not fly off the handle when somebody upsets you. These are all forms of wealth.

The Great Simplification

Vicki Robin (00:21:50):

It's like the old Siddhartha. They shouldn't have, let us read Siddhartha when we were in high school, because I can think, I can wait, and I can fast. Those were his three powers. So if we can think, and we can wait, and we can fast, as in do without for a period of time. And doing without for a period of time, it's not just your networks and your capacities, but it's also your prudence. I'm overly prudent, so I have a shed full of tools and all the nails that I pulled out if they're not rusty. I have beans and rice. I have... I could live for a month without leaving my house. And even I have enough wood to run my wood stove, which they don't like you to do anymore.

Vicki Robin (00:22:41):

So you know that... The Mormons ask their members to store food. And so not living on current income, but, but always stashing a bit, whether you stash it in money, like dollars and cents, whether you stash it in the market, whether you stash it under your mattress, whether you stash it in things, these are all competencies. These are all forms of wealth. And I would hope, and I'm not sure I'm really stepping up to this, but I would hope that people will learn this.

Vicki Robin (00:23:19):

And I think it's like you and I are part of a conversation about were the truckers right? Were the truckers wrong? When we're talking about the truckers in Ottawa, what was right about it, what was wrong about it? Were they like January 6th? Were they like Black Lives Matter? Were they like XR? How do you interpret this?

Vicki Robin (00:23:41):

But some of the stories coming out of that experience were stories of people around campfires, people having potlucks, people helping and supporting one another. It just like with Occupy Wall Street, it was like a blossoming of an experience that humans long for, which is this giving and receiving, mutuality, reciprocity. It's just being part of something that has your best interest at heart and recognizes you as part of it.

Nate Hagens (00:24:13):

So I have a lot of thoughts that came to mind based on that. First is that in high school in Wisconsin, Vicki, we did not read Siddhartha, FYI.

Vicki Robin (00:24:24):

Did you read Thoreau?

Nate Hagens (00:24:26):

I read Thoreau, but I don't think that was assigned by the high school.

Nate Hagens (00:24:30):

The Great Simplification

So H. L. Mencken once famously said that to be wealthy or to be rich is any income that is at least \$100 more than the income of your wife's sister's husband, which is a funny way of saying that we compare ourselves to others. And how much of our wanting and feeling of lack is because we're comparing ourselves to the wrong demographic or surrounding ourselves by people who are living by a different system of values? And to be honest, in the age of energy surplus, massive energy surplus, our values are defined by how we make our living. And so that's why I think your ideas are so important, is one of the antidotes that you suggest is changing your group of people that you hang around with.

Nate Hagens (00:25:26):

And part two question is, did the millions of readers, and what happened after Oprah, and the movement that you built, did people then find others who were trying for this Financial Independence Retire Early, find meaning in other things? And did that give them an impetus, and a shot in the arm, and some motivation because they were surrounded by other people that were searching the same thing?

Vicki Robin (00:25:53):

Yeah, that was true back then. And very much it was people who already valued frugality, people who already wanted to do the communitarian stuff, the back to the land. That was the demographic we were serving. When I traveled and gave talks, and I did a lot of that, audiences would always come up to me. People would always come up to me and they would whisper, "I'm really frugal, too." It's like I could see that people were trying to keep up with the Joneses to keep their public face respectable, but they really valued frugality. Because at that time they were the sons and daughters of parents who lived through the depression.

Vicki Robin (00:26:41):

What I see now in the FIRE community is you would not believe the number of blogs. There's a million people on the Financial Independence Reddit. A million.

Nate Hagens (00:26:55):

How many of those people are self-motivated to just be more frugal?

Vicki Robin (00:26:58):

Usually 1%. They are motivated to be frugal, but not for the reasons that I'm motivated. They're motivated to be frugal because they have a call to retire early. And it actually, I think it diminishes their humanity because they're in such a race.

Nate Hagens (00:27:18):

To retire early?

Vicki Robin (00:27:19):

The Great Simplification

Yeah. Then, and they're very influenced, a lot of them, by stoicism, a hyper rationality. And I've discovered a subculture in the FIRE community that's really into social responsibility, and I adore them, and I'm organizing over there. What could we do together? Like we're... The FIRE community I'll betcha, because they're savers, that if the FIRE community organized, they could do shareholder activism. There's possibly a billion dollars in this community. If they decided to organize, they could influence. I'm not sure they're really organizable because they're very individualistic, but there's power there.

Nate Hagens (00:28:05):

So here's a tough question.

Vicki Robin (00:28:07):

Okay.

Nate Hagens (00:28:07):

How much of the Financial Independence Retire Early formula is based on the markets and growth continuing as it has and will be that apple cart will get upset if there is some sort of a financial recalibration thing?

Vicki Robin (00:28:29):

Their theory, and I say they, because that arm of this movement does not resonate with me. Their theory is that the market always goes up because they've lived through a period of time when the market has. And even with corrections, they've trained themselves to buy index funds, and buy and hold, because it'll always go up. And they do the classic retirement of 4% or 3.5% withdrawal rate. And in good times when the market's going up, they just steadily buy, their holdings increase. When the market goes down, they decrease. But that steady 3.5 to 4% is available because of the past.

Nate Hagens (00:29:19):

And they believe that will continue for the next century or whatever.

Vicki Robin (00:29:19):

I don't think... Yeah. For me, I'm into deep adaptation, I'm just watching this system teetering. This cannot last, we are so leveraged. And people don't understand that no bugs on their windshields means that the planet is dying. They don't understand that the plastics in the ocean, that there's more plastic than fish means, that the one of our great sources, one of our great sinks of carbon and one of our great sources of food, is dying. They don't realize, they don't identify with the coral dying, they just think, "Oh, maybe over in Cancun I can go see it."

Vicki Robin (00:29:58):

And I don't mean they, they, they, because I have an American mind. I'm subject to it, too. But it's not a tough question for me. I've thought about this. I think... My whole investment strategy, yes, one of the

The Great Simplification

conversations in the FIRE community is, "You know what? There's no social responsibility in this. We're just capitalists and we're living on passive income. Is it correct to buy up property and flip it? Is it correct to be a landlord? Is it correct to buy index funds? What the hell can we invest in that can throw off a passive income?" So that question is very alive.

Nate Hagens (00:30:39):

Well, here's a part two to that. This is my worry. And by the way, irrespective of what they do with their money, or if they buy index funds or whatever, a core part of what you're trying to do is what I'm trying to do with my students, is advise waking up to our reality and making behavior change. And when you do that, you will find that most of the best things in life don't cost money or energy once your basic needs are met. And I have to acknowledge, and you're well aware, that for a lot of people in our country and around the world basic needs are not met. But to start having a conversation of what is wealth to you and income, and a lot of my students that is probably the most important thing they learn.

Nate Hagens (00:31:30):

But getting back to the tough question. I think as our world becomes more obviously fractured, and more obvious thunderheads on the horizon for dystopian events, that paradoxically, because our culture has parsed all of the benefits of our ancestral tribal life into one denominator, the dollar or the Euro or the renminbi, that as these stresses become more obvious, people will try to amass more dollars as an option on the future because dollars can be immediately transferred into something else. And so if someone has a million dollars, they'll want a million and a half for more security. If someone has 10 million, they'll want 15 million. If someone has 10 grand they'll want 50 grand, or whatever it is. So I'm wondering what you think. As society gets more dicey, and some of the things that you and I and our colleagues have been warning about and discussing become more widely known, won't there paradoxically be a rush to make more dollars to protect against what's coming?

Vicki Robin (00:32:50):

Yes. And I noticed that in myself. I trained myself to hoard and I am not done hoarding.

Nate Hagens (00:32:58):

Me too, to my girlfriend's chagrin, but go on.

Vicki Robin (00:33:01):

Yeah, exactly. But in part, I believe two things. Number one is the social safety net is so shattered that money is going to be the only way you see yourself through to the end. This is a very big concern because I'm 76, I'm hale and hearty, but I am sure that that's not going to last. I don't know how long it lasts. I hope it lasts 10, 15 years. But there'll come a point when my physicality and my intellect can no longer operate in such a way that I can care for myself. And so that's what the retirement savings are for. And if you don't have a system that you can rely on, if you have a system that throws you into poverty, if you have a system that says you're on your own.

The Great Simplification

Vicki Robin (00:33:57):

So it's not just the fear of a diminished... It's not just the hoarding from fear of the future, it's the reasonable hoarding realizing that the social safety net is not working, and it's working less and less. I just feel like it's like the system that we're in is expressing a lack of care for the multitudes who are falling off the bottom. So I think it's both things and I think we're in a fear state.

Vicki Robin (00:34:30):

I've been most impressed with the news that's coming out of Ukraine, that the people are determinately not falling into fear. These are the reports that I get. So learning to be present to your fear and learning that fear is maybe an ancient and correct response to threat. But it is to let that disable you so that you have, none of your other faculties are available to you, I think that's where the problem comes in.

Vicki Robin (00:35:01):

I have a friend, Mathis Wackernagel, who did the Ecological Footprint and I have been talking for years about we've just been waiting for this balloon to burst. And I think that one of the reasons it hasn't burst is because we're so leveraged. It should have burst a long time ago, but we're using debt to keep the game going.

Nate Hagens (00:35:24):

Yep. We did it in 2009 and again in 2020. And how many more options are there down the road?

Vicki Robin (00:35:31):

Another thing I've seen in the FIRE community, which just astonished me, is that as interest rates were super low, where they realized they could get a 7 to 10 to 14% return in the market, a lot of people just borrowed at 1% or 2% and invested. They just borrowed to invest.

Nate Hagens (00:35:53):

Including state pension funds did the same, but go on.

Vicki Robin (00:35:57):

What I have done with my surplus is I have stored it in things. I've stored it in my house that I own. I stored it in a rental house that I own. I'm now... I store it in a sprinter camper. I have stored it in things that are pro-survival. I've stored it in my community. I do a lot of community lending. I am storing it in places that will create a benefit now and in the future, a non-monetary benefit, now in the future.

Nate Hagens (00:36:33):

Well, that was my question is if our social safety net is fraying, paradoxically the impulse to maximize your financial hoarding would be better off by hoarding relationships and... Well, hoarding or building them in your community.

The Great Simplification

Vicki Robin (00:36:49):

Right, right.

Nate Hagens (00:36:50):

So one of the things that you also, in addition to your book, you've done many things. You explored a hyper local and relational eating, where you ate things only within a 10-mile radius of your house for something like 30 days. What was that like? What were the biggest challenges?

Vicki Robin (00:37:09):

What was that- [laughs].

Nate Hagens (00:37:10):

I've done... We grow a lot of our own food, but there's no way I've ever done that. So what were the benefits? What did you learn? What were the challenges? Do you think that's like lifting weights, you build your muscles eating locally, you're getting ahead of the curve on some of the things we're talking about?

Vicki Robin (00:37:29):

It really came out of my work with the Transition Whidbey... inspired by the Transition Town Movement. And we had a speaker who's a farmer. And I asked her to do a calculation, because we're dependent on a bridge that's over a huge chasm, and ferries. I live on an island. So I said, "The bridge goes down, the fairies stop running, could the people who live here eat from here?" And what she said, she did a calculation, blah, blah, blah. And what she said is probably we might be able to do it for two weeks in August. And so that, to me, was like this gasp. Oh my God, we are so fragile here. We are so fragile and nobody knows it.

Vicki Robin (00:38:20):

So my 10-mile diet also came from a friend of mine who's a farmer. And she was watching a Morgan Spurlock 30 day experiments. And so she wanted to see... She wanted to find somebody who was willing to just be fed by her for 30 days, just do the experiment. So those two things combined, I was primed to do the experiment. And then I realized that there's plenty of things I couldn't... She couldn't provide that I might want. And so I gave myself four exotics, foods from afar I couldn't live without, which is oil, salt, caffeine, and lemons. But now I'm planning to grow Meyer lemons, so that might be handled if I can be successful. And I live by the ocean. And so I've learned how to make salt from the ocean. But I gave myself exotics and then I wanted to, because I'm a meat eater, I found people who could source meat within... So I set this 10 mile radius was defined by-

Nate Hagens (00:39:25):

But isn't there perpetual fish there if you wanted it?

The Great Simplification

Vicki Robin (00:39:28):

But it's not 10 mile.

Nate Hagens (00:39:32):

Oh, what? Aren't you on the ocean?

Vicki Robin (00:39:32):

No. I might have been able to fish off the pier in Langley, but 10 miles is not a very... So basically... So it was simply in service to discovering what it would take for us to be food resilient. It was an experiment in service to something.

Vicki Robin (00:39:51):

And then I, in doing so, I realized that local food is not a local food system. That we don't have a local food system. That that is broken. We have a farmer's market, but the farmer's market, what we have now cannot feed us.

Nate Hagens (00:40:07):

Right.

Vicki Robin (00:40:07):

And part of it, so now I'm working with a food resiliency group that is working to change the regulations. I have stories galore about what the regulatory environment developed in service to the people had no relationship with their food. You have to be able to go to the market and be able to trust the food you get. And so all of the regulations are in service to the industrial system. Plus the industrial system has one of the biggest lobbies. So doing scale-appropriate regulations, getting even people who raise pastured beef here, pastured hogs, pastured chickens. No, the chickens we can do. They cannot process their own meat, it has to go to a USDA facility.

Nate Hagens (00:40:52):

Same here

Vicki Robin (00:40:53):

Even so, they have to sell it by the quarter of an animal, and I cannot eat a quarter of a hog in two years, five years. And so they can't sell cuts of meat. They can't sell homemade cheese. They can't sell anything that's made in their kitchen.

Nate Hagens (00:41:08):

So the things that we need to do to make food systems more resilient and more reliant on local things are not advocated because of the system above it. So we can't, even if we wanted to do some of these things, there are giant speed bumps in the way. Yes?

The Great Simplification

Vicki Robin (00:41:25):

Not only that, but we have really, honestly been trained to fear our neighbors. We've been trained to fear anything other than that which is produced by the industrial system. If it's a widget that comes from Amazon, we can trust it. If somebody has a lathe, if our neighbor has a lathe and they can turn something... A farmer has so many skills, but we no longer trust and respect that.

Vicki Robin (00:41:58):

My opinion is that any producer, local producer, cannot poison his neighbors because he would be out of business. The care that's taken in growing and producing the food is done out of real love and integrity. Pretty much, not everybody all the time. And so I think we should be able to have hold harmless clauses. We should be able to buy from our neighbors. Just like they have egg stands out and you buy the eggs. That's permitted.

Nate Hagens (00:42:35):

There's so many aspects of our human repertoire, like shame and love and pride and trust, that have atrophied. Why? Because we're so rich as, metaphorically, as a nation that we can just live in our house and order stuff, like you said, the widgets from Amazon. And so in order to feel shame, I have to be part of a group where I have daily interactions with them. In order to have trust, I have to have daily interactions with my neighbor and sharing eggs and things like that. So it's our lack of social interactions that's caused a lot of these dynamics to atrophy. How can we change that? Is there things in your book, in your work, that... How can we start first with rebuilding social connection and community? Because I think we're going to need that in spades coming soon.

Vicki Robin (00:43:30):

I think participation. It's like if you join a movement, if you volunteer for the food bank, if you... Whether it's volunteering or taking local positions, every time you're part of a group where you're accountable, that builds social capital. And so participation is super important. Whether it's with indivisible or even if it's with the truckers, I'm not... There's no political signature on this. The participation with other people, barbecues, street dances, that's really how I have been accepted in my community.

Vicki Robin (00:44:15):

I used to say, "I may be the village idiot, but I'm their village idiot." It's like, I am part of how other people define the community, is like, "Oh, Vicki's part of us." So being... And really, the values on the left are very, unless you go to the extreme left, the liberal values are very individualistic. But you go to the extremes and people understand the communitarian values.

Vicki Robin (00:44:47):

We have a buy nothing group. And I tell you, I bonded with all the people in that group. I put little things out on my porch and it's like, everybody's like, "Oh, thank you. Thank you." It's an amazing community. Just today I borrowed a snow shovel from my neighbor and she thanked me. So I think there

The Great Simplification

has to be an intention. And there's an embarrassment because we're, we're trained that we have to have everything in our own house. If we ask for things it's like... We used to have these big potlucks with Transition Whidbey, and we would have a period of time when people did offers and asks. And we also had a local currency. And I realized that asking is how the machine of community starts. You can't all sit in your home and say, "I have a lot to give, but nobody will take it."

Vicki Robin (00:45:42):

You have to... Vulnerability, need, shared, allowing your neighbors to give to you, allowing... And appreciating what you've been given. These are all the ways traditionally societies... We talk about money as like a... We think of it as just a substitute for barter, but in intact societies, it wasn't exactly barter. It was like to be obligated. It's a funny thing, to be obligated to other people is a way in which you are allowing yourself to become part of a community. To say, "I have no obligations to other people. I am self-sufficient" actually is not allowing others to contribute to you. And that's extremely hard for an individualistic American.

Nate Hagens (00:46:34):

So for the people listening to this that might be in Topeka, Kansas, or a town in California, or in Massachusetts, who understand the logic behind the energy debt technology, Great Simplification, that we discuss, but are really hungry to start these conversations and local food or developing discussion groups in their community. You've been trying and doing this for a long time. What advice would you have to someone listening that wants to broaden the social capital in their community, on these issues? How would you start?

Vicki Robin (00:47:18):

I think there's so much risk in asking somebody to join you in something. It's like a big risk, because you could be told no, or that's a stupid idea. And so I think there's a part of it to just accept that it's a risk and you might get a no. That's what I notice in myself. That every time I organize anything, there's always a risk of making a fool of myself, of losing credibility, of being rejected, and of reputational impoverishment. There's so many risks anymore in changing the valance of social connection.

Vicki Robin (00:48:05):

And so when we were doing the conversation cafes, I was for three years, every week, I would show up in a cafe and I would just put up a little tent. Conversation cafe, join me. Topic for today is love. And it's just... And you're sitting there and you feel like an idiot and then two people show up and you go like, "Okay, fine, fine." And then six people show up, or maybe nobody shows up. I think it's a skill anybody can develop. I'm a pretty social person, so it's easier for me.

Vicki Robin (00:48:42):

And the thing is with Facebook, and I've gone off Facebook in-service to thinking more deeply about things. And I miss it a bit, but I think you bring credibility through not only cat pictures, but through these buy nothing groups or through being a good participant in communities that are already formed.

The Great Simplification

Now it's Facebook, so it's not face-to-face, but I have Facebook friends, especially in these last two years with the pandemic, who've just been... We've all been so affirming with each other that when we see each other, the relationship is deepened. Nate, it's a difficult... It's not a formulaic question because I think it takes risk.

Nate Hagens (00:49:31):

I've failed trying that here many times in my county. I've got a podcast, people around the world listen to it, which is different than getting people in my own community to listen, and to share, and to participate. Because there's wildly different assumptions about the future. George Jetson technology, colonize outer space, economic growth for centuries are the dominant narratives. So the narrative that you and I ascribe to is becoming more accepted because we're seeing it unfold in real time, but it's still cognitively quite a large barrier between people's actual behaviors and what they'll talk about and discuss.

Nate Hagens (00:50:17):

So one of the other things that you've written about, you call it a hero's journey, which is finding one's purpose in life. So what is it? How do people do it? And how does the hero's journey fit into someone listening to this program?

Vicki Robin (00:50:34):

Yeah. So for me, it's not the hero's journey in general, that is a metaphor that I have used in the FIRE community to talk to people about that there is life after Financial Independence Retire Early. There's light... You retire early and you have a bigger problem, which is that you have to design your whole life. There's no bus you have to get. There's no boss you have to please. There's no cafeteria where you get your lunch every day. You have to do the whole thing. So I use that metaphor for talking about what it's like to be responsible for filling your time in a way that gives you a feeling of happiness and also a feeling of purpose. And so I said retiring early is like just the first quarter of the journey.

Vicki Robin (00:51:30):

And then I've noticed that the next quarter of the journey you get out and you're disoriented. What I notice people do is they spend time with family, they go on the road, they take up an instrument if that's what... Or learn a language. The things that they've delayed that they thought would bring them happiness, but they didn't have any time. And then I think they start to discover that they have something that other people admire. And so I've seen a lot of people coaching others. When I wrote *Your Money Your Life* and I looked at the FIRE community, there were over a thousand blogs. There were maybe 50 that were popular. But people start a blog, I'm going to help people.

Vicki Robin (00:52:12):

And then I see that there's an awareness that grows that there are bigger problems. So you could just say that the next quarter, the third quarter is community service. It's participating in movements, participating in community service, trying to help out, solve the problems of the world.

The Great Simplification

Vicki Robin (00:52:33):

And then I think the fourth quadrant, and I think I'm there mostly, is a systems thinking. The realization that there's a paradigm that's off. And it's being willing to tolerate the complexity and the confusion of having a mind and life that were formed in a paradigm that is no longer appropriate to our condition. And so I think it's quite a bit of spiritual journey. It's like a remaking of the assumptions of your life, your identity, your beliefs, your circles, your loneliness, because that is not where everybody is. So that's what I used the hero's journey to talk about, what is life designed with the world in mind? How do you design a life in a bigger context than financial retirement early?

Nate Hagens (00:53:38):

Yeah. That's what I'm trying to tell people now, instead of what to do, it's how to be. How to be alive, how to be a human, during these times. And I'm fully in that fourth quadrant. I don't have financial independence or those other quadrants, but I'm in that paradigm shift that our system is on fumes and we're going to have to live differently.

Nate Hagens (00:54:01):

What advice would you give to teenagers, to young people, who are putting together the knowledge and awareness of this whole Great Simplification resource limits our social and environmental circumstances?

Vicki Robin (00:54:15):

Yeah. So sounds weird coming from a boomer, but I would say to the degree possible, waste no time blaming any the generations that came before you. Just to the degree possible, just forgive us that we did our best within a set of expectations and rules that we accepted, because every generation just accepts the world that they're born into. And some of us, like you and me have, have worked hard to address that, but it's rolled on. And so that would be one thing.

Vicki Robin (00:54:49):

The second thing I would say is, and I think young people understand that, is to work in groups. Do not let yourself get isolated. Whether it's Fridays for the Future inspired by Greta, whether it's a communal household, it's like to accept that the group is not a step down in status. The group is your pod for moving forward. And don't necessarily... Couple up if and have kids if you want to, but don't be convinced that it's low status or to not have the things... It looks like a big gyp. It looks like a deprivation. Wait a second, I was supposed to be better, but it's not. No, you're going to find new things. There are going to be niches. That's the other thing is the dominant system always, because it's so big and it assumes that it's persistent, it always has blind spots. It always has places it cannot see. And so there's always niches that are open, but anger and fear will diminish your capacity to see the possibilities.

Vicki Robin (00:56:09):

The Great Simplification

And it may be that you settle in some place that... If you look at the climate mass you can see where to settle. But you settle someplace with other people that's where you can grow some food. Now it's called permaculture, we used to call it back to the land. Or you may operate in cities, or small cities, or you may... The kids who can't stand to inherit the farm, because they want to go to the city, there's opportunities. Even as things are crashing there's opportunities. And whether it's apocryphal or not.

Vicki Robin (00:56:50):

I heard that Helen Keller said, "Life is either a great adventure or it's nothing." So I have lived my life like a great adventure. And these are tough times, but it's also what we talked about earlier about multiple forms of wealth. These are tough times, but the other thing to know is that humanity has gone through really tough times. This seems like the biggest existential crisis that you could ever imagine, because it's planetary.

Vicki Robin (00:57:23):

But the old world has died to many generations. The people at the end of the Roman empire, the people at the end of the Inca empire, the Mayan empire. It's not to reify struggle, and the struggle that indigenous people went through. It's not to reify that and say, "Oh, go and get yourself destroyed and you'll be stronger." Whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger. It's not that. It's to know that within you, as a human, part of your birthright is this capacity, this amazing capacity, to scan the horizon and pick a line that you think is going to lead you to something better. And the very fact that humanity is here at all means that we have a 10,000 year, at least, history of exactly this. Of generation after generation after generation, by hook or by crook, figuring this one out. So do not despair of this time. It's tough, it's not right, it's terrible, it's horrible. Grieve, cry, but be undaunted.

Nate Hagens (00:58:48):

What do you care most about in the world, Vicki?

Vicki Robin (00:58:51):

Besides my cat? Besides my cat, my friends.

Nate Hagens (00:58:56):

I laugh. It's true. I care about my dogs quite a bit. But, yeah.

Vicki Robin (00:59:01):

No, no. I care about the community of life. I don't care about like... I care about the specific Doug fir that are stressed now and will be. I care about the individual people and plants and animals a lot, but I care about the community of life. For me, I am part of the community of life. And that is so comforting to me, is I belong here. I do, because I'm part of the community.

Nate Hagens (00:59:32):

The Great Simplification

I understand. What are you most hopeful about in the coming decade or so?

Vicki Robin (00:59:39):

It could be because it's my area of focus, but I think that relocalization. I actually think if the empire comes apart, and may it happen without huge wars and all that stuff, but as the people are sorting themselves out by their politics. People are moving to Texas. People are moving to California. People are moving where their people are. So we are already voting with our feet for a falling apart of this country. I would love to have it be graceful.

Vicki Robin (01:00:18):

I actually think localization has a lot to offer in terms of all the things I talked about: networks, competency, all the other forms of wealth. And where I live is as polarized as the country. We have a naval air station up north, it's a red zone, and I live in the blue zone. And we're just going to have to figure it out.

Nate Hagens (01:00:43):

Yeah. I do have hope as well on localization. And we're probably not going to choose to do that on mass, but little examples of what you're doing, if they could scale, and we get a little bit ahead of the curve, I think that is a positive development.

Nate Hagens (01:01:02):

So any other words of wisdom, advice or closing thoughts for our listeners before you go to your youth climate change local meeting, Vicki?

Vicki Robin (01:01:12):

It's like... What occurs to me, and this is unplanned, there was a spiritual teaching, I don't know who offered it, but it's like "love as much as you can from wherever you are." I think that love is the lubricant. Love is the glue. Love is the practice. Love is the possibility. Love is the nature of the spiritual gravity that holds us together. And there's so much fear and so much anger and so much loss and so much grief and stuff like that. And so just to not forget love, I guess, would be the thing that occurs to me at the moment.

Nate Hagens (01:01:50):

Vicki, so great to talk to you today and...

Vicki Robin (01:01:52):

Yeah, it's so great to talk with you, too.

Nate Hagens (01:01:55):

We'll be in touch.

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Vicki Robin (01:01:57):

I'm really glad to know you.

Nate Hagens (01:01:59):

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