

## Cultivating Imagination: Leading Towards a Just Future Transcript for Episode 5

### Activism and Imagination: Rob Hopkins and Michael Datura Discuss Longing, Storytelling, and Fighting for Just Futures

**Stephen Hurley:**

So today on the cultivating Imagination podcast, along with Meaghan Dougherty and Gillian Judson, I'm Stephen Hurley and we are welcoming today two guests from different parts of the world. On the west coast of Canada, we have Michael Datura, who is the principal of Cortez Island School. He also moonlights as an independent scholar, an ecological hip hop artist, maybe a performance in the offing here, and occasionally a poet. He published his first book back in 2015, *Place, Being, Resonance* and has co-collaborated on a project, *Wild Pedagogies*. Welcome, Michael.

**Michael Datura:**

Thanks for having me.

**Stephen Hurley:**

Rob Hopkins is from the UK. He's the co-founder of the Transition Network and Transition Town Totnes and author of several books, including *The Transition Handbook* and most recently one that is on my bookshelf *From What Is to What If: Unleashing the Power of Imagination to Create the Future We Want*. Welcome, Rob.

**Rob Hopkins:**

Hi, lovely to be here. You pronounce Totnes just properly. Very good. You fit in like a local.

**Stephen Hurley:**

I've been getting coaching every Wednesday.

**Rob Hopkins:**

Well, it shows, it shows.

**Stephen Hurley:**

I wanted to begin and Rob, maybe we could begin with you by telling us about your current role. And I want you to put your leadership hat, the leadership lens on and talk about some of the leadership priorities that you have in that role. I know you're involved with a lot of community development, but let's talk a bit about that from a leadership perspective.

**Rob Hopkins:**

Yeah, leadership is a funny sort of a concept for me. I guess I'm often seen as somehow being the main figurehead of the transition movement, although I'm not that involved on a day to day basis anymore, but I still am, I guess, the most recognized person. My own approach to

leadership, I guess, over a long time, has been to sort of just get rid of it when I have it or not get rid of it, but sort of to spread it around. So Transition Network, which I was one of the people that started— that was started by three people, and about six or seven years ago we became a holocratic organization. So we took on holocracy with a flat structure and a very different way of making decisions, which was a fascinating process to go through. And so I kind of feel like anytime I've been vested with any power or whatever, I tend to give it away. And there's a project that I'm very involved with in my own town, which is called Atmos Totnes, which is one of the most ambitious community-led development projects in the country, where I'm one of the people who's involved with that. And I guess in that scheme, any role— I'm one of the leaders of that scheme, I guess. But our role is really a storytelling role is of just keeping... It's been a long project over a long period of time where the community wants to take an old factory site next to the train station and turn it into the biggest, as I said, community-led development. And it's been a long, complicated story. And so our role has really been about just keeping the energy up, just keeping retelling the story, keeping it alive in people's sense of what's possible. And so for me, a lot of the role of leadership is around storytelling. And a lot of the work I do now is about imagination and storytelling, which isn't so much about leadership, because I work in, I guess, as sort of a self employed way, but I have that role, I guess, as a kind of a thought leader, I suppose. And so that, for me, is very much about storytelling.

**Stephen Hurley:**

Thanks, Rob. Michael, I wanted to turn it over to you. I know you're an official leader at the Cortez Island School. You're the principal there, but there may be other dimensions of your life that have a leadership quality to them, a leadership aspect to them. Talk to me about what you do through that lens of leadership.

**Michael Datura:**

Yeah, I'm relatively new to this position, so I started here as a principal in September, so I'm only a couple of months in. So in that regard, I'm not by no means an expert on educational leadership. The other thing I want to say is my educational philosophies and work as an armchair social scientist, and definitely my politics don't necessarily play into my role as a leader in an obvious or explicit way here right now. So that might be one of the things we end up talking about, is how to circle that square. But, yeah, I'm new to the leadership chair, and it's been quite the ride thus far. Obviously, I've been working with Gillian about what imaginative leadership means. I've been thinking through that question, and maybe one of the things we can talk about today.

**Stephen Hurley:**

I want to know about the Wild Pedagogies project. Can you say a little bit about that?

**Michael Datura:**

Yeah. The Wild Pedagogies was a project started by Sean Blenkinsop and Bob Jickling, and I think maybe Bob Henderson. A couple of years ago, maybe about ten years ago, it started. Sean and a couple of colleagues and I, we used to go to educational conferences, which would be in downtown Oakland or Philadelphia, and it would invariably be a bunch of environmental

educators sitting in a conference hotel room with sort of weird carpets and odd decor, talking about the role of nature, of the human world, and started to not feel authentic or generative, I suppose, in some ways. So then those guys started playing with the idea of what would happen if you took environmental education conferences out onto trail. So they started going on hiking trips in Tetrahedron in the Sunshine Coast here in British Columbia. And then we ended up having a conference on a sailboat off the west coast of Scotland, going to Staff island, and then one in Norway near Finsa, where we actually hiked up to a glacier and talked to locals there. It also included incorporating local storytellers and ecologists and myth tellers into academic conversations, which I think is a really interesting turn. And then the trip in Scotland, we stayed around for a while and wrote a book which lays out a couple touchstones for what Wild Pedagogies might mean going forward.

**Stephen Hurley:**

There's a lot to pick up on just there, but I wanted to turn our attention to this idea of imaginative leadership, in particular, imagination. Michael, when you try to describe what you think imagination is to people and know you have had a lot of opportunity to do that, how does it come out? How does it sound?

**Michael Datura:**

Confused, mostly, but it's one of those terms that's enormous. And there's a lot of misconception. A lot of people say, well, imagination is simply this or simply that. And I think one of the reasons that it's difficult to zero in on what it is, I hold the opinion that it's not a discrete part of the human mind or experience that you can sort of separate in an easy or obvious way from reason or emotion or cognition. Generally speaking, in imaginative education, we use the term "perfinking," which is a combination of perception, thinking, and feeling, because those modalities are so entangled. I'm a student of Kieran Egan and Lev Vygotsky, so I take a cognitive tool approach to imagination, that it's on some level the mode of consciousness responsible for all things. So in that sense, imagination is responsible for science and art and music and perception. On some level, its involvement in so many aspects of experience makes for a difficult topic, difficult to parse out in any meaningful way.

**Stephen Hurley:**

Difficult but interesting.

**Michael Datura:**

Super interesting. I will say I really liked the part in Rob's book where he differentiated between imagination and other related words like innovation and creativity. I imagine one could draw a chart and chart out the appropriation of these words by consumer capitalism. And there does seem to be like... innovation is almost— in the educational realm, when we talk about innovative education, most people mean something like iPads in every student's hand, and it's very much been appropriated by technology. Creativity, slightly less so. But we get into the realm of, like, Google Bluesky thinking, creativity, and the sort of corporate implications of that. Imagination does still seem like the fringe of the wilderness in some senses, and the most dangerous of the three. So I agree with Rob on that, and I hope that it's true. And that's my draw to the term.

**Stephen Hurley:**

Well, Rob, let's bring you in on that. Your name has been dropped a couple of times here already. Your take on imagination, and maybe even responding to a little of what Michael said.

**Rob Hopkins:**

My favorite definition is by John Dewey, who described it as the ability to see things as if they could be otherwise. And my approach to imagination comes less from the educational perspective and more from an activist's perspective. And what I've been involved with for a long, long time in community led responses to the climate and ecological emergency. What can we do where we are, with what we have, the resources we have, the passion we have, the people that we have? How can we recognize there's no cavalry coming riding to the rescue? And we need to roll up our sleeves with who we have around us and get on with it. And I found myself in about 2018, I kept reading people who I really admire, like Bill McKibben, Naomi Klein, Amitav Ghosh, who were saying, climate change is a failure of the imagination. And I was left there thinking, that's really interesting. What do you mean by that? By which time they'd moved on and they were talking about something else, and I felt like a kid at the back of the class with his hand in the air that no one was seeing. What did you mean by that? What did you mean? And there's a guy called Gary Young, who used to write for *The Guardian* newspaper here, who said a quote I loved. He said, things look bleak. The propensity to despair is strong, but should not be indulged. Sing yourself up. Imagine a world in which you might thrive for which there is no evidence, and then fight for it. And at the moment, the work that I do, I'm writing the follow up to *From What Is to What If* at the moment, which is a little bit more bonkers, and which is kind of about time travel as a tool for activists, or rather, like, taking a more fluid approach to time. Some of the most brilliant practitioners of imagination around the world, who really, really inspire me, who often actually tend to be women of color in the US, people like adrienne maree brown, Walida Imarisha, Mariam Kabba, people who are doing the most phenomenal work with the radical imagination, and they often take a much more fluid approach to time. I think, as activists, we often tend to work in spaces where there is a threat in the present, whether it's climate change, whether it's Gaza, whether it's whatever threat we perceive, and then we bring all of our energy and effort in the present. But the people who are doing some extraordinary work at the moment are bringing the future into the past, bringing the past into the future, allowing people to travel into the future. And I find in my own work that what I do really boils down to using the imagination to cultivate longing. Because, as Don Delillo wrote in his book *Underworld*, one of my favorite quotes ever, he said, longing on a large scale is what makes history, which is so beautiful. I'm going to say it twice. Longing on a large scale is what makes history. And I think, well, who are the people in our culture who are brilliant at cultivating longing? Is it climate scientists? Not really. Is it engineers? Not really. Is it climate activists? Occasionally? Is it screenwriters? Is it cartoonists? Is it street artists? Is it poets? Is it hip hop writers who also are teachers? Absolutely it is. And so we need to be cultivating that capacity to generate longing. And that, I think, brings a very different approach to how we do the kind of activism that traditionally I might have been involved with. So a lot of the projects that I'm involved with at the moment that we might come on to talk about are very much rooted in that idea of how do we cultivate longing? How do we bring alive in 2024, the 2030 that we could still create if we were

to do everything we could possibly have done in such a way that it feels so delicious and so exquisite that it becomes like a new North Star for people to run towards? That feels like the big question that underpins a lot of what I do.

**Stephen Hurley:**

Can I follow up on that longing piece? Because I've always seen longing as kind of almost a languishing, a lament, pining for something. How does imagination plus longing equal something a little more positive?

**Rob Hopkins:**

Well, there's that lovely quote that I probably can't cite completely off the top of my head, by the guy who wrote the little prince, Antoine's son, Exuperie, who said, if you want to build a ship, you don't summon people together and teach them how to build a boat. You help them to long for the endless immensity of the sea, which is so beautiful. And it feels to me like— all the debates... you know, we have no choice. We can't argue with physics. We have to decarbonize incredibly quickly. If we were to do what every government signed up to in the Paris agreement, which most governments are now rowing back from, but even if we go with that as being, which even itself wasn't ambitious enough, but that means we need to cut our carbon emissions in half by 2030, which is not very far away. We could do that. We saw during COVID the scale of ambition, when we have to change things, when we act like something is an emergency. If we decided to do that for climate change, we absolutely could. But if our vision of what that future is going to be like is sitting in a cold cave, eating green potatoes with no teeth, that's not really very exciting, is it? But actually, the reality is that we could create a world that is so much better, with better mental health, better education systems, better nourished families and young people, and so on and so on. And so, for me, longing is that sense of having a new North Star, having something that we wake up every morning— It's like, I want to get to that. It's like why we called the book *From What Is to What If?* Because the ability to ask a really good “what if” question can create that. One of the projects that I talk about in the book was the food belt in Liege, which came from a question. What if, in a generation's time, the majority of food eaten in this city came from the land closest to this city? That question inspired so many people to step up and go, I want to see that happen as a reality. I want to be alive in this city when that has happened. How can I help? And that's where the positive version of longing comes in for me.

**Stephen Hurley:**

Michael, you wanted to weigh in on this.

**Michael Datura:**

Yeah. I also come to educational work from an activist background, so I deeply sympathize with Rob's writing on the way he's framed imagination there. And that's where I'd like to get, because I think that's the most interesting part. I'm just aware, though, that, and I'm not saying Rob is saying this, but in the educational world, imagination often gets tethered, perhaps too strongly to the arts or creative writing or poetry, and that we're eager to make it our own because reason and imagination are always on the side of angels. But also, I've read social science and humanities research proposals where you have scientists who want to infuse their projects with

imagination. So they suggest doing the project and then adding a spoken word piece on the end to add an imaginative element to the scientific experiment, which I think is a limited way to approach imagination. Presumably, the scientific experiment is exercising as many imaginative cognitive tools as the artistic one is perhaps just a different mode of application. So that's something interesting that emerges in the educational space, and a way in which I think imaginative education and a Vygotskian approach to it provides more applications, a more broad definition of the term.

**Stephen Hurley:**

Yeah, this seems like a good place to bring Gillian in, because I know she is nodding in the background there. Gillian, did you want to weigh in on some of this, what you've heard so far?

**Gillian Judson:**

Sure. First of all, I appreciate what you're bringing in here, Michael. It's a much more organic, it's a much more rooted sense of imagination, how it's infusing what we do from the beginning. I've just finished reading a book called *Learning to Imagine: The Science of Discovering New Possibilities*, as well as a little book in the short introduction series from Oxford University Press called *Imagination*. And both of those are very clear that in whatever ways, imagination has been defined in the past and tied to different ideas, for good or bad, because some of the ways imagination has been defined has held it back, I think in terms of being fully accepted and applied and discussed, it's got some serious baggage, if you will. They do indicate that it is very much tied to our motivations, our hopes, our moving forward, our initiative, our intentions. And so for me, that activist element, I love bringing it out, because I think that every activist does have a vision, an idea that what is can be another way. That was a long comment.

I do have a question quickly for Rob. When you're talking about longing, I do see how it's impossible to have longing without imagination. I feel like it's this combination, sort of curiosity and awe and hope and love on all of those things. But when you're working with folks to cultivate that feeling, that sense of longing, there seems to me a lot of what Kieran Egan would call cognitive tools at play. There perhaps vivid mental imagery of what is not yet, or what could be perhaps role play, changing of the context in the discussions you're having. I wondered if you could speak a little bit more, because I know that the listeners to the podcast, they support the idea of imagination, or they're interested in learning more, but then they say, well, what can I do when I'm talking with the people I work with? How would I support or help cultivate this sense of longing? What are my tools?

**Rob Hopkins:**

Yeah, very good. And, yeah, thanks, Gillian. There was a quote that just came to my mind while you were talking there, which was Walida Imarisha, who wrote a book called *Octavia's Brood* with adrienne maree brown. And she says in there, all organizing is science fiction. All change-making is about storytelling and the power of telling different stories, better stories, stories that we want to get to the end of and see what happens. So one of the things that came out of doing *From What Is to What If* was that a lot of people started saying, oh, can you come and do some workshops with us? And I've been developing trainings around building a sort of

flexing the imaginative muscle within an organization. For the first thing I learned right in our book was the imagination needs space. You have to give the imagination space. If you are an organization that recognizes what Martin Luther King called the fierce urgency of now and that you want to do something about it, then you need to stop and make space to actually do that, because otherwise you're just going to carry on doing it. So some of the things that I do with people, firstly, I often do exercises which are around just getting people out of how they're thinking at the moment, particularly men who often, if they're kind of engineers or in a more kind of rigid sort of discipline to get everybody onto the same page. I always play this lovely game at the beginning called potato monsters, where I tell everyone in advance to bring a potato, and nobody knows why I've asked them to bring a potato. So there's this lovely kind of, I'm going to do this course tomorrow, and the guys asked us to bring a potato. I don't really quite understand why. And when they arrive, I put them into groups of five, and I give them a handful of cocktail sticks, and I say, I want you back here in 20 minutes. I want you to have made a creature. I want to know its name, I want to know its mating call, and I want to know its diet. And you can add to the potatoes and the cocktail sticks. Anything you find lying around, go. And they just go and they giggle for 20 minutes. It's fantastic. And even if you are the most control freaky guy who needs everything to be done in a particular way, you can't make anything with potatoes that is not ridiculous. So it puts people into a space of kind of welcoming and celebrating the ridiculous. I do a lot of kind of games and activities, as I'm sure you do, Gillian, that we've sort of collected over the years that help exercise, some of which I've got from doing improv training. I guess the main exercise that I like to do with people is time travel. I tell people that in the town of Totnes, we have developed the world's first fully functioning time machine, and we're going to use it to travel into the future, and it can take you to different futures. It's not like there is the future as a single lump and thing. There are an infinite number of futures ahead of us. And with our time machine. And I have pictures that I show people of us in our sort of time travelers costumes, embarking on trips into the future. And I get people to close their eyes and to imagine they travel to 2030. We stand in silence for two minutes. I tell them it's the future they long for. It's not a utopia, it's not a dystopia, but it's the future that resulted from us doing everything we could have possibly done. And then in two minutes, just to take a walk around in that world in their imagination, using all of their senses. What does it smell like and look like and feel like? It's often quite an emotional experience for people. As the facilitator, I can see the tears on people's faces, quite often happy tears. And after we've done that, I put them into pairs to kind of digest with other people what they've heard. We hear back from the room some of what you saw. Then I put people into groups of four and I give them a big sheet of paper. Sometimes we just do it with pens. Sometimes we then have a big pile of old magazines and they can cut pictures out and make a collage that captures what you've seen. There's then other things that you can do from that point onwards. My friend and colleague Ruth Ben-Tovim has developed an extraordinary activity called "Town Anywhere". If you go onto YouTube and you type in "town anywhere", and "Hull", which was the last place they did it, there's a beautiful video of when they did it recently, the thing that I'm talking about. I'm running a course tomorrow, and as part of what I've been writing about in the book I'm writing at the moment is about— Well, yes, we can talk about visual imagination as a really good way of helping people imagine the future. We can also use— I go to visit places that already sound like that future needs to sound like: car free neighborhoods, bicycle rush hours, rewilded landscapes. I play those recordings to people to

help them feel like they're in that future. But then I'm also tomorrow going to experiment with an adapted exercise from the Institute for Earth Education, these set of tools called earthwalks, which are this amazing way for taking people out into the forest and getting them to see them like children do. And one of those exercises is called whiffs, where you have to find— you make your own sort of smell cocktail of things that you find around. And I'm going to have a play at that, which is to get people to not just draw the future, but to find things that to them, smell like that future would smell like. And then you have, like, a smells cocktail party where you invite people to smell your smells. So for me, it's like, how do we make it as immersive and visceral as possible and trying to really bring in all the senses in that?

**Stephen Hurley:**

Megan, I wanted to bring you in. You had something to say about longing, and you've been longing to get in on this conversation for a few minutes now.

**Meaghan Dougherty:**

Love that segue. Yeah, I just wanted to highlight that. I just love the very practical and playful ideas that Rob's talking about in relation to cultivating imagination and really flexing that imaginative muscle. I was just thinking when you were talking about this need to cultivate longing and some of the ways that you do that, it reminds me of Deleuze and Guattari's concept of desire. And I'm wondering how you see kind of that idea of desire as a productive force. And I'm seeing it in combination with what you talked about earlier with the holocratic network and the flattened structure, how do we create these kind of networks of what Deleuze and Guattari's would call desiring machines?

**Rob Hopkins:**

Mariame Kaba, who's this phenomenal prison abolition activist in America, she wrote a book called *We Do This 'Til We Free Us* about prison abolition. For me, prison abolition is one of the great “what if” movements in the world, right? They've kept that question alive for decades, of going, “But what if there was no prisons?” And people would say, yes, but, well, if there were no prisons, yes. We'd have to have a very different education system. Yeah, keep going. It's like it unlocks more and more things that are possible. Oh, yeah. So Mariame Kaba, she said, we must imagine while we build. Always both. So for me, it's always finding that balance between, yes, we have to create those imaginative spaces so people can step into that future and feel it in a way that cultivates the longing. But then, at the same time, we also need to be doing stuff. We need to be making change happen in the world. And in London, in Camden, which, for people who don't know London that well, is the part of London that Amy Winehouse came from, they are the first local authority in the country to have declared a climate emergency. They were then the first one to do a citizens assembly on climate change. And my friend and colleague Phoebe Tekel has then been working with them to design what she calls imagination activist training. So they are the first local authority, I think, in the world to do imagination activist training, supported from the very, very top by the chief exec who's passionate about them becoming the most imaginative local authority in the country. And there's a very good report you can find online called “Imagination Activism in Camden”, which talks all about how that works. And Phoebe, at the moment, is starting to write a book. And I keep badgering her, no, this training just needs to



be rolled out everywhere. Every organization needs to have it, because at the moment, it feels like so many organizations are just stuck waiting for everyone else to go first. And, well, do we want to be the first? And we can't be too ambitious. And the imagination activism training shifts from organizations that are playing it safe to what we want is that when somebody comes and people say, what a ridiculous idea, they don't say, oh, I'm terribly sorry, let me go away and come back with a more sensible one. They go, well, thank you very much. I wear that as a badge of honor. We are an organization that recognizes that the only ideas really, in 2024, that have any value and currency are the ones that, on first appearance, that seem a bit ridiculous. And we need to be kind of fostering that within our organizations, within our activists' community, too. There's a lovely quote by Guy called Gregory Claeys, who wrote a book called *Utopianism for a Dying Planet*, who said, only the extraordinary can save us. And that's sort of underpinning a lot of what I do now. It's like, I don't know what's going to work. Is it— writing reports? That doesn't seem to be working that well. What else might it be? Might it be making recordings that we can pretend we've bought back from the future in our time machine? Maybe dressing up as time travelers? I don't know. Let's try it all and see what might stick. I think what will work is the stuff that comes from the directions that we don't expect.

**Stephen Hurley:**

Michael, I wanted to turn to you, give you an opportunity to weigh in on some of that.

**Michael Datura:**

It's difficult because I sense that the people in this space here are all mostly on the same page. When I read Rob's book last month, I tried hard not to like it as I was reading it, but how could I not? It's so.... We seem so close on almost every point. It was fantastic. But what worries me about it, and this is a self report, it worries me about my own thinking. And I think it's maybe at the root of Meaghan's question, too, is it feels like there's an invisible thing here that we're maybe skipping over in our positive discussion of the imagination, which is something like a qualifying thing, really. We're talking about critical imagination, or imagination in a Maxine Greene social transformation type of way, because there's no guarantee that the ability to see things as if they could be otherwise is going to be in the service of liberation or the people or the Earth. And I apologize to bring up such an unpleasant example, but I was watching *Zone of Interest* last night, a new film about the commander that lives next to Auschwitz. And it's a very troubling scene in which they're discussing a rotating crematorium. And that, too, is a product of imagination in the Vygotskian sense that all things require this mode of mind. So the question then switches to, and this is why I appreciate the political thrust of Rob's book, is how do we focus that mode on liberatory projects, let's say, or in service to the Earth, even if we want to go one step further? And that's the question that worries me in education or to frame it in how do we protect or cultivate the desire machines and safeguard them from the war machine state? And that gets a lot more messy, because presumably poets are the secret legislators of history. And longing makes history, but power also makes history. And power has this ability to, particularly late capitalist power, to seize onto our novelties and insert itself into our best laid plans. And I find that very concerning. I'm reading a lot of Mark Fisher these days, who's a countryman to Rob, I think. I'm not sure if he's familiar with his work, but one of the things that I wrote about recently was a problem perhaps best articulated by Frederick Jameson in the 80s,

which is, it's easier to imagine the end of the world now than to imagine a world without capitalism. Mark Fisher calls this capitalist realism. And that, to me, seems like the principal problem with imagination these days. It's tricky to take a problem that big and then break it down to the educational realm, particularly with work with children. I was struck by how similar, like, the whiffing exercise and stuff is something that we do in environmental education a lot, too. And it's fantastic. And I love those things. And I think that's ultimately the right thing to do in education. And despite my best efforts to not like Rob's book, I think I'm going to take it next year and frame our whole secondary program around it. Around "what ifing". But I'm still unsure of how. And maybe this is a question for Rob of how to insulate that from what Mark Fisher would call precorporation by capitalism, how to insulate it against being mined by power.

**Stephen Hurley:**

Rob, did you want to respond to that?

**Rob Hopkins:**

Wow, fantastic. What a great— yeah, thank you. I love the idea of someone reading my book determined not to like. That's fantastic.

**Michael Datura:**

I mean it in the best way possible.

**Rob Hopkins:**

Yeah, no, I appreciate it, I guess for me, and it's just my own sense, it's not particularly research to back it up. I feel like a vivid, active imagination is the outcome of everything else being in balance. So when our system is healthy, when we are mentally well and held and supported and connected to other people, we have an active, open, compassionate imagination. I always know when we look at somebody like Donald Trump, for example, we could say, well, Donald Trump's quite imaginative. Is he? I'm not convinced that he is. People would say, when Brexit happened in the UK, people say, well, that was an act of collective imagination. I kind of feel like it was the opposite. It was rooted in nostalgia. It was a refusal to reimagine things and a retreat into the safe and the familiar and the known. And what I always say to people is, if you go back to the 1960s, you had amazing people like Bobby Kennedy, Martin Luther King, progressive politicians who talked about the future and who filled it with dreams and hopeful stories and things to run towards. We haven't had that for 30 or 40 years. We tend to have politicians who just talk about moving in little incremental little steps. And what happens when we don't do that is what we're seeing now across the world, the far right, fill the future with frightening visions of how the future could be and then tell you that they'll protect you from that. So for me, I feel like our failure to fill the future with exciting stories and possibilities has been a massive, massive failure and has really opened the door for a lot of what we see happening. And yeah, I read Mark Fisher, too. I feel I have to read Mark Fisher in limited doses because it's very depressing and very dark. But I think when he talks about how we have lost the future, we've lost the future out of our culture, I think he's absolutely right. And that quote about the end of capitalism, for me, that comes down to the fact that we have lost that ability to paint different pictures, to paint better pictures. And I was in France recently, and I did a talk in a place called Pontivy. And at the end, the first

question, this guy said, I really enjoyed that. He said, and the last time I came to a talk in this room was with a woman who was 95, who was the last member of the French resistance, who talked about her experience during the war as a member of the French resistance. And she was asked, what one thing did all the people you knew in the French resistance have in common? And she thought about it for a while, and she said they were all optimists. So I feel like when you need optimists, you really need optimists. And now is a time, I feel like, when we really, really need optimists. And certainly people who are on the far right hate creative, imaginative people. Fascists always go after the writers, the artists, the playwrights first of all. For me, I feel like that ability to see things as if they could be otherwise, if it comes from a good set of motivation and an understanding of the times that we're in, is a really powerful ally for the change that we need to see.

**Michael Datura:**

I sensed an undercurrent in your book with sort of references to Henry Giroud and David Graber and 68 Paris. Would you describe them as the same types of optimists? Is their project optimistic in the way that you imagine imagination?

**Rob Hopkins:**

I think certainly the Paris student revolution was deeply rooted in the imagination. And beneath the street, the beach, and all that sort of stuff, I loved Henry Giroud's talking about the disimagination machine, the Trump disimagination machine, which for me was such a powerful kind of visceral image about what's going on. But when I look around in the movements around climate change, which is, I guess, my base, I suppose, in terms of what I do. It's like I see so many people who are still stuck in this idea that somehow we're going to bring round a global transformation of culture and economy if we just talk about collapse and extinction all the time, and it's like, that's not going to work. It has never worked, it's just not going to work. So maybe we need to take on a different approach and we can take some bit of an inspiration from each of those people.

**Stephen Hurley:**

I'm aware of the fact that this conversation could go on for days and we would still not be finished. I want to move into that area of social and ecological justice that the cultivating imagination project is really grounded in. And Michael, let's get your thoughts on specifically how imagination and the use of imagination, and maybe even the engagement of other imaginations, might help us to meet some of these challenges head on. What are you thinking of when you turn off the light at night in terms of social ecological justice and imagination?

**Michael Datura:**

What keeps me up at night is thinking that maybe we need to be more explicit about the critical project at the base of our understanding of imagination here. And I'm thinking about some of the research I've done in the past at various ecological schools where it was assumed amongst the research group that everyone is sort of on the same page in terms of our critique of capital. And just to give you one anecdote of that. So it's the first day of school at an outdoor, innovative school project, all led by ecological principles that had been debated ad nauseam by various

academics with big degrees. And the principal shows up the first day with a McDonald's bag and cup of coffee. And some of the researchers there were like, well, we don't really like the optics of that. Like that McDonald's has no place in this eco-imaginative school. But for him, McDonald's had nothing to do with it, because for him, the ecological imagination was about getting outdoors and getting rough and tumble and being in direct contact with nature, with a capital n, which is in and of itself a hugely philosophically problematic term. So my concern is, on what level is our work explicitly activist? And I suspect it has to be, even though I'm an abject failure at this. And that's what keeps you up at night, is that I've been trying to embody activism in education for almost 15 years, and that the net results feel minuscule. So it makes me wonder if a more explicitly situationist type approach to imagination is actually what's required, and if that's the undercurrent of our work anyways. So, I wonder.... The flip side of that is I deeply agree with Rob's critique of the cynicism and the need for utopian thinking, and I love not only the thought experiments, but the attempt to try and immerse humans in a future where everything turns out okay. The type of experiential power of that. But there's a troubling blank spot in the transition there. I'm reminded of a book that Rob, you would definitely love by Kieran Egan called *The Future of Education*, where he does a very similar thought experiment. He jumps ahead to 2050 or something like that, I believe, and then basically traces out how education changed and solved all of the world's problems, but it seems a little too seamless, and I'm worried about what happens in the interim there and what kind of struggles that entails and what that means in my work directly with children, what type of messaging that would look like. I don't want to come with a heavy cynicism either, and the doom and gloom that Rob's referring to, but also there's encroaching harsh realities, as it were. So what keeps me up at night is the type of messaging that that's going to entail to young people and my desire to not join the aging generations of just like passing the buck.

**Stephen Hurley:**

Rob, I want to bring you in, but I'm going to ask Gillian to maybe frame my 30,000 foot question a little closer to the ground to make this a little more practical for our listeners.

**Gillian Judson:**

Sure. I just love all the range of thoughts and ideas that have been brought into this podcast today. So I appreciate everything that's been said so far in our attempts to address misunderstandings around what imagination is and does and can do. We are trying to point to the ways we embody and enact, and so how do we embody imagination and longing and optimism in our actual encounters with the people we work with, the people we lead? So the question would be, as leaders, small l leaders, if you like, what tools do you recommend others use? If they want to take up imaginative work or they want to take up explicitly using imagination in their work? What's one or two tools, dispositions, approaches that you would recommend that they begin with?

**Rob Hopkins:**

Yeah, well, just to come back, first of all, on a couple of things that Michael was saying, I absolutely know this idea. There's really a great cartoon of two mathematicians standing in front of a board, and then one of them with all these equations, all over the board, and one of them

says, and then a miracle occurs, and somehow they manage to get from one to the other. I get a lot of inspiration at the moment from an emerging kind of.... Is it a movement? Yeah, I'm not sure. But a guy called Rupert Reed, who's a climate scientist here in the UK, wrote a paper about the need for what he called "thrutopian storytelling", which is that utopian stories are really not much use because they're so far away. And most people's utopias are just full of people that look like them. And so it's why, you know, the artist Alicia Wormsley put up that big billboard in Pittsburgh that said there are Black people in Philadelphia, that said there are Black people in the future. Because obviously, a lot of Black people's experience of science fiction and films about the future is that there's no Black people in them. And people need to be able to see themselves in the future and to be able to see themselves in the past. And the thing with thrutopian storytelling is it's not the stories about how everything fell apart, because we've got millions of those. It's not the utopian stories. It's the stories about how people started now, here today, and what they did, and the serendipities that occurred, and the people that they met, and how one thing led to another thing, which led to another thing. And so far, the best attempt at that is Kim Stanley Robinson's book, *A Ministry for the Future*, which tries to tell the story about how humanity responded to the climate emergency. And it's a very brave thing, I think it's flawed in some ways, but it's an extraordinary attempt to do that, I think. And those are the stories that we really need, I think. What did people do? Who did they meet? How did they get started? And I talked before about stories and why they're so important. And I think in response to Gillian's question, when people say to me, well, what can I do to increase my imagination and my ability to think about the future in different ways? One of the things that I learned researching *From What Is to What If?* was the neuroscience about when we are imagining the future in different ways and when we are remembering the past, exactly the same networks of our brains light up. It's a very, very similar process. It's the same networks that kick in, whether we do either because when we're being imaginative and we're trying to imagine a more socially just more diverse, more compassionate, more loving, low carbon future society, all we have to imagine that with what we have in our memory, in the cupboards of our memory, what we've stashed away in those cupboards. So if you just watch Fox News all day, it's really hard to imagine a low carbon future because you've got nothing to work with at all. Whereas all around the world, there's so many amazing stories of things that are happening and things that people are doing, and we really need to fill people's imagination with those stories. And there are films that do that and there are Twitter accounts that do that. And it's what I try and do in my books is to say, look, there's this, there's this, there's this. Because one of the things that I found out in the research for the book I'm doing now is that when you do that and when you can give people an experience of imagining the future that they can attach emotion to, so when you can help them to imagine stepping into 2030, which turned out well, and it's delightful, and they feel excited and they feel connected with other people and they have experiences they associate with it, then what happens is that that imagining of the future then gets put into our memory cupboards. So when I can do those events and the more you can make them theatrical and playful and fun, people remember, if they go to something and they laugh, they remember it much more than if they didn't. How do we bring in that sort of— make it an experience, make thinking about the future an experience, giving people the tools and the stories that they need. So when they can go home and people say, what did you do? They can say... there's a lovely placard that I saw a woman had in a photograph at the Black Lives Matter protest in Washington. It said, I've been to

the future. We won. And it gave me goosebumps when I saw it, as it might be giving you now. And so for me, that's what I try and underpin in my work. It's like when I do talks now, I don't just show a whole load of examples of what a low carbon future would be like. I say to people, I've been there. We have a time machine in my town. We've built it. It's amazing. I just got back from 2030 yesterday. It was incredible. You're going to love it. I'm going to show you pictures I took there. I'm going to play you audio recordings I made there. And it touches people and it affects people in a way that I never did before. When I just gave talks when I was just sharing information.

**Gillian Judson:**

Brilliant. I love that. Thank you so much, Rob. And anyone listening, you might want to pick up Rob's book as well, *From What Is to What If?* It's just fabulous. And I want to ask the same question to Michael, who has people with their iPads not charged and their shoes not laced up outside his door as we speak, and his school.

**Michael Datura:**

Yeah, well, again, this is— maybe not wearing multiple hats is not the approach I would take with children or educationally speaking, but I think it's an important point. I 100% agree with Rob, particularly in the sense that the role that dystopian narratives can play in political paralysis and lives of quiet desperation and all that. But I also wonder. I think we need to be a little careful around being obsessively positive as well. I can't remember who said it, probably Mark Fisher, but he said something to the effect that 1968 gave France barricades and Britain punk rock. And I'm just aware that there's dystopian narratives. I'm a huge fan of dystopian narratives that are also not the ahistoricizing political paralysis that they can be, and that this may come down to just a difference in style. So a vision of car free streets and children running around sounds great, but that's not exactly my jam. I'd rather go to a punk rock show or something which may not strike the masses as necessarily positive, but what matters there, I think, is a revolutionary transformational energy, and I think that's the key, regardless of how we get to it. And that would be the same yardstick that I would use to measure arts. Obviously, there's reams of literature on how art can be appropriated by capitalism and appropriated by the dominant powers and sold at art galleries and all this. So what I think needs to be our North Star in these conversations, and this gets back to the vision of imagination, is what is its intent? What is the world that it's creating? And in that respect, that's why I appreciated Rob's project so much and the Transition Town Movement, of which I'm a huge fan of. But I think that the incessant positivity just kind of, like, irks me a little bit sometimes. And this is also coming to someone that works in criminal youth justice and with a lot of teenagers who seem to be drawn more to the darker sides of the human experience sometimes.

**Stephen Hurley:**

Well, I'm going to turn it over to Meaghan to bring us home on this fascinating conversation.

**Meaghan Dougherty:**

I don't even know how to bring it home. I think I'm on page four of notes, and I'm just inspired and motivated and I guess, longing, leaving this conversation. So I wanted to thank both of you

for all of your thoughts, for spending your time with us, for sharing your ideas, and for giving very, I think, grounded and rooted strategies about how we might move forward as... I like this idea of this activist leader, so incorporating activism into all of our leadership. So thank you so much.