Healing Ourselves and the Planet with Katharine Wilkinson and Uncle Pappy

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Kousha Navidar: Ariana, what do you do to, like, abate the heaviness of the world? Like, how do you decompress in that way?

Ariana Brocious: Whew. That's a tough one. Um- I wouldn't say I excel at it, but, um, you know, I, I try to move my body. I like to swim. I go on walks. I turn off my computer and hang out with people I like, and those things help. What do you do?

Kousha Navidar: I read romantasy and other books.

Ariana Brocious: Mm.

Kousha Navidar: And then I also just, like, scroll on Instagram – a lot.

Ariana Brocious: Yeah, it can be a real escape.

Kousha Navidar: I'm not saying it's a good thing. I'm just saying, like, what I end up doing. Yeah. Uh, there's a lot of interesting, like, artistic stuff actually in Reels, like people trying to break the, the, the format of short-form video, which is cool, which, you know, I, I find very interesting as a creator myself.

Ariana Brocious: Yeah, I mean, I think it can be healthy to appreciate the good things that exist, and some of it's, you know, you can find it, you can uncover it, um, online even though there can be a lot of dark news and hard-to-process information, too.

Kousha Navidar: Yeah, and it's cool because in this episode, uh, there's two quite different people. One is a teacher and an author, and the other one is an Instagram star, and they both kind of talk

about how to navigate the world through climate challenges, which I thought was pretty interesting.

Ariana Brocious: Yeah, and the sort of internal work that you can do to make yourself more resilient in the face of all this stuff.

Kousha Navidar: Yeah, so let's get to it. I'm Kousha Navidar.

Ariana Brocious: I'm Ariana Brocious.

Kousha Navidar: And this is Climate One.

Ariana Brocious: One of the joys of this work is getting to talk to some of the climate luminaries that devote their whole lives to the project of making a better world. Katharine Wilkinson is one of these people.

Kousha Navidar: She's an author, teacher and creator who's worked to shift how hundreds of thousands of people approach and work in climate. Wilkinson co-founded and leads The All We Can Save Project, co-hosts the podcast A Matter of Degrees, and writes the newsletter Human on Earth.

Ariana Brocious: Her latest book is called "Climate Wayfinding: Healing Ourselves and the Planet We Call Home," In it, Wilkinson shares her own climate journey and offers readers many tools – from journaling, group conversations, thought exercises, poems and even playlists. It's a deeply heart-centered invitation to each of us to find our way from dark feelings to more action-focused, uplifting ways to do the work.

Kousha Navidar: She spoke with Climate One founder Greg Dalton.

Greg Dalton: As a teenager, you attended an experiential education school and read Mary Oliver's poetry. What did your 16-year-old self know about your identity and your passion?

Katharine Wilkinson: Our 16-year-old selves I think are sometimes very, very wise. And I actually still have this sweet, handmade. Journal Handmade by me that I had at that time, and I wrote in that journal, I think it was a Haiku assignment actually, speaking of poetry, wanna help the world, be connected with the earth, change the way I live. And I can remember this absolute sense of clarity in my body while I was writing those words. And it's like a big font on that page. And. I had no idea what that would mean for the direction of my life from there. So it was sort of the paradox of calling. I think that certainty and uncertainty in the same breath.

Greg Dalton: Wow. That's quite a lot of, 'cause 16 can be a confusing time.

Katharine Wilkinson: Certainly there was that too. There's a, there's some really bad poetry about boys I had crushes on, so don't worry. I, I, I didn't have it all figured out.

Greg Dalton: It wasn't always that level of clarity. Okay. Well you had some of it amid the turmoil of being 16 and how did that change as you became a climate professional?

Katharine Wilkinson: Lord, I have zigged and zagged a lot in this space. I think the first undertaking after that very formative semester living in western North Carolina was I got back home to Atlanta and a fellow student, Lindsey Baker and I decided that we would try to run a campaign to convince our school to build a LEED building. There was a new building in the works, and the LEED standards had just been developed. And so, you know, being young and idealistic, we thought

obviously this was the thing we should do. And probably that we could convince the school and the decision makers that they should do that. We were profoundly unsuccessful with that campaign. But it started to give me a sense of my capacity as a changemaker, and I took that with me into college and beyond. But I also took those questions that I think were seeded around the Mary Oliver poetry, reading around Danielle Quinn's novel Ishmael, around Annie Dillard's writings about the role of narrative and story and our collective values and beliefs, and that's been a really important through line for me as well, both in terms of research and writing and in a lot of ways, I think it's the heart of what I do now.

Greg Dalton: Mm-hmm. So living in narratives, living with nature. Then around 2016, you wrote a book called Drawdown, highlighting the most research-backed, effective tools to address climate disruption. Included things like smart thermostats and tree intercropping, clean cook stoves, very technical, practical, tangible things. Looking back, what did you learn from that work and how did that relate to, you know, the spiritual part you mentioned?

Katharine Wilkinson: Mm. That was such a fun sprint through the world of climate solutions because I would take, you know, two or three days to work on one of these essays about peatland protection, which Seamus Heney, it turns out, wrote some wonderful poetry about bogs and peatlands in Ireland. So some of that was fun. Green roofs. You know, efficient HVAC systems and how do we bring these solutions to life, not just in their technical specificity and the analysis about the role they can play, but in how they land in our lives and how they shape our communities and why we might wanna build relationships with them. That was all present in that, in that book. But ultimately, for me, each of those solutions was a data point that helped us tell a bigger story about possibility that human beings are not just terrible horrible, no good, very bad beings, but that we are curious and collaborative and we're doing wonderful things to try to mend the wounds that our species has created on this planet, that our civilization has created on this planet. And when we start to see that, I think we see a story that we might wanna deepen our participation in, right? That not all hope is lost. That there are wonderful things we can do together and to begin to see ourselves in that story.

Greg Dalton: And that's quite a range. You know, you have this sort of awareness as a 16-year-old, you studied religion as an undergrad, did PhD research on spirituality, Rhodes Scholar, and you're doing peat and poetry. So I'm just curious how the technicality and the sort of the spiritual part kind of weaved together for you.

Katharine Wilkinson: Mm. You know, I think what I realized. In the environmental space was that having some literacy on the technical part, on the scientific side was really, in many ways, a necessary thing to have to be taken seriously in the conversation. I can remember having a conversation with my first boss out of undergrad when I worked for the Natural Resources Defense Council, and he said, Katharine, you've gotta go get a PhD. It doesn't really matter what it's in, but you've gotta have that if you wanna be taken seriously in this movement. And I think that has happily evolved since that time. That was 2005, 2006. But I felt that, I sort of knew that if I rolled in, I think with just poetry, with just this big broken open heart of mine with just storytelling that I might not find myself in the rooms where important decisions were being made and where I might be able to influence some of the trajectory of, yeah, how we're, how we're operating as, as a society. But the truth is that my love and my joy and I think my sense of kind of my own inner capacity has always been more on what some people might call the soft side of this work. Even though I think in a lot of ways that's the hard and the necessary side of this work.

Greg Dalton: So you got this certain credential to be taken seriously, perhaps as a woman in this very technical –

Katharine Wilkinson: – and young and Yeah. Yes. Yeah, absolutely. And I think there's part of me too that's just sort of a hopeless interdisciplinarian. Um, I, I had an undergraduate advisor who said specialization is for insects. And I do think some of that is just true for me with, with all respect to insects, you know. Um, I like the weaving, I like the braiding. I like the way that we see things. More deeply and with more complexity when we bring these different disciplines and lenses together.

Greg Dalton: Well, we recently had a person sitting right here who's a bat expert, who won the Goldman Prize this year and don't get her going and know how humans can learn from bats and bats. They're not an insect, but like, you know, there's a lot more to bats than I realized.

Katharine Wilkinson: Bats are extremely cool.

Greg Dalton: Yeah. And we can learn from them. Now you've written a book on Climate Way finding. The first words are a quote from novelist and poet, Wendell Berry. I'd like you to read those.

Katharine Wilkinson: Mm oh yeah. Wendell Berry. I think I also started reading that same, that same time in high school. And this is from the unforeseen wilderness. “And the world cannot be discovered by a journey of miles, no matter how long, but only by a spiritual journey. A journey of one inch. Very arduous and humbling, and joyful by which we arrive at the ground, at our own feet and learn to be at home.”

Greg Dalton: So climate is so big and macro. Why did you choose that to open your book?

Katharine Wilkinson: Yeah. We have this wildly global, wildly multifaceted, wildly long-term challenge, and yet the impacts of it are profoundly intimate right in our lives, in our communities, in our days, and I think there is a piece here about coming into the smallness of this work in a way that's actually extraordinarily powerful.

Greg Dalton: because we're told that everything's trivial.You know, global warming, gigaton –

Katharine Wilkinson: Big, big, big, big, big, big, big. Right? And, and I get it. I mean, I have empathy for the way in which. A challenge of this magnitude takes us to big solutions, mega swings, sweeping policies, huge shifts of capital, speed and scale. Speed and scale. You know, and, and, and we need, we need all of that, right? But all of it is made possible by people. It is all made possible by someone, or someones often with linked arms who have decided. That they can contribute, that they have a role to play, that they are, as I write in this book, a node of possibility for healing the planet we call home. And I think there's a real risk for us in this movement, in this community that we have not been adequately tending those nodes of possibility. We have not been investing in the human infrastructure of change that maybe other social movements have a better sense of. Um, but somehow the origins of this work in science and in and in technologies and in systems like energy I think it takes us into a place where sometimes we devalue the role of the human.

Greg Dalton: And relationships and intimacy.

Katharine Wilkinson: And relationships and intimacy. And not just the power of our heads and our profoundly capable hands, but the power of our hearts and the power of the human soul.

Greg Dalton: Right. That, that's, that's beautiful. And you've taken this to college campuses, this work, this wayfinding work, and you met, uh, one student named Anya, and her story really stayed with you. So what stayed with you about Anya?

Katharine Wilkinson: So this book is a, an unusual book in the sense that it did not begin as a thing with pages. It began as an experiential learning journey meant to help people at any stage of

their climate journey, their climate story to help discern: What can I do? Who can I be in this work? Where am I headed from here? And we ran a beautiful pilot cohort with students in the summer of 2023. They came from 18 different institutions and Anya was one of those students. And her words are so beautiful that I thought I would just read directly from them. She was an undergrad at UT in Austin at the time, and she said this after the program:

“Even though I had the climate knowledge and the passion, I realized something was still holding me back from taking the climate action I wanted to take: fear and the inner work I needed to do to actually sit with that fear and understand it. Climate wave finding gave me the space, tools and supportive community to do this work. I feel a new steadiness steady in myself and in how I can best be of use and the climate movement.”

Those words stuck with me so much because I think very many of us are feeling the unsteadiness of this time, that we are navigating a world where quite literally with ecological change we're, we're navigating a world where our maps are coming up short, but it's true internally. It's true about how we might navigate lives of purpose and meaning and what community looks like and where we go from here. Anya's story was such a reminder to me that at any age, we are deeply capable of giving each other what we need. To not be stuck in the overwhelm of information and fear or grief or anger, but to actually work with those emotions, find our sources of inner power and deep joy, and let that fuel us forward. Let that create a compass in this increasingly mapless world. I think there's a fundamental task for us at this time to grow our capacity to be with those emotions, with ourselves, to greet them with some compassion, with some empathy, with some curiosity, right? What is it that they are telling us? Our emotions, I think in, in a way, are teachers, but also to create more capacity to be with one another, to meet you and the fear that you're feeling to meet me and the grief that I'm feeling, and to not treat that as something that should only happen in a therapist's office, right? Because we know that around the world, almost 85% of young people are feeling climate worry. They are feeling sadness, anger, grief, fear, rage. They're feeling –

Greg Dalton: Not planning to not have children.

Katharine Wilkinson: Maybe planning to not have children, because that is how unsteady the world feels. And they're feeling betrayed by leaders, right? And so even if we had every mental health professional on the planet, turning their focus to helping us with the growing distress that we feel about the conditions of our planet and our own encounters with climate impacts, we couldn't possibly meet the need, so we've gotta do it peer to peer. This has been something that I've really learned from my dear friend, Dr. Britt Wray, that we can do that and we must do that. And I hope that climate way finding is one contribution in that direction.

Ariana Brocious: Coming up, the value of working in community with others as we tackle hard problems:

Katharine Wilkinson: I cannot think of a more meaningful mission to take on than the continuation of life. And that at its core is what I think climate engagement is about.

Ariana Brocious: That’s up next, when Climate One continues.

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Kousha Navidar: This is Climate One. I'm Kousha Navidar. Let's get back to Greg Dalton's conversation with Katharine Wilkinson, author of "Climate Wayfinding: Healing Ourselves and the Planet We Call Home." The book offers three core principals: to look inward with care, look outward with curiosity, and look forward with courage.

Greg Dalton: So how can I transform overwhelming grief into power, joy, and meaning?

Katharine Wilkinson: Well, that's as simple as bibbity bobbity. No, I'm kidding. Formula.

Greg Dalton: Gimme the formula, Katharine.

Katharine Wilkinson: I think the formula is to feel the things right, to actually let them move through us in their fullness. For me, sometimes that's just like, I've just gotta cry. I've gotta, I've gotta really let this, let this flow through and to not beat myself up about the grief. Right. To not feel like the grief is the whole story. And I write about this in the book. I think in some ways about this pendulum that swings within us that goes into these heavier, some might say darker emotions, but also swings to the other side into wonder and into delight and joy and a sense of of meaning. And I think we have to, in some ways, trust the pendulum that we won't get stuck, especially not when we have some compassion for ourselves and supportive space that we can be in together.

Greg Dalton: There's a powerful example of that. Just a couple of days ago, sitting right here where you are. It was John Doerr, who's founder of the Doerr School, big investor in Silicon Valley and Google, et cetera. And he was crying when asked about his daughter. He teared up on the TED Talk 18 years ago, talking about in 20 years I wanna talk to my daughter she's mad at me 'cause she thinks my generation ruined the planet. We have to fix it. And he cried saying she's still mad. And that was a for a man who is immensely powerful. Yeah.

Katharine Wilkinson: Yeah.

Greg Dalton: A rare show of vulnerability for a man, so wealthy and powerful. For me it was quite poignant. for him to, to go there when so few people do, to me, that enhances his power and leadership in a way.

Katharine Wilkinson: And I think welcomes people in, in a funny way, right? That so often in this space I see us trying to leverage robust data and this really compelling chart and another, you know? And the truth is I think we trust people more when we see their hearts. Right. Even if we may not share that feeling, we may, we may have a different perspective. We trust people more when we see the deepest motivations that bring them into this work. And I think that's also where we can build much needed sense of reciprocity across a movement that is approaching this work in lots of different ways and in ways sometimes we disagree with. Right. But if we can come back to that love, that sense of obligation, maybe to his daughter, maybe a little bit of a sense of shame or guilt about having participated in the systems that have gotten us into this mess. And so what now? Right. That's a really beautiful and generous thing to share, and I hope we see actually a lot more of that.

Greg Dalton: One of the things we hear a lot is, what can I do about something so big? And that common answers are what to buy, what to eat, what to drive, what to wear, how to vote, how to talk, what are the internal pathways to answering that question, what can I do?

Katharine Wilkinson: Mm. Yeah, we love a little punch list, don't we? A little punch list. And I think sometimes people want a punch list. I think sometimes there are folks who are like, can I just tick off a couple things maybe on Earth Day? And then I don't have to think about this again.

Greg Dalton: Electric car, check. Done.

Katharine Wilkinson: And feel like I'm not, you know, a total jerk. , But I've come to think of that question, what can I do almost as a fruiting body to use a fungal metaphor of these bigger, deeper wonderings that we hold about belonging and meaning and how to cope and where to live and what to do, and even who to love and part of getting to more powerful answers to that question of what can I do or what can I do now, I think is to welcome in those deeper wonderings, and that's part of what we do in climate wayfinding at the very jump of the program and at the very opening of this book is to say those questions are companions, right?

The punch list approach takes us into a level of certainty that I think is false certainty, right? Not that these are not things we could or should do, right? And EV is a great thing. Yes, let's move our retirement funds out of fossil fuels and into sources of funding for solutions. But there's something bigger that's going on beneath that question. And when I have seen people work their way into the most meaningful answer to that question, there's a couple things that go on. It's about finding ways to take our gifts, our talents, our deep sources of power and joy, and finding ways to offer those in this time of trouble and transformation. And I think about a professor who joined us in our first higher ed faculty and staff cohort. She was a dance professor and she arrived, I think, feeling pretty convinced that there was actually not a role for her in the climate space. And when we got into the leverage points for systems change and formed a bit by Dana Meadow's work, she had a recognition about the need for shifting culture and shifting story. And of course dance and performance is an extraordinary way to do that. And she came out the other side feeling deeply convicted about how the things she is good at and the world she lives in day to day actually can be a really generative place to take climate action. And I think that's just one story. But a vibrant movement to me means many, many, many of us figuring out those deeper offerings that we have to give

Greg Dalton: It doesn’t have to be a protestor with your fist in the air or environmental scientist or a clean energy investor, et cetera. You also write that it's critical to do this work in community with others if you can. And one of the things that, people say, what can I do? Well, you don't act. It's the “I” part that’s the problem. What can we do? Yes. Uh, and you've also talked about sort of this soft tissue of social movements and the churches and Quakers, et cetera. So how, tell us about the importance of community with others.

Katharine Wilkinson: Well, I often say that, as with a personal crisis, with a planetary crisis, it's best not to go it alone. And I think that's true for how we keep one another safe and how we forge resilience as we face more and more intense impacts from, from climate change. But it's also about how we make change, right? It's about how systems actually transform and how we do what, what James Baldwin said to, to make the world over. To make the world over, and my word, that is entirely too big of a task to take up alone. I also think there's a power in community around kind of the near term goodness of this work, right? We're chipping away, chipping away slowly, ever so slowly at this big challenge. But the people we get to do this work with, I mean, I, I almost have goosebumps, saying this. Like that's where it feels so good right now to be doing meaningful work together. And I think that's part of how we don't just do one-off tasks, but we actually find our way into deep, sustained, courageous contribution.

Greg Dalton: It reminds me of Russians after World War II saying that they actually didn't look back on that at such a bad time. 'cause even though there was horrific losses, they had common purpose. Humans can go through a lot if we have common purpose.

Katharine Wilkinson: Yes. And when you think about how many people are feeling, sort of at loose ends about what they're doing and what their lives are about, I mean, I cannot think of a more meaningful mission to take on than the continuation of life. And that at its core is what I think

climate engagement is about.

Greg Dalton: And you have accelerators for change. You mentioned changing narratives and culture. There's also build power, rewrite the rules, shift capital. Which one of those you might say a little more about?

Katharine Wilkinson: so many, so many different ways in, and thank goodness we have people who are excited about, about all of them. Clearly the space that I have chosen to spend most of my days and most of my talents for whatever they're worth is around culture and story and around the intersection of narrative and community building and how our kind of deeper, more holistic learning journeys can be profound catalysts for the paths that we take forward from here. I think often I, I live in Atlanta, Georgia, and I think about the role of the Black church and the civil rights movement, and I think about places like the Highlander Folk School, where Rosa Parks went on a retreat and to do nonviolent resistance training before the Montgomery bus boycott. And I think about consciousness raising circles happening in living rooms where feminists were coming together long before they put demands in front of legislatures.

And I think about Quaker meeting houses during abolitionism and the role of these quiet, small, often invisible aspects of social change that have such an important relationship to the big moments that we think about, right? Occupy Wall Street in Zuccati Park and the marches from Selma to Montgomery, right? These are the images we call to mind of what social change looks like, but we don't get them. We just don't get them without these other dimensions. And maybe one good example in the climate space, that was perhaps our biggest win of last year was the, uh, the outcome at the International Court of Justice on that climate case, right? Unthinkable even that the ICJ would hear a case on climate change. And that grew out of the bold dreaming that happened in a classroom in the South Pacific, a group of law students who had reached their wits' end about the levers they were able to pull at the national level in these low lying island states, facing the most horrific impacts of this mess we're in. And they said, yeah, we've got a world court. It needs to hear the biggest case of our lifetimes. And that's extraordinary. It's extraordinary.

Greg Dalton: And audacity to dream big from people that no one expected that change to come from those people in that place without a lot of power.

Katharine Wilkinson: Yes.

Greg Dalton: Your book includes grounding poems and playlists –

Katharine Wilkinson: Love a playlist.

Greg Dalton: – to do what art does best, make us more porous. So I'd like to close by asking you to read a poem that kind of captures what we've been talking about.

Katharine Wilkinson: I would love to. I would love to.

This is the poem that's tucked into the first chapter of the book called Embarking and the poem is Equinox by Tamiko Byer. "Dear Child of the Near Future, here is what I know. Hawks soar on the updraft and sparrows always return to the seed source until they spot the circling hawk. Then they disappear for days and return a full flock. Ready. I think we all have the power to do what we must to survive. One day I hope to set a table, invite you to draw up a chair. Greens steaming garlic slices of bread. Still warm. Honey flecked with wax and a picture of clear water sustenance for acts of survival for incantations, stirring across our tongues. Can we climb out of this greedy mouth, disappear and then return in force. My stars are tucked in my pocket, ready for battle. If we flood

the streets with saltwater, we can flood the sky with wings.

Greg Dalton: Beautiful. Katharine Wilkinson, thank you so much for your brainy and heart-centered work on climate.

Katharine Wilkinson: Nerdy and feeling all day.

Greg Dalton: We need both. We need it all. In fact, I think I first learned from you, when we were talking about all we can save that you bring your whole self to this work and I've borrowed that phrase a lot since. So thanks for bringing your whole self.

Katharine Wilkinson: My pleasure. Thanks for inviting my whole self to Climate One.

Kousha Navidar: Coming up, a social media star from Florida combines philosophy, humor, and love of nature into his own brand of inspirational messages:

Blair Carlyle: The world outside your front door doesn't belong just to the people who are trying to protect it. It belongs to you too, and you are not protecting it on behalf of anybody else. You're protecting it on behalf of yourself.

Kousha Navidar: That's up next, when Climate One continues.

Ariana Brocious: This is Climate One. I'm Ariana Brocious.

Kousha Navidar: And I'm Kousha Navidar. If you were to check out the Instagram page for the account known as unc.pappy, you'd see a 60-year man with a mustache posting shirtless videos, usually in the water. His face looks 60, but the rest of him looks way younger, like suspiciously ripped. It's a little weird and it kinda works.

Ariana Brocious: And his bio reads: "A fella /Uniting folks /Spreading philosophy & positivity /Loving the environment."

Kousha Navidar: That's right. I met Uncle Pappy at an event in New York organized by Nature is Nonpartisan. And it turns out, he's not an old man at all, he's a thirty year old who was messing around with Snapchat one day, found a filter, and started making videos. He hid his true identity for a long time, but recently revealed his real age and face.

Ariana Brocious: Regular listeners may be wondering… what's this got to do with climate? Well, Blair Carlyle, aka Uncle Pappy, uses his platform to encourage people to connect with nature and pay attention to policies that harm it. And he reaches all kinds of people, all across the political spectrum.

Kousha Navidar: Yeah, he's got 1.1 million followers! So when I sat down with Carlyle, I wanted to know what motivated him to focus on environmental issues.

Kousha Navidar: Let's start with the pivot a little bit. I think that's the one of the most interesting parts of this whole story because Uncle Pappy started as satirical rants before you pivoted to philosophy and positivity. Tell me about the moment you realized the character had a bigger purpose.

Blair Carlyle: So yeah, like you said, most of my videos starting off were very satirical kind of comedy. Overly patriotic old man screaming about freedom and George Washington and trying to unite America against England. And then there was one night I was lying in bed, and I started

getting a bunch of texts from my sister and my friends being like, "Oh my God, did you see this?" And it was Ben Shapiro, the, like, right-wing commentator, had made a reaction video to one of my videos during his podcast. And he did not think it was a joke. You know? He was just laughing and loving me talking about Florida and freedom and America.

Kousha Navidar: Taking it totally seriously.

Blair Carlyle: Yeah, I mean, he was just, like, giggling and laughing, and it was probably the happiest I've ever seen him, and I was kinda... I know. It's not... I don't think it's a secret that I'm a pretty liberal left-leaning guy, and so the fact that I was making Ben Shapiro the happiest I had ever seen him was a little concerning to me. It was the first time I really had to reckon that people were hearing me and seeing me, and that it would have farther-reaching consequences than just, you know, my own personal life. And, uh, that was kind of the first time where I was like, "Well, now that I actually have people listening to me, what do I wanna say? Like, what do I wanna be known for?

Kousha Navidar: What did you wanna be known for?

Blair Carlyle: I mean, genuinely a lot of my life has been just journaling and thinking about... I mean, philosophy kind of has a bad rap as, like, you know, over intellectual, like, like just philosophizing is kind of a nauseating concept kind of. So I feel like just saying philosophy undermines it a little bit. But just kind of figuring out the best ways to live a happy life, and especially like, I don't know, I haven't drank in six years now, and that was something I struggled with a lot. I struggled with depression a lot since I was a little kid. I have like a stack of journals like this tall 'cause I've been journaling just since I was in high school about just road trips and things that I was going through, breakups and depression and philosophy, and I don't know, anytime I had what I thought was like a minor revelation. So I was like, "Well, since I have people listening to me and I have this kind of encyclopedia of my thoughts and things that I've been going through, why don't I just start talking about that?" and I originally had th-- I had thought that it was gonna make my views and everything decrease just 'cause, you know, a guy talking about Ralph Waldo Emerson is a lot less eye-catching and viral than a old man screaming about England and eating beans on toast and talking about how gross it is. But then after that, it took off. Like people really were hungry for just positive, just fun, carefree stuff, especially like in a world where controversy sells and people are trying to be antagonistic and trying to get people to argue in the comments. And it was really kind of life-affirming 'cause it went against what so many people, myself included, thought about social media for so long.

Kousha Navidar: It kind of transcended expectations, if you'll excuse the pun, with Emerson.

Blair Carlyle: Yes, exactly.

Kousha Navidar: And one thing I've noticed from your videos is that you always film in the water, and your content is always touching on, like, wildlife and environmental conservation. How did the natural world become so important to Uncle Pappy's identity?

Blair Carlyle: I've always been an outdoors person my whole life. Like, since I was a tiny little kid and my grandpa would take us fishing, or we would go camping. And then especially during, during COVID, like 2020 to 2024, I lived, um, in a little cabin that my grandpa had built that had kind of fallen, not into disrepair, but had kind of fallen away since he'd, uh, died when I was 14. So I moved back there, and there's no Wi-Fi, so I would just spend all my time kind of... I had a woodworking business, so I would just be woodworking outside and really just realizing how far removed modern society has tricked us into being from nature and how it seems almost deliberate a lot of the ways that our world has shifted is to separate us from nature and really reckoning with mental health and

my own mental health and just trying to think about what human beings are supposed to do. And like Ralph Waldo Emerson says, "The eye demands a horizon." And I that encompasses so much of what I think. I'm like, if you think about your eyes are not designed to see a wall six feet in front of you. They're designed to be looking at horizons and clouds and seeing things even just on a physical basis.

Kousha Navidar: So thinking about your relationship to nature, do you feel a responsibility to use that platform to speak more directly about climate change, the health of ecosystems, the places that you're actually filming it? Do you feel some kind of like moral imperative in that sense?

Blair Carlyle: Oh, 100, 100%. And it kind of goes both ways. I feel a moral imperative to nature to try to remind people of how incredible it is, and at the same time, I feel a moral imperative to people to remind them of how incredible nature is. And so it's kind of... I- it's a double-edged sword, where if you can get people to care about nature, not only you're protecting nature, but you're making those people's lives better. Because I genuinely think so many people's lives could be improved with even five minutes of going outside a day. So many people get to the end of their day-- I have a lot of friends, I'm in law school right now, who, you know, will say, "Oh, I haven't left my house in like two or three days 'cause I've just been working and studying." And I'm like, This is not how just evolutionarily a human is supposed to be. We're like supposed to be breathing, you know, the fresh air outside and have the sun on our skin and not fluorescent lights, not climate controlled, not feeling so separate from everything. And that's like Ralph Waldo Emerson, one of my favorite people, said as, says like nature is kind of God's love just made manifest towards humanity, and it kind of reminds you that you belong to something.

Kousha Navidar: Here's the other side of that, though, for me, specifically when thinking about Instagram or TikTok. Like being preachy, I don't think really sells. You tell me what you think, but Uncle Pappy isn't preachy, right? Does the power come from not being preachy?

Blair Carlyle: I definitely think that's part of it. I am reticent to say that I have any like s- special skills. I feel like I am very just like a regular person who... I don't know. Whenever I speak, I speak to people who have done incredible things. You know, I work with a lot of environmental organizations, and I have so much imposter syndrome 'cause I'm I'm like, I'm just a goofy, just like a goofball who just like talks about my ideas and somehow it's grown into this thing that is like, I feel like the luckiest person on earth. But I will say one of the things that I do think I'm good at is just knowing what is cheesy and not. there's a lot of stuff where organizations or environmental things are preachy. You know, it feels like a commercial for the environment, and it's like you almost feel like you roll your eyes, you're like, "I see what you're doing." You're telling me to care about the environment, but you spent like, I don't know, $30,000 on this high class like commercial for the environment to convince people to care about something. And I just wanna be real and remind people that they already care about it rather than try to convince people to care about something that's probably pretty far down on their list of daily stressors.

Kousha Navidar: Isn't that kind of ironic saying you're gonna keep it real and you literally have a filter on your face? I mean, I, I believe you. I get what you're saying, but like break that down for me. Where does the real come from?

Blair Carlyle: Well, I think that's, that's one of the things is, um, a lot of people love Pappy because he does feel so real. And to me, I'm like, Pappy is the realer version of me than even the me that's here right now.

Kousha Navidar: Oh interesting.

Blair Carlyle: I do think every- everybody wears masks wherever they do. You know, you-- like me in a job interview is very different than me hanging out with my friends, different than me by myself. Like the Pappy is the realest version of me because it's like the me who I aspire to be, the me without the kind of social anxiety that I will have or the me that I ask for advice. You know, I feel like so many people don't realize that there is a version of them that they can go to for advice and that they can go to for wisdom. Because every single person contains so much wisdom and such a divine spark that a lot of people look for external validation in external figures, and I feel like a really powerful, underutilized kind of way to visualize it is kind of just say, "What is the version of me that I really aspire to be, and can I ask that version of me what to do whenever something happens?" And so I feel like Pappy is kind of the truest version of me, and I think if he was fake or felt fake or felt like me being inauthentic, it definitely wouldn't have had this carrying power or the staying power post-reveal. Like post-reveal, people are like, "Oh, this is like just the same guy, just with a different, different face and a younger voice." And so I feel like that is kind of the way that I, how I reckon with being authentic.

Kousha Navidar: Uh, thank you so much for sharing that. You're bringing up Uncle Pappy, so I wanna, I wanna get into that and, and the identity here. So you hid your true identity for months, and you're turning down major media opportunities to protect the secret. Now that it's out, how has your relationship with your audience changed, and did anything about their reaction surprise you?

Blair Carlyle: Genuinely, the thing that surprised me the most was how positive it was. I can't even tell you how many nights I would lay in bed just being so scared that, you know, some YouTube sleuth was gonna figure this out and do a reveal and spin it in some nefarious way or even just, like, one of my parents' friends accidentally, like, saying something and reve-- 'cause, like, there was a lot of people who knew in my personal life. , And it was kind of a strange Hannah Montana situation. I'm in law school. I, so I started law school, and, like, very, very few people in law school even knew about anything. I even had...

Kousha Navidar: Disney show Hannah Montana, where Miley Cyrus is keeping her secret life as a pop star, uh, a secret. I just wanna... In case listeners don't watch as much Disney Channel as I did. But sorry, go ahead.

Blair Carlyle: Yes. Yeah. Exactly, exactly. And so I spent so much time kind of being really paranoid and kind of feeling just conflicted about everything, and then so finally I decided, "I need to just do the reveal." I would love to be able to do things in person. So many people wanted to do, like, events, and I also just thought about making an impact, and I just thought, "I think I've taken this as far as I can, and if I really wanna be able to make an impact, like, especially for the environment, in doing events and speaking to people, it was just gonna be a risk that I would have to take. And, um, pressing post on that, that video was, like, one of the scariest buttons I've ever pressed. And then, uh, but the biggest surprising thing was so much positivity, like, so many comments, people coming out of the woodwork that I just could not believe. I was so honored with, like, just the sheer number of people who were really happy and really supportive. One of my favorite comments that people were saying was like, "Oh, this just means we get a lot more years with Uncle Pappy just 'cause I'm 30 instead of 70." And I was like, "That is, like, the nicest thing I've ever heard."

Kousha Navidar: I can imagine that it was really tough also from the perspective of keeping your base as wide as possible, because you had mentioned, like, Ben Shapiro watched this, and whether or not he was taking it seriously, wanted to share it, you yourself have a different political identity. I, before this interview, was going through your Insta and looking to see which of my friends followed you, and Blair, it's really interesting. The most conservative friend I have, who lives in Miami, follows you, and the most liberal friend I have, who also happens to live in Florida, also follows you. And I was like, "Whoa! This is a wide swath of people here." So your audience is spread across the political

spectrum, and that's super rare. I, I wanna know, even beyond the worry of are we gonna keep them, what I actually am interested in is for you, the, the, the art of making content that appeals to so many people. Like, do you have an example of the framing or the language you use that speaks across the spectrum when it comes to the environment?

Blair Carlyle: Yes. Environmentally speaking, I, I do make a lot of videos about the environment, and then I kind of divide them into, like, videos about the philosophy of the environment, which have less potential to ostracize people. And then I have kind of real world kind of calls to action videos that will be about, you know, proposed changes to the Endangered Species Act or proposed public land sell-offs, um, and different things like that. And I really try to ask myself when I'm thinking about making a video, Am I making this to change people's minds or am I making this to just show that I agree with a bunch of people? And if it's the latter, then I just won't do it 'cause I'm like-- I feel like the trap a lot of people fall into is just being like, "Oh, I just need to make a video just to show everybody on my team that I'm still on their team."

And that can be powerful in certain instances, but especially since I have this kind of far-reaching, base who watches my videos, I feel like I would do more harm than good for myself and the, and the people watching my videos because, like you said, a lot of conservative people follow me, and so I'm able to kind of frame maybe right-wing pro-- like, right-wing proposed legislation that affects the environment in a way that won't make them turn it off, as opposed to a lot of other kind of left-leaning creators will kind of use certain things or have an accusatory - tone or even just say, like, "Oh, Republican lawmakers are doing this." I will not say Republican or liberal in my videos. I'll just be like, "Lawmakers are doing this." And so you-- people who might be on the side that's doing that don't get their, you know, defenses up immediately. And just being like, "I'm presenting this to you without all the words that you might react negatively to, and if you'd still disagree with it, then maybe think about what that means." And so I feel like that has been able to spurn a lot of action instead of just the immediate accusatory shutoff, which I feel like happens a lot, especially with political issues.

Kousha Navidar: So there are some words, some terminology that are politicized that you choose not to use in order to appeal to as wide a number of people as possible. Is that fair?

Blair Carlyle: Yes, but I wouldn't even say to appeal to as wide an audience as possible, but to be able to, be able to convince people who might not otherwise be able to be convinced. You know, I'll avoid words like climate change, which, you know, the EPA has said is fake, which is insane. Um, but it's also, you know, if the Environmental Protection Agency is saying climate change is fake, then in my head I'm like, "Okay, I can't be using that word anymore," 'cause all the people who are in charge of the EPA will shut their brains off the second they hear that word.

Kousha Navidar: I, I find that so interesting. So you avoid using the term climate change. How about climate? Like, is climate just one of those words that you'll avoid saying in your videos?

Blair Carlyle: I, I don't know if I've consciously not said climate. 'cause, I mean, for the record, for all the listeners out there, I believe in climate change. I think it's, like, the, the most pressing issue. Um, but just, I just wanna say that as a caveat.

Kousha Navidar: W- And I, I appreciate you saying that, and I think it's still super interesting to think about the framing 'cause it is a, a real issue, obviously. You know better than most people about how to frame for a wide group of people. So tell me more, like, how do you think about the use of the term, let's say, climate change? Do you use something else instead?

Blair Carlyle: I'm from Central Florida, so I have friends across the political spectrum. I go quail

hunting, and so I'll be sitting at the table, and I'm the only liberal person at the table. And so then you will, like, stay up late into the night talking about things. And so a lot of times I'll just be thinking about, okay, if I was sitting at that table with, like, those people, or if I was sitting here, how would I be able to try to talk to them without, you know, sounding like I'm just reading a report of kind of buzzwords. So rather than making a video about climate change policy, which would kind of shut fifty percent of the people off the video already and make them unable to hear what I'm trying to say, I'll make a video, you know, about, you know, just how incredible the world is, how incredible the nature is, make a video out in nature and talk about how I think about it and talk about the responsibility of humans to protect it. I'll maybe pull in some quotes from Teddy Roosevelt, who is kind of beloved across both political spectrums. I'll try to pull in a lot of philosophies about humans' obligation and, like, need to care for nature. And, , then I'll, like, leave it at that

Kousha Navidar: Yeah, what I hear you saying is, uh, thinking about it from your audience's perspective.

Blair Carlyle: Yes, 'cause I, I do-- I'm working, I've worked a lot with this organization called Nature is Nonpartisan. , And I'm doing a road trip with them over the summer for clean water. And the reason we became friends is 'cause I made a video saying the environment should not be a political issue. Like it has become one, and it, it, it is one, but it really shouldn't be if you get... If you really sit down and think about it, and you think about hunters and fishermen, and you think about environmentalists and hippies, you know, and all the different types of people who rely on the environment, which is everybody, not just hunters and fishermen or campers or outdoors people. It's every single person on earth like relies on the environment. And trying to just remind people of that and saying like, "We have a common goal here," and different sides have been tricked into believing certain things because certain words have gotten painted with an unfair brush. And so I think it is just kind of reminding people like this, the world outside your front door doesn't belong just to the people who are trying to protect it.It belongs to you too, and that you are not protecting it on behalf of anybody else. You're protecting it on behalf of yourself too.

Kousha Navidar: What kind of world do you think we're leaving for that next set of people?

Blair Carlyle: It's really easy to get bogged down because of the actions of a select few group of people. But at the same time, I feel like never before in history has there been so many people working for what is right and what is going well. And it is just very easy to get lost because the loudest voices drown out everything. You know, they say, you know, a tree, a tree grows in silence, but it falls with a huge boom. And so we're so-- we're hearing so many falling trees that it's easy to miss the slow, silent growth that is happening across the political spectrum. Especially recently, you see a lot of people coming together across the political spectrum realizing that it's not Left versus right. It's more top versus bottom. It's like the, the rift is going up and down rather than side to side, and people are really starting to realize that they need to come together, and I feel like the environment is one of the greatest jumping off points to find that common ground.

Kousha Navidar: Tell me about that. Tell me about the environment being a place for common ground and how climate factors into that.

Blair Carlyle: One of the things I worked with the Downriver Project trying to, uh, to get oil drilling banned, in the Apalachicola River Basin. there's, like, a bunch of different groups that bring together right-wing people, left-wing people. Like, there's so many fishermen and so many people up in the Panhandle of Florida came together for that, where it was, like, completely bipartisan. There's, like, super right-wing, like, the most right-wing people you could ever imagine, charter fishermen who care deeply about the health of the ecosystem, who have lived there their entire lives, who hate pollution, who hate, you know, changes to the Clean Water Act and the Clean Air Act coming

together with like, the most liberal people that you've ever seen who care very much about the species and, biological conservation and the ecology of the land. And I feel like that, that's, like, a local thing that I've been super honored to be a part of, but I feel like that is happening more and more. And I do think the environment is one of the greatest ways to open the door to more conversations across the aisle and realizing that we're stronger together.

Kousha Navidar: Blair Carlyle, AKA Uncle Pappy, is a content creator and the creator of the Instagram handle unc.pappy. It has one point one million followers and counting. Blair, Unc, thanks for joining us.

Blair Carlyle: Kousha, thank you so much. This has been a blast. I, I can't thank you enough.

Ariana Brocious: All right, we've reached the end of our show, and we've got one more thing to share with you. Kousha, what are you thinking about right now?

Kousha Navidar: Ariana, I wanna know what comes up for you when I say the word sand.

Ariana Brocious: Ooh, uh, beach and, um, glass.

Kousha Navidar: Those are both very true. I wanna add one more. Storing renewable energy. How about that?

Ariana Brocious: Oh, no, tell me more.

Kousha Navidar: Okay, I just saw this article. Finland, a startup in Finland, is literally using sand to solve one of the hardest climate problems we have. The startup is called The Storage, and what they do is they heat ordinary sand to 800 degrees Celsius using surplus wind and solar power, and then they store that heated-up sand in insulated silos, and then they release the heat on demand to power processes. And I can get into that in a minute, but, like, what do you think about that?

Ariana Brocious: That is so cool. It's like a sand battery.

Kousha Navidar: Yeah, it's like a sand battery, exactly. It's a great way to put it, and, and they're using that battery right now as for, like, a proof of concept thing to power a brewery. They just piloted it in January. Uh, here's why all that matters. Industrial heat, I looked this up, it accounts for about a fifth of all global energy consumption, and it's almost entirely powered by fossil fuels. So it's a massive blind spot kind of in the energy transition. And this is really early days, so I don't wanna oversell this, but I thought it was interesting. Like, they project that energy cost for this, this brewery could go down by 70%, the carbon emissions by 90%. Uh, again, still very early days, but, like, hey, sand. Of course, who would've thought it? That's a pun, course, sand, bada bing, bada boom.

Ariana Brocious: Great. Nice. Yeah, you know, this is, uh, similar to some other technologies being explored.

Like, there's one that's trying to do... It's essentially, like, letting iron rust and then reversing the process, and that can also work as a sort of battery technology. You know, there's pumped hydro, for example, or, like, you can sort of... You can use excess power to, like, elevate some weight and then release that weight when you need it.

Just another form of storing energy, you know, until you're ready for it, and this is a really creative one, though, I have not heard of yet.

Kousha Navidar: Like, I was thinking creative when you were talking about the weight, so yes, I think that's a perfect word for it. It's super creative. Okay, that's our show. Thanks for listening. You can see what our team is reading by subscribing to our newsletter – sign up at climate one dot org.

Kousha Navidar: POD version: And that's our show. Thanks for listening. Talking about climate can be hard, and exciting and interesting -- AND it's critical to address the transitions we need to make in all parts of society. Please help us get people talking more about climate by giving us a rating or review. You can do it right now on your device. Or consider joining us on Patreon and supporting the show that way.

Ariana Brocious: Climate One is a production of the Commonwealth Club. Our team includes Jenny Park, Brad Marshland, Austin Colón, Megan Biscieglia, Kousha Navidar and Rachael Lacey. Our theme music is by George Young. I'm Ariana Brocious.