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Praxis Radio 2020 Podcast

Episode 7: Rev. Earl Koteen, Berkeley, CA // Kim Noble, Atlanta, GA

<orchestral music intro, "Praxis Theme" by Jason Cross continues to play under narration>

Taylor, the host of the show: Welcome listeners—to week seven, somehow, of the 2020 season of Praxis. If this is your first listen, I recommend you check out the show trailer or whichever other episode strikes your fancy for some more context on the project. The best way to do that is by subscribing, which you can do anywhere you get your podcasts, and at praxisradio.com slash subscribe.

This season is a revisitation of a radio show road trip I embarked upon in the summer of 2015. It was a hot time, politically and literally and I met a ton of interesting people who were involved in radical social change. Last week, we were in Richmond, California at a rally to stop oil trains, sometimes called ‘bomb trains’ from coming through communities along the oil corridors of the state. We are going to stay there, at least for the first half of this week’s show.

Reverend Earl Koteen was one of the speakers at the rally. You’ll hear from him in a minute. When he talked to me about his work with Green the Church, I knew I wanted to talk with other organizers in that project, preferably one of the many women of color he lifted up as leaders in this movement. His reference took me further south than I was able to go on the original trip, to Atlanta, GA to talk by Zoom with Kim Noble.

For now, let’s return to that park by the water in Richmond and hear what Reverend Earl had to say that afternoon.

Stephanie, the emcee of the rally: “And now what I want to do is bring to the stage... on the ground...”

<laughter in audience>

Reverend Earl Koteen (EK): “...into the grass...”

Stephanie: “...Reverend Earl Koteen of the Sunflower Alliance!”

<cheering and applause>

EK: So we’ve heard some storytelling today and one of the nice things about the really old stories is that they can be retold for each generation. When I was a kid, I used to

watch Charlton Heston pretend to be Moses, which was a very interesting experience. And just a few weeks ago, I saw the new version of the movie [*Exodus: Gods and Kings*] that Ridley Scott put together. And it was a very interesting contrast because Ridley Scott didn't have very many miracles, and he did have Moses who was trained to be a military leader. And Moses who trained the Jews to be military fighters. Who actually were actively involved in their own freedom from bondage. Well we are bound to the fossil fuel companies. And they and the other neo-co...neo-conservatives are doing everything they can to disempower us. To lower our salaries, to lower our wages, to make us more and more in bondage.

And this thing coming through is not going to part the Red Sea, this is parting us. It is killing us slowly, or it is killing us quickly. But it is a continuing challenge we have to face. And we cannot face it passively. We must fight. Now how we fight includes a number of things, including coming here today. But we in the Sunflower Alliance, which was birthed out of Our Power Richmond, are part of this group. We're connected with APEN [Asian Pacific Environmental Network], CBE [Communities for a Better Environment], Sierra Club and a bunch of other organizations through the Richmond Environmental Justice Coalition. And we encourage you to sign up, get our newsletter, check for information like the event on the 21st, thank you very much."

<music fades in under sound of applause and continues under narration>

Taylor Roseweeds (TRW): "Storytelling is super key to most theology traditions, so even though I'm not religious, I often vibe with social justice minded believers of all stripes, and both of today's guests are no exception. Here is what Earl had to say when we spoke by Zoom on September 3, 2020."

<music fades out>

TRW: Ok so, um, if you want to start by just introducing yourself, who you are, a little bit about the work you do?

Earl Koteen (EK): So I'm Reverend Earl Koteen, I am a [Unitarian Universalist] minister. My specialty is ecological justice and I'm either on the board or volunteer with several different organizations. I'm based in Berkeley, but much of the work I do is nationwide.

TRW: So when we, I don't think we actually met when I was down in Richmond, but I encountered you, you were giving a speech at a rally against oil trains in Richmond, CA. That was an issue, a big issue in 2015, then all up and down the west coast and the rail lines to the port cities, including where I was living. So you were part of Sunflower Alliance and you talked about those trains. Can you just give an update on that part of the work over the last five years?

EK: Yeah, we call them bomb trains in large part because of the explosion and the death in Lac-Mégantic in Canada. Those trains come down from Canada and from

Alberta and in many cases they go right through the middle of cities, for example, Davis, CA. And if one of those were to explode again, the death toll if it happened in a city would be much greater. There have been others that have derailed or had other problems, but so far not with the sort of consequences for people that happened with Lac-Mégantic. In addition to the coal trains, excuse me, the oil trains, what's really been a big deal here lately are the coal trains.

Phil Tagami has been trying to set up a coal terminal in Oakland at the Port of Oakland and those trains will end up polluting all the waterways along the way, as well as providing terrible air pollution. And some communities, for example in Richmond, they already have to wipe the coal off their cars or their houses, but what's really frightening is not visible, which is the smaller particles. The 2.5 microns particles. And it's not clear how much of that's going on right now, but as we speak, the air here in Berkeley is bad because of all the fires that are going on around us.

TRW: And so those coal trains, the community I'm from has those, too, and they're uncovered, correct? So, they're dampened down but they're uncovered and this dust is kind of just passively blowing off as the train moves?

EK: Uh, correct. And even, you know, for example when I was in Louisville, KY I saw mountains of coal and coal ash and that sort of thing. Same sort of thing, they spray them with water, but they get into the air, they poison us.

TRW: So I guess that rally was part of a lot of action in 2015. So what has the resistance to this looked like around the Bay and— yeah, what role have the different communities played in trying to stop these from coming through?

EK: So one of our main adversaries is BAAQMD, the Bay Area Air Quality Management District, and we've been pressing for a long time to-- for them to set measurable limits, and every time we zig, they zag. So being successful when you have what's known as regulatory capture, which means in essence that the organizations or the agencies are controlled by the organizations or entities they're supposed to regulate, make it really really difficult. And while some of the employees *<computer alert chimes in background>* of those organizations are well motivated and helpful, often the leadership is in the pocket of the corporations.

TRW: Mmhmm, yeah and that's the issue so many places too, you know. We all have a different, I feel like every region in the country has a different part of this beast of fossil fuels and we're all just trying to pull on it where we are...

EK: I think the other really large problem is that what we need is probably more radical than what someone like [Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez] would recommend. What we're getting instead is compromises and compromises, I liken it to playing in a sandbox when a tidal wave is approaching. And so we have burden shifting in such a way that people imagine that if they put solar on their roof or they cut—you know, go vegan, or do something like that— they're saving the planet. And while all of those activities are

virtuous, what we need is dramatic system change in order to have pretty much any chance of survival as a species.

TRW: Yeah. And do you see that coming more from, like, direct action, like, mass mobilization?

EK: Well, I define myself as a radical and not a revolutionary, because usually revolutions have a lot of unintended consequences, but it is quite evident, for example in Florida, when you see pictures of people on little skiffs or walking and the water only looks like it's a foot deep. What you don't know is that the water is full of sewage because Florida is made of limestone and when the water levels rise, the water comes out from underground. So some of my fellow Unitarian Universalists have been buying galoshes for schoolchildren so that they can get to school without being made ill by walking through the water.

And so when we're talking about the wildfires here, or flooding in Florida, or the hurricanes, or any of these other things, it's quite evident that while scientists are still somewhat timid about saying climate change causes a particular problem, they have lost their timidity about acknowledging that climate change exacerbates these situations. So we get more frequent hurricanes, we get them more severe. And now with Greenland and the Antarctic, we're going to have more and more sea level rise, acidification of the oceans, just, you know, we have a future unlike anything that has happened since the last 12,000 years and the beginning of the agricultural revolution.

TRW: I mean, when you say it that way it seems kind of funny to ask about five years. So other than the obvious, like, acceleration that scientists and activists predicted and pointed at that has happened in terms of climate change effects over the last five years, what do you see? Just as someone who's involved in social movements, involved in, you know, really a social justice church structure I'd say with the Unitarians in general, what do you see has changed over these past five years in those terms? In social terms, in movement terms? For good or for ill.

EK: There is no terrible situation that does not create opportunity. And usually that opportunity is exploited by people trying to make a profit which only adds to the damage, but what I see happening right now is much of the work I do is in communities of color or communities of poverty. Most Unitarians and other mainline Protestants, on the other hand, tend to be older, tend to be upper middle class, and tend to live in places where they really do not see what's going on directly. Covid 19 has changed that in that the people who are now dying, you know the people who are at greatest risk are at eighty-plus, the people who are second greatest are seventy-plus, you know, that sort of thing. And while wealth still provides a lot of barriers to suffering, the worst consequences— so when you hear about all these deaths in nursing homes, these usually aren't, like, the high-priced spread. We're talking about places that are exploiting Medicare and the people who are there as well as exploiting their workers and that's where you see the really high death tolls. But what has happened with covid is that it has finally really frightened people who look like me, who are of my socioeconomic

class, and who are my age and older. And so my hope is that they will become increasingly radicalized by finally being of, at risk.

TRW: Hmm. Yeah, it's kind of depressing that that's what it takes, but like you said, it's an opportunity perhaps. So...

EK: You know for example, the French Revolution didn't happen until the people were starving. And they were starving in part because the French king provided support to the American Revolution. And as you go back, and this is the other thing that's critical, I'm doing a lot of reading about the 14th century right now and the Plague because the way people responded to that is, in many ways, the way people are doing now. So the Catholic Church lost a lot of credibility because the best priests in many cases died because they provided support to the people who were ill. And the people who replaced them didn't have the same training and preparation. In some places, like the Pope at the time, Pope Clement, was a wonderful human being, who when people tried to blame the Jews for the Plague said, 'I don't believe it, they're dying at the same rate we are', But in Northern Europe, they slaughtered Jews. There were full-on genocide. And so we're likely to have similar situations throughout the world as we see with various types of autocrats, you know, in Hungary and the Philippines and a number of other places arising. And it's— you know, we can only hope that there are going to be more movements from the bottom up to make democratic changes as opposed to further autocratic changes.

TRW: Yeah, that's an interesting time to be looking at right now. You know, to be thinking about the way that superstition and bigotry and all of these things that we're seeing again were alive and well then, so...

EK: I think it was Mark Twain who said, 'history doesn't repeat itself, but it rhymes'.

TRW: Yeah <laughs>

EK: Um, and so I've been doing a lot of reading about history, anthropology, archaeology, a number of different fields, of course economics and politics as well, to see what can we learn about what we have previously experienced as a species.

TRW: And I want to pivot off of something that you said, you were talking about this demographic that you're in, in a variety of ways, older, whiter, more economically privileged people. I'm curious about your own journey to being an activist. How did that happen? Have you always been in this milieu? Was it through your faith? I'm just curious about that story.

EK: Sure. So I was brought up Unitarian and I was also brought up agnostic. And when — by the time I was in high school, I was creating a philosophy club and I was reading the Existentialists and, you know, the Russian novelists and those sorts of things and those, along with Greek, Roman and Norse mythology, formed a lot of my background at the time. I was active in the Civil Rights movement and my minister, my youth

minister, was the one that was murdered in Selma, Jim Reeb. After college, and I entered the workforce, I worked for the federal government for thirty years. During that time, I was covered by the Hatch Act, so that sort of limited my political activity, but I could continue to, for example, support equal employment opportunity and add to the diversity of the workforce. Once I retired, I really wanted to continue the spiritual journey I was on and that's one of the reasons that I ended up in seminary. But as I was— after I had graduated from seminary and I was sort of finished up my internship and residency as a psychiatric chaplain, I made the mistake of going to a lecture on climate change...

<laughter>

EK: And while I had actually met Al Gore and had listened to him tell the frog story, the boiling frog story, long before he did the movie [An Inconvenient Truth] and I watched the movie, this program I went to at the Chabot Science and Space Center by Dan Miller was absolutely terrifying and much more extreme than what Gore presented.

TRW: And what, what year is this that you're seeing that, roughly? Early 90s?

EK: No, no, no, no. This was about 2007, 8, 9... somewhere in that range.

TRW: Oh

EK: I didn't move out here until 2003 to attend seminary. Well, I went home more depressed than I had ever been in my entire life, but I hoped that Dan didn't know what he was talking about. He's a venture capitalist, he's not a scientist, blah blah blah, but the two people he most recommended reading were James Hansen, the climatologist and Bill McKibben, the journalist. And I read both and then I started asking questions. And it turns out that McKibben has or had a relationship with the UU Ministry for Earth and so I formed a relationship with McKibben. And at the time, 350.org was headquartered in Oakland, so I started working with them and became one of the founders of 350 Bay Area. And that's how I met Carl Anthony, who's one of my heroes and one of the founders of the environmental justice movement. And so I became involved in a lot of local activities primarily along the refinery corridor that runs from Richmond to Benicia. And then later on with ports of <audio distorts briefly> Oakland, Richmond, Vallejo <distortion ends> and so forth.

And then those of us who were of a more radical nature than 350 Bay Area created Sunflower Alliance after the 2000—I think it was 2003— explosion at the Chevron plant which sent 15,000 people to the emergency room. And then a year after that, I was responsible for being a leader in planning the rally and whatever we had in Richmond where McKibben was one of the keynote speakers and some other keynoters as well. And I worked with Sunflower for several years while continuing, while I was also on the board of the UU Ministry for Earth, but at some point I just really became disenchanted with how often we were losing, how often we were failing and I really felt I needed to step back a little.

And I also— as someone who lived in the DC area for most of his life, had thirty years with the government and whose father had forty years with the government— I figured, well, I know more about the federal landscape than I do about Sacramento or the Bay Area; I need to reach out to people in DC. And so I had been working with several UU organizations to try to impact national legislation as well as working with a number of interfaith groups. And I'm also for several years now, been on the steering committee of California Interfaith Power & Light which is how I met Ambrose Carroll who is the founder of Green the Church which is the organization that looks at the intersection between the Black church and the environmental movement. And so my main focuses right now are— the two organizations I'm doing the most work for— are Green The Church and Unitarian Universalists for a Just Economic Community.

TRW: That's great and how, I guess with talking about Green The Church and both of those and just the connection between faith communities and environmentalism, what does that look like in your congregation and also in these other churches?

EK: So I don't have a congregation...

TRW: Oh, ok

EK: I've never been a parish minister. But let me start with Green The Church. So all religions talk about welcoming the stranger, providing hospitality. Green The Church lives it. And so I formed a bond with Ambrose through Interfaith Power & Light, but I was working with an organization called the Moving Forward Network, which I think very highly of, that deals with freight issues around the country and someone was passing out fliers for the Green The Church summit.

TRW: Mmhmm

EK: And I said, 'well, could a pale male like me attend?' and her response was, 'well we've talked about that, and the answer is yes'. So I went to my first Green The Church summit, they'd been going on for a few years before I attended, but I went to my first one in Charlotte, NC and I had an absolute ball. It was so wonderful. I would say at that event the African American [to] Euro American ratio was, you know, I'd say ninety to ninety-five percent African American. But I was very welcome and it was that old Southern hospitality that I love so much, ok? And in addition, I met a number of people there that I still work with.

And over the years, like the last physical summit we had was in St. Louis last year and by that point I would say that the ratio was about eighty percent to twenty percent. And what I so loved— and this was not something that we created but that we found— was that there was really thriving interfaith and interracial groupings of people who were fighting together to deal with some of the really, really terrible things that were happening in St Louis. And so I was very involved in doing outreach to churches and recruiting people to participate. Once again that was an opportunity to build further

connections and networking, so when you asked me about like, women of color I admire and suggest contacting, and so forth and so on, I can give you a very long list.

TRW: And I would love if you did! And for people who maybe aren't from a religious background or maybe don't know a lot about race and racism in America, it's pretty remarkable to have an interracial, faith based... I mean I think it was James Baldwin who said the most segregated hour was Sunday morning....

EK: No, it was actually MLK

TRW: MLK, ok, yeah! But talking about that idea, you know, that the church communities do tend to be very segregated. Can you speak to that?

EK: Sure

TRW: Do you think it's the issues you're working on that brought that together, and...

EK: First of all, and this is rarely quoted, MLK followed that with 'my church is segregated, but not by intention' and the Unitarians have been trying at least since the 1960s to increase the participation of people of color and while they've had a few successes, for the most part they've failed. And one of my fellow Sunflower folks said, 'we really should spend less time trying to get everybody, you know, all in one church building or one whatever and spend a lot more time trying to go where people are'. So I've been to a number of Black churches, always welcome, always treated with kindness, but getting people like me to even go into the neighborhoods is very difficult because the media has made them so afraid.

And one of the best things I have been involved in, and it's not active right now, is something called the Richmond Environmental Justice Coalition. And it had representatives from each of the races, Richmond is about equally one third white, one third Black, and one third brown, with a large Hmong community from the Vietnam War. The Hmong were the hill people who supported the US and then, you know, had to leave when the US left. And it was such a joy to work together, you know? It was just absolutely fabulous, but we had a common enemy. And that common enemy was Chevron.

TRW: Hmm

EK: And you didn't have to, you know those who live closest to the refinery or on the rail lines were most at risk, but you know the air does not pay attention to boundaries.

TRW: As we've learned this year!

EK: Yes, exactly! And so even today, if you live in a community like Hunters Point or Richmond or one of the other communities which Naomi Klein called 'sacrifice zones', you're going to get worse air, in many cases like Flint you're going to get worse water,

and you're going to be on land that is probably brownfield or maybe even a Superfund site. But back in the day, when new movies were released, they'd be released downtown and you'd see these commercials that said 'coming soon to a neighborhood near you'. And every time I go out and preach to a middle class neighborhood I always say, 'you've got to understand what's going on in the sacrifice zones. Because it's coming to a neighborhood near you.' And people are finally beginning to go, 'oh my god, I'm not bulletproof anymore'...

TRW: Mmhmm

EK: '...my community is not bulletproof.' And that, it's a bad thing, but it's also a really good thing. Because I hope it will create the kind of solidarity we need to make a difference.

TRW: Mmhmm, yeah. And that leads in to, you know, something that struck me in the speech that you gave, which was short, but which I have recorded and I revisited is that you opened, you know, you talked about, I can tell you went to seminary because you were telling stories and you were framing it very well and I can tell you've been doing that and you just did it, too. So framing it in that way, I guess I'm really interested in storytelling as a means to reach understanding with folks who are reachable—and I think that is a distinction that's been made really clear these last five years is that some people we're probably not going to reach right now— but there's a lot who we can reach. I guess I'm just curious what your perspective on that is. What do you think the role of stories is in movement work?

EK: So before I became a minister, I was involved in a lot of lay-led services and I remember at one of them, after— where I actually did the entire sermon— afterwards someone came up to me and she was not hitting on me, and she said, 'Earl, I love the sound of your voice so much you could read the telephone book and I would listen with attention. But when you made a shift in your sermon from reading it to just telling a story, it was like your whole being changed.' And that got me to think about the fact that you know, what do we remember? We remember stories. Whatever scripture you're thinking about, whatever, you know, novel or story or movie or whatever, what's the story you remember? Sometimes when I'm listening to something I will pick up new vocabulary and that I will stick with, but mostly, it's not the abstractions, it's the stories.

And in order to accumulate stories beyond that you can get from mythology and literature and scripture, you've got to get out there and live it, you know? You actually have to, you know, you have to—you don't have to die to go to hell, you just have to go east of Houston. The air there is so bad, that it's worse than anything I've ever experienced with the wildfires here. And I don't know how people live there, and I have friends who have died there because of the different problems there. But if you're in downtown Houston, oh my gosh, it's beautiful, and there's skyscrapers and there are museums and it's absolutely lovely. But when, for example, they had the hurricane there, all of the brownfield and refineries and the other things like that which are east of Houston, and are part of the whole you know, gasoline corridor, they went underwater

and many people who lived in places that had not previously been inundated now found that their houses were flooded. So it's part of my 'coming to a neighborhood near you', and don't wait until you yourself are engulfed by the tidal wave. Go out there now and look at your future by being engaged with communities that are already suffering.

TRW: Yeah, and it's increasingly harder and harder to avoid. You know, it's like you said before, just pick a place on the map in this country and there's something new happening in the physical world that was not happening before.

EK: And one of the things that's happening now, just like those leaders in the Middle Ages who said, 'it's all the Jews' fault and if we just kill them off everything will be fine' or they were not understanding how the Plague was transmitted and thought it was just bad air so if they could just you know, you may have seen pictures of the masks that the physicians...

TRW: <makes beak motion non verbally on camera>

EK: Yeah, exactly. Finding, like Diogenes with his lantern, finding an honest person is incredibly difficult and one of the people I recommend highly is David Wallace-Wells. He writes for *New York Magazine* and his latest book is called "The Uninhabitable Earth"—or at least that was the last one that I read— and what he says is what I'm increasingly doing, which is looking into the whole area of disaster preparedness because we can't avoid it. We have already put too much crap in the atmosphere and it's not, you know we're not going to be able to remove it, and our very survival as a species, much less all life on the planet is at risk now. And so, these people who give you happy talk or tell you that if you just change your diet you're going to save the planet...

TRW: Yeah, 'we're going to do it by 2050'!

<laughter>

TRW: That's my favorite.

EK: <coughs> I, I was reading the other day that even if a few people could live on, close to the Antarctic, the air and the ocean would be so polluted by that point that they probably wouldn't live very long. So we may have, let me just say, the scripture that most appeals to me is the [*Bhagavad*] *Gita*. And the heart of the *Gita* is when Arjuna says that he doesn't want to kill his opponents because they are his cousins and his uncles and his nephews. And Krishna, who is a chariot driver, says, 'They're already dead. What happens to them is not your concern. What your concern is is your duty.' And so discerning in these really troubling times where it is very easy to become hopeless and, in fact, hope is often 'hope-ium'...

<laughter>

EK: ...or a drug that keeps us from really paying attention. We need to find our courage and do the best we can without guarantee of outcome and that's where I get my inspiration.

TRW: Hmm...you pulled one of my very favorite things also, so well done.

EK: Good <laughs>

TRW: Yeah and that leads perfectly into what I was going to ask. You know, it's hard for me to ask, for that exact reason, uh I might steal your 'hope-ium' line, because it can sound kind of trite, but I do think that going back to story, we need to find ways to maintain imagination and articulate what we want rather than constantly having to fight what we don't want. And being able to do both of those at the same time. So who do you think, whether individuals or groups, are articulating that other way of being best right now? Who's inspiring to you?

EK: Well first of all, I'm going to get back to David Wallace-Wells because it's hard to be inspired when you feel you're being lied to. So understanding the magnitude of what we need to face is a first step to making a meaningful difference. If we don't understand, you know, the metaphor I always use is: if we don't understand whether we're in LA or New York, it's very difficult to get to Chicago. We have a fifty-fifty chance of getting very wet. And therefore, we should start out with clarity about where we are. Beyond that, we need to be very critical of any solutions we hear. So some of the best work right now is [Project Drawdown], but we need to be critical of their findings.

There's also another effort called the Powers of Ten which identifies at what level of the exponential of ten, you know one, ten, one hundred, on up are we likely to have the most impact. But what I always advise people, because a lot of my work was in Human Resources, part of finding out where we are is doing an inventory of what our skills and interests are. Because it's very interesting, it's very easy to burn out doing this work and so you need to find something you enjoy doing as part of this.

And then secondly, while it's always great to pick up new skills and new learning, I didn't become a Human Resources specialist by accident or move on to Organizational Development by accident. These were areas in which I was particularly interested. And so this combination of skills and interests is a good starting point for figuring out how to engage and then through the engagement, starting to build networks. Because early, very early on, I figured out that I had to have a brain trust. That only Leonardo DaVinci or someone of that ilk could retain all this stuff. And my initial brain trust was hard scientists like geologists and others, but at some point I recognized that the problem was not the hard science, the problem was the social sciences. The problem was human psychology, sociology, other fields along that line. So I expanded my brain trust. And now if I see something, so, for example, I have a mathematician I'm close to and I see something in Drawdown, he will be able to say, 'yes this makes sense', or 'no, this doesn't make sense'. And simply the fact that it comes out of a Harvard professor doesn't mean it's reliable.

TRW: That's such a good strategy, I think, for people to take. There's a lot of pressure to know everything, I think, particularly among my generation and the younger generations who have just...always had a magic box in their pocket and it's...it's good to surround yourself like that, so...

EK: Yeah, and finding trustworthy sources is maybe one of the most important things. The project I'm working on for a couple of years now after I finally figured out some of the reasons I was failing, I've been calling 'the roots of justice'. And the idea is that most of us spend our time in the canopy of the tree. So maybe we're most interested in women's rights and then we move on to the branch of womanism, or feminism, or reproductive justice, or even beyond that into particular leaves. And then those of us who are on one branch get into arguments with those on a different branch or are in competition for resources or so forth or so on.

Well, the tree itself is going to die unless we acquire economic and political power. And the trunk of the tree that connects us to the roots that we need to have to make a difference is communications. And we're—though there's a history of misinformation, through the world and you know the battles that Jefferson and Adams fought were incredibly nasty in our U.S. history—there's more opportunity for ossification and misinformation and other things like that, so in addition to assessing 'what are my talents?', 'what do I like to do?', 'what will engage me?', 'what am I passionate about?'—almost like the most critical next question is 'who can I trust?'. And how can I build in that work, not only for information but also for action.

TRW: Well, I think that's about all we've got, but is there anything else you want to add? Is there anything you'd like to plug, ways that folks can find— I'll link to the organizations that you mentioned, but is there anything else you want to send us off with?

EK: So I mentioned Green The Church and UUs for a Just Economic Community. I would suggest checking out Movement Generation, which a lot of what you find in Naomi Klein she actually got from Gopal Dayaneni, who is sort of the best philosopher, thought person, in ecological justice. Because of your interest in stories, I would look up the Center for Story-based Strategy. A lot of the people I worked with have moved on, but Gopal is one of the people who is connected with that under their network. As is Christine Cordero who was the executive director there for a while, and Reverend Dr. Faith Harris who is an African American theologian and also part of Green The Church. And I, if you would like to interview another individual, I think Kim Noble who is with Green The Church and is incredibly talented.

TRW: Cool. Wow, thank you so much.

EK: Sure

TRW: That's a good list and a great interview, so thank you.

EK: You're most welcome. And you know where to find me."

TRW: Yeah"

<music fades in>

TRW: "Shoutout to Earl for the wealth of information and connections, which you can find in the show notes below. While this podcast is going to cover a lot of the ground I covered, it won't hit it all. And I didn't hit all of the country. I drove down the west coast as far as Bakersfield, cut north through Utah at Las Vegas, making a broad loop of the west and up into Alberta and BC, then flew to Detroit and did the second loop—across Ontario and Quebec, into New York by way of Vermont, to Baltimore, DC, and Kentucky. That's when I ran out of money and grace from my employer and came on home.

I didn't make it to the south, though one day when travel feels safe and accessible to me, I will. The next guest, Kim Noble with Green the Church, brought enough storytelling to the table to make me feel, for a moment, that I had been there. Here's what she had to say when we talked via Zoom September 22, 2020."

<music fades out>

Taylor Roseweeds (TRW): "So, hi. Um... I don't know if you want to start by just introducing yourself, your name, who you are, a little bit about what you do in the world?"

Kim Noble (KN): "Sure, yeah, happy to do that. So my name is Kim Noble, I'm the Chief Operating Officer for Green The Church. We are a sustainability initiative working to create a cadre of Black church communities who are committed to green theology, promoting sustainability practices in those communities and helping to build economic and political change. Glad to be with you today.

TRW: Yeah, so as you know, you know, I'm doing all these interviews with folks I met on this road trip five years ago. We did not meet then. But if we had, where would I have found you in the summer of 2015?"

<laughter>

TRW: What was going on then?"

KN: Wow. That's an interesting question. So five years ago, um, that's back in 2015, I was working on environmental issues for green the—Green For All—I keep forgetting, it's Green For All, so Green For All, they are a national initiative as well. Their mission is to build an inclusive green economy strong enough to lift people out of poverty and at the time, they were incubating Green The Church. And uh, so that's how I got connected there. But more about Green For All and the work I was doing five years ago—our work

was primarily around the Clean Power Plan, we were fighting for that, against any attacks that was coming against that. You know, the Obama administration put forth this power plan to save lives, and you know, clean up the air that we breathe, but also it would save money and create jobs.

So I worked in DC at the time and really just did a lot of Hill visits educating folks on the Clean Power Plan as a surrogate for the EPA that was on our side back then. <laughs> But yeah, we, we were really about making sure that we got our comments in and people were...had the full perspective on what this plan would do and what it meant for uh, cities around the country to reduce that carbon footprint. So as you know, states and jurisdictions were looking to you know, establish their own plans to clean up the environment, we were helping them and pointing them toward some great resources and best practices around what solution-based looked like. And so, yeah, that's what I was doing back in 2015. I also got connected with Green The Church at that time and Green The Church was hosting a summit in Chicago, IL. And so that was my first introduction to seeing the Black church in this environmental space and I was fascinated by it.

TRW: So which comes first for you—the Black church, the environmental movement, what's your...what's your inroad to that place look like?

KN: Sure, so I am from the South. I'm actually in Atlanta, GA right now, visiting my mom, so this is home for me. And um, I was raised a Southern Baptist and definitely have my roots and foundation in the Black church, so from the time I could walk, I think that's my first memory of sitting in church with my mother, you know, listening to hymns, listening to sermons, and just having that soul ...being stirred and moved. So I think I would have to say that was my first inroad, but then when you talk about environmentalism, you know, I have to say that was around as well.

My father, um, who has now passed away, but he was very much a, a very wise soul. And I remember sitting outside with him and he'd take a deep breath and he said, you know, 'can you smell the rain? It's coming'. And I'm like 'hmm'. Or he'd say, 'look at the animals, watch what they're doing, cause they're preparing' for, you know, impending weather, or you know, if the birds are flocking somewhere. He was very much looking at the seasons. I also remember him saying that you know, 'I'm seventy-five years old and I've been on this earth this long and I've never seen...' you know, a rain like this, or a flood like this, or a hurricane like that. I think he could see that the climate was indeed changing. So my— my early introduction there was, you know, with my father. I think we just talked about it differently. We didn't say 'environmentalism' or 'climate change', but we did talk about it. It was just in a different way.

Um, I also feel like in my early days, you know I was raised by parents who, you know, took very little but made it stretch a long way. I like to say that our folks were the original conservationists, you know. We didn't throw anything away, we always found a way to repurpose it, to recycle— though recycle wasn't a word that we were using back then— but that's exactly what we were doing. Nothing was cast aside. We were always trying

to make something, repurpose it, and make something out of nothing. Yeah, I think that's where I'll stop with that *<laughs>* let me know if I'm going too long.

TRW: No, no— that's perfect. And that's such a good point what you said at the end, cause I think the face, you know, of the environmental movement has been this, like, wealthy, white, urban, like 'we just invented reusable bags' and it's like...no. I grew up with a bag of bags under the sink!

KN: Yes, we did too...

TRW: And like, what are you...

<laughter>

TRW: ...you know? So I think that's a good thing to talk about and center. So, I just want to back up a tiny bit to sort of five years ago working on the Clean Power Plan, you know, you were obviously doing this work professionally and in the movement, during the Obama years and possibly before but um, can you just talk about about the shift, specifically in doing that kind of work, how have things changed since?

KN: *<sighs>* Wow...so, yeah, I think it was jarring. I know for me personally. I sat with my other colleagues, we were...we were all remote at the time, but we were, you know, doing a— I think doing a Slack kind of chat— and we were watching the results come in on the election and, you know, praying that Hillary would pull through. And then the reality set in that Trump had indeed won the presidency um... and what that meant for not only our work, but for our lives and our livelihood and our future, more broadly. I think this was the first time I ever, at the end of an election and the results came in, that I cried. I cried because of— I thought about my two young sons at the time. They're, well I call them young, but they're thirty and twenty-four, but you know, young black men, you know. And what having a president like this meant and how it emboldened— emboldened others, um, who shared his same sense of, you know, white supremacy or racism for lack of a better word.

So there was a shift there personally. And then of course, we went from being very close, working very closely with the Obama administration and the EPA, you know, it was commonplace to reach out to Chief Administrator Gina McCarthy and, you know, work with my liaison colleague over there to get a meeting with our principal at the time, Van Jones. You know, those were... you know, that was commonplace. We'd be on the Hill and talking to Democrats, but also you know, Republicans about ways that we could work together and work across the aisle. Those, I call them the good old days. Not realizing that what we were in for was you know, basically an administration that came in and was uprooting and rolling back all of the progress that we'd made on climate change over the last decade or so and really putting the polluters and big oil in front of vulnerable communities.

TRW: Mmhmm

KN: And we went from seeing that, that shift to having an administration that we could work, you know, together on and we all had a shared goal, a shared vision, on saving the planet <laughs> you know? And then that shift to see, ok— now we have an administration that is really... doesn't care about climate change, in fact denies it, is putting polluters and big oil ahead of vulnerable communities, those that have been most impacted by climate change and pollution. Um, so we have a clear, definite target here or who to go after and it starts at the head and it works its way down in that administration. So we shifted from, you know, educating about, you know, the Clean Power Plan and what it is going to do to really going into, you know, defense mode and trying to make sure that we got Pruitt, Scott Pruitt, you know the administrator of the EPA... but I mean, he was horrible. And a— very much against progress that had been made. He was only self serving and cared nothing about the very institution that he was put over to... to really head up. Or our climate, our weather, our people. So you know, I think we went into this just really, really being in an offensive mode, once that happened. I think that was definitely the shift.

TRW: Yeah, and I think at the same time, you know, in resistance to Trump, you know, it kind of woke a lot of people up who weren't already in the fight...

KN: Absolutely

TRW: ...as it were. Can you talk a little—is there a relationship with Clean Power Plan and the work that was happening with, why can't I remember the name, Green... the 'green' you were with before Green The Church...

KN: Yeah, Green For All?

TRW: Green For All. Yeah, and then what has emerged with the Green New Deal? Is there a relationship there or is it a...?

KN: And I'm not sure that I can speak well to that? I left Green For All back in 2017, so I stayed there, you know, a couple of years when we were still in the fight and Green For All is still doing that work today. I know that the Sunrise Movement is really doing a good job trying to educate and really show how the Green New Deal is something that's for our communities, you know and instead of just saying what we're against, but it's talking about what we're for and solutions-based and how we can put policies in place like, you know, 100 percent clean energy, economy that, you know, our champions like Congressman McEachin has put forward. Those are the types of things that we uh, like to see in the Green New Deal and we believe that's in the Green New Deal that will make a difference in the long term. But I'm—I'm sorry— I won't be able to speak too much to what those relationships look like now.

TRW: Totally fine. So, I guess just kind of shifting into Green The Church, you know, I was reading through and I'm from, like, the... I'm on the border of North Idaho right now.

KN: Oh, wow

TRW: This is not like, my... this is...

<laughter>

TRW: I'm in a different world. So you know, grew up in a very different place than this that does not have like, the same deep culture of like, the Black churches you were saying in your childhood. But reading through the website it's just like, a really lovely vision and I would just love to hear you talk more about how you see that kind of like, what I see as like, the deep roots of resilience and community in that faith space feeding into the environmental movement. And just what is kind of, the story of Green The Church? Or what is a story of it that you'd want to share?

KN: Sure, yeah. I'll try to see if I can kind of sum that up for you. So I still work on solutions to poverty and pollution for low-income families and communities of color, but now my work is primarily with the African American church. To make sure that voices of color are at the table when we're having conversations about the environment, about climate change, about pollution, about climate policy. We have to include people who are most impacted. For far too long, our communities have been really left out of these conversations, go figure. It's changing, but there's much work that's still left to do. So from Green The Church's perspective, we don't see, you know, many people of color and the Black church in particular doesn't seem to be as prevalent in these spaces. So we see ourselves as really kind of helping to bridge the gap, the equity gap, in the environmental movement. So I can go on and share a little bit more around what we do, if that's helpful...

TRW: Yeah, that'd be great.

KN: Ok, so I'll kind of tell you a little bit around how we came to be. So our founder and CEO, Reverend Dr. Ambrose Carroll, along with Carroll Ministries International, created Green The Church back in 2010, so that's ten years ago. And it really was created out of a need to have a program with a national focus and scope to facilitate the building of a repository for Black churches— that we would be a place that they could come to and share their stories because there's a lot of Black churches that are doing amazing work, but who's helping to tell their stories? So that's one of the things that we've been commissioned to do is to, to make sure that we are capturing as many stories as possible in their own words, they're the ones that are telling them, we're not telling their stories for them. Um, so I'm glad you got a chance to look at our website, you'll see on there that we have folks from all over nation that have shared what they're doing in their local church to help become more sustainable and be more environmentally conscious. So yeah, that's a little bit around how we came to be.

TRW: Yeah and do you think, I mean, going back to what you were saying about your dad, you know, the ways that environmentalism doesn't always look the way that—that it exists in the popular imagination, you know?

KN: Mmhmm

TRW: Of like, people with electric cars? Or whatever. Like how— how does that play out just where you are, you know? What do you think that a popular environmentalism looks like among your community? Communities?

KN: Hmm...yeah, I think it takes on different, different types of appearances optically. You know, again I said I'm here in the South and the last time I was here this time of year, Hurricane Irma was coming through and my mother lives in a vulnerable community. She also has breathing issues, for her just to go outside and check her mail is a detriment for her. And when that hurricane— the impacts— came through the neighborhood, there was a big tree that's on the main road here and it was—it blew down as a result of the wind and the rain. And, you know, after the storm had passed, we waited. You know, we waited. The community waited for— you know a day went by, two days went by. Help did not come. <laughs>

What ended up happening was a group of neighbors got together, they got their chainsaws out, they, you know, got their pickup trucks, and cut down that tree enough to make it passable so we could get in and out of the community. And that showed me something that, you know, our communities are hit first and worst by climate change and pollution, but we're also last and least when we're talking about getting help. And so for us, when we talk about environmentalism, we're looking at resilience. You know, what could, what do churches and African American and Black and brown communities need to do to be prepared to weather these types of events? Because we know that they're not letting up any time soon. I think we're in the Greek alphabet now for storm names...

TRW: Yeah.

KN: So you know... and we're still ... have a long way to go within this hurricane season. So the question is how will we prepare? How do we make sure that our communities have the help that they need especially if, you know, help isn't coming? Or our communities who have been— have not been invested in properly and so that makes, that lack of investment has made our communities even more vulnerable to climate change and pollution. So the resiliency piece is one thing that we definitely are making sure that we're pushing, but also again there's an education piece out there.

A lot of churches, you know, are owned by— Black churches are owned by their congregants, those faithful people that come every Sunday. They've worked and sold chicken dinners and, you know, had car washes and you-name-it to help pay for that church building, so that is an asset that they have collectively. Well, what can we do to take care of that asset? Well, we can make sure that— my goodness— we're not paying \$14,000 a month on an electric bill to heat it up or to turn the lights on. We want those churches to have energy audits. We want, once they get the results of that audit, how can we, you know, change out those lightbulbs and get LED lightbulbs? Um... do

you need solar panel, panels on your roof? Maybe that's a way to save energy costs. Maybe churches are trying to feed the community around them and maybe a community garden is the way to go for them. So again, it's learning how to take what we have, take care of it, but also use it to, to help and provide for others in a safe way.

TRW: Yeah that's just, that's such a great model cause churches are such an infrastructure that already exists and it's already decentralized and if, you know, the federal government is doing what it's doing now with voter suppression and you know, I mean you know better than anyone being in Georgia with the midterms and then now...

KN: <laughs> Yeah...

TRW: ...what they're up to...

KN: Right

TRW: It seems that, you know, that's not a reliable model for a lot of people who haven't been represented. There's no plan to better represent people, so that seems like such a smart model to use what's already there and...

KN: And I have to say, Taylor, you know, with covid 19, it really has underscored the need to have churches in Black and brown communities, you know to learn how to be more sustainable. To learn how to live healthier lives. When we think of the number... and Black and brown folks are disproportionately impacted by climate change and pollution, but also by covid 19. So it's— it's all just, you know, it's interconnected.

TRW: Well, so in the last few minutes we have, I want to ask you a couple things that I asked everybody in the first set of interviews and that I like to ask— do you have any predictions for the near future and specifically any like, hopeful outlook? Like what's giving you hope right now and what do you hope we'll be seeing in the near future?

KN: Um wow. I'd love to say I had predictions. <laughs> In a perfect world, I think we would be celebrating, you know, a Biden-Harris win and able to work with an administration who not only acknowledges climate change, but is willing to step up to the plate and do something about it and have the U.S. resume a role of leadership around this on a global scale. I'd love to see that happen. But what also gives me hope because we know that a lot of things are happening at the national level, but there are wonderful things that are happening at the state and local levels as well and I don't want to overlook that. There are people in their own communities that are doing amazing work, they're bringing about change, and young people are excited to vote in this upcoming election for— some for the first time— and so I think that <phone rings> we can... oops sorry about that.

TRW: No, it's all good.

KN: Uh... what gives me hope is our youth. And to see them out there, you know, protesting around social justice issues and racial justice issues, I'm like 'yea!'

TRW: Mmhmm

KN: You know, they're...they're fearless! You know? And I love that. A good protest, why not? Yes! And so I want to see more youth, you know, take an active role in protecting our planet, which they already are doing an amazing job, but we want to give them a good handoff. And so yeah, I'm encouraged about that. Like I said, my oldest is in his thirties, my youngest is twenty-something, I don't have any grandkids yet, but what I'm working towards is the day when I do. I want to be able to look them in the eye and say, you know, 'your grandma did everything she could to leave an inhabitable, healthy and clean planet for you'.

TRW: Yeah, that's lovely. And yeah, I totally agree with you about the—the youth, you know, they're tying it all together, you know?

KN: Yeah

TRW: Especially, like, environment and racial justice, like respect, you know. They just get it, they're great.

KN: Absolutely, they do.

<laughter>

TRW: Yeah, is there anything else you want to add at the end? Anything you want to plug? Where people can find out more about any of the work you've talked about?

KN: Yeah, I think I didn't get a chance to talk about, you know, some of our work around summits. I said that was kind of like my onboarding to Green The Church back in 2015, but I wanted to say a little bit more around what we do around our summits. So we have an annual summit every year and this year unfortunately it got tabled due to covid 19, but we've been in places like, you know, California, Chicago, Baltimore, MD, Charlotte, NC, and we've done that over the past several years and the purpose is really to address environmental issues that are specific to African American congregations and communities that are oftentimes disengaged from these conversations of climate change, ecology, and sustainability.

So one of the things that was a result of last year's summit in St Louis, was the Growing Green Solutions seed funding. With our partners The Nature Conservancy, we were able to create around \$50,000 that went to ten churches, divided up to ten churches, for sustainability projects on their church grounds. So you can go to greenthechurch.org and click on our blog to learn more and read more about those stories there in St. Louis. I also want to say that policy is huge. You know, we can do a lot of this work on the ground, but policies have to continue to change and improve, not like what this current

administration is doing— like tearing apart and rolling back climate policies—but we need bold action on climate and that’s what things like the select committee— the [House Select Committee on Climate Crisis] report is doing, it really looked at solutions to climate change and how we make sure that everyone, all boats are lifted, you know?

TRW: Mmhmm

KN: So check out that policy and there are others out there, like you mentioned the Green New Deal, but Green The Church we’re often surrogates and spokespeople for policy that makes sense and that’s equitable and all about saving the planet.

TRW: Awesome, well, thank you so much for all that you’re doing. Yeah, I hope that y’all can bear through hurricane season.

KN: Yeah *<laughs>* I’m only down here for a little bit and then I do have some siblings down here who also take care of my mom, but yeah, you know, we’re all impacted, you know, whether we’re on the coast and dealing with sea level rise, and you know, the impacts of hurricanes, but you know California with the wildfires, you know, flooding in the middle of the country. No one is exempt, you know. It’s just that some people are better able to weather it...

TRW: Mmhmm

KN: ...unfortunately, than others.

TRW: Yesterday was our first clear smoke day.

KN: Was it?

TRW: It was just over the [Air Quality Index] chart, like they have to change the chart cause the top of it used to be 500 but we were over 500 for like four days in a row.

KN: Wow, oh my goodness...

TRW: Yeah, so we’re on the other side of the coin

KN: And I pray it stays that way. Most of our team is out in California and you know, to see pictures of their outside air and sky look like your, your filter here on your microphone [which is bright orange] I’m like, ‘whoa! Did you do something here to this picture?’ And they’re like, ‘no this is how it looks outside right now’

TRW: Yeah

KN: It’s crazy

TRW: Well, yeah, thank you so much. I really appreciate you taking the time.

KN: Oh, you are very welcome and it's my pleasure. I'm honored that you asked me to talk with you.

TRW: Yeah, thank you, have a good rest of your day

KN: Thank you, you too. Bye bye.

TRW: Bye

<music fades in under narration>

TRW: Thanks again to Kim and Earl for taking the time to talk with me, and thanks to all of you for listening and supporting the show. Here's to continuing the fights that many of us have been engaged in long before Trump, long after he has gone and on new terrain.

You can find links to all of the projects and resources that both guests referenced on today's show in the notes below, along with a full transcript of the episode. If you like the show and want more, you can subscribe at www.praxisradio.com/subscribe that's p-r-a-x-i-s-r-a-d-i-o and you can also check out the archive of over 250 episodes from the radio version of this show on the site while you're there.

Next week, I'm taking a week off for some very carefully managed and contained family time. Please, wear a mask, be responsible, and take care of each other. See you on the 30th.

<music fades out>
<radio static bursts>

TRW: "Alright, I'm gonna pause and save I get so paranoid."

<radio static bursts>

END

