

GIVINGDONERIGHT-S4-EP1

What if We Get it Right? Ayana Elizabeth Johnson on Collective Climate Action

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson Join something. I think there's some people who are focused on individual action and I just think we all need to join something and contribute our talents. The most important thing an individual can do is be less of an individual.

Grace [00:00:16] Welcome to Giving Done Right, a show with everything you need to know to make an impact with your charitable giving. I'm Grace Nicolette.

Phil [00:00:23] And I'm Phil Buchanan. I am excited to welcome everybody back for a new season, our fourth season of The Giving Done Right podcast.

Grace [00:00:40] Woo hoo! Through after a break. It's really lovely to be back at it, Phil, and to kick off this new season, we have a very special guest with us today.

Phil [00:00:48] Yeah, I am so excited to welcome author, scientist, policy expert, climate activist, Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson, whose latest excellent book, *What If We Get It Right?*, is just out.

Grace [00:01:13] Welcome, Ayana to the show.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson [00:01:15] Hello. Thank you both for having me.

Grace [00:01:17] So after reading your book, the first thing that stood out to me to start is really the title: *What If We Get It Right?* With all the great experts that you interview in the book, you really lay out a positive vision for what our shared climate future could be. And that's like in many different realms, right? Built environment, farming, financing, all these different areas. Why did you decide to take this positive approach and do you really feel hopeful about what's possible?

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson [00:01:49] So the answer is a bit semantic, which is maybe not the right note to start on. I'm not hopeful. I'm not positive or optimistic. I'm a realist. I'm a scientist. I know that the future could be not great if we keep heading in some of these directions. But I also know that we... the future is not yet written, and there is so much possibility, and we have so many opportunities to shape what the future will be. And so that's what I try to lean into with this book. I mean, the title, *What If We Get It Right?* It does have a question mark at the end. So I don't know if we're going to get interesting, but we could. And isn't that worth a shot?

Phil [00:02:31] I was thinking about the research that we've done at CEP on foundation giving toward climate and how there's a mismatch between the sense of how big a problem this is and the funding that's going out. Yeah, I thought of that in particular throughout as I read the book. But at the beginning, you say something that I just want to quote in light of this, "half-assed action" you write "in the face of potential, doom is an indisputably absurd choice."

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson [00:03:06] I stand by that.

Phil [00:03:09] "Especially given that we already have most of the climate solutions. We need, heaps of them." And then at that, toward the end, after all of these amazing

interviews, you say something that I loved equally as much, which is "I'll offer what I believe to be the sexiest word in the English language: implementation."

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson Implementation, baby.

Phil Yeah. So Implementation baby and I just thought of these, you know, big foundations and there are some that have made big, bold commitments to climate, but there are others that believe that it is the existential crisis of our time, but they're just kind of paralyzed by a sense of not knowing what to do.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson [00:03:53] Yeah. So there's two parts of that question. I want to share some thoughts on that last part, that there's so much sort of existential dread that it can freeze us, and not knowing what to do. And part of the reason, Grace to your question, that I framed the book this way to be about possibility and to help people see what the future could look like if we do get it right, is because we have so much apocalyptic imagery when it comes to climate, and not very much at all through Hollywood, pop culture media about what does the world look like if we implement all these climate solutions we have, what are we working toward? What feels good about the world we want to create, that makes us want to roll up our sleeves and put in the effort to do this transformation that's required to move from an extractive, fossil fuel based economy to something that's more regenerative? And so I want to offer people some glimpses into these possible futures we could have. In the subtitle is *Visions of Climate Futures*, Right. Because I feel like we haven't been offered the opportunity to really see what these better futures could be. And so a book is a weird way to try to help people see things, but I'm really trying to spark the imagination by talking to all these people who have helped me understand some of the answers to that question, and offer that to folks. There's also some commissioned artworks in this piece they're in the book there are... there's poetry. There's a whole playlist that goes with the book. The Anti Apocalypse Mixtape is my offering at the end, and so I'm trying to give people many different ways to sort of have something to grab on to about what the future could look like. And Phil to your question, I think the role of philanthropy here has been quite disappointing as far as people knowing that it's a problem, and also just still not stepping up to the plate in a major way. If people do believe in the existential risk, then there is no reason to be spending only 5% of your endowment a year like this it like, this is the time to shape the future and determine how much of a future that we get as a species on this planet. So go big or lose home, right? That's kind of the stakes. And yet, in that context, when I was doing research for this book, globally, only 1.6% of philanthropy funding goes to climate. And in the U.S., it's actually 0.5% of philanthropic funding is going to climate. So that's not enough. And then on top of that, you have where those foundations are investing their money. And the thing that was very surprising to me was that approximately 70% of U.S. foundation and nonprofit leaders state they have no plans to divest from fossil fuels. So not only are we underfunding the solutions, we're investing in exacerbating the problems within the philanthropic sector. And that's just untenable, irresponsible, not putting our money where our mouth is, not acting with the urgency that's required, etc. So there's a lot of room for improvement, I would say.

Grace [00:07:15] Could I process with you? Like, I think this is one area, the whole piece about divestment from fossil fuels. And hopefully this is something, this is like a safe space for me to ask a question that I think a lot of people, do bring to us is like this fear that when someone, let's say a large foundation or an individual donor takes all the fossil fuel investments out of their portfolio, as you say we should in the book. Can you talk me through like so, when they do that, like other money does rush in, right? And it can feel... and I've heard this described that it's it's more of like a signal than it is actually like

negatively impacting the fossil fuel companies. And so that's just like a wonder that I've had.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson [00:08:02] Yeah, there's these two sides to this coin. I actually had this conversation with my friend Boris Khentov who is an executive at the fintech company Betterment. And if you are a friend of mine, I have probably asked you what more you might be able to do on climate solutions. And yes, I took him to a protest organized by Greenpeace and Jane Fonda, one of these Fire Drill Fridays that she had been holding in DC for many months. And the theme that week was divestment. And Bill McKibben was there and Naomi Klein was there, and a bunch of celebrities, Joaquin Phoenix and whoever played the president on the West Wing, Sheen was there. All these folks who were saying, divest, divest, divest. And as someone on the financial services side, he was like, exactly what you said: Well, someone else will just come in, take that opportunity. It's not like those shares disappear. And what he said is like, well where are we investing. And so I think it's really important to think about both sides of the coin. You want to move your money to a good thing. It's not just that we're not investing in the bad thing and then someone else is investing it in instead. We are shifting to invest in clean energy, in regenerative agriculture, in green buildings, in sustainable, electrified transportation, right in the nonprofits that are protecting and restoring ecosystems and supporting green jobs and training. Right? There are a million things to invest in, whether it is for profit or grantmaking. And I just want people to think about that side of it because, yeah, I mean, certainly me moving my money is not going to tank any fossil fuel companies, but I did it anyway because I want to be supporting the solutions. And I think that's a great opportunity for every endowment.

Grace [00:09:56] Are there particular kinds of funds, or is it as easy to find those ways to invest? Because I imagine that people want to do what's right, right? But then it feels like there are more.... there's more friction to finding those. Like are there funds that are more widely available?

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson [00:10:12] I think the secret is it's often hard to figure out at first and then you're just done. When I wanted to move my piddling retirement savings, I did a little research. And actually, the fun end of this story about my friend Boris is that nine months later, Betterment launched a climate fund that he had done nine months of work figuring out like, what would the invest side of it be, supporting companies who are making this transition. And so that's where I ended up moving my money as a vote of confidence in him and the methodology that I spoke with him about over months that he was deploying there. But there are so many more options now for both individuals and institutions. And so it's a matter of going to your banker and saying, this matters to me. And even that signal means that they need to get it together to have those options available. If we're not demanding these investment options, they won't be available, especially with this backlash to ESG that we're experiencing right now. Which is really unfortunate because there's a lot of money to be made in climate solutions also. So it's kind of silly that we're now worried that it's going to tank the economy by investing in these profitable companies. It comes down to just asking questions, whether it's your retirement fund or your 401K for your work. There are so many options now that most of these large companies have some sort of fossil free or climate friendly option. And so it was a pain in the butt for me to do, you know, half a day's worth of paperwork to move the money and make sure I was making the right decision for myself. But then I'm done. Right?

Grace [00:11:54] Yeah. That's super helpful.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson [00:11:55] Especially for institutions that have the capacity to have, you know, those money managers and experts vetting all the different options. It's important work to do. And it's not work they have to do every day forever. It's a decision that you have to make and revisit periodically. Like all of these institutions are thinking about their finances and doing these reviews. And this just needs to become a part of that. And maybe the first big shift is a heavy lift. And then after that, your quarterly or annual reviews can go on as usual. So I would encourage people to not shy away from that, because what we've seen, according to reports by Bank forward and others, is that your money in the bank could be doing more harm than all the good you do in your personal life and in your grantmaking.

Grace [00:12:45] I was struck by that part in the book.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson [00:12:47] It's shocking, right? Like if you have \$125,000 saved up for your retirement, and that money is invested in a fund that includes fossil fuels, you're doing more harm with that money than all of the veganism and biking you could possibly be doing could ever make up for. And I think it's really important that people have this sense of scale and perspective when it comes to the decisions that we make. And our money decisions are actually a huge part of our impact on the planet. And obviously that goes much more significantly for 100 million dollar, billion dollar endowment. That becomes a really significant part of their impact on the planet. Even if these philanthropies make zero dollars in grantmaking to climate organizations, if they move their money away from fossil fuels, that would have a huge impact.

Phil [00:13:43] If massive institutional foundations whose wealth literally comes from fossil fuels, like Rockefeller Foundation and Rockefeller Brothers Fund, can do it, as they are, then hopefully we can take some inspiration from that and also recognize that in their case, the symbolism really matters too in terms of shaping the conversation. But I'd love to go to: Okay, that's big institutions. What about regular individuals who just want to make a difference? Their individual philanthropy might be modest. You have a Venn diagram in the book that I wonder if you could just talk about in terms of how someone can think about what they can do, like what your advice for them is about that?

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson [00:14:30] I'd love to. I also want to just say, on your previous point, I think it's so important for institutions to lead and individuals to lead by example. Rockefeller's transition of I'm not sure how their divestment has proceeded, but I know their grantmaking has really shifted towards a very strong climate focus. I think on the endowment money management side. It's so important for these different institutions to share their process because there are parts of it that take research. If some organization has found a great banker or money manager to work with, like we should be sharing these tips and tricks with each other. These lessons learned. So I hope that... I think one of the hardest things about climate work is everyone just wants to announce the thing when they're done. And we're missing this opportunity by not talking about the process of transition and transforming our organizations. That helps bring more people along with us. So I would just encourage foundations, individuals, nonprofits to really talk about that transition and share what their learnings that other people aren't all reinventing the wheel. So I would just put in a plug for being as transparent or having those one on one conversations between, you know, chief financial officers behind the scenes is really valuable, too. It doesn't have to be, you know, all over the internet, but we should be having these conversations about how we're making these shifts. So to answer your question about the Venn diagram, I find this to be a really helpful, super simple framework for thinking about how we each want to show up and what our specific, individualized,

unique roles can be because I think one of the shortcomings of the environmental movement to date has been to ask everyone to do essentially the same short list of things, right? Vote. Protest. Donate. Spread the word. Lower your carbon footprint...and absolutely do those things. Encourage them. Encourage other people to do them. Do them as institutions. I think if that's all we do, that's never going to be enough, and it's going to be a real waste of our specific talents, our superpowers. Right? If you and I, we're doing the same things for climate action that would be ridiculous because we have different skills, networks, resources, etc. And so this idea of a climate action Venn diagram is to think about three circles. So, first circle is what are you good at? What are those skills, resources and networks that you can bring to the table? What is your sphere of influence? And we all have one. And I think it's really important to be generous with ourselves about what we can offer. And then the second circle is what is the work that needs doing? And this is all of the hundreds of climate and justice solutions that we need, everything from transportation and buildings and infrastructure and agriculture and land use and electricity, but also the things that accelerate the implementation of those solutions, right? The politics, the culture, the policy, etc. no one can change all of that. So what are we choosing? I've chosen ocean climate policy for coastal cities. That's my jam, right? I also do climate communication work. Obviously, those are the two things that I focus on. And then what brings you joy is that third circle. And I feel like this gets left out of the conversation a lot that like, this is the work for the rest of our lifetime, so we better choose something that doesn't make us miserable, doesn't cause us to burn out or give up, to choose our colleagues in ways that are like we want to have be working with good collaborators. And joy is maybe like in some ways, too high a bar. It's not like we're skipping and giggling all the time as we're working. Like sometimes we're just writing emails, but this sense of satisfaction that we can get from doing meaningful work that is punctuated with moments of joy, I think, is a really beautiful opportunity to think about how we can sustain ourselves in this work for the long term. So what are you good at? What is the work that needs doing? Which solutions do you want to focus on and what brings you joy? And then like the heart of that Venn diagram is what you like specifically you or your organization should be doing for climate. And I've been so surprised at how people have really appreciated this very simple framework. There's actually at Climatevenn.info that URL people can go and there's a worksheet you can download to fill it in. There's a link to my Ted Talk where I describe it in more detail. But I'm hoping people actually like, bust out your colored pencils and, like, draw out what you think fits in those circles for you, and be creative about going beyond what you're, you know, a lot of people diagram their way to what they're already doing, but try to take a blank slate and really think about where you can be most useful. And if people are familiar with the Japanese concept of ikigai for finding your purpose, which is like five circles and a very similar approach, then this will be familiar to them.

Grace [00:19:51] That's great. We're going to link to all those in the show notes. It seems like climate change is just this like ultimate collective action problem.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson [00:19:59] Absolutely.

Grace [00:20:01] Yeah, your Venn diagram is so helpful even for other issue areas. But really, this issue has no parallel in that. Like one single person, as you said earlier, can't really affect the change that we need to see. Nor is there like one silver bullet solution. And so what would you say to folks who are kind of overwhelmed by the scale and the scope of the problem?

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson [00:20:22] Join something. I think there's so many people who are like focused on individual action or feel like they should start their own nonprofit or quit their job. And I just think we all need to join something and contribute our talents, our skills to that thing. Whether it's within our community, our sports group, our church, our school, the business that we work for, right? There are all these ways, whether it's volunteering, whether it's political organizing, getting people to vote for candidates who get it on climate... how can you be a part of a larger effort? And I think this trial and error approach is underrated, in my opinion, for many things. And I would say just try a bunch of different things, try volunteering with joining different organizations until you see, you know what thing actually sticks for you. But Bill McKibben, I think, said it best, this incredible journalist and climate activist. He said the most important thing an individual can do is be less of an individual. I hope people would think about that.

Grace [00:21:30] Right, because to your earlier point, I feel like, you know, I try to compost and recycle and maybe, you know, if someone has the means, they could buy an EV. But I think what you're saying is that what's missing is the community aspect of that. And I often feel like that is not part of the conversation. So that's very helpful.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson [00:21:49] Yeah, and that's actually why the book takes the shape that it does. As a collection of interviews. Right? The heart of the book is 20 interviews with people who have helped me understand answers to this, "What if we get it right?" title question. And it took me two years to think about going from like, okay, I've sold this book proposal, I've got to write it. But I could not crack the nut of like, how do I do this that it doesn't just feel like a textbook with maybe like better graphic design, you know, how do I present this in a way that is digestible, delightful even, and helps to unlock some of this anxiety and uncertainty that people are holding. And the answer was through conversation. So much of my understanding of the world, all of our understanding of the world, is through dialog, how we learn and process things. I thought about, you know, quoting people, distilling their research, their work, describing it, putting it into my own words, paraphrasing, quoting them. And I always find myself so frustrated when I read a book that's just quoting a bunch of other people and like, should I just go read their stuff, because what do you have to add? Right? And I thought, let me just transcribe and edit these interviews along with the interviewees and present it in that format so you can get a sense of the dialog of the relationships, of going deeper together with follow up questions. And you can actually hear the voices of all these very different folks with different areas of expertise in the audiobook, in their own voice. I thought that would just be a more fun way to do it. Of course, I you know, I do a lot of writing in the book as well, but I can think of no better way to talk about farming than to have a conversation with a farmer. Right? No better way to talk about, you know, family office investing than to talk with someone who's guiding people on how to do that on climate solutions. Right? No better way to talk about energy policy than the guy who's managing 400 billion taxpayer dollars to invest in renewable energy companies. And so it was also just made the process a lot more fun for my own Venn diagram. Right? I was like, oh, this is going to be a miserable, like five year research project. Or I could chat with these amazing people who are doing incredible work and have all these insights that they can share with us.

Grace [00:24:26] Well, one thing I love too, about the book is I definitely felt sort of the fellowship of your spirit in the conversations because there's like these little icons next to phrases or ideas that you found really powerful. And I, I've never really read a book like that before. And so that was really cool, because not only was I hearing from the folks that you wanted to really platform, but it was almost like I could read sort of like little facial expressions from you around those ideas. So that was really cool that you did that.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson [00:24:56] Yeah, there are these marginal markings. There are hearts and asterisks and exclamation points. There's hearts that are like sweet, heartfelt bits of text. There's asterisks that are like important insights. There's exclamation points for like caution, bad stuff. And then there's underline terms that are key things that I want people to remember or take away or like useful vocabulary. And those appear in the margins throughout the book. And then the underlined words actually are in the inside of the front cover is a, a list of all those underlined words chronologically as they appear in the book. So you can kind of get a sense from like love and biophilia through to, you know, interdependence and etc. ways that people can start to think about threads to pull and things to hold on to. It also lets me sort of put my imprint on the interviews without interrupting the person, you know? I can just put a little star in the margin, like, ooh, that was really good. What they said, like, make sure you catch this part. So it's kind of my editorial prerogative of making sure people don't miss the most important bits.

Phil [00:26:12] I loved the feeling of reading it, which felt like the opposite of a slog. I don't know.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson Oh, good!

Phil Yeah, the opposite of a slog. Both because you're writing is so beautiful and moving, but also because of the way the interviews are edited and annotated. And there was just a ton that jumped out and

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson Some spicy footnotes.

Phil Yeah, there was a lot of spicy stuff. One quote that I loved from Paola Antonelli, who I think is, senior curator at MoMA. She says, "the call to action is to really be better humans. I don't know how else to put it. Be better humans by understanding that we live for others. Otherwise, we don't have much of a reason to live. And when I say others, I mean also the rest of the environment. All creatures and things. Love is the answer." And I thought, that's just a great quote.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson [00:27:06] And my response was too bad it sounds corny because it's true.

Phil [00:27:09] Right? It's totally corny, and it's also really wonderful. And it is. It is something that can guide people's individual choices about how they spend their time and how they give. And the other thing that I loved is I think the book broadened my understanding for and appreciation of how many elements to this there are. And from the perspective of our audience, which is largely individual donors, people really committed to their philanthropy. I suppose you could see that as overwhelming. But going back to the Venn diagram, I was thinking of it more as there are so many opportunities to participate, actually... philanthropically and as a volunteer.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson [00:27:53] And I would add that there are also ways to contribute to climate solutions that are directly intertwined with or adjacent to the things people are already funding. Right? If you are working on poverty alleviation, racial justice, food security, affordable housing, species protections, right? All of these... education, all of these things connect to climate, whether it's the risks that climate puts on these already existing challenges, who's bearing the brunt of the impacts of climate change, or how we need to adapt the way we do other things because the climate is changing. So I would

encourage people to think about it as an expansion or deepening of their philanthropy, as opposed to having to go do a whole other thing. The first time this really crystallized for me was when I was thinking about the sustainability development goals and how every single one of them, it actually depends on climate or can help with climate solutions. And so I would just encourage people to think about those intersections as a way of deepening their commitment to move forward on implementation.

Phil [00:29:10] I mean, in that way, and maybe this is an odd comparison, but in that way, it's sort of like racial equity in the sense that there are these topics that no matter what you're funding in, whether it's education, criminal justice, poverty, arts and culture, there aren't that many, but there are few issues that span everything. And racial justice, certainly in the United States anyway, would be one I think, and in climate, globally, no matter where you're working, would be another. And so to see yourself as a climate funder, whether you saw yourself before as a climate funder is really important. Yeah.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson [00:29:53] Yeah. It can be a lens on your grantmaking as opposed to like the mission statement of the organizations that you're funding, for example.

Phil [00:30:01] Thank you. Yeah. Yeah.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson [00:30:02] So one example is that if you care about education, if you're funding education, if you want to support building a new school, for example, are you building that in a way that makes sense given how much climate is changing? Are you building it in a way that students can still go to school during a heat wave? What are you doing to think about water and drought that's coming or whatever the projections are flooding or fires. We have really good data on what the projected changes are going to be, and so it's really important to keep that in mind that we're not investing in things that don't make sense in the context of a changing world.

Phil [00:30:48] Stick with us. We'll be right back.

BREAK

Grace [00:30:59] In your book, you have a section called Follow the Money, and it's for interviews with folks such as the longtime climate activist Bill McKibben that you mentioned earlier. And much of the conversation around climate seems to be around these like very upstream things like government policy or even the example building schools, right, would be like a systemic kind of government decision, government infrastructure or even corporations. And so it can seem that philanthropies' potential to make an impact is actually quite small compared to those big sectors. And I think there can be a worry sometimes that donors think, well, this money is just the cheap money that you are getting when actually like what needs to happen is that these huge levers need to change, which actually is quite separate than what I donate. And so I'm curious, like, what do you say to folks who have that concern?

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson [00:31:50] Two things. One, if you want to focus on big levers, please go ahead and do that. If you want to donate, you know, all of your money towards making sure we elect only politicians who are going to do good things on climate solutions, that is a very important lever to pull, and often it is non-profits who are getting out the vote for these candidates and doing communications for them that you can support. So, right. It's just a matter of like, I think maybe that framing can misconstrue the

roles that nonprofits play, right? Nonprofits can be working on pulling those big levers. Many of them are. I mean, that's why Urban Ocean Lab, my think tank, exists. Coastal cities are not ready for the climate impacts that are here and coming. So how can we help to shift the policy framework in city governments so that they can better adapt to the world that's coming? And city governments don't have the capacity in-house to do a lot of this research and policy analysis. Right? They're busy with the day to day work of managing a city. So if we can contribute policy frameworks, resources, memos, analysis, data to that decision making, even though our budget is only two million dollars a year, that can have an outsized impact. If cities are picking up these policy recommendations and using them to protect the 1 in 5 Americans who live in a coastal city, right? So there are all of these opportunities to have big impact through philanthropy. It just needs to be, of course, thoughtful and strategic. So part of me thinks this is a false dichotomy, right? Because it's not that nonprofits are working on tiny problems. And even though the dollars that are required to make the clean energy transition are enormous, there are a lot of levers that need to be pulled, pushed along that pathway to unlock some of these changes and make sure that the transformation is just. How are we making sure that low income communities, communities of color, have access to clean energy? How are we making sure that air quality in those places is improved, that we're actually focusing on shutting down some of these coal plants etc. that remain causing a huge health burden in a lot of these communities. I mean, for funders who care about public health, climate change, like an air pollution associated with burning fossil fuels, is like killing millions of people a year. So I think we just need to sort of map out which of these levers we want to be working on, and how that intersects with the areas of expertise that we have. Because I'm not going to recommend that we, you know, play small here. But sometimes small organizations are doing critical work to unlock some piece of this puzzle.

Phil [00:34:45] And it makes me think of the fact that oftentimes it is healthy conflict, even intense conflict between nonprofit actors and corporate actors that brings about needed change with respect to the environment and other issues, too, right? So in our little philanthropy world, there has sometimes been talk that kind of makes me roll my eyes a little bit about the blurring of the boundaries across sectors. And we're all going to work together... private philanthropic public partnerships that can sometimes be really important, but sometimes what is needed, actually, and this is the way we have. Correct me if I'm wrong because you know about more about this than I do Ayana, but made some of the most important progress that we have made in with respect to clean air, clean water. It has been nonprofits agitating about corporate behavior that has been un or under regulated that needs to change. And so I think sometimes gets lost in the conversation about what nonprofits do. Sometimes they are holding both the private sector actors and governments feet to the fire and saying, look at this thing that shouldn't be happening that's happening. And it seems to me with respect to climate, there's a lot more of that work to be done. If we look at the corporate behavior and the the greenwashing and the fact that, as you point out in one of the interviews or one of your interviewees does, you know that that actually the big companies really have done next to nothing to make progress on this, even as their ads might have you believe otherwise.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson [00:36:29] Absolutely. And I mean, I think right now there's a wave of protests against some of the big banks in the US because since the UN Paris Agreement was signed, saying, okay we have to limit warming ideally below 1.5°C or 2.6°F. Since then, 60 banks have provided 5.5 trillion dollars to financing fossil fuel companies. So since we all agreed we need to rein in climate change, 5.5 billion has gone to fossil fuel companies expanding their extraction. Right? And the top four banks in the US JP Morgan Chase, Citi, Wells Fargo and Bank of America have actually provided a

huge amount of that. Out of 5.5 trillion of those, four banks alone have provided 1.36 trillion dollars. And while, of course, like every company needs a bank to work with, we should absolutely not be investing in expanding fossil fuel infrastructure right now. We should be really devoted to this renewable transition. And so there's all these people protesting banks right now because we spent a lot of time protesting fossil fuel companies. But it's the banks that finance them that are making all of this possible. So moving away from using those banks is a campaign. Right now people are saying, move your money into a bank that's doing it right, not just your investments, but your day to day banking. And that protest can be very helpful in moving executives, shifting the status quo. And I think another example, Bill McKibben is leading some of that work with third act, which is mobilizing the older generation, like people 60 and older, to be a part of the solution, to try to leave a better world for their grandkids. And Abbie Dillen, who's the president of Earthjustice, she's suing the corporations when they break the Clean Air Act and Clean Water Act requirements, it's those nonprofits holding the feet to the fire, suing the federal government when that's what's needed. So there are lots of different roles that activism can play that are absolutely critical. On this question of the role of corporations in this and the greenwashing Phil that you mentioned, another thing I discovered researching this book was nearly 50% of corporations do not have a net zero pledge, so they have no plans to eliminate their greenhouse gas pollution, 50% have no net zero pledge, and 58% of global business executives agree that their companies have overstated their sustainability commitments. 58% of corporate executives are like, yeah, we're totally greenwashing, right? Right. I'm like, okay, and you were brave enough to even say that in a survey. And so I think there's really this opportunity for us to push corporations to do better as part of this. There's a chapter in the book that I coauthored with the vice president of policy and communications at Patagonia, Corley Kenna, that we talk about, like, what would it look like for a corporation to do it right? And then because they're not voluntarily doing all these things, what would it look like for government to hold corporations accountable? And what would it look like for citizens to hold government and corporations accountable to making some of these transitions that we need? So I think there's... there's a long list of very practical things that we could be doing.

Phil [00:40:11] Yes. And I, of course, was not meaning to suggest that there aren't positive corporate actors because there are. But let's do what you're doing with Patagonia, which is hold them up, you know, let others learn from them. And then let's also be much more vigilant in calling out those who are either not doing anything or for whom there is like a clear and obvious disconnect between the rhetoric and the reality. And I really do think, not to repeat myself, this is a vital role nonprofits can play. And you had a good example of how that's being done. And so, yeah, there's a funny way in which we've sort of don't want to talk about that part of what nonprofits to the conflictual part, the fighting part, it's really, really important. We need that tension in order to surface these issues.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson [00:40:59] That exposure part, exposing the malfeasance and environmental harm that corporations and policies are causing. Because I think so much of our ability to solve problems is knowing who's causing them. And nonprofits often do a great job of saying like, here's the problem, these guys over here, can we just cut this out?

Phil [00:41:24] And journalism two is obviously crucial, and this is why it's so problematic that there's such challenges for journalism right now, in particular local journalism.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson [00:41:34] Yes. Fund local journalism, please.

Phil [00:41:36] And a lot of interesting experimentation with nonprofit journalistic ventures. And that's another way that donors can get involved in the exposure part to your point and the call to action part of this.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson [00:41:49] So it's September and we have an enormous election coming up in America.

Phil [00:41:56] Oh, that.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson [00:41:57] And the climate stakes of that could not be higher up and down the ballot. So for people who are thinking about how to engage in this homestretch towards November, I really think that one of the biggest things we can all be doing if we care about climate right now, is making sure we are electing politicians who get it, who are committed to implementing climate solutions, to passing policy that makes all this possible. The way that I think about policy is like, that's the rules of the game. And right now, as the rules are written, they are rigged for fossil fuel companies. They are rigged against a sustainable future of life on this planet. And so it really, really matters that we have people in all these positions, from president to city council to your utility board, mayors and governors offices, Congress, across all elected officials, we really need to be focusing on getting people in those seats who are ambitious on climate solutions, because we just do not have time to, like, maybe care and maybe have it on the second page of our to do list. So if people are looking for something impactful to do right now on climate, supporting climate candidates is a hugely important thing to do in the near term. And there's two organizations I work with that I think are worth mentioning. One is Lead Locally that supports down ballot climate candidates who otherwise would not be known or be able to support their campaign. So check out leadlocally.org to see who's running for office on a climate platform, and then also Environmental Voter Project, which I am on the advisory board for. That's just mobilizing environmentalists to actually go vote, because we know there are something like 10 million registered voters who have environment as their number one issue, who do not regularly vote. And we know how close a lot of these elections are. So if we can get even a fraction of those 10 million inactive environmentalists to go to the polls, that could make a huge difference in the policy, the rules of the game that we're working under for the next four years to two decades. So please show up for this election. It's... it's critical.

Grace [00:44:24] Ayana, thank you so much for joining us today. I feel very challenged and inspired.

Phil [00:44:29] Yeah. Thank you Ayana. Great to talk to you.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson [00:44:31] Thank you for having me.

Phil: There are a ton of resources about effective giving on The Center for Effective Philanthropy's website, cep.org, as well as givingdoneright.org, where you'll find all of our episodes and show notes.

Grace: You can also send us a note at gdrpodcast@cep.org.

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