



## **Conversation with Andrew Schwartz**

**Ashley Hopkinson**

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**Ashley Hopkinson: Can you introduce yourself? Tell me a little bit about your background and what brought you to the work that you do today?**

**Andrew Schwartz:** My name's Andrew Schwartz. I'm an analyst and an advocate. I've been doing climate work for more than 10 years. I got into this work while I was going to seminary in New York City, at Union Theological Seminary. I went thinking that I was going to become a Lutheran pastor. Then I quickly learned, after being surrounded by a bunch of people who are now pastors, that that was not it for me. I did an internship around the UN in 2012. I went to this environmental conference called Rio+20 in Rio de Janeiro. That changed my life and my focus and trajectory.

I've done work hyper-locally with different communities around the United States. I've done national work on policy and big campaigns and communications around climate and climate change. I've done international work with everything, from food systems, to eco-systems, restoration, and plastics work, really pushing towards policy. I always do my best to stay grounded. All these different modalities, whether that's through the people I work with or the communities to figure out — how do we all move forward together as well as we can?

**Ashley Hopkinson: It sounds like you bring a lot of different perspectives. What would you say is distinctive about the approach you take related to environmental work?**

**Andrew Schwartz:** A lot of it comes from the training that I had at seminary. Union was all about that — that's where liberation theology was born. A gentleman named James Cone, may he rest in peace. A theologian named Gustavo Gutiérrez who always talked about the preferential option for the poor. What is this human element that we bring into this so often? In society, we're bound by the economy.

How's this good for the economy? How is this good for money? How's this good for business? This is the currency. Capitalism is the state religion.

There's this sensibility of if we're going to move these people, these policies, these ideas, we need to appeal to earnings, to the bottom dollar. However, if we lose nature, we lose many billions of dollars. Within that, you need to interrogate how is this thing the best thing.

If we want to talk about these environmental issues, I want to talk about the people that are being impacted, the species that are being impacted, the way that culture is being impacted, the way I'm being impacted, and future generations. That doesn't come out of a balance sheet. These are things that are deeply personal, that are deeply individual, and societal, and community-oriented.

For me, as I look at this work, you have to give homage to the economy and to the dollar, whatever it is, because that is part of the conversation. Can't live without it. At the same time, what are those dollars serving? What is the means that we're actually trying to get toward in the end? For me, it's always putting forward the impacts to people, to communities, to other species of larger ecosystems. Telling the story or the narrative of the totality of life rather than a very specific aspect of it that is meant to serve us rather than the other way around.

How then do we understand ourselves and the stories? How do we disentangle or re-entangle ourselves into the web of life that we're ostensibly trying to solve? Then asking the question of why. Why is it important that we do this? Who are we doing this for? What are we doing it for? How has it benefited us and the generations that are next to come? For me, whether I'm writing policy briefs or I'm doing a round table, there's always this human element that has to come first, this human rights element. Then really asking the question of who's being the most impacted, whose voice do we need to be paying the most attention to and why?

Then trying to create conditions for that voice to emerge, and those communities to emerge, and for that to be empowered so that we can at least try to open up as representative a table as possible as we're approaching these issues so that the power brokers, as they are, whether it's a nation-state, or the UN, or a company, or a large NGO, trying to create equal footing for these different perspectives, and voices, and needs, can actually try to solve for the problem that's right in front of us.

**Ashley Hopkinson: What lessons and insights have you gained from being in spaces that push to recognize ‘we’re all trying to do work that moves toward this direction.’ How do you bring together diverse voices and perspectives in this way?**

**Andrew Schwartz:** One thing that I found fascinating is so much of the conversation is defined by the premise that the conversation is started by. A lot of the time, I would frame this as a moral or an ethical conversation. I did a whole series and created this coalition called Faith and Food where the founding members were all faith-based organizations. Then we went out and addressed state-level delegates, UN delegates, and these large NGOs. People knew that they were coming into a space that was not defined by economy or policy. They were coming into a space that was asking a different question around this issue.

Start wherever you are. We would always try to populate it with different people, different approaches, different jobs and professions with the goal of getting people to actually hear each other, and creating a space for people to hear, to actually listen to learn rather than listen to respond. It created these really interesting human moments.

I would set the table— we don't need to agree, but we need to be here. We're all working on this. Everyone is trying. Even if you disagree, we can agree that we're all trying. Then we got to figure out how we're going to get there together, or at least some semblance of whatever together might mean.

For me, it was always amazing to watch, to just let the conversation happen, and bring different people in to “build off of this or respond to that,” and just see where the conversation would take us. Just try to keep it grounded [in the fact that] we're just all trying. We're all just people who are trying really hard. How do we get there? What does this mean to you?

There are some really beautiful moments when you’re watching actual change happen, or hearing about it down the road, like, “Hey, we've connected, and now we're working on this policy, and this is rolling out in Mombasa, and it's incredible.” You're like, “Oh wow, all right.” You never really know. So inviting people to be themselves, to strip away much of the pretense and just show up because you care, it created some really moving moments in time.

**Ashley Hopkinson: What's your measure that you're advancing the work and making progress?**

**Andrew Schwartz:** It's a good question. It's the right question to be asking because there are traditional metrics like, you had the 1000 people in the group or KPI's or what you got out of it. I feel like there's this distinctly unaccountable aspect of this work, which is, you just can't know what little impacts you are going to have.

Years ago, I held a climate training in Ohio, and a couple of years later, I got an email and it was like, “Hey, this thing changed my life. I changed my job. I'm now doing food justice work in Chicago. Here are all the things. Can we talk?” I was like, “Oh, great. That's very cool.” I don't know where that comes out in a balance sheet.

I have an impact sheet – a lot of it means something to somebody. It might not always come out, it might not be easily defined, it's hard to put into report, the funders might not see it, but you know it's there. It matters to the people who it matters to. I feel like some of this work, I'll never know.

I can report back on a grant form “Hey, we did this, and we reached this many people in this many countries, and we talked about these things, and I don't know if this is going to move the needle for the UN agency on policy. I don't know if we're going to get more dollars for this community in the way that we hope to.” Those things have a longer horizon than I'll know or have the capacity to understand.

I think there's also this piece of how in these times of upheaval, in these times of incredible pain for so many of us in the world and all this uncertainty, it's, “How am I seen? How am I helping people being seen? How am I helping people feel like they're heard?” At least if nothing else, to have an outlet, because I don't have one otherwise. Part of this specific kind of work is helping people find their way.

**Ashley Hopkinson: What do you think is missing from the conversation that we're having in the environmental and climate space? What do you wish we were talking more about?**

**Andrew Schwartz:** I wish we spent more time on ourselves. Environment is so hard because it's so apocalyptic. There's so much fear that's associated with it. So much sadness and so much loss. It drives people into a certain way. It drives this freneticism. It drives this zealotry of we've got to do this. I've watched a lot of beautiful people just get really burned out, become very bitter. It's hard not to.

For me, then it's like, “How do we cultivate beauty in the midst of sadness? How do we find— not just see the rows in the sidewalk, but cultivate it so it can become a bush? How do these things happen? How do we take care of each other? How do we take care of ourselves? What does that mean?” It gets back to your premise of what does “wellbeing” look like systematically within the systems that are imposed upon us and the ones that we're trying to create?

Audre Lorde always talks about “master's tools, master's house,” but so often, they're the only tools that we have. What does it mean to create new tools or to discard the ones that are given to us? Why is it that so many within the nonprofit system, so many of these nonprofits are abusive to their staff and employees even though their entire mission is to disassemble that kind of oppressive thinking? It's because that's what we have.

There's a lot of these reflective moments that get lost because we're so busy encountering the problem that's directly in front of us, because how can we not? At the same time, what does it mean to be human in these moments? What does it mean to create community and beauty in these moments? How do we actually grieve within a system that does not account for grievance or death?

These are questions that I try to ask. If I'm in a coalition, or in groups of people, or with my staff, I try to create space for this. Even in some of the bigger moments I've had with hosting these conversations, or these dialogues just acknowledging the sadness, just saying, "This is where we are," and letting it sink in, because sometimes, we don't even see it because we're so busy trying [to fix it].

Then you're asking the question, "Are we solving for the right problem?" Two years ago, we built this huge campaign. Does it make sense today? Can we pivot? Are we asking the right questions? That's a hard thing to do. I feel like the environmental movement, understandably, is just one giant panic attack right now, and we're spinning our wheels because we keep trying to use the same solutions, to solve the same problems. I just wish we gave ourselves more time.

**Ashley Hopkinson: There's this feeling across social issues and I've felt, even as a journalist covering social issues, that everything is urgent. How do you get to the place where you are really able to have that space to contemplate?**

**Andrew Schwartz:** I don't know what the answer is, but I think it's just something I see again and again. There's so much urgency. There's so much turmoil. People are in crisis right now. I think there's also this absurdity to be like, "Hey, we got to slow down y'all." Some people can't. They need answers and solutions right now. Then it is to look systematically and say, "All right. These are the pressure moments. These are the crisis moments. We need to be our own response now." We, being, this large global community of people.

There's also this space of saying, "We can't all be hustling this fast." There's this aspect of the movement or ourselves that we need to reserve for meditation, or prayer, or silence, or just a collective deep breath to center ourselves and say, "We know all these things are true. We're not trying to dismiss this crisis. We're not trying to dismiss or pretend like it's not that bad because it is, and because it is that bad we need to make sure that we're being thoughtful and not just throwing stuff in the wall and hoping things stick."

For me, that's part of the real importance of bringing in folks who are in the midst of crisis into a conversation, because it brings a different tenor and tone, and demand into the policy or into the disbursement of funding or into the conversation because you can't just create an avatar of who this

person on the frontline is. They're sitting right there and they're telling you. Hopefully, you have some sense of responsibility towards that person to say— here's what we can potentially do. It doesn't always work but it creates a different sense of responsibility and necessity around these issues.

**Ashley Hopkinson: What has been a challenge you've faced in doing this work and how have you worked to overcome the challenge or challenges?**

**Andrew Schwartz:** It's like these things that flex and flow. There's a lot of tokenism that comes into it. For instance, “Hey, look at this Indigenous speaker we have. Look at this frontline speaker we have.” We've checked this box. That's a really hard thing to try to unpack because you want these voices, but how do you have them at a table meaningfully? You're not just in the room, but you have an ability to impact the room. I think that's a big piece of it. Creating the equal playing field in an unequal world. That's a hard thing to do.

I'm part of this really cool coalition with this group called Break Free From Plastic, and they do this really amazing job of centering and prioritizing frontline voices and Global South voices, and making sure that there isn't this paternalistic relationship between developed or developing countries or Global North or Global South, but really trying to create from—this is where we are and this is what matters, and building it into the institution. It's part of its bones.

Watching that and being a part of that conversation, that movement, has been a really strong example of how things can, and I think should be done in terms of organizing and yet really trying to create this space to meaningfully engage as a community, not just as, “Look at what's going on over here.” But from, “This is impacting us all. It's impacting some of us more directly or dramatically than others, but we're all here.” How do we come together on this? What can we say collectively? Who's leading? Who's speaking? Who are we putting out front? Who's behind, and why? All these things. Just really trying to thoughtfully answer and ask these questions, that to me has been a really amazing model of grassroots organizing.

**Ashley Hopkinson: Earlier, you spoke about the Faith and Food dialogue and bringing your faith into it. What has having your faith be a part of your work meant for you? What has it taught you? Have you seen the connection between your faith, your spiritual practice, and the work that you're doing in the world?**

**Andrew Schwartz:** That's a good question. It's a different starting point. For me, I came out of Divinity School, so those were the questions that I was being trained to ask. If you're coming out of an MBA program, you're thinking about things through a specific lens.

For me, it's a starting point. It helps me stay in the work, honestly. It grounds me differently to have a practice, to be with people who share practice. Some of us in the faith world, we're agnostic and agnostic Christians. This is what we've grown up with. This is what we know. At the same time, we understand its meaning and its importance.

For me, it lets me draw on a different depth of wisdom, or knowledge, or ask the question on these issues a little differently, because I want to center wellbeing, I want to center spirituality, I want to center the human condition that we're all trying to put forward. I'm trying to delve into these questions that are like, what makes us us, and how do we keep us going in the midst of all of this? What does it mean to be alive? Why are we alive?

That then informs how I think about a food system issue or an issue around justice or any of these things, because it's trying to preserve the sense of a human right. Then for me, from a spiritual point of view or a faith point of view, it's informed by thousands of years, whether it's from a Christian tradition, or Buddhist, Muslim or Hindu tradition. These age-old maxims that are always inevitably true.

There's a lot of trouble in religion too. There's this sense of trying to preserve some different part of ourselves, and see ourselves beyond the here and now.

In these Faith and Food dialogues, it was funny how it changed people or who I saw them as on some panels versus our panel, because it was asking a different question. We were creating a different sense of community even amongst ourselves. The Faith and Food Coalition was intentionally multi-faith. It was intentionally gender balanced, so that we were as representative as possible. "We don't see the world the same way. We don't have the same experience, and yet this is where we are and this is where we're trying to go."

How do we create a conversation? How do we invite other people into it? Then when we put out policy recommendations, statements, reports, people know where they're grounded. It is grounded in this sense of, this is why we're doing this work. We're not doing it to preserve the economy. Those things are all important, they matter, but we're doing this because humans are suffering right now and we want to alleviate suffering in the world. This is why we're starting here. The starting point really matters, and informs everything else. Then when people step into that space, they know that that's what they're speaking from. Then hopefully, it changes the conversation a little bit.

**Ashley Hopkinson: What might it take to move some of this work more center stage so that it's happening more often in more cities, in different parts of the country, the world?**

**Andrew Schwartz:** Something that I tried to do with my team in my previous position with the Center for Earth Ethics was how do we take these high-level conversations and bring them into community orientation. We made this really cool conversation guide, and this training manual. I left before it was completed, but I think that was something we were trying to do.

How do you model this conversation with other people? Trying to create basically this manual of how to do it because it is really important. Right now, the entire thing is around finance. You have all these country-level delegates arguing around how much money should go into the fund and where's this money going to come from. The fight is over dollars. That's what the fight is. That's the premise for the fight.

It's not like... how are we making sure that keystone species are being saved? How is enough money going to wherever it is so that we can have the right counts on species and making sure that we're getting the right money over here so these people are fed and that we understand why we need to be preserving this forest not just because it's worth \$500 billion but because of people.

One thing I was trying to do at the center, and what I try to do now is really, as much as I can, center the conversation on asking a better 'why question,' or at least, why are we doing this? What is this \$500 billion going towards? These aren't just dollars on a page. It's going towards something.

**Ashley Hopkinson: Given the right support, what would you like to see grow and expand?**

**Andrew Schwartz:** I've had the opportunity to talk with people around the world, and I've met so many people and it would be so nice if people could just be where they are. Thinking about climate migration, this is what's popping up for me. I was having this conversation with this guy in Uganda, and he was talking about all the climate migrants that are now coming into Kampala, and none of them want to be there. I'm thinking about the climate migrants that are coming into Oregon, none of whom want to be here. They all want to be home. They didn't want to leave. They didn't want to leave their story. They didn't want to leave their ancestors.

I was having a conversation with a guy who lives on a small island that's going to be flooding, he said, "We're going to lose our graveyards. It's what we're going to lose. We're not just losing our island. We're losing our history. We're losing our sense of identity and ourselves." That's something that is becoming more and more apparent to me. I live in a space where we're pretty climate secure, wildfires, heat, all these things are happening, but the rains are going to come.



There's this sense of watching people come into the space, watching people come into the community, being disoriented, being disassociated, not knowing who they are anymore because the things that tethered them to their sense of self have been severed, sometimes violently, sometimes not.

For me with a perfectly resourced world, how do we build out that sense of adaptation or mitigation so people can be where they are? Then for people who are coming, helping them feel welcome wherever their new home is with mental health and economic support, spiritual friends and removing the sense of isolation. There's such a profound sense of isolation. Despite how deeply connected we all are, we're still as lonely as we've ever been.

There's a lot of reasons for it, but I think helping people just be where they are and feel connected to that space. That's a hard thing when those traditional structures or community structures, whether it be church, after-school programs or just simply having the time to show up to your kids' game, have been lost. I would want to provide those spaces just to be yourself, to be there with the people that you love so that you can feel that love, and so that you can get back out there and really dig into the things that you need to.

The sense of burnout is because you're giving so much, and you're not being filled back up. So giving people those opportunities to be filled back up so they can go back out, and keep working, and keep trying, knowing that they come from this place of love and support, would be incredible. I would love to see that. I'd love to see our systems, and our organizations, and our jobs, provide that sort of care and opportunity to the people who are working in these spaces, which we don't often get. I would love to see that.

**Ashley Hopkinson: Thank you, Andrew.**

**Andrew Schwartz:** Thanks for taking the time with me.

*Ashley Hopkinson is an award-winning journalist, newsroom entrepreneur and leader dedicated to excellent storytelling and mission-driven media. She currently manages the Solutions Insights Lab, an initiative of the Solutions Journalism Network. She is based in New Orleans, Louisiana.*

*\* This conversation has been edited and condensed.*