



Conversation with Deepa Iyer

Ashley Hopkinson

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Ashley Hopkinson: Can you introduce yourself? Tell me a little bit about yourself and what brought you to the work that you're doing today.

Deepa Iyer: Great to meet you, Ashley. My name is Deepa Iyer. I was born and raised in New Jersey. My parents emigrated from India in the early '70s in the earlier wave because there wasn't a lot of emigration from India until the Civil Rights Act of 1965. So I would like to give thanks for all the people who fought for the Civil Rights Act at that time, which also benefited our community for those who wanted to immigrate to the U.S. Currently, I live on a farm in Enumclaw, Washington, which is about an hour outside of Seattle.

Our farm is called Ayeko Farm. I'm here with my partner, Victor, who is the main land steward and farmer out here, and our children, Samika and Devon. For me, my journey started pretty young around the age of 12. This is the way I remember it, so I don't know how I felt at the time. The way I remember it is at that time, I was just hit with knowing that my purpose here was to care for the earth. At that time in the '80s, it was 'save the earth.' That was the way that it was (discussed)— recycling and the ozone layer and greenhouse gases.

I was very emotional about it, but also very much into taking action. In some ways, I don't know that that has changed very much. I think the one thing that has changed about it is that I used to dislike humans as a species on planet Earth, the single most destructive. I like people. I always have a lot of friends and I like being with people but there's a lot of things about humanity that make me sad in the way that we relate to the planet and to each other.

At that time when I was younger, I was very much like, "We got to protect the planet and people are the ones that are causing the problem so people need to stop." In the meantime, I have developed a better

analysis. I was raised upper middle class in the suburbs so we had enough, plenty, and I had some consciousness around not having enough. My family was raised with very little and we had all the stories of my parents' childhood. We would visit our motherland and see and experience something very different from what we lived in where we grew up, which was untold suffering. Of course, it's everywhere. You start to see that actually the system that is causing harm to our planet is the same system that's harming the majority of the population, which is held down and exploited through that same system, which is exploiting the planet.

Then, there's a few people that benefit from that. That really helped me to realize that my work has to include – in addition to protecting the earth and soils and waters and trees – working closely with the community, especially those most impacted. I started out farming and in environmental education. In some ways, again, that's what I'm still doing. The thing I love the most is being on the land with children, especially. I love being out with people, any kind of people, but I love being outside with children.

What I learned really early on was that something transforms for people when they're outside and they're slowing down enough to be more present with other creatures, with the forest, with the pond, with the frogs, with the vegetables. I started to see my role as helping to open space. I'm present for when people have an opportunity to connect with nature. I can't force you to connect. You might come out here and be like, "Whatever. I'm on my phone."

My role is to make space and create opportunities for the chance that people will feel something and they're going to feel something inside. The way I'm seeing that more is what they're going to be feeling, it's a lot of different emotions. I'm seeing a lot of grief right now. Not just right now, like in our current political moment, but the right now of our broader political moment and moment in humanity, there's a lot of grief. There's also a lot of joy. What happens, I think fundamentally, is people are like, "Oh, this is who I actually am."

I'm feeling the vibration of the planet and I'm like, "Oh, I forgot. I forgot," because I'm so busy on my phone, on the computer, in my car, in the city, with this and that, running around producing in a sense of urgency for someone else's capital gain, constantly struggling with not enough, whatever it is. All these things don't always bring me joy. Then it's like people come out to the land and they're like, "Oh, I forgot." Sometimes in that moment, people cry. People cry a lot when they come out here. There's a range of things that happen.

People will harvest something and taste it and they'll be like, "Ah, this is what this particular vegetable tasted like when I was back in my homeland." "This is what my grandmother used to make." "Oh, this

is this thing I used to do when I was a kid," or all those things. Some of it is even deeper than our own lifetime, which is, again, with lots of grief and pain because our relationship to land has been exploited.

Ashley Hopkinson: What do you think is distinctive about the work you do and how you do it?

Deepa Iyer: That's a great question. There's a few layers to it. It's something that has evolved and continues to evolve. I came up in "environmental education" and that kind of education was like: "This is a white oak and that's a red oak and you can tell because the leaves look like this." And I love that and it's really interesting information and it's very useful. This amount of processing, some people need that and it's really important. It connects you to some history, connects you to the ecosystem, all those things. One difference I would say is... I love that information, but I think what I prioritize is being present.

When people come, I'm not going to overload folks with information that they didn't necessarily ask for. It's about experience that allows us to be present with ourselves, each other on the land. That experience itself is transformative.

That's one difference in what I would consider traditional outdoor agriculture or environmental education. I'll also talk about the farming side because we also do a lot of land work, which is also different. Programmatically, that's one. If you have a question and I have the information, I'll definitely be happy to share it with you.

My priority on what people experience is that feeling of presence, and where does that lead us to. The second is, when I came up in organic farming in the '90s and stuff like that, early 2000s, a lot of it was like, "This is this type of kale and you plant it this deep and this far apart, and then you harvest it — super important information. Love it, again. I'm a plant nerd. I love all that stuff. But what I felt lacking was this.

I was in spaces where there was oftentimes, a white farm owner or white educator, and farm labor was almost always Mexican or Central American. What I found in those spaces, it would be the campfire with the folk country songs, which of course, I love all that. But what I felt was: "What about my culture? What about how my people, how did they relate to the land, and what songs did they sing? Who am I? What about the food that we grew? What about the medicines that we grew?"

That was a really big piece for me coming to Ayeko Farm, and my partner's from Ghana. For him, he grew up in that. He was born and raised in Ghana. He grew up very much connected to land, and his

cultural food in that way. For him, I think his relationship is stronger with land. For me, I didn't grow up with this.

There's more of us not living in our Indigenous or homelands than there are actually living in their homelands. This is the first time in humanity's experience on planet Earth where there are more of us that are displaced, whether we chose to, or we were forced to, most of us were forced to in one way or another.

The experience that we want to support people having is that remembering of, "Who am I in relationship to the land?" It doesn't have to be like, "Oh, my family's from India, and we grew this crop, and this is how we grew." That's important, but some of us don't have the luxury of knowing because our connections were cut forcefully and violently from our own homelands and our people. How do we even know; it's painful to go into that process? Part of it is remembering who we are in relation to the land from a cultural perspective.

Ashley Hopkinson: From your experience of feeling that disconnection when you were in that circle, you wanted to bring that level of connection to Ayeko Farm so when people come, they can have this space to remember, and reconnect to experience that?

Deepa Iyer: Yes, and then, remember the importance of that process. Maybe your grandparents cooked a certain thing and that was your family thing, and then you didn't really learn how to cook it.

Now, every time you eat food, it's like DoorDash, or it's highly processed packaged food. Highly processed food is pretty much what most people are eating right now. When you add a bunch of stuff to it and put it in a box, it's called ultra-processed. That's what most people are eating right now. I would argue it's not actually food.

There's many levels from physical, emotional, mental, spiritual that are toxifying us. This is just my opinion and my belief. We're easier to control. I am so not down with that. Like, "No, let's come back." Some people will say, "Oh man, I don't know how to make that thing, but I know it's important to my family." Some people will come out and say, "I've never seen this thing growing, but it's such an important part of my family's food. I've never even seen it in the ground before.

Then, let's grow it together. Let's harvest it together. Let's make that food. Now, you get to have that experience of knowing more about who you are, and where you came from, which has so many ripple positive effects where you're like, "Oh, I can do this. I can grow it. I can eat things that actually nourish me, not only physically, but because they're reconnecting me with where I come from and who I am."

Also, because that process of doing it collectively and as a community, is nourishing to us on a very deep level because that's where we're also coming from."

All of humanity, all of our cultures and civilizations come from this collective tending of the land, whether it's hunting or fishing, or gathering, or agriculture as we might call it as not a strict definition, but planting and harvesting. It's very hard to do any of those things alone. Our legacy is that collective process of being like, "Ooh, we know that this rice is going to be ready." You're going to all be planting rice together, you're going to have to harvest it together. It's a huge process. What does that do for us? How does that make us think differently about who we are?

Ashley Hopkinson: What are some of the things that you've learned through the process of Ayeko Farm that have stayed with you and are good to pass along?

Deepa Iyer: That's a good question. Here's the tricky thing about the work that we do is that people feel all kinds of feelings when they're out here and then people are like, "I want to be in the land too."

I'm like, "Here's what it takes and it's not cute for the most part." It's a little bit deceitful in a way to be like, "Oh my God, all these fields and the community." Then it's like, "Oh, but actually day-to-day, you got to be burly," and you got to have somebody like my partner who is the kind of person who is capable of tending land in this way because he doesn't leave the land. He is literally part of it now, and it's part of him. Even to leave for a night, it pains him.

He's aware of all the things that are happening and he's got 17 things happening at the same time where he's managing all of them. There's so much to that. It's a lifetime of practice, knowledge, and wisdom to have anything. You're never going to know it all. Number one is, who is on your team?

Knowing that it's not going to be easy and you have to know what your strengths are and what your weaknesses are, and then have somebody who can complement you, which can be challenging because then you don't agree on stuff.

We complement each other because we have different strengths, but that means we don't agree, but then you have to be able to trust, to be like, "Here's my opinion, but that's your area so I trust whatever decision you're going to make, and I will do whatever you tell me to do in that thing. This is my domain. I want to hear what you think, but I'm going to bottom-line it." Then what are the things that we're both in, or all of us because eventually we hope to have a larger team.

The other is to really learn about who else is doing similar related work in the area. Not all the time does a new thing need to be built completely on its own. We're guilty of it. We did it because when we

came here, we didn't really know anybody. I just felt the real estate market was going to go bonkers, which it did. I don't even have a word for it. We would not be where we are right now if we hadn't jumped on it in 2017/2018. We had actually been looking for land collectively with a group because we lived in the Bay Area as well. When we came up here, we were going to have my daughter and we wanted to be with my parents and my sister, and that's why we moved up here was to be with family but we were like, "We got to jump on the land thing now," and this is before we had meaningful relationships.

I wouldn't recommend that for a land-based project. I would recommend getting to know neighbors, really identifying where you want to be. I don't have any regrets about where we are. I think we might have ended up here anyway: I love our property, I love our location, everything but I think really learning about what's the landscape and who's doing something similar and where are you best positioned to complement, support, fill gaps, take leadership where leadership's not being taken—really be a part of the ecosystem that exists.

I've been part of the non-profit industrial complex for a long time now. I started working in it in 2014. It is divisive, just like anything else. The best application and who is going to show that they have the biggest numbers. You get the money and then it's crabs in a barrel. It's like you should be the A student and you should only look at your own homework. I have a lot to say about the nonprofit sector.

In learning about what other people are doing, in building relationships with people who you feel aligned with, you feel you can collaborate and work with, you discover that it makes us stronger.

Rather than approaching it like, "I'm creating another thing that now needs to be resourced and is in its own corner. I'm going to compete with you and I'm going to do the same thing, but I'm going to do it better." I'm not opposed to competition wholeheartedly – there might be a need for that – but to me this is very American to say, "I'm going to build my own thing and build my own corner and set myself up." It's not necessarily coming from the "we."

Another thought is to really see who's doing what; take leadership if need be or build something new if need be or see if the thing that you want to see happen already exists and you just help to make that stronger.

Ashley Hopkinson: How, with all of these multiple areas where you want to make a difference, are you able to measure your own progress? What are markers for you that you're moving in the right direction?

Deepa Iyer: Really good question. I think a couple of things come to mind.

One is, does this feel sustainable? Because if it's not, then it doesn't matter. Even if it's doing good, it could end up doing harm if it stops to exist. The whole thing is going to fall apart. That's a little apocalyptic. But yes, sustainability — including financial sustainability. Can we keep doing this in this way?

Do we see ourselves getting to where I have a role for when I can't farm 10 hours a day, I have a role for when I can't be hosting 17 events in the summer that I plan, clean up for, and teach." That's not sustainable. Is there a path forward to sustaining the work? That could look different ways. We can't do it here anymore, because we don't have the financial resources or we don't have the energy for it. That's also sustainability. Sustainability from that financial and the energetic.

Other things are — what's the response to what we're doing? Sometimes it's hard to know, but we definitely ask people, we try to pick up people's vibes in the moment. We do some surveying, one on one phone calls and things like that. Then of course, if people come back, then that's another indicator that; "We want this, we want to be part of this." It's always keeping an eye on that, listening for that.

I can measure if I think we're on the right track with people who want to return and do the same event repeatedly with us, people who want to return and be part of things that we're hosting. And people who give us positive feedback or are open to give us ways that we can improve it because that's also a sign that it's worth it, it just needs to get better. I'll take that too. Those are things.

Then another thing I look at is how our partnerships are growing and strengthening. There's a participant response. Then there's my partners' response. If my partners are like, "Yes, I don't really want to do that event anymore. I don't really want to do this program with you guys anymore." Then it's like, "Okay."

It's okay if things don't go right. But if that happens a lot, then I look at the quality of the relationships. Everything we offer programmatically is in partnership and collaboration. I look at that quality: Are those relationships strengthening? Are we deepening our trust with each other? Are we deepening our generosity with each other? Are we getting more and more behind each other's work, we want to see each other succeed. What we're doing together is to help the greater mission we both believe in, but also, it's to see both of us succeed.

I have noticed that I haven't spoken as much about the land. I think that's indicative of my role in this work in this organization. I do tend the land I'm outside a lot, but I have thought about whether we are setting up systems that can maintain themselves? For example, if we plant, or we are reforesting in

partnership with our local conservation district, several acres of habitat along the creek that runs through our farm, which is a salmon-bearing creek.

It's something we're super, super excited and passionate about, but if we get too ambitious and we put too many things in the ground, we're not able to take care of it. That's a measure that we're not on the right track. This happens all the time with people who manage land very, very often, you're like, "Oh, yes, I can handle all this." Then things change, something else comes up, or something fails. We have to pay attention, "Oh, our strawberries didn't taste as good this year. Are we on the right track to soil health?" Are we on the right track in the way that we set up our irrigation systems? Are we on the right track in the way that we engage volunteers and help to steward the land?"

Ashley Hopkinson: Can you tell me a little bit more about the role partnerships play in the work that you're doing? How are you cultivating and maintaining those?

Deepa Iyer: I will preface it by saying that I know that there are different definitions of collaboration and partnership. I use them pretty loosely. We mostly do this on our own. We don't have really super clear partnerships on land stewardship. For example, we're the only farmers on the land right now. We are always trying to look for folks who want to use some of the space to grow.

The agricultural piece, we're pretty much doing on our own, we bring in a lot of volunteers, but it's the third Saturday of the month, volunteer day. There's not really a partnership with that. We do work with our local conservation district restoration project along the waterways on the lower part of the land. They're like a governmental conservation district. They have public funding to do the projects that we're doing with them, so they built a bridge, and they're contracting out the planting work and the maintenance work of the native plantings. That's sort of different from almost all of our other partners, but that's the only other partner that is not programmatic and it's land stewardship.

In terms of programmatic, we have an annual cultural arts event every year with a group called Union Cultural Center. I know them because I've been practicing Capoeira de Angola for many years and I know them through that art; they're like my local teachers of that art form. It's been beautiful, it feels like we're doing what we're supposed to be doing.

When we have that event, we get about 100 people out and we spend a lot of time planning together. We're trying to raise money together because we want to financially sustain the event. So far, it's been like volunteer time, and then we try to get the hard expenses covered, but we have to get our time covered too if we're going to be able to keep committing to it, or we have to collectivize it, either one of those. That's one partnership where it really is like one annual event.

Then there are other things that we might do together. I've known those folks that I partner with for 20 years. We've been friends for a long time, we've been in the art form together, and there's a deep friendship that is the foundation of that partnership, which I think is kind of unusual. You don't always have that in programmatic work. For us, it's always like, "No, you take the money." "No, you take the money."

We look out for each other a lot, and it's really fun to work together. Those are the things I look for. Like, are you looking out for me? Because, I'm looking out for you. I also want it to be pretty fun and easeful to work together. I love collaborating and creating programmatic content. I love all that, it's like my jam. If it's not that fun to create with someone, I'm like, "I don't know if I want to keep doing this." This is supposed to bring me joy.

So I look for that too. I look for that feeling of inspiration when we're talking together. People who do what they say they're going to do. I need the follow-through. Those are the things I look for, and I think we have a lot of partners like that.

We work with another beautiful organization called Teaching with Love and Care. The owner took a bus and retrofitted it so that it had desks and chairs for kids in it with seat belts. She picks them up from more urban centers and takes them to our farm once a week. She takes them horseback riding, she takes them to all these different enrichment activities, and I really love working with them. We did a beautiful summer program with them this past summer, so that's a partner. We're looking for funding together to keep growing what we're doing.

The feedback we got from the community was super powerful. There's a huge need. Any time you're doing stuff with kids, there's always a huge need, no matter what. There's just never enough you can do for kids, no matter what situation they're in, but especially the youth that we're connected with, there's a need, so that's really beautiful. We also work with another partner on these retreats specifically to support Black and Brown Earth stewards. We're trying to make it an annual retreat. Our partner is calling the retreat "Reclaiming Alignment." Beautiful work, they're a very powerful leader, and visionary.

A lot of times, what happens is people are like, "I want to do this thing. I need some land to do it on, and I want to do it with people like you on the land," because we're aligned to how they're in relationship, and they're aligned to that idea of, we are going to create space where people can experience this connection and learn and grow and build community. That is the number one alignment we have with all of them. It takes a different focus.

One's cultural arts, and one's ancestral spiritual ceremonial practices and alignment and restoration for stewards. Another is kids, play, and enrichment. I'm so proud and blessed that those are the people that we get to do this with, that somehow they found us, because we haven't really put ourselves out there like, "Hey, we're looking for partners." It's just people, literally two of them just randomly called me and were like, "Hey, I want to do this with you." I'm like, "Oh, that's exactly what we want to have happen out here, and you're awesome to work with."

Ashley Hopkinson: What do you think leaders and decision-makers can do to advance progress in collective wellbeing?

Deepa Iyer: I have an orientation towards love and non-harm. I understand that that orientation is not for everybody, and that there's also a time when that might not be the thing. Sometimes it's like I'm going to lift up arms and we have to or we're not going to survive otherwise. But I have an orientation towards love, and I think there's a lack of understanding and there is an intentional divide in many of our communities. At the end of the day, what I see is there's these common threads in humanity. The things that we need to survive are pretty similar, right?

We need food, water, shelter, safety, and joy. We all would die for our children, right? Well, except for the people that harm children, that's another story, but how can we be in dialogue with each other?

We might not agree, but how can we be in dialogue with each other from a place of love and curiosity and seeking to understand? That's a lot of work. It takes time, it takes repeated interaction, it takes potential conflict, it's emotional labor. It takes a level of commitment to developing communication skills, to understand each other's languages—in the way I rock, the way you vibe.

It could be because I'm getting older, I see more and more division. Just people looking down on each other, people disrespecting each other. I love how principled people are, I'm definitely down, yes, justice, of course, and all these things. Also, we can't assume that somebody else doesn't feel that way too just because they have a different perspective.

We don't know what someone else is going through in their life, and there may be reasons that people believe the way they believe, we just don't know. We literally haven't sat down and talked with them. Everything changes if you can have a conversation where it's led with love and curiosity and the intention to understand, and so I just wish there was more talking about that. I don't feel like that's very popular.

I feel like whenever I say it in circles, people are like, “Well, I'm not going to lay myself down as a bridge, and I'm going to be harmed if I do. I'm like, “Then don't do it. I get it. I understand that you've been educating a lot, don't do it then. It's not like you should.”

But how do we have conversations with each other where we're understanding each other and in dialogue? Where we're promoting that as the main action step, it's because I believe everything will come from that. I understand, in the moment, there's decisions that have to be made and policies have to be made, but what is our culture around being in conversation with each other and seeking to understand?

I just want to pay respects to those who came before me in whatever way, shape, or form. Whether it's literally my great-greats and the people who stewarded the land that we're on and the way that we seek to be in relationship with all of those who came before us. That is something I wish also guided our leadership.

There's a lot there that we don't need to recreate. There's a lot of wisdom, and it's not about going backwards, because we can't go backwards. It's about learning from the past and honoring what has happened, and then lifting up the leaders who already know how to lead from that space.

That's just one more thing I would share. I also wish things were more fun – with more song, more dance, more freedom of movement and expression.

Ashley Hopkinson: What does collective wellbeing mean to you?

Deepa Iyer: Fundamentally, it's a reorientation to deeply understand on a very embodied level that my wellbeing is your wellbeing. There's no, like, "We're good over here because I'm good over here. That doesn't exist. It doesn't actually exist. People might think they're good, but they're actually not.

Collective wellbeing is when we are oriented that way and then what we do flows from there at the most basic level. How are you going to have people who grow the food that we eat not have enough to eat? That's the way it is because it's been racially exploitative capitalism. But there have been hundreds of years of this. Can we stop doing this? It just feels like it's such an invisible issue.

Most farmers can't even sustain themselves. This is why they say farming is public service; you don't even have a wage but you're still growing food for the community. Let's get the land to the hands of people who want to steward it, who want to grow for the community, who want to grow sustainably and grow for the earth. We can't have 90% of our farmland in industrial corn and soy that goes to feed lots. This absolutely has to stop happening.

Collective wellbeing will be people having access to food that's actual food, our children being fed actually good food prepared with love at school. It's totally possible. I've seen it happen in rural villages in other parts of the world where people have absolutely no money. Of course, it's like aunties, who come and are cooking on a wood fire in the yard, and deliver food, and the kids are eating an actual meal. "We can't make that happen here? You have to be kidding me."

Then all the institutions, correctional facilities and everything happening with incarceration. All the systems are connected. We cannot be putting people in those situations. It's reorientation that my wellbeing is your wellbeing. It's ending the exploitation of others for our individual gain, and that's racial capitalism that's unchecked completely.

Ashley Hopkinson: Thank you, Deepa.

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.*