This transcript was exported on Apr 16, 2025 - view latest version here.

Beth:

Welcome to ChangeMaking Connections, the podcast where we talk about the joys and challenges of social change work. Today I'm thrilled to talk with Sherri Mitchell -Weh'na Ha'mu Kwasset, who is an Indigenous attorney, activist, and author from the Penobscot Nation. She received her Juris Doctorate from the University of Arizona's Roger's College of Law, specializing in Indigenous Peoples Law and Policy. She is an alumna of the American Indian Ambassador Program, and the Udall Native American Congressional Internship Program. Sherri is the author of the award-winning book, *Sacred Instructions: Indigenous Wisdom for Living Spirit-Based Change*, which has been published in four languages.

Sherri is the founding Director of the Land Peace Foundation, an Indigenous educational organization that focuses on Indigenous leadership, environmental justice, land rematriation, and kinship building. The Land Peace Foundation has provided training for some of the largest environmental NGO's on the planet, helping them develop better policies and procedures for engaging with Indigenous Peoples living on the front lines of climate change.

She is also the convener of the global healing ceremony, *Healing the Wounds of Turtle Island*, a gathering that has brought more than fifty-thousand people together from six continents, with elders from 40 Indigenous nations, to focus on healing our relationships with one another and with our relatives in the natural world. Her bio is rich and extensive and I'll put the rest of it in the show notes.

Sherri, thank you so much for joining us today.

Sherri (<u>04:25</u>):

Thank you for inviting me.

Beth (04:26):

My pleasure. I really loved your book so much Sacred Instructions: Indigenous Wisdom for Living Spirit-Based Change. Thank you for writing it. I keep going back to it over and over, and your work has just continued to evolve in such important ways as I'm looking around the world and trying to figure out how best to make change. I'm curious, what are some of the questions and thoughts and hopes on the forefront of your mind? In our world today?

Sherri (04:55):

What I've been primarily thinking about and focusing on in this interesting time that we find ourselves in is how do we keep ourselves grounded in our own values? I think that this is the challenge of this chaotic time is keeping our feet on the earth so that we have this grounded sense of connection to life, first of all, but to one another. And we have this grounding space for our own deepest core values. It's very easy for us to get spun out during this time, and a lot of people are feeling spun out during this time, and that's the intent is to spin us out, to keep us feeling frenzied and frantic and sacred instructions. I talk about the cannibal giant and one of the purposes of Kiwakw's work is to lull people into this frenzied state of being so that they end up consuming themselves off the planet.

(06:15):

And we are allegedly in the time of Kiwawk right now, and I feel like the vast movement of this time is leading people to find ways to comfort themselves that are actually contributing to the harm that we are

all also hoping to be alleviating at this time. And so if we don't have this grounded sense of connection to our own core values, if we don't have this place where we can root ourselves during this chaotic time, we tend to grab for things that are unstable, unreliable, incapable of meeting the need that we have in that moment. We become addicted to materiality and we also have this deep attraction to artificiality to escape the reality that we're living in. And so it's a dangerous time for us as spiritual beings on the planet because there are so many traps for us to fall into that would lead us down a road that separates us from our own humanity. And I think that's the danger. So for me, the most alive question in my heart right now is how do we maintain our sense of deep connection to ourselves, to the earth and to the truth of our own heart?

Beth (07:54):

That's a powerful question. That's a really powerful question. You talk about this in sacred instructions, but what are some of the values that you think are really important for us to stay rooted in? As you described, that is the world we are in, all that over consumption, that drawing on things that contribute to the harm.

Sherri (08:22):

Yeah, I think that one of our core values that we organize around as Wahponahki people, my community, if you'll indulge me for a moment, I'll introduce myself in my language so that I can orient myself in place and time we see. (her introduction); So my family is Bear Clan from the Penobscot Nation and Crow clan from the Passamawuoddy tribe. And when I introduce myself in my language, I'm orienting myself not only in place in a rooted place, but I'm also orienting myself in connection to the people and the land and the waters. So when I say that I am bonowapscali, that's both the land, the people and the water or all three of those things. And so there's this understanding that there's no distinguishing between us as a people and our connection to place. And so when we think about core organizing principles, indulnebanic is at the center of that which is recognizing that I am related to all other living beings, that I am related to all of the people in the bear clan, all of the people in the Crow clan to all of the people who call themselves bonowapscali and Passamaquaddy, and then all of the people who call themselves Wahponahki, and all of the beings that call themselves people.

(10:06):

And so when I start to recognize that connection to that larger concentration of life that spirals out from the center of my being, I realize that I have greater responsibility beyond this concept of self. I have greater responsibility than to look at my own interests or those that are closest to me because I am connected to this ever expanding web of life and understanding that more than in theory, but in practicality, that we can't take any action that doesn't impact others, that we can't have a thought, that doesn't create a ripple in time, that doesn't join other similar thoughts and vibration and frequency that eventually form matter. And being conscious of that capacity for co-creation and taking that very seriously and that sense of kinship is core to all of that. It's a central orienting point. So that is our primary value. And also thinking about moral courage.

(11:26):

A lot of people talk about moral courage, but what does that look like in action? That means standing up in your life, embodying the values that you hold most dear, not just professing them, but how do you embody kindness? How do you embody mutual care? How do you begin to embody this understanding of albizu, which is my sense of wellbeing is tied to the wellbeing of all others. And if those around me

don't have the same grounded sense of wellbeing that I have, then my sense of security is incomplete. And so having that understanding that spirals out from this awareness of connectivity that helps you to find the boundaries of what is your sense of enough? Where does it bump up against somebody else's sense of enough? Where does your wellbeing bump up against somebody else's wellbeing? Where does your sense of right or rights bump up against the rights of others?

(12:34):

And recognizing that we all live in relationship with one another and that all of those things are interrelated helps us to understand who we want to be in the world and how we're going to walk through life. And so all of those things I kind of hold in my center and in the way that I live, the way that I walk up on the earth and the ways that I engage with other people so that when I do fall down, I have a grounding place to center myself. I have a very distinct location of where I need to put my body in order to reconnect with that sense of awareness. And so I think that that's one of the things that people have forgotten is their sense of connection to one another, their deep sense of kinship. Despite the growing awareness of quantum entanglement, people still seem to think that they're isolated.

(13:40):

They still seem to think that they can operate in a way that doesn't impact others instantaneously. And I think we as a species are growing beyond the immaturity of those beliefs and are being forced to recognize the immediate consequences of our choices, our thoughts, our words, our actions so that we begin to understand our powers of co-creation and can use those in a conscious way to collectively build the world that we most want to inhabit. And so without this deep sense of kinship at the core, we wouldn't know where to begin in what we were creating, and we wouldn't know where to stop in what we were asking for because we wouldn't understand the impact that that had on others. And so all of those things are things that humanity needs to reclaim. It doesn't mean we go backwards in time. There is no such thing as going backwards in time any more than there's such a thing as going forward in time.

(<u>14:48</u>):

We don't look at time from our perspective as a Askiginowok person the way that I was raised. We don't think about time in a linear fashion. We think about time in circular, in a circular manner, and we don't orient ourselves in accordance to time, but we are spatially oriented people recognizing that we are people of a certain place and that time doesn't move away from us forward or back, but that it circles around us and that's why we are connected to all those who have walked upon that land previously and all those who will walk upon that land in the future because we're spatially connected to Nicoskitemut, to Mother Earth. And so we all have that. We all have that type of connection no matter where we're from or what we call it, some of us has just forgotten that we have those connections and it's really essential that we remember.

Beth (<u>15:55</u>):

That's so powerful and beautiful. It leads me to one of my thoughts and questions. Your website is beautiful and you have a lot of lovely videos and podcasts on there, so listeners, you should go check it out. But I'm curious about how we can remember that and be an interconnection with all beings including the earth while we seem so polarized in this world or country. And at the same time, part of me is like, well, we've always, these differences are not new. And I can hear some people, some listeners feeling like, well, that's all good, but what about the person who doesn't want to connect or doesn't want to has very different values? How do we still with these values bridge that?

This transcript was exported on Apr 16, 2025 - view latest version here.

Sherri (16:58):

There's so many different places that I could go with that question, and I think I'll tell you what I would tell my child in that relation, which I have told my children and now my granddaughters and the oldest one more specifically, how can you ever know who you are if you base the way that you choose to behave in the world on the way someone else is behaving? And is your character and integrity truly your own? If it can be determined by how someone else chooses to behave, our understanding of sovereignty is based on this phrase deepen, which means I own myself. And it's not like I'm a free agent. It is I am solely responsible for my own choices and my own behaviors and the ways that I choose to place my feet, how I choose to use my words, the ways that my hands connect with and interact with other people.

(18:27):

And if I want to hold onto my agency, if I want to maintain my sovereignty of being, then I have to be willing to take responsibility for all of the rights that come along with that. And so we can't determine our own behavior and our own character based on how someone else is going to choose to behave. One of the things that I think is really the most powerful opportunity for us in this time is for us to really start thinking about and closing our eyes and imagining what does the world look like that we most want to inhabit?

(19:27):

What does it feel like to live in that world? How do we talk to one another? How do we see one another? How do we care for one another? And who are we required to be in order to live there? And if we think about the ways that we have been taught really at the toddler level to manifest, we have to place ourselves in a position of believing that that thing that we're attempting to manifest or that experience or attempting to manifest already exists. So if we were to spend time on mass every day, imagining the world that we most want to live in, and we began to breathe life into that image and to feel into it and to understand it and to see ourselves there, we would begin to recognize who we needed to be in order to inhabit that world. I.

(20:49):

And then we would realize that the world can exist in that way until we become the people who are capable of living there. And so how can we begin to become people who are capable of living in the world that we most want to inhabit today so that we can bring that world into physical form and then collectively hand in hand, shoulder to shoulder, walk into that world as flesh and blood? We have to start taking responsibility for what we're creating collectively. We are creating every single moment of every single day. We're just not doing it consciously. And if we want to start reclaiming our power, we have to recognize the power that we have to frame the reality that we're living in. We have collectively created the reality that we're current living in, but we're like children. We look around at the big mess that we've created and we wonder who made it and we blame other people and we claim that it couldn't have been me, and we want someone else to clean it up, but we have to take responsibility for the mess that's all around us. And we have to become better at taking responsibility for the ways that we vision the things that we talk about, the ways that we talk about one another. Are we doing anything to reduce violence in the world by angrily judging those who are violent? Are we doing anything to reduce hunger by condemning those who have more than others?

(22:48):

I once heard somebody talking about people who pray for others to find comfort in their lives in some way, whether they want to be housed or fed or clothed or loved. And there are a lot of people who stand

in their home drinking their designer coffee, eating their wonderful breakfast out of their well stocked fridge who are praying for those who are hungry and cold, that they will find food and shelter, but they don't go out and they don't feed them. They don't bring them the things that they need to survive the elements. They don't try to address the issues in society that are causing those challenges.

(24:03):

We've become so separated from one another. We've outsourced our compassion in so many ways. We've outsourced our care for one another. We've forgotten how to care for one another because we have like children foisted that responsibility on some parental figure. The government, we have made them responsible for fixing all of the problems that we have created with our careless powers of creation. And then we complain that they're not fixing it fast enough. We complain that they're doing it wrong. And so if you have a sibling and you walk into a room that's destroyed with toys and your sibling has made a big mess and you've just come home and there's this big mess in the room and you're the older one and your mother says to you, go clean your room, you're going to feel a sense of injustice because you're not solely responsible for making that mess.

(25:28):

And so if we continue to blame one another for the mess that exists in the world without taking any responsibility for collectively sharing in the work of cleaning it up, helping to heal the harm that has been caused, helping to eliminate and diminish the division between us learning how to cultivate our compassion by learning to care for one another, again, we're going to point our fingers until we're all spinning off the planet because nobody's taking responsibility for what's going on and nobody's taking responsibility for what's going on with an intact sense of connection to their compassion.

(26:21):

So you have people who have ideas. One of the phrases that I just wrote today in my edits for the new book talk about this crush that we are under this deafening den of poorly thought out ideas. We are not able to think deeply, to feel deeply to speak from our most honest place in the current situation because we will get crucified in the public square because we are moving at such a fast pace that we don't have time to take our breath, to catch our breath. And so if we can't take the time to really consider if we can't take the time to feel deeply into the experience that we're having, if we can't talk honestly through the limitations in our site so that we can begin to understand and comprehend the complexity that we're facing, we're going to continue to skim across the surface and have shallow meaningless options to consider for moving forward.

(28:02):

And if we want to be able to address the myriad problems that we are facing and do so in a way that leads us to solutions that don't make others fodder or a machine that lacks consciousness, we have to be willing to work at a pace that is different from the pace that is being forced upon us. We have to slow down. We have to think about things. We have to consider them from every angle. We have to think about the implications. I think one of the challenges that we have right now is taking ourselves out of the current narratives and moving ourselves into the story that we most want to live. So how do we become the narrators of our own story and how do we place ourselves back into our own mythology? That's what all of my programming is about this year here at Wi our men's and women's gatherings and other gatherings that we host here that we need to really think about how do we write ourselves back into the story?

(29:28):

Because what most people are living right now is a childhood fable Chicken Little. They're running around acting like the sky is falling all the time and they're making decisions. They're inappropriately blaming, criticizing, condemning, misjudging what's happening around them because they're not allowing themselves to slow down to thoughtfully explore what's going on, to try to understand the complexity of it, to feel deeply into that complexity so that they can see how that aligns with who they are and who they want to be, and then taking conscious steps forward. And so when we continue to exist within the framework of Chicken Little, we can't make good decisions. We see our friends as enemies. We see danger all around us, but if we think about our existence in deep time here on this planet, we are a blip in the radar.

(30:45):

And if we continue to believe that we have no time, we continue to believe in this illusion of time, we are going to continue to adequately address the very real crises that we're facing because we are facing crises, we are facing many crises, but we also have the capacity to address those things. If we could shake ourselves out of the illusion and realize that the dream that we've been creating is a nightmare and take conscious responsibility of our own powers of creation and actively engage in activities that are going to bring about the emergence of the world that we want to live in.

Beth (31:47):

I found that reframe very, very helpful, really helpful. Thank you for that. And also that little hint, you dropped that there'll be another book. Is there anything you want to say about that?

Sherri (31:59):

Well, it's probably not going to be available until next summer because it takes about a year to go sometime, few months to go through the publishing universe. The title of the book is Rise Wild, and it's really looking at the ways that we are being mechanized and the importance of maintaining our connection to the living world. There is a prophecy and this petroglyph that is associated with it that I had the opportunity to come in contact with and to learn about from an elder from a specific territory. I'm not going to name the place. I don't want people to go looking for it.

(33:00):

And in that place, this petroglyph has all of these humanoid figures who are cycling up this large rock. I mean it's massive. I can't even imagine the amount of people who had a hand in creating this image. And there are two tracks. So you start at the bottom and there are two tracks and they look very similar, these humanoid beings who are walking along and eventually the group that's on the bottom row, they just continue to walk along on the earth, their little heads and bodies connected to the earth walking along. And then eventually you start to see that the second group on the second line, their heads are separating from their bodies and then they start to lift from the earth as their heads are separating from their bodies. And that slowly happens over a period of time. And by the second turn, that line disappears off the edge of the rock. But the beings who keep their feet on the earth, who keep their heads attached to their bodies and their hearts attached to Mother Earth, they continue all the way to the top. And so right now we are being strongly influenced by those who want to live in a post-human world, those who envision immortality for human beings being the result of uploading human consciousness into machines, the separation of our heads from our bodies, the separation of our minds, from our hearts, the separation of our hearts from the earth.

(35:16):

That pathway leads to the end of our existence. This illusion of immortality that we have takes us out of the cycle of life. And we have separated ourselves from the cycle of life in so many ways. So we think about when we're born. Traditionally, when a baby is born, the after birth, the placenta will get buried on the land where that child is as a symbolic transference of the connection to the birth mother being transferred to the earth mother who will sustain that child for the rest of their natural life. And then when they die, their body is placed back in the earth to continue to feed the other living beings. That's a reciprocal relationship that we have with life. Now. They call the placenta bio waste and they wrap it in plastic and they throw it away in another plastic bag and they send it to a landfill where it gets all melted into this plastic goo at the end of our lives, we get pumped full of chemicals, we get put into a metal or cement container, put into another metal or cement container and put into the ground and our bodies never returned to the earth.

(36:43):

We are separating ourselves in all of these ways from the circle of life. How do we expect to continue to live if we are actively and consciously and purposely separating ourselves at every step of the way, from the very essence of life, from the natural order of life?

(37:07):

And much of this is being based on illusions of separation, breed ego, and unwillingness to accept the reality that we're living in. It's an addiction to artificiality and it's a dead end road. And so we have to be willing to move ourselves back into relationship with the wild living earth. We are so much more easily controlled in a technocratic world. It's much harder to control wild beings living on a vast wild earth. And so this whole notion of rising wild, of being in an inextricable connection with the dance of life, knowing how to survive without dependence on outside sources, knowing how to take care of one another, knowing how to be in deep relationship across time with the earth, these are the things that we've forgotten that we have to remember. It doesn't mean that we can't use technology to improve our lives. It just means that we have to take responsibility for how technology is used. We have to take responsibility of the illusions of this dreamscape of ego and greed, which is really based on fear of not being seen, this deep fear of not being known because we're not allowed to fully be ourselves in this shallow existence that's been created. So how do we allow ourselves to be deeply seen?

(39:04):

How do we ensure that we're fully known? How do we allow ourselves the vulnerability of being fully known in a world where truth is so subjectively viewed and critically judged where shame and condemnation leads to the destruction of one's life because they used language improperly or they didn't support the right cause or they had questions about an issue that was really complex? If we have no space for those kind of deep inquiries, the shallowness of our existence will continue to thrive. And so how do we slow down? How do we make space for the thing that allows a healthy ecosystem to thrive?

(<u>40:19</u>):

One of the most reviled words of the moment, our diversity, our diversity of understanding, awareness, perspective, belief. One of the things that we really value from a cultural perspective is recognizing ourselves as people of the circle. And what that means is that when we have challenges that we're facing, we come together in circle and we continue to talk around and around and around the circle until there is a full understanding, till there's consensus of everyone in the group of full understanding of the thing that's being contemplated from all sides. That discussion fleshes out what we're looking at and helps us to be able to move forward to make a decision based on depth of knowledge. Right now, you have people who are in positions of authority, who are being charged with making decisions for entire

nations who are getting documents that are thousands of pages long, several a week, and they're being asked to make decisions on behalf of everyone based on very, very limited knowledge of what's inside of that document. There's no time for them to read the entire thing. There's no time for them to ask real meaningful questions about every aspect of it. There's no time for them to be the type of decision makers that we hope that they will be.

(42:12):

We've created a system that makes it impossible for us to live the way that we want to live because we've allowed this illusion of separation and materiality and our addiction to artificiality and our unwillingness to feel deeply to prevent us from living meaningfully as a collective. And so how do we get people to rise up in a way that is still deeply connected to the earth without leaving their values at the door with their moral courage and tact so deeply rooted that a strong wind does not blow them over, that they can weather a storm? How do we remind people to be one another's caretakers? The only way that we do that is by creating space around us for it to happen and by being living demonstrations of that in action. And so I think that that is our most powerful opportunity in this moment, is to become those living examples of moral courage and kindness and deep care acceptance, community connection, renewing our sense of connectedness to the sources of our survival that we have mislabeled as resources

(44:02):

Like our soils and our waters and our air, the plants and the trees and the animals. These are all the sources of our survival. They're not resources to be exploited. And if we can elevate the consciousness of those around us through kindness, connection, deep care, if we can humanize ourselves again to one another, if we can use the intelligence that we have, I'm an attorney and I'm A CEO, we can be ourselves in those positions. I can still be one of Weh'na Ha'mu Kwasset in these jobs. I can continue to have my values guide my decision-making. I can choose to keep my integrity intact in the ways that I'm operating in the world. And if we understand who we are and we believe that who we are is exactly who we're meant to be, even if we can improve, we have the confidence to be ourselves.

(45:29):

We have greater access to our moral courage. We have less concern with who likes us and who does not because we realize that when we are true to ourselves, the most important person that likes us is ourselves. That when we look in the mirror, we feel a sense of peace with who we are. And that originating sense of peace radiates out and impacts everybody around us. And this is not Pollyanna-ish. It's simplistic truth. And if we can look at the complexity that surrounds us and recognize that within the core of our being is an instinct to survive, that is greater than any separation, any fear, any judgment that we have about another person, and that instinctual deep desire to pass on the threat of life to the next generation connects us to a wisdom that will lead us to the method for doing just that. But when we run around like Chicken Little, we cut off all of our opportunity to access that wisdom.

(<u>47:07</u>):

So it's an interesting time filled with opportunity for us to begin to emotionally and spiritually mature and put into practice all of the things that we've been talking about for millennia, the ideas that we have been growing amongst us, the ideologies, the aspirations that we have held up in our faith groups and in our societies. We need to walk those out onto the public street, not as a platitude, but in practical application. If we do that, even in a small circle, if everybody takes responsibility for doing that in a very small way where they are, where they're living right now, things will begin to change around them.

(<u>48:14</u>):

Once things begin to change around them and people get curious, they can share that information with others. We host ceremonies here and I have an annual woman's gathering that happens here. And every year we look at something else and we start moving closer to our capacity to be able to build the families and the communities and the societies that we most want to build. And I tell everybody that comes steal every idea that you find here that you think is going to help someone else become their best self, that's going to help somebody else to be more authentically in the world, that's going to help somebody else to be more connected to their heart, that's going to help somebody else have the courage to be themselves fully and completely create a circle of women in your own community. It's the same for the men. Men's gatherings. Share everything that you are learning with them. Ask them what they're learning, grow together, be unafraid and watch what changes around you when you do that. I mean, it's very, very simplistic, but it has deep and profound impact. And if we could all take a corresponding action in the real world that's connected to the deepest desire of our heart, the world would change overnight. But we think it's too simple.

(<u>50:12</u>):

We think it doesn't matter in the face of power, false senses of power, we have real power within us.

Beth (50:24):

Yeah, that's really inspiring. Thank you. I think about even how powerful that could be in LGBTQ communities with all the attacks on trans folk these days, how much support is needed. And I'm really looking forward to that book. I'll wait with bated breath until it comes out. And we are almost out of time. Did you want to say anything about the Land Peace Foundation and the work you're doing there? I can also link to it in the show notes.

Sherri (50:52):

Yeah, I think people can look at it on the website foundation.org. I would like to share something that we're doing here, that we're planning here, and folks can steal this idea wholesale. We are coordinating. We started out coordinating with faith communities from multisectors in our area to come together to have a seven day prayer walk and holding the sacred at the core of that journey. We have a lot of marches and people started to walk as a means of prayer, as a practice of connecting more deeply with themselves and with their highest truth. That sacredness has gone out of our walking and correspondingly the meaning has been lost from a lot of our marching. And so we want to encourage people to create movement of some kind within their communities where they are coming together not in opposition to anything, not in condemnation, not in protest, perhaps it is a demonstration, but it's not a demonstration of us versus them.

(52:53):

It is a demonstration of the light and the love and the kindness, the moral courage, the dignity, the sacredness, the acceptance, the community and the connection that we all hold most dear because we all hold those values. And it doesn't matter where you fall on the political arena and the political spectrum. We politicians from both sides of the aisle who have agreed to walk with each other for a mile in each other's shoes. And when they're walking together, they're going to share stories about why they chose to become public servants so that they can begin to humanize one another in each other's eyes, but they can also be reminded of why they chose to serve.

(53:48):

And so we are having a seven day prayer walk that's also on the Land Peace Foundation website that honors those values, that honors the light that we all carry, that honors the capacity for love that we hold. And we're now across four states, and we have multiple Christian groups, Jewish groups, Muslim groups, Sikh, Bahai, Buddhist, indigenous, and the Veterans for Peace, and many others who are joining us to focus on the commonalities of values. Because this madness that is going on right now is only successful if we forget to care for one another, if we start seeing our neighbors as enemies, if we allow ourselves to feed into the fear in the division, and if we choose to use our thoughts and our breaths and our actions to feed what we don't want. And so let's build a movement of moral courage, of kindness, of connection, of acceptance, of growing awareness, of returning our feet to the earth, connecting our minds to our hearts, and keeping our entire being in alignment with the light of sacred guidance or divine guidance, and seeing where that leads us because we see now full well where that other path has led us, and it's not where any of us want to be. So let's choose a different path together.

Beth (56:07):

That's a really powerful note to end on. Thank you for that work in the world and for your insights here. It gives me hope and also practical ways of living those insights. So thank you so much for that and for taking the time to talk with me today.

Sherri (56:22):

It's been my pleasure. Thank you for having me.