



Podcast Episode #29 – Call for action to you - for a new path to reduce climate change, with Joshua Spodek of NYU, Spodek Academy, USA

RAW TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW

Balint: We have a returning guest for the first time in this podcast, which I'm quite excited about. Welcome back, Josh, to the podcast.

Joshua: Glad to be here. Thank you for having me again.

Balint: We are recording this interview because we have such an important topic to talk about. Usually, at least now I see it, we hear about technologies and products, which want to speak to the green part of our brain, the green conscious part of our brain. Tesla is bringing us electric cars or roof tiles for producing solar energy or the Powerwall for energy storage. Recently, there has been a campaign called #2020-Don'tBeLate on Twitter and there was also a corresponding YouTube video which stresses the need to reach six milestones in different domains to reach peak carbon emission by 2020 and afterwards such emission should decrease further. This campaign, however, misses a point. We discussed this with you Josh after our first interview and yeah, there's perhaps a more simple, more elegant way of getting real results. Maybe you could continue this line of thought. So what's your view on sustainability and on climate change?

Joshua: Well, first of all, I support sustainability, I support moving in a direction away from what we've been doing so far which is... And people are doing a lot of stuff but it's not working. And I think that what's lacking more than anything else we have people working on... I mean, what are people doing to try to get people to influence their reducing carbon? I think there's a lot of people working on changing laws to get institutions and governments and companies to change. There's a lot of education, there's a lot of doom and gloom, there's a lot of guilt and blame, but I support some of these things. I certainly support education but spreading on facts doesn't change people's behavior. I support working with institutions but trying to pass laws without popular support, first, is authoritarian and people tend to resist that, especially in this country, the United States. And guilt and blame, that never seems to... That gets people to dig in their heels and resist.

I think missing from all this is what I would call effective leadership, influencing people in ways that work not just in ways that make the person trying to change, feel bet-



ter as if they've done something but don't actually change other people's behavior. I think what's missing is... Well, here's what I see a lot of is that there's a lot of people who have the following thoughts like it's a hot summer day and it's really hot out. If they turn on the air conditioner, it'll make them feel comfortable. Maybe they think, "If my electrical power is coming from coal, then if I turn it on, I'll be polluting and contributing to global warming. But if I don't turn it on, I'll be uncomfortable. And if billions of other people don't also make the difficult choice that it doesn't really matter what I do. And so I might as well just be comfortable." And so a lot of people are just continuing to do what they were doing without actually changing and saying, "Well, we should change the power company first or we should make a law against what I'm doing. So what I'm doing can't be done."

But in the meantime, they're doing the opposite of leadership - they're following. They're doing what's easy even though they have a sense of what's right for them. And another big thing is a lot of people my age and older they tend to ask... They hear something like by the year 2050 the sea levels will rise a certain amount and this can be really dangerous or something really bad is going to happen, there will be wars over resources and weather patterns that are destroying the crops and so forth. And if they're me, they'll say something like, "Well, let's say I was born in 1971. By 2050, I'll be just about 80 years old. Oh, that sounds pretty bad but not for me. I hope someone solves that but it's not going to be me." And the thing is that people my age and older that's who's in government, that's who's running organizations, those are the people who have influence of the institutions. But so they're not really doing it.

And so there's a lot of people, I think a majority of the people in the world, I can't prove this but I think the majority of the people in the world want to leave the world a better place than they found it. But they are born into a system that makes it easier to keep doing things the way they are and most people aren't stepping forward to lead the change that they want to see in the world. And I think to me that points to leadership. I'm not saying someone with a strong, central authority leader figure, I'm saying someone who can get it what you want to do and help enable you to do it so that you can look at... A lot of people look at changing their behavior for climate change. Certainly, in the United States the most common perspective is they think that's deprivation, that's sacrifice and they don't want to do that. They certainly don't want to be the first one, they don't be the chump who sweats through a hot summer day or who doesn't get to visit Paris any time that they want to go, when other people are and they don't have a sense of I'm part of a bigger thing. They think, "If I'm just into it by myself, it's not going to get anywhere."

And a leader can help people sense: 1) what they do will make a difference; 2) what they do will improve their own lives that they'll look back and say, "I wish I had done it earlier"; and 3) it's not what looks now like deprivation or sacrifice. After you do it, and



yes, you will have to go through a period of change that is challenging. You have to do things that are difficult. You have to do things differently than they are now and some things you like now, you're going to stop doing and some things that you don't like, you're going to start doing. But if you do it, after you do it and you get through those changes, you're going to look back and say, "I wish I'd done it earlier. I wish I'd done more of it. I can't wait to do more of it." Which is how people who've gone through movements of social change look back at it. It was a challenge to do these things at first but they're glad they did it. I'm thinking of like in the United States I think of people who worked in civil rights during the 60s or who during a wartime will sacrifice. In World War II people sacrificed to help the cause. But they're glad that they did. Anyway, so that was a long answer to your question.

Balint: What kind of practical things would you give as recommendations, even out of your own experience?

Joshua: Well, I can't help it start with my own experience because there are a few experiments that I did that I really had no expectations of what would come of them. They were exactly what I described of before doing it, I looked at it as a challenge and even deprivation, doing it was a challenge, but once I got through it I was, "I can't believe I didn't do this earlier." So one big experiment that I did noticing how much of the trash that I produced came from food packaging. I gave myself this challenge to say go for one week without buying any food where I would have to throw away packaging afterward. And for like six months I sat on that idea without doing anything because I thought, "How can I explain to others? People are going to say you're not being consistent." People push back on eating habits. And I also thought, "How am I going to do it?" Like I thought I had to plan out every day.

And one day I realized. I was taking all this analysis and thinking about stuff. I wasn't actually doing anything. And I said, "Look, I'm not going to die." So I said, "Right this moment I'm starting." And for one week I'm not going to get any food where I have to throw away packaging. I allowed myself to finish what was in my cupboards. But basically it meant I had to get fresh fruits and vegetables. And there's a store near me where if I bring bags, I can fill them up with beans and nuts, and in bags that I brought with me. So I made it two and half weeks. This was about a year ago. And then after two and half weeks I bought a bag of onions. I thought, "I didn't need to get that bag. I just did it because it's a little easier, because I was in a place where they had a bag of onions." But since then I haven't gotten any more bags of onions. In fact, in the year plus since then I've gotten one can of food. It was some friends coming over and I bought some canned tomatoes and after I bought it I was like, "Why do I get these canned tomatoes? I was in a hurry to get some tomatoes. But I don't like canned tomatoes. I like fresh tomatoes." And so I haven't gotten any more canned since then.



And I might mentioned it last time we spoke but I now I have a canvas bag that I fill up with my landfill garbage. I put my compost in the compost and that's the wet stuff. So it's only dry stuff. And when I put paper and plastic and metal in the recycling and the stuff that doesn't get recycled and can't be composted, I put in the landfill trash. So it's a canvas bag. I don't even use plastic bags because it's dry. So I just take it down the hall to the trash chute and emptied out and I'm in month six of my current... Last time I emptied my trash was December 4th. So as we're speaking now it's mid-May, late May. And not that it's a big deal but I throw out my garbage once, twice a year. I had no idea that this was going to happen.

But more importantly, and this is like the trash's side effect. The main thing, the big effect is that my diet is much more delicious than ever before. I can't believe, like I didn't know how to cook with local stuff, which in New York City in the winter means things like beets, and kohlrabi, and potatoes, and turnips, and radishes, and squashes, which I never bought any of those things before. I didn't know what a kohlrabi was. I never bought turnips and now I make such delicious food with it. In my opinion, when people come here I make it for them. And people really like this stuff.

I did this other experiment where when I found out that one flight from New York to L.A., a one round trip flight New York - L.A. or New York to Paris and back. I found out that there's roughly one year of driving, one flight, one roundtrip flight and just the flight. And I also later found that if you look at the Paris agreements trying to keep the earth's temperature rise to within one and a half or two degrees Celsius, I found out that you use almost what you're allocated for an entire year to keep the temperature levels low in one roundtrip flight. And if you go first class, meaning you take up more space on the plane, so you take up more. And that's not even the plane that uses that, you, you're part of the plane and if you use business class or first class, you're over the limit. If you fly from New York to Asia or Australia, you're way over the limit. And all these people who are saying all these places change but they themselves are way over the limit. There's a matter of personal...

See if you just talk about the stuff, people are like, "Oh, yeah, that's interesting. That's an interesting fact." When you change your behavior you go through a challenge. Yeah, it was hard because... My book came out last year or rather earlier this year in the year when I was not flying and it's certainly beneficial for me for my book to go on a book tour, to go locally. And I had to say, "You know what? I'm not going to do it." This is a matter of integrity. I'm not like the most integrated person in the world but it's an opportunity for me to improve that. And I'm not special, it's not like anyone else can't go for a week without food packaging and see that it leads to more. Not just more avoiding of packaging but more delicious, more saving, money more convenient. And this opportunity is there for everyone. And what I'm not telling people is you should do what I did. Nor am I saying you should come to me for ideas. What I'm



saying is what I'm hoping to happen is for people to make the mental shift in beliefs and mental models to associate. This is an opportunity for you to become more consistent with what you want to do. This is an opportunity for your personal growth and for you to make a difference, for you to become a leader. And if you do these things, I can't tell you the low level details of how it happens, but if you lead yourself, and I'm not even saying you have to go and try to lead others, but if you do, you'll get hired faster you'll get promoted faster, you'll get your ideas funded because you're doing what other people don't. And that's what gets people hired. That's what gets people promoted. That's what gets people to look at you as a problem solver.

Balint: Yeah. I think you touched on many, many things. At the beginning you mentioned about information, that we are flooded with information. So I don't want to and we should not talk more about the consequences of not acting. Because it's very well-known. For example, just the food packaging, you mentioned that you are avoiding these and you recycled them whatever you can, the plastic you get from the supermarket. It has a decomposition time of 10 to 20 years. Plastic bottles - 450 years. And it's definitely out there the huge consequences of not acting. So that's one thing. The other thing is that you mentioned everybody can do change behavior differently based on also the values the person has and also on the preferences. And anyway, one should do it step by step. You cannot eat an elephant in one piece but you have to do it step by step, in small steps. So how did you start this, just as an example, so that people can further be inspired by you?

Joshua: I mean part of it is like this is something that I've cared about my entire life. I think everybody's cared about... I mean I've never met anyone who doesn't say, "I want to leave the world a better place than I found it." I've never met anyone who says, "I want to hurt people." The thing is it's just easier not to. I mean we are born into a world where it's easier not to. And I guess for a long time having a Ph.D. in physics I feel like I have a view of nature through... I understand conservation of energy that I can't use energy without it coming from somewhere and if I live in a world where it comes from coal or other non-renewables or other fossil fuels and gasoline in the car, then I'm responsible for my choices. So a lot of it is growing up. When I was a child I didn't like responsibility. I didn't like accountability. I tried, "Not me. It wasn't mine. I didn't do it."

And as I've grown older, to me one of the big maturations, one of the big areas that I've matured in life is that I've come to find that taking responsibility and being held accountable improves my life, not in some abstract way, like the big ways, it makes my relationships better. I mean people like people who are accountable more because you can open up to them, you can be more intimate and friendly and they're a better teammate. And just because someone doesn't see me polluting or doesn't see



me creating waste or burning fossil fuels, doesn't mean that they're not still affected by it.

And this is a matter of applying what I learned in leadership, what I've learned in growing up to myself and saying, "I'm going to hold myself accountable for things that other people can't see." And it turns out that it's made my life better. And now it's not about being more responsible or being more accountable, it's really about delicious. It's really about community. And I couldn't have known that unless I actually started doing it. It's about leadership, it's about being... OK. Everyone listening to my voice right now. Everyone listening to this. Either you're perfect or you want to improve in some way. And if you want to improve in some way, you probably have role models, you probably have people that in some way in the past have done something that you wish that you could copy or emulate, that you would like to be like them.

If so, I hope people are listening, think to yourself. Do you have role models? Do you have people that you would like to be more like? If so, think about one of them or think about a couple of them. Did they get there by doing what was easy, by following the path in front of them and everybody else followed? Or maybe did they take on challenges that they weren't sure what the outcomes would be? Did they take on challenges that they didn't know if they would succeed in that? And probably sometimes they succeeded, many times they probably failed, but they stuck with it and probably made it through in some way. Everyone that I've asked this has said, "Yes, that's the case. There's people that I like to emulate, they're role models for me. I'd like to be more like them."

And a lot of people have said, "If I were born in South Africa under apartheid, maybe I could have risen and even if I didn't become Nelson Mandela, maybe I would have been someone who worked with him and I could have taken on challenges and I could have been more like someone like I'd like to be like." Look, I've expressed this at times in my life as well. Poor me, pity me because I was born into a comfortable middle class lifestyle and unfortunately I didn't have an apartheid to take on. I didn't have a civil rights agenda to take on. And poor me, I can't live up to my potential.

Well, here is your chance because we happen to live in a world where we can no longer say, "I hope someday in the future that it'll turn out that global warming isn't really happening or that there'll be inventions or the market will do stuff." The inventions, if you look what happens, they're not working on the timescales that we need, the market is not reacting and governments keep putting in price supports that the markets don't react to what's happening. And if you think that doing what's happening, what's led us into the situation is going to get us out of it, it's not. And we can no longer...



You happen to live and I happen to live in a time when we can no longer say let's hope that what we keep doing we'll keep working. It's not going to work. It hasn't worked. And in my conversation with you right now I can't go into the details of like what happens if we keep doing what we're doing but people have done this and done the systems thinking and projected it out, and it doesn't work. And we need to do different things if we want to see different actions to come from it. And this is your opportunity. Those of you who said, "I have a role model, I am not perfect yet. And there's other people that I would like to be more like." You said it, not me. This is your opportunity to realize your potential, to become the person that you would like to become to emulate someone that lived at a different time. But you have your challenge to take on and become the best you that you can become.

And the side effect will be others will follow you, will decrease the carbon concentrations and the greenhouse gases in the environment. We can't change the past, the sea levels are going to keep rising for a while. But there's different levels of disaster and we might not get disaster, we might avoid catastrophe. We could. It's possible. I live in a country where 50 years ago people would be arrested for sitting at the same lunch counter with each other and people were killed for these things. And then not long ago we had a black man in the White House. I don't think people who acted in those times, I don't think even they believed that within 50 years that someone like Obama would become president. But it happened. And whether you agree with his politics or not, that's a major change in a short amount of time that I don't think anyone predicted. And it was only 100 years before that that we had slavery in this country. That's pretty quick change. I think that we could get change like that in our time.

And thoughts like that are what led me to act and to stop saying, "I want to wait for others to act." I'm going to start acting now, I'm going to try to influence other people. And let me tell you, it's a minefield to go out in the world and to point out to people that something that they believe is inconsistent or the behavior is inconsistent with something that they believe because people like to sleep at night and they tell themselves stories, I've told myself stories why I'm not acting in the moment. And if someone comes out and points on my inconsistencies, I am going to get annoyed at that person. And so part of what I'm doing now is testing the waters and finding out how I can deliver this message and hopefully lead people without stepping on these landmines of people's psyches. But part of being a scientist is looking at predictable behavior and saying if it's predictable, then I can work with it and I can do something about it.

Balint: Josh, many times in behavior change people change when they encounter, when they run into some difficulty and pain. So, personally, what I use, it's kind of like a technique that I developed, it's a simple one, maybe it could be effective for some of the listeners, is that even if I don't feel any immediate pain at the moment, so for



example I didn't fall, I didn't hurt myself, emotionally I was not influenced by some external factors, I can still create pain about something that I want to avoid. So in this case, I want to avoid polluting by thinking about my future projecting out that if I don't act now, I will for the next 20, 30, 40 years, I will pollute a lot in total and that will have huge consequences if we don't act all together collectively. And by thinking about that future pain in the moment I can get myself to act. It's been helpful, even for example when I was, let's say I had a girlfriend and I was let's say disappointed by the girlfriend acting in a certain way in the past and how I got myself to break up or to even if the other person broke up, to feel better is that I thought about the consequences of how that could result by just going on like that with the problems. And that helped me in that moment overcome difficulties. So maybe it could be something useful this kind of tip for listeners to change their behavior, as you said it, you gave a couple of tips what kind of behavioral change would have positive consequences.

And, Josh, we didn't discuss this before the interview, we discussed a few things but not this. But how about that you create a website, a webpage just like in the previous episode that we had recording where you had on your website */hardware*. Maybe you can again mention that name but that was for your book *The Leadership: Step by Step*, which we discussed. Maybe you could create such a page for the listeners who want to maybe even sign up for some personal challenges if they are interested and if there is something even more coming out on this topic, on this initiative to start some kind of movement. Then, of course, the listeners will be informed.

Joshua: Yeah, this is music to my ears. I think that there's lots of ideas that I have that I don't have the time or resources to act on. I mean there's more than anyone can do. But I've been talking to more and more people who are like, "What can I do?" And I would love if someone has experience and skill with creating webpages, if they contacted me, I would love... This will be something that you can do to help promote things. Because I'm giving more and more talks all the time and I want to be able to say to people one idea I have. And is this the only idea? No, but it's one that I have and if the others have others, you don't have to wait for me. But if you want to work with me, please get in touch with me.

And for example, I want to be able to say to the audience, everyone here, if you want to do a week, like maybe you want to go for a week without eating food packaging or maybe you'll go for a month without eating steak because eating beef is like really taxing on the environment. Or maybe you'll not fly for a year like I did or even six months or maybe just delay one flight or you'll change one vacation from being flying to riding a bicycle and camping or something like that. And I want to be able to tell him, go to this webpage and put up your public commit to what you're doing. And at first maybe it would just be that people will just commit to it. But maybe we could throw in some functionality that it will pair you up with someone else is doing some-



thing similar or it will email you every day or every week to remind you of what you're doing or maybe it'll tweet out and put on the social media that this stuff is happening and get it out there. And the people who do this, the people who create the page, you'll be a leader in what is going to become a movement. You will help others to become leaders as well because we have to... I mean ultimately I expect that billions of people will change their behavior. And so, that means millions of people can still act and still be one in a thousand leaders of those other billions. There's a lot of space for people to be on the forefront of this. It doesn't necessarily have to take time. It doesn't have to necessarily take a lot of resources.

And at this stage now, there's so many people out there who want to change and are waiting for others to take the lead. That if you take the lead you're going to learn and grow for yourself, you're going to get hired, you're going to get promoted, you're going to be in demand. People are going to look to you and you're going to learn and grow and things that you don't know how to do now. You learn by doing, you're going to learn more by doing this than you ever did in almost any of the classes you took.

I'll give you the link to put up... I mean, if you go to joshuaspodek.com and click on Contact up in the upper navigation, then you can email me directly. Or you can tweet to me at @Spodek. Or they can contact you and if you don't mind putting them in touch, if they know how to contact you directly.

Balint: Sure. Yeah.

Joshua: And if people contact me and they want to do something, just let me know what your skills are and what your interests are and we'll find something out. I'm at the very beginning of this myself. I've just started doing my first public talks but there's so many people who are waiting for leadership, waiting for people to make it so that they can feel good about changing instead of feeling like it's deprivation and sacrifice. And they're going to look back to you, look back on what you helped them with and they're going to thank you for what you helped them do.

Balint: Maybe it's even your first podcast on this topic. You've had many podcast appearances on other topics but maybe this is the first one, as you said it, a public speaking.

Joshua: Yeah, yeah, of course. It had to come from a physicist, someone who loves nature, who loves the beauty of the world and sees it in a way of like how you act with it not just observe it or not just your interaction with it. It didn't have to be a physicist but I'm not surprised it was.

Balint: Yeah. So, to wrap up because we're running out of time, I think it's very important this call for action, especially at the very end that if you, the listeners, would



like to make a change, behavior change, and not waiting for somebody else to act, for example the government, which is moving, as we see it, very, very slowly, especially when countries have to collaborate and coming to a common agreement, then maybe this is the right moment to act. So thanks a lot, Josh, for being on the podcast again.

Joshua: My pleasure. Thank you for having me back. If people want to contact me, please feel free to contact me. You don't have to, you can act on your own. But if you want ideas, you can come to me and this is part of the start of something that I think will be billions of people following.

Balint: Yeah. I'll put it into the show notes your contact details from the earlier episode. I know that. Thank you again.

Joshua: Thank you.

Balint: Thanks for listening.