**Conversations on Creative Climate Leadership Podcast**

Episode 6: COURAGE

**SPEAKERS**

Farah Ahmed, Guy Ritani, Louis VI, Payal Parekh

**Louis VI** 00:00

This is it, the sixth and final episode of this mini podcast series. Before we get into our final reflections, we've got one more set of guests to hear from Farah. So far we've heard about Play, Integrity, Care, Exploration, Repair… What have we got for the last one?

**Farah Ahmed**

Hey Louis and hey everyone. We're really at the end, but there's a reason why we saved these guests until last. They're gonna talk us through Courage as our final value and how we put that into action. This is Payal and Guy introducing themselves in their own words.

**Payal Parekh** 00:49

My name is Payal Parekh, and I used to be a climate activist, climate scientist, and now I work on campaigning, mobilising and organising for climate justice. I'm originally from Mumbai, a mega city in India, and now I'm based in Switzerland. A couple of projects that are related to arts and activism that I'm working on is right now organising a book tour of a German political activist who's been focusing on climate collapse, and on the other hand, what I'm doing is working with a journalist in India, and we are collecting from local journalists all across India stories about about adaptation and climate impacts, because normally they're written by either Western journalists or journalists from the big cities like me. And this is an opportunity to really hear from people who are journalists, but from those communities and writing in local languages, not writing in English.

**Guy Ritani** 01:56

Kia Ora koutou katoa, ko Guy toku ingoa. My name is Guy. I'm from Aotearoa, so New Zealand, Land of the Long White Cloud. I've been living in Gadigal Country in so-called Australia for the past seven years. But I've just moved home. And I've just been at the Waitangi Treaty Grounds, the place of our treaty here in New Zealand, celebrating Indigenous sovereignty in all of its different forms and our protection for our lands, our waters and our skies. I'm part of a number of different networks, Pacific Climate Warriors, Collective of Youth Food, campaign and community organisers on localising food systems, and Rising Tide and a number of other wonderful climate organisations. A recent project that I worked on the end of last year was the Newcastle Coal Port Blockade, which is the largest coal port in the world, and we had a massive blockade there of civil disobedience direct action, and had 177 of our kayakers arrested. And yeah, it was a beautiful week-long event of awareness raising, community organising and movement building that we had a lot of fun storytelling and dancing and having a holding ceremony with.

**Louis VI** 03:28

All right, there's a lot to talk about, not just from today, but also from the whole series. So before we switch off the mics, let's get into it. Payal, Guy, welcome to the podcast. Very pleased to have you with us. This series is all about Creative Climate Leadership, and let's dive straight into that. I want to begin by focusing a bit on what those words creative Climate Leadership mean. What does that mean to you, and how does that live in your day to day work? Maybe start with you Guy?

**Guy Ritani** 04:11

Creative Climate Leadership for me, is definitely grounded in storytelling and how we re-connect and re-engage with, not just our communities, but the people that we really need to build bridges with and build alliance with and build union with. And I think creativity is the most critical part of that. You know, there are so many different ways that we can tell stories, and the ways that we tell those stories then fractal out through our communities really quickly. And so coming up with new ways or different ways, or more relevant ways, or more contextual ways, that we can speak a deeper truth to this experience in a way that our communities can hear is so deeply important. And in a world that's changing as fast as the one we exist within, that is reconciling with histories in a way that it hasn't before… We're in a time of a lot of truth and a lot of confusion, and so how we can write that story, and how we can tell that story, and how we can find truth and connection, solidarity, and understanding, and union in that is of the most importance, at least to our communities. And the leadership in that is really critical. You know, how do we all find our part in that story? How do we all find our own creativity? Everyone has some art form, even if they don't know it, and all the different art forms play a critical role in this harmony of change that we need to come towards. And so I feel like we're in this wonderful place of recognising all the different forms of creativity and artistry, and I'm seeing a lot of amazing organisers across the world recognise the different parts that they play in this, yeah, this whatever performance or whatever the story is. Some of the most compelling organising that I'm seeing at the moment is through this intersectional synthesis of different creative forms coming together, bringing this really critical message that's right, relevant now in a beautiful and compelling and emotive, and really artistic and creative way. And I think, you know, that's always fertile.

**Louis VI** 06:59

That's beautifully put. And it does feel like the yeah, it does come down to the fact that, you know, humans require storytelling to relate to stuff and bring them into the fold of more complex issues, kind of like we're getting into today Payal. Do you have anything to add to what you feel Creative Climate Leadership means to you and your work?

**Payal Parekh** 07:25

I think what I would add is maybe from a personal perspective, from Eastern to a Western culture, in India, I was part of a movement, the Narmada Bachao Andolan - Save the Narmada River, and there was a lot of culture used in that. It was basically Indigenous communities and farming communities that were going to, and did eventually get displaced by hydroelectric dam, a mega dam. And you know, it was, it was really hard, but there was so much of this storytelling that Guy is talking about, but there's also this, this community of rituals, of traditions that were a glue, keeping people together, keeping hope up, also making people feel they're part of something bigger, and that we can, we can defeat a huge corporation, a huge project, and it was the first time in the history of the World Bank that the World Bank had to pull out of a project. And I think if it had just been hardcore campaigning, that would not have happened, right? Because you need people, and you have to reach people. And I became a scientist, you don't reach most people by telling them facts, right? You reach them through their hearts and minds. And that's where culture and arts is so important. And I think it's also, as Guy says, an opportunity for so many people of different walks of life to show their leadership, because it doesn't mean you have to be at the front of the march speaking loudly, and you know, we can. We can also unpack that and say, are those people really leaders? And on the other side, we have to meet people where they're at, and we have to make connections and build bridges, and we do that again through storytelling. And when I left India, and - I grew up in India as well as the US - and when I came back to the US to do my PhD, and started to get involved more in social causes, I was a bit turned off, because, like, everybody is wearing black. It's so angry. And I'm an angry person, you know, but even I was turned off by it. And the arts and culture were missing until I met an American activist who organised against the WTO, David Solnit, who is an amazing arts organiser. So I would just say that, you know, just wanted to give a couple exam personal examples that mirrored what Guy said for me. And I could not get into the US activism circle until I started to see arts and culture coming through, even though I myself am not the, I'm that's not my metier, per se, but I just couldn't connect without that.

**Louis VI** 10:27

And it's interesting, because it's come up a few times in the episodes, like what the definition of leadership even is, and if, if that is something that we should be a term, or even like a a a role that we should be moving forward with because, yeah… Is leadership, so much of this, the typical individual aspect of someone being at the front and the rest following clearly isn't working very well, and we don't have a very good display of it. So do you think the creative and climate aspect changes the way leadership should be? Is there a type of leadership that we've overlooked so far?

**Payal Parekh** 11:12

I mean, it's, it's something I think about a lot, and I write about. I don't have, per se, difficulty with the English word leadership. I work a lot now in the German speaking part of the world, so they don't like that word at all because of historical connotations during the Nazi times. But what I like to say is that there's many forms of leadership, and I really advocate for a type of campaigning that's more of an ecosystem model. That is to say that there's not one right way, and if we only do one thing, we will not win. But if we can combine and see that, hey, we need, perhaps, you know, those policy advocates. We also need people who are in power, who are on our side and working from the inside. We need the creative communicators, like Guy. We also need the scientists, but what we actually need to do is realise that everybody is a leader. And the person who stands in the front and might be known as the leader can't do that without all the people behind them. So that's how I see it is that we need lots of different types of leadership, and actually the best is when people can kind of work in their parts of the ocean, but they know what they're doing. We don't need to be coordinated like a military, but we know that what we're doing provides energy to the other areas, say, of the ocean ecosystem. Since I used to be an oceanographer,

**Guy Ritani** 12:51

Yeah, I love, I love that ocean narrative. It's something that is completely on the ball for projects that we're working on around leadership. And yeah, I completely agree with what Payal said. I think leadership is contextual, and I think it looks different for every different context. And what's right somewhere is wrong somewhere else. And you know, we can't be prescriptive about what works somewhere. And so, for us, we really approach from a Tino Rangatiratanga or self-determination, how do we find and equip the skills for the leadership to emerge out of itself? And you know, when we talk about this sort of movement and collective solidarity, if we're all able to lead and know what's right for us and for our community, and we're able to work together and be in solidarity to the extent of what that looks like for your context, then our collective strength is so much more powerful. I think the Western, white leadership model is, yeah, it's really competitive. And I don't necessarily think leadership needs to be competitive. It's about finding harmony, and it's about, you know, the people who have the resource and privilege to mobilise in the way that they do, taking those leadership roles, because not everyone is born with the same access or skill or talent, or, proximity to resources or education. It doesn't mean that they're not a leader. It just means their form of leadership looks different. And if we can recognise all of the different leaders for what they are and work together, then we become more powerful. And so I think the term leadership can be definitely expanded on, and I think there are translations of the. leadership or leader that can be learned from in many different languages, in many different contexts.

**Louis VI** 15:06

What is interesting because what I'm or feel like I've also heard and in both the things you say, there's a there's also a theme of of of flow and water, and particularly rivers, is a really interesting one, and I've been doing a lot of reading and listening about re-wilding rivers and letting flows come back, and particularly removing like hydro electric dams, like the Klamath River and the salmon coming back. But also, you know, more importantly, the communities and Indigenous people that are coming back are able to have their whole culture and set up back by a natural flowing river. And you said Payal, you did quite a lot of work around rivers and removal of dams and exploring that. But also, Guy is speaking about bridges, and how do we build these these metaphorical bridges with those that are seemingly ideologically opposed to what is so natural to ourselves? Even those that are intentionally causing destruction, like followers of Trump's doctrine, or, you know, Bolsonaro, or, there's a long list of bad world leaders right now, so that could go on. That's an inexhaustive list. So I feel like, how do you speak to that side? Or even, maybe there's something in saying there's a certain side that can't be spoken to, but there is a huge section of society that seems to be somewhere in the middle that falls either way, depending on the way the wind blows, I guess. But I think we are always in that danger of only speaking to those that already understand.

**Guy Ritani** 16:53

I mean, I think this is why art… If we take a like decolonial look at art and its function in a lot of pre-colonial communities, it's not about consumption. It's just a reflection of what is. It's a part of everyday life. We sing because there is protocols of why we sing. There are events that we are meant to sing at. There's a blossoming of a certain kind of tree brings on this performance and that's a marking of who we are and how we know ourselves to be. And there's something divine in that. And I think if we look at how the arts as an industry has emerged now, and the need, especially young people, to be at music festivals, because they get to be in touch with that divine, they get this collective experience, and they get to be beholden to incredible artists, incredible vocalists, with amazing…the bass of these drums. And if we peel that back, it's all ceremony, it's all meaning making, it's all purpose. It's all about who are we? Why are we here together? And I think part of addressing this challenge is not necessarily addressing it head on, but participating in these new ceremonies together. And what does that look like in a contemporary context? How do we invite our senior knowledge keepers of these lands into these contexts? What would that look like if we had a, I don't know what festivals there are in London, but one of the big festivals, what if we had a collab with some of the senior Indigenous knowledge holders and that might be crazy, and it also might be really meaningful. And I, when I see that this leadership that's not going in the right direction, it's because it's lived by people who don't understand that purpose, they don't understand that responsibility, they don't understand where or why they need to go. And there are actually many cultures across the whole world that know that landscape and know those protocols and how about we platform them, and how about we collaborate. And you know, that's not necessarily to colonise or gentrify that, but what would it look like if we reimagine these spaces of convening that are just meaningless consumption with a new story? And I think the world is really ready for that, and we've seen a lot of these events emerge. And I think it's, again, that synthesis of meaning, because no matter how disconnected you are, you're still a human. You're still in your body, you still have your senses. And that's something that's magical about being alive in this world, is we can sense that ceremony. We can sense that meaning making. Even when I was in Australia, some of the crazy, racist, far right people couldn't deny that reality, that this is something that's sacred. And how do we, how do we create more of that? What is it? Who do we need to platform and what communities are already doing that? Of which there are very many all across the world.

**Payal Parekh** 20:26

I guess this is where I focus less on arts and culture, but I do a lot of work around this, and I started something called, I guess in English, it would be like Climate Conversations, and this is where I kind of take more the techniques of organising and working with unions and campaign strategy. And as you said, Louis, I think this, we can do something called a spectrum of allies, where you tend to look at different communities, different groups. Are they…How far away or near are they to our perspective? And I think you're right. There is a group that you know, they're diametrically opposite. You're not going to find common ground. Forget it. It's not worth our efforts. But as you said, there's a large group of people that are sort of in the middle, and I've wanted to reach them more. And I do think there's, I absolutely agree with Guy, and there's lots that can be done with arts and culture, but I think some of it is about actually reaching out and talking to people, and how we do it. And this came to me when my husband and I were cycling along the Danube, I think we actually then got off the Danube and went to Turkey. But we were in southern Germany, which is quite conservative, and a woman asked us - we were taking a break - where we were cycling to, what we were doing. And then she suddenly got really upset. She said “Oh, you're a climate activist. You know these activists that come and tell us that we should never drive anymore, and how do I do that when I live in a village where the bus comes once or three times a day, where I have an organic farm? I'm trying to do my best for the environment, but I have to get my goods to market.” And in that moment, I realised, Ah, okay, basically people like me don't ask what she thinks about the world. Don't ask what her situation is. We come in and we say “you need to do this, this and this”. And I knew at that moment, if I just start arguing with her, I'm going to lose so then I started to just ask her “what is the situation? And it sounds like you do care about the environment. So what do you think are the solutions? Why do you think these are important?” And you know, things come out that, for example, over the course of that conversation, by the end, it was “well, maybe a bunch of us who have farms could actually share a truck, and maybe we share an electric truck”. And, you know, “I really need the car because my mother is 88 and she can't stand at a bus stop”. And started to think about solutions. And so I think it's a lot about us going out of our bubble and learning how to listen to other people and find some of those common threads, which I do think culture connects us, even if you're from very different cultures, as you said, like the far right. And it's not easy. It's not easy by any means, but I think we can start to find common ground and I think rituals and traditions, whether from the same culture or different cultures, they often have the same role, can bind us further, but that's one of the things I'm really trying to do, is get out of my bubble and get out of my attitude of, you know, “I'm trained at MIT on climate, physics and chemistry, and I can tell you what needs to be done”, and as opposed to really seeing what a lot of Indigenous communities do is is not have a very strong hierarchy and everyone's a part of the conversation and try to find that common ground to move us forward. Will we agree on everything? No, but I do believe that if we can find a way to hook people or see our commonality and see why it's important, we can then move in the direction of saying, you know, we can live better with less, and it does require real changes. And maybe some of us are giving up something, but what we're gaining is a world in which the majority are thriving, nature is thriving and we continue to live and we gain peace of mind and better quality of life.

**Louis VI** 25:21

And as exactly as you say, you know we need it to be where a majority is thriving, because we're definitely at the complete opposite of that word, a tiny minority are thriving and everyone else suffers. Each of our episodes has a word, and the word is a characteristic we think of climate leadership. And this episode's word is Courage. Guy, what does it mean to have courage when going about your work or telling the story of your work?

**Guy Ritani** 25:51

I mean, you know, I also want to reflect Payal, my favourite moments actually have been the eldership that has supported me to be courageous and also to be courageous in failing. We've had some bad actions, like some bad rallies that we've done, and the eldership just holding us through the fact that we needed to learn from these experiences. We needed to understand, we needed to know what we did wrong, and we also needed to determine that ourselves. And if I hadn't been held by a huge range of incredible elders that are staunch and I respect so deeply, I don't think I would have stayed. I would have seen that as a failure, and I wouldn't have the wisdom or insight to know what comes after that. And it's because of these elders in these spaces of support that I've been able to be courageous. And I think now is a time of courageously failing and learning and trying, just trying something new for the sake of it, and not being afraid of failing, even though everything's on camera, on Tiktok or on whatever, and there's such a social weight to it, but you know, just fail valiantly and courageously and learn from it and do it again, because we have no other option. And I think we've seen a lot of courageous actions absolutely pay off, and those ones are the ones that grasp attention, that grasp the hearts and minds and action of people that haven't witnessed that before.

**Louis VI** 27:34

I mean, that's a brilliant way to put it. And I think a lot of people listening to this as well, and some will be familiar with what Creative Climate Leadership is, and that courage to fail, I think, is such a massive part of it, because if you aren't open to failure, you can only achieve mediocrity, really. And as you know, whether that's creativity, whether that's science, which is inherently creative, or whether that's just communicating and having a conversation, if you're not willing to have a conversation that fails, you're not really going to say anything that meaningful. And I think you know, you've both spoken to that brilliantly. But yeah, to wrap up, it's been such a beautiful conversation. But I think there's also a lot of people for everything we've said is quite fresh, especially you know the concept of Creative Climate Leadership. So what would you say to the people that are listening? What's one thing that you would ask the person listening to this right now to do next?

**Guy Ritani** 28:39

This year for me, is about relationships, about forming relationships with people you wouldn't normally do that. And within that as well, let go of your moral outrage. There are enough… There's enough people outraged, and we need to convince the people who are doing heinous stuff. So moral outrage is useful. We understand it, your community will, but throw it out the window because it's not effective in storytelling sometimes. So that's the thing that we can play with. I'm also open to that being a failure of mine this year. So there we go.

**Louis VI** 29:12

No, I love that. That's brilliant. I needed to hear that one.

**Payal Parekh** 29:16

Yeah, for me, it's really the same to talk to new people, people who maybe don't think like you do. And what I would add to it based on guys' great response is that it's okay to fail. Just try, try, try, try, try, and eventually you will succeed.

**Louis VI** 29:39

What a beautiful way to finish it, Guy, Payal, thank you so much for coming onto the podcast and chatting to me. It was brilliant to have you on. What a conversation!

**Payal Parekh** 29:49

Likewise, thank you for the invitation. It's been lovely speaking to both of you.

**Guy Ritani** 29:54

Kia ora, thank you so much.

**Farah Ahmed** 29:56

I just want to quickly ask you about your reflections on your conversation with Guy and Payal, before we get into a look back over the whole journey so far.

**Louis VI** 30:12

That felt like a really holistic one. I really enjoyed that one because it was very much centred around the non-Western narrative for one and, and the language as well. And Guy's talking a lot about from Maori sovereignty in New Zealand and personhood of things like rivers, and that came a lot into Payal's work, and I think… the rewilding of rivers, but also the communities that surround that and how important that is. And these rivers run through many different cultures and places and countries and stuff, but you know, there's a real connection there that I think is beautiful. And what they said about everyone being a leader in their own way. Yeah it's beautiful.

**Farah Ahmed** 31:07

I think connection's the real word there that sums it up for me.

**Louis VI** 31:12

Yeah.

**Farah Ahmed** 31:13

So Louis, over the course of these six episodes, what have you, what have you taken away from this? And what do you think about Creative Climate Leadership now?

**Louis VI** 31:25

It's a good question, because I didn't really know what it was before, but now I it's almost the answer that is more questions, which I think is a good thing. I feel like I now know that also you should challenge the hierarchy of certain words and where they come from, like leadership and exploration, but also…moving artfully, which is, I guess, the creative aspect of the Creative Climate Leadership is so important. That really comes down to what Eliki was saying. But also, I think there's a lot to be said for empowering people to talk about and experience and empathise with difficult things through play and humour, and that takes courage, and that takes all the words that we've talked about, but it's a lot about finding your own way to be a part of this, I think.

**Farah Ahmed** 32:34

And all of these, these different words have different interpretations and different ways into this, right? There's no one way to be courageous, and there's no one way to repair, that every person has the potential to bring all of those things along with them.

**Louis VI** 32:51

Yeah yeah. And there's a reoccurring theme of community-based storytelling, and I think that does a lot of repair, both directly to the land, but also a relationship to the land. And I think there was also, you know, there's a wider theme. It's like, yes, we've had science for a long time. You know, it's been 50 years plus of being told exactly what's happening in graphs and stuff. But we aren't these mechanical, logical beings that we wish we were. We are just so based on feeling and emotion. And I think we speak to and relate to other people through art. That's our language. That's the thing that we have. You know, for all the terrible things humans have done, art is a brilliant thing, and probably in big part because it's so inspired from the natural world. And that is a way of tackling these behemoth topics of climate change that are umbrella things to racism and social inequality, and billionaire destruction of everything we know. And awful examples of leadership, we do need to redefine that. What does good leadership look like? And maybe it isn't this hierarchical, very patriarchal and colonial and Western construct. There's other definitions of these things that need to maybe come to the top. Now, okay, so Farah, can I ask you a question though?

**Farah Ahmed** 34:28

Go for it.

**Louis VI** 34:29

So you know, we've asked all our guests about this, but for the listener, what can they do to really connect to that Creative Climate Leadership personally for themselves, do you think?

**Farah Ahmed** 34:45

That's a great question? I think that there's a couple of things that we can do. It always starts with really understanding your role and what it is that you bring into this space. We are all different, and we have different strengths. We all have different passions, and it's important that we bring it all to the table and we connect with one another, because this is… we are an ecology. We are not single, lonely people. We are not islands, who are completely separate from everything and everybody else. We all have something really beautiful to offer, and we are… that's how we become more than the sum of our parts. We can be something that is really strong and really rooted and really powerful.

**Louis VI** 35:35

and fun!

**Farah Ahmed** 35:35

And fun!

**Louis VI** 35:36

I mean, that is definitely the thing that's come out is just, that you want to dance in that revolution as well.

**Farah Ahmed** 35:46

Exactly, we're building worlds together here. And so those worlds should be full of art, should be full of laughter, should be full of all of the beautiful things that we want and that make us healthy, that make us happy, and that connect us to one another.

**Louis VI** 36:05

And it is, you know, chatting to all these people all over the planet, really listeners, they've been all over the planet! I've been having to get up super early. I don't think I've ever spoken that much at that time, you know, 6:30am but no, it wasn't quite that early… It was nearly that early! But the take home from that is that we are in a majority. It's just a tiny minority of people that are ruining this for us, and I think the majority of people would be hard pressed to deny that they want clean water, they want access to nature, they want clean air, they want their family and their kids and people and their friends to feel joy and art and just experience life in a good way. And that does… We live on a planet that is nature, and we're part of that. So it requires nature for us to live healthily and joyously on this planet. So yeah, everyone isn't alone, which is quite cool. So that's definitely… I learned that.

**Farah Ahmed** 37:15

What a way to end your Creative Climate Leadership School journey.

**Louis VI**

I can't believe it. I'm not quite ready to give a lesson, but I've definitely learned a lot.

**Farah Ahmed**

We'll have you back on for the next series, Louis.

**Louis VI** 37:30

I'm down, I'm down. So before we go, I've been Louis VI. It's been a pleasure.

**Farah Ahmed** 37:34

I've been Farah Ahmed. And thanks everybody for listening. Thanks for listening to Conversations on Creative Climate Leadership. It's a podcast from us here at Julie's Bicycle, a non-profit, mobilising the arts and culture to take action on the climate, nature and justice crisis. Big thanks to our funders and partners who've supported the work of the creative Climate Leadership Network and the making of this podcast. Pro Helvetia and Stiftung Mercator Schweiz for CCL Switzerland, as well as the European Cultural Foundation's Culture of Solidarity Fund, and Porticus. And a thanks to our host Louis VI, who's a member of EarthPercent, the music industry's Climate Foundation, who support JB's work on climate action with the music community. Thanks for listening.