Transcript of *Frontiers of Commoning*, Podcast #38

Interview with Leah Penniman
Co-Executive Director & Farm Director of Soul Fire Farm
May 1, 2023

Penniman: [00:00:00] Albert Einstein called Dr. Carver the greatest mind of the century. He had thousands of patents. He discovered species of fungus. He said, "Oh, well, it's very simple. I go out into the forest in the pre-dawn hours and listen to the voice of God through nature. I listen to the trees, the flowers, the soil, because nature is God's broadcasting system."

It struck me that this renowned scientist had a kinship relationship with the earth, with the divine through the earth, that informed these practices and who else in our community might have that remembering of the way that we're interwoven?

Announcer: This is *Frontiers of Commoning* with David Bollier.

Bollier: My guest today is Leah Penniman, a Black Creole activist farmer who co-founded Soul Fire Farm in 2010 in Petersburg, New York. Soul Fire Farm is a remarkable afro-indigenous centered community [00:01:00] farm dedicated to promoting food sovereignty, uprooting racism, and reclaiming ancestral connections to the land.

It has a deep commitment to regenerative agriculture, but also a fierce dedication to using food and agriculture to make change in the wider world. It has an immersive farmer training program for Black and brown people. It helps feed people who lack access to healthy, nutritious food due to food apartheid.

And the farm campaigns for access to land and reparations for massive land theft that African Americans and indigenous Americans have experienced over the generations. Penniman told the story of Soul Fire Farm in her 2018 book, *Farming While Black*, a manifesto and practical guide to liberation on the land.

Now, Penniman has expanded her vision to explore the distinctive history, spiritual traditions, and deep ecological understandings that African Americans and indigenous people have long had with land and the earth. Her just published book, *Black Earth Wisdom* [00:02:00] describes itself as love songs for the earth and its people. It consists of sixteen captivating interviews between noted Black elders in a variety of fields, a rich conversation that includes author Alice Walker, activist adrienne maree brown, ornithologist J. Drew Lanham, attorney Savi Horne, farmer Chris Bolden-Newsome, and many others. I'm thrilled to dig more deeply into this topic with Leah and into Soul Fire Farm's pioneering work.

Welcome to *Frontiers of Commoning*, Leah.

Penniman: Thank you so much for having me.

Bollier: I'm just so impressed with the richness and wisdom and insights that you pull together in the book. And as someone who studies the Commons a lot, the fierce emphasis on relationality just jumps out at me. And of course, that lies at the heart of the commons, but it's a topic that's mostly ignored in mainstream thinking and activism, including in agriculture.

Do you agree with that? And tell me how you're trying to get [00:03:00] beyond some of those premises of capitalism and modern culture.

Penniman: I love that we're diving in deep right from the beginning. So I do agree that *Black Earth Wisdom* is very much about relationality, both within the human community, but also with our beyond-human kin.

And the seed of the idea for the book came out of one beautiful anecdote that I came across when writing *Farming While Black*. It's about Dr. George Washington Carver. And for those who don't know about this incredible scientist and agronomist, he was a professor at Tuskegee University in the late 1800s and early 1900s, and arguably one of the godparents of modern, organic, and regenerative. Two generations before the word 'organic' was even coined in its modern usage.

He was having farmers compost, mulch, rotate their crops, use cover cropping of leguminous crops in order to fix nitrogen in the soil, and was talking about [00:04:00] soil in these kinship terms. And when asked by his friend, Glenn Clark, where he got all these ideas. Now, mind you, Albert Einstein called Dr. Carver the greatest mind of the century. He had thousands of patents. He discovered species of fungus. He said, "Oh, well, it's very simple. I go out into the forest in the pre-dawn hours and listen to the voice of God through nature. I listen to the trees, the flowers, the soil, because nature is God's broadcasting system through which we receive information every minute, every hour, every day if we just tune to the right channel."

It struck me that this renowned scientist had a kinship relationship with the earth, with the divine through the earth, that informed these practices. And who else in our community might have that remembering of the way that we're interwoven? So of course, talking with one elder led to two, to ten, to forty, to hundreds, which, you know, I had to stop at some point because of word [00:05:00] count.

But I do think that the fundamental breach that we are dealing with that underlies capitalism, white supremacy in all manner of oppression, is the delusion that somehow we're not connected, that the other is less than or unimportant, different from our beloved family.

Bollier: I mean, the idea, first of all, that a scientist could also be a mystic is kind of an amazing thought. But of course by his own admission, that's how he came through a lot of the wisdom that he later shared as a scientist.

In your book you say that the idea for it originated in a dream. Could you tell me about the dream you had and what you make of that?

Penniman: Sure. So it's important for folks to understand that my deep, spiritual, and kinship relationship with the earth started quite young.

My siblings and I were, for most of our childhood, the only brown family in our rural, central Massachusetts town, and the racialized bullying from our peers and from teachers in [00:06:00] our school was relentless. So there wasn't safety in the human community for us. And we sought sanctuary in the forest amongst the moss, and the wood sorrel, and the rainbow trout and the islands of blueberries in Lake Watatic and developed this real sense of Mother Nature was not a metaphor to us. We felt mothered by and cared for. My sister Naima and I started the Junior Ecologist's Kids Club when we were six and seven years old, going around on pollution patrol with our Huffy bicycles and so on.

We invented a religion called Mother Nature, where we propitiated the trees. Of course later on realized we were remembering rather than inventing. But all that to say, you know, when we learned that the earth was in trouble, so to speak, of climate change and biodiversity loss, it was a very personal assault and jarred us into action.

And in that time of my life, I remember quite keenly talking with the deer and talking with the pine tree, we would [00:07:00] make up songs and odes of praise and they'd come to us in our dreams. And, you know, as I became an adult and sort of matured in my activism, got more pragmatic in how I approached things, there was less of that direct connection.

So during the pandemic in 2020 I had a vision actually during a ceremony where these animals of my childhood, the barred owls and coyotes and deer were admonishing me in grief that I had forgotten how to speak their language, that I was no longer checking in with them directly; been too focused on the people. That was further inspiration to lean into this question around earth listening particularly in the Black community where earth listening has been underappreciated, let's say, by the white environmental world. And to really add a little bit to the canon of Black environmental thought and contribution from that perspective.

Bollier: It seems that that canon has been largely overlooked. There's obviously been [00:08:00] literature, but it hasn't been foregrounded or elevated within the white mainstream canon. Was part of your purpose to try to precisely consolidate and bring that forward in a more conspicuous way?

Penniman: Certainly, and I stand on the shoulders of my peers. You know, Dr. Carolyn Finney with *Black Faces, White Spaces*; Audrey Peterman’s work; Lauret Savoy’s work. There is some incredible Black ecological literature out there. And I know that in my space of regenerative and organic ag, there's nary a whisper.

People are not talking about these authors or this thought. And so if that's true in the Black farming space, even more so in the white environmental and white farming space, that the contributions of indigenous folks, including Black, indigenous folks are ignored, maligned, appropriated. And so I did want to contribute to that.

And also, you know, in some ways, *Farming While Black* is the how to guide: how to compost, [00:09:00] how to do farm to table, how to plant your carrots, how to restore your soil. But there's an underlying why, and I think *Black Earth Wisdom* starts to go deeper in terms of what is the cosmology, the worldview that underlies the decisions of right action with respect to our beyond-human kin?

Bollier: It seems so compelling and necessary because one of the lessons I've learned in studying the commons is that there was this almost inborn compulsion to seek wholeness in one's identity and that it seems that a lot of regenerative agriculture is kind of stuck in the earth system sciences mode and doesn't want to cross that threshold into the inner life, into the relational life of the earth lest one be accused of mysticism or getting too woowoo because you have to have hard science. And that's what was so refreshing to me about this book is stepping into that threshold, unapologetically. [00:10:00]

Penniman: Right. And weaving both together. You know, originally my editors were trying to classify this as a religious or philosophical book. I interviewed just as many scientists as I did priests. I think that our scientific ways of knowing and our soulful ways of knowing are completely compatible. And I hope that we can lift that stigma and get more comfortable talking about cation-exchange capacity alongside the voice of the God in the wind. Those things can coexist.

Bollier: The Dalai Lama is well behind that, and people I've interviewed on my podcast like Andreas Weber, the eco-philosopher, and Stephan Harding, who's a big proponent of the Gaia theory of James Lovelock say the same thing: that this inner dimension of the collective unconsciousness of our spiritual life has to come to the fore.

Penniman: Absolutely. I think if we could solve this in the material world, we would have, because we have the solutions, right? [00:11:00] We have project draw down and we know how many slices of the pie of this carbon reduction strategy and that; and the powerful do not want to give up their power or their money. So there's certainly that that we're up against, but fundamentally, there needs to be a shift in terms of our understanding of the why.

It's not just about extending the life of the natural resources so that we can hedonistically, consume and have them run out a few generations later. We actually need to consider each unborn child of each species as our own. And when we do that, the philosophical approach to resource, to environment, shifts in a way that's much more sustainable than these sort of external metrics and impositions of policy.

Bollier: I think that's one of the hardest things, however, is getting people to make what I call the onto-shift, the ontological shift, because it means surrendering [00:12:00] such deep emotional and intellectual investments in the former worldview. And that's really hard to do, which maybe this is an appropriate moment to circle back to Soul Fire Farm because that obviously has been an important incubator for many of your ideas, it's given you perspective, it's introduced you to new friends and colleagues.

Maybe we should talk a little bit about your experience with Soul Fire Farm as a context in which you've tested and experienced a lot of these ideas. Start maybe with how you came to found Soul Fire Farm and how it's developed.

Penniman: Oh, I'd love to.

I wish your listeners could see the smile of a proud mother right now. So we consider Soul Fire Farm our third child, Neshima and Emet being the human children, Soul Fire, born shortly after and is the organizational farm child of our family.

So I've been farming since 1996. I started as a teenager, very much fell in love with farming as the intersection between earth care and human care. And had [00:13:00] that career alongside being an environmental science and biology teacher in high school, public school. Soul Fire Farm itself, the impetus was after our second human child, Emet was born, we were living in the south end of Albany, New York, which is a community under food apartheid. Food apartheid is that insidious system of segregation that relegates certain people to food opulence and others to food scarcity, and means that Black and brown folks most often are more likely to experience hunger and diet related illnesses, kidney failure, heart disease and so on.

We struggled to get vegetables. I mean, there was no farmer's market, no grocery store, no community garden plot open when we moved and we had to walk over two miles to pick up a CSA share from a farm. So when our neighbors found out that we knew how to farm and they were similarly yearning for that life giving food, they… it was a running joke, like, 'When are you going to start a farm for us? When are you going to start a farm for the people?'

Bollier: [00:14:00] This despite you being a public-school science teacher at the time.

Penniman: Oh, yeah. I was a science teacher until 2019. So this career has been alongside Soul Fire's growth. But we'd had that itch in the back of our minds, but it really catalyzed us to go ahead and wed ourselves to some land. So we're on 80 acres of unseated Mohican territory, also known as Grafton, New York, about 35 minutes away from that neighborhood, the south end of Albany. And we signed white man's papers in 2006 and for four years, built the soil, built the straw bale, timber frame, passive solar home and program center, and built the vision in collaboration with community.

We opened in 2010 with a mission to end racism in the food system. And our first program was a doorstep delivery of low and no cost food to the south end called Solidarity Shares. And that is our longest running program to this day, it's expanded to more neighborhoods, but we bring fresh food to those very people who encouraged [00:15:00] us to start the farm.

Bollier: How did you make a go of it? It's farming is a notoriously difficult proposition economically, and besides the difficulty I'm sure in raising the down payment to buy the land as a small farm without the economies of scale or the so-called efficiencies of industrial agriculture, how did you keep it going in those early, difficult years?

Penniman: I love that you asked that. That's the realist question, right? It's something like 95% of small farms rely on outside income. We were no different. So I worked as a public school teacher, a high school teacher until 2019 and put about 50% of my salary towards the farm. My spouse was a builder and built people's houses and renovated, and also put funds toward [it], we borrowed money from, we were denied a bank loan, but we were able to borrow money from friends and family.

We also took a lot of time. I mean, we took over four years to build the house, so we would save and spend, save and spend. More recently, [00:16:00] 2015 to 2016, we formed a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization alongside co-op. So the land is held cooperatively [and] the education programs and farm are run through the nonprofit, and of course nonprofits can leverage funding through grants, foundations, donations. And so that's made it possible for us to build a staff and, you know, expand our reach.

Bollier: It strikes me that you had a whole different ethic in the sense that you were not there to just as a solo farming operation, but as a collective, which had the energy, the income, the connections of a lot of people, which of course is why I'm so fascinated as a commoner about the project because it's so…What shall I say?...outside of the imagination of most people, it's not seen as a practical way. It's seen as idealistic or visionary, but in some ways you could say that was the most practical way forward.

Penniman: Yeah. Let's go ahead and be idealistic and visionary. It's very practical. I mean, [00:17:00] I am the most spreadsheet kind of brain person that you probably will ever meet, so… I love math and science and logic and doing things together is quite logical.

I mean, the enclosure of the commons and the sort of western notion of private property is a very young idea and it's a very strange idea. You know, almost anywhere in the world that you go indigenous communities don't put all the proverbial bundle of sticks of property rights into the hands of the one person or family that's holding the land.

A whole bunch of those rights are still held by the community and some are held by deities. So, you know, it's honestly quite strange. And one of the reasons that we wanted the land to be 'owned' and this is in, you know, air quotes because I think ownership is a problematic idea when we talk about the earth. Why we wanted it to be owned by a co-op is because that was one of the few legal structures that are recognized in Western property law that start to approximate some of the values that we hold, the afro-indigenous values that we hold. [00:18:00] Even with that, we gave our pro bono lawyers such a challenging proposition because not only did we want to have a co-op, but it couldn't just be a regular co-op, we wanted nature to have veto power; they had to scratch their heads at how you build that one into a legal structure.

We wanted to make sure that the Mohican nation had perpetual rights to the land and these types of cultural respect easements are quite new and only a few states recognize them. You know, so there's a number of things that we were able to build into the cooperative structure to, again, it's not the same as dissolving private property because there still is a deed and there are taxes and all the things, but to at least symbolically state our values and to, in actuality, have some democratic control and accountability over how the land is used and cared for and held onto as the years go by.

Bollier: It's amazing you had the clarity at the beginning to do that, because that's often a hard-earned lesson. The idea [00:19:00] that existing structures of law, particularly property law, are just ill-suited for what you want to do. I think of the work of Janelle Orsi at the Sustainable Economies Law Center, where so much of her work is precisely about building workarounds and legal hacks to bad tenant law, bad cooperative law, bad property law.

I like to refer to it as relationalized property, meaning people have relationships and affect and traditions involved with the "property."

Penniman: Well, you're giving me a little too much credit. We did not…initially, we bought it fee simple and then started to engage a pro bono legal team to figure out how to put it into a co-op.

And we went through…it was our third legal team that was willing to try to figure this out with us. So it actually took many years. The intention was always there, but it took many years to actually transfer the property into a cooperative. And I had some belly laughs at just exactly what you're saying, how ill-suited[00:20:00] property law is to any type of relational understanding, and particularly in these rural counties, no land trust had tried to file, for example, you know, without getting too legalese, but like no ground lease had ever been filed in the county. You know, there was no housing cooperative in the county. And so trying to work with the county clerk just to convince them to file your paperwork in the correct bin, you know, that alone was this whole universe of struggle.

Bollier: Well, I will give you credit for, first of all, having the insight and imagination to know that this was a problem and persisting because, you know, as precisely trying to find ways to work around that. But I suppose the other thing that I think you deserve credit for is assembling precisely the community of committed players who were committed to each other, committed to the earth and so forth.

Because in some ways that trumps the law. The practice can trump the law. And it has to be [00:21:00] based on that, where the law is just a dead letter anyways. It's not as if you become a co-op and wipe your hands and say, well, we took care of that.

Penniman: Right, you actually need to meet and, you know, have discussions and come to agreements and have nice potlucks and help each other out.

And you know, that's really where the life of it is. And we laugh sometimes that there's so many papers that define both the co-op and the nonprofit. And what's actually happening day to day is there's between 10 and 12 people who live here who cooperate and do work and support each other's personal lives and care for the earth.

And you know, that's the real stuff. The papers are sort of over here in one land, and then there's what's actually, you know, happening on the ground.

Bollier: Tell me a little bit about the life of the farm. How you do govern yourself, some of the programs you've decided to develop, what kind of crops you raise?

Penniman: Absolutely. So as mentioned, we're on 80 acres though we do reserve about 70 of those acres for wildlife. So the humans are concentrated, you know, on these ten acres we have beautiful net [00:22:00] zero straw bale buildings. And over time we've built up a campus, you know, our home was initially the program center and the dining commons and, and, and…you know, the lodging and, you know, bit by bit have been able to grow the campus.

We have four acres of mixed perennial orchard, two acres of vegetables, and then our goats and chickens and mushrooms and honeybees. And there are three main areas of work for us. So one is of course, growing the food and medicine, which we do using our ancestral methods that capture carbon, increased biodiversity, and that food is distributed primarily through the Solidarity Shares that I mentioned, though, as our programs grow, you know, we also serve many thousands of plates here on the farm to our participants.

The second major area of work is education. We're trying to equip and inspire the rising generation of Black and brown farmers. So we have day long workshops. We have week-long immersions that teach everything seed to market, and [00:23:00] now an 18 month fellowship for ten rising star farmers to receive a salary and a mentor for a year as part of a cohort.

So lots of education. And then our final area of work, I affectionately term rabble rousing. Where the laws are frankly quite unjust to the earth and to the people who care for the earth. You know, farm workers don't have a fair shake. Black farmers have lost a lot of land and continue to do so.

Indigenous folks need land back. People are not getting the food that they need that's culturally appropriate and healthy and on and on. And so we're working on policy and institution building and trying to through storytelling, through speaking and writing, to mobilize the public to really see how important these issues are.

And we decide together, what to prioritize. You know, Soul Fire Firm Institute Inc. is the nonprofit. We're not a flat organization, but we are a worker-controlled nonprofit. And so everyone has some say in major decisions, including our strategic plan and program, [00:24:00] developing and budget and so on, even in the context of some power differentials.

We have an awesome team; there’s fifteen of us, about half are like physically on the farm doing something, education or farming, and about half are on their screens remotely across the country doing a lot of landscape work and national organizing work.

Bollier: I mean, I was struck on your webpage, your advice called the Beyond Hero's Media Guide, in which you basically take to task the media for elevating you or others as the singular hero and messiah of something, but really as a very collaborative team and that needs to be recognized, which, of course, feature writers for newspapers or magazines are not so inclined to do.

Penniman: Oh no. They get so mad at me because, of course, good writing again, in quotes, requires a central character and a sort of hero narrative arc. And so it can be very attractive to focus on a founder or focus on the person with the [00:25:00] most experience with public speaking.

And, you know, that can be dangerous. And you talk about yourself as a commoner, and part of the philosophy of the commons is around democracy, including the democratization of voice and platforms. So we do what we can to increase the comfortability and skill of our newer teammates so that they can take interviews and do public speaking and writing as well as our alumni and partners in the field because we really do need everyone's voice and everyone's perspective to be listened to.

Bollier: Let's talk a little bit about some of the rabble rousing before then continuing on with *Black Earth Wisdom*. I mean, the fact that you sort of organically, you’re not just growing food, but organically reaching out to the world and engaging with it on issues like food sovereignty, food apartheid, and the idea that these larger issues of Black reparations, of land theft need to be addressed.

Tell me how you got into those and what you're trying to do on those different fronts.

Penniman: So a lot of [00:26:00] folks when they think about food, don't necessarily connect it with racial injustice right away. So a quick crash course in why we need to talk about racial justice in the food system relates to land, labor, and food.

So, right now in this country, around 98% of the agricultural land is white owned by value, which is higher than ever, and this is because of a long history of land theft and violent expulsion, both against indigenous and Black people. Black folks, for example, owned 16 million acres of land around the turn of the century, 1910. Almost all is gone because the Klan and the White Citizens Council lynched people and drove them off their land for the audacity to try to become independent landowners and get off the plantation. The U.S.D.A., the US Department of Agriculture was completely complicit, denying loans and other supports to Black farmers, and effectively driving them to foreclosure.

Many other factors, as well. So, you know, one of the things that we are advocating for [00:27:00] is land reform, is land back for indigenous people, and also land access for Black and brown people who've been systematically denied. I'm very excited that Cory Booker and Elizabeth Warren and some other forward thinking senators have championed the Justice for Black Farmers Act, which among its many provisions, has a way of purchasing land off the market in order to make it available initially as a lease, sort of with an option to buy and loan forgiveness for Black farmers.

On the worker front, tragically, this country's agrarian labor force has always relied on exploitation from chattel slavery to sharecropping to convict leasing it is…I don't…it's honestly just heartbreaking to me that even more recently, we haven't figured out how to pay people fairly for what is arguably the most important work of feeding the nation and now rely quite extensively on the guest worker program and migrant workers to meet the nation's labor [00:28:00] needs on farms.

Farm workers have a whole separate set of labor laws from everybody else. They're actually not entitled federally to a minimum wage if they work on a small farm, to a day off in seven, overtime pay, 40-hour work week. Not entitled to that. Not entitled to some of the basic protections that we enjoy in other sectors.

The Fairness for Farm Workers Act would start to address some of that. But really, I think we need an even more fundamental frame shift of creating pathways for farm workers to become owners, leaders, citizens in this country and take the rightful place of dignity and self-sufficiency. I mean, people when they come to this country to work on farms, their life expectancy drops by 10 to 15 years.

And then we talked briefly about food and the food apartheid situation where Black and brown folks are just much more likely to die early from these metabolic diseases, which are completely connected to access to food. Not because of choice, but because transportation, you know, the location where people live, the distance to food and the money [00:29:00] to access food are just not favorable.

And so we work with other farmers and food organizations to try to both directly provide food, but also to advocate for the full funding of SNAP and the Farm Bill and some of these other important changes. And very, very excited – this is the last thing I'll say on this – very excited that in addition to kind of working through channels of reform with state and federal policy, we're very excited about the building of alternative institutions to show society the way it can be done, kind of without compromise.

And so orgs like the Black Farmer Fund of New York or the Northeast Farmers of Color Land Trust, which are non-extractive capital and land back, respectively, are organizations that we've been deeply involved with and are so proud of. And so for us it's a both/and, you know, working within the system and also trying to create some of our structures that are less compromised.

Bollier: That is one of, I think, one of the quandaries because simply getting on the ladder for economic sustainability in farming is a challenge in itself. But does that mean you're going to become [00:30:00] a junior capitalist? Versus having the infrastructure and support systems to develop, as you say, a non-extractive, non-capitalist approach to farming? And that arguably is the challenge we face with climate change too. We can't continue extractive agriculture and the emissions that it entails, so bravo for trying to get some alternative structures and simply cultural validation for a different approach.

Penniman: Right. I think we do need to see things in action to understand what's possible, and that's why I get very excited about alternative institutions, whether they be folks pooling their money together to create a susu or an ad hoc credit union, or whether it's these land trusts and co-ops popping up.

You go there and you see, and then you say, 'Ah, okay, we can point in that direction. We can think more expansively about how humans can relate to one another in the earth.'

Bollier: And I think you also start to see that the various collaborative commons-based efforts naturally overlap when you see the, you've mentioned the co-ops, when you mentioned [00:31:00] in your book, you mentioned the susus, which were the informal finance systems of people, you mentioned the idea of tenancy in common for holding land, which in a time when your community of peers were more reliable than the law. Anyways, you start to see that these are all mutually supportive as kind of a federation of commons as a concept, as a paradigm, and that's perhaps the way to build that strength over the long-term going forward.

Penniman: Absolutely. I'm with you and Schumacher's part of that, right?

Bollier: I think there's so many of these latent collaborations that need to be developed more, but I think that's part of what the challenge that I've encountered, at least.

Let's talk a little bit about…you mentioned these, this history of African-Americans in the land. Tell me how this has informed a lot of the material in *Black Earth Wisdom*.

Penniman: So African Americans and the land, to take one step back to *Farming While Black*, I think I had come to believe the mistruth that [00:32:00] white folks came up with all the good environmental ideas and all the good farming ideas.

When I say 'good,' I mean the ones that would care for the earth and ensure sustainability over time. And so, in the research for *Farming While Black* wanted to uncover whether that was really true. And of course, almost every good idea that organic farmers use does have roots in indigenous wisdom, including Black indigenous wisdom, everything from the raised beds of the Ovambo people to the dark earth compost of the women of Liberia and Ghana, to the polycultures of Nigeria, to the cover crops of Dr. George Washington Carver and the soil stabilizing practices of Vodun in Haiti. And it could go on and on and on. And so similarly with *Black Earth Wisdom* I became very interested in, in addition to farming specifically, what are some of the contributions of Black folks, African Americans and otherwise to ecological thought?

And of course, we've all heard, you know, Dr. Wangari Maathai, founder of the Green Belt [00:33:00] Movement, a movement that planted 51 million trees, earning a Nobel Peace Prize. We've all heard of Harriet Tubman, but maybe didn't know that she was an herbalist and an orchardist. One of the first things she did upon rooting down in land in New York was to plant an apple orchard and used her knowledge of plants in the Union Army to cure soldiers.

But that's not all. John Edmonstonenbh is an ornithologist who taught ornithology to Charles Darwin, a black scientist, Dr. Charles Henry Turner is a zoologist who was the first one to provide evidence that insects are intelligent beings, not machines on autopilot. Hattie Carthan, tree planter in Brooklyn, who is one of the founders of the modern urban Community Gardens movement.

Hazel Johnson, mother of Environmental Justice, and on and on. And so it was deeply moving to uncover so many stories of Black environmental genius. And so many that have been underappreciated or underrepresented. I got into some tension with my [00:34:00] publisher around word count because I had a lot more to put in that book. I was like, we need to list all these people.

Bollier: Well it is true, as an author, you sometimes have to have triage and say, that's another book, and we'll have to limit this book.

Penniman: Well, if you go to my, if you go to blackearthwisdom.org, there's a directory on there, a digital directory that is a living document that I've been adding additional organizations and thinkers and books over time. So also, if anyone has suggestions when they look at that all, I'll just keep adding for exactly that point.

Bollier: Let me ask you to be immodest for a minute. Is this kind of a new frontier in trying to bring together all this and synthesize it in terms of a history of Black ecological stewardship?

Penniman: It's a great question.

I would not say that it's a new idea. The people that I interviewed in the book, almost all of them are well-respected leaders in their field, many of them published authors, and so they've been putting out there, probably most notably, you [00:35:00] know, the histories of the environmental justice movement by Dorceta Taylor that are out there are quite comprehensive and they do center the voices of Black people.

Black Earth Wisdom is unique…I'm pretty sure this is true, but is unique in that it is spanning the scientific and the spiritual, and it's spanning the deep past with the present. So it is trying to cover some ground and point people to where they can dig in and learn more.

Bollier: That's a nice way of putting it because as I was reading it, I was struck by how this was not from some distant foreign land necessarily, although there were a lot of African spiritual traditions discussed.

But it was something that was in our midst, part of our American history that was just this far away that we have not, at least for white Americans, have not accessed. Maybe you could talk a little bit about how this African indigenous experience and spirituality has been infused in the agriculture and ecological practices.

In other words, the people you [00:36:00] mentioned were not simply entrepreneurs contributing to the great capitalist story. They were coming from a different set of values, a different set of social relations, different aspirations.

Penniman: Yeah, very well put. So I mentioned quite frequently woven throughout the book, Yoruba and other West African indigenous spiritualities.

Full disclosure, I am a member of clergy in this religion, so I have a keen interest. But something that's fascinating about Yoruba religion alongside many other indigenous spiritualities is that we see the earth as a deity and in fact, not just the earth as a whole, but each tree, river, bird, hill and other natural forests has its own divine spirit, its own name, its own rituals of propitiation.

A lot of folks call national parks the best idea of the United States as if it were a new invention. But these ideas of sacred groves that are set aside are quite ancient *Ogbe-Odi* and are the two types of sacred forests in Yoruba [00:37:00] land where extraction is prohibited. The only activities allowed in these forests are magical and spiritual activities, and there's underlying the core values and the fundamental worldview of Yoruba land is very much about balance and not doing things by force.

And so I weave in some of the folk tales and stories, including one about the sort of fallacy of force where this character called Mr. By Force invites friends to a collective work party on his farm and arranges them to go hungry so that they attack each other and try to devour each other. The friends are different animals: grasshopper and hen and wolf and dog and hyena, and then the dew drops come, which is the embodiment of wisdom, the deity of wisdom come to cool them down and remind them of the original covenant that they have of moderation and balance and not using force on one another.

This is a very, very different way of seeing the world than one of competition [00:38:00] extraction, winning over and getting as much as we can as quickly as we can while we're here in this one short life.

Bollier: It’s funny because there's a whole literature that's emerging these days called the New Animism, which is from a very cognitive point of view, anthropological point of view in its own way, a huge advance over the past.

But what you're speaking about is far more subjective and experiential, more firsthand, more intimate, you might say, spiritually and, therefore, more of a challenge than simply cognitive thinking about living systems that way. In other words, if you start to treat mountains and rivers as having spiritual agency this opens up a whole different way of relating. I guess you would argue that this is really important if we're going to save the earth and get into right relationship with it.

Penniman: I do, and I might even argue, I mean, this is a hypothesis that maybe it's easier than only experiencing it cognitively or abstractly.

I think it could be very hard to get your head around the [00:39:00] idea of a tree as a deity without any direct experience of trees or seeing only a forest and not knowing even the name. Imagine, for example, that you lived in a neighborhood for decades and you didn't know the name of your nextdoor neighbor.

People might pass some judgment on you for being maybe unfriendly or inconsiderate, and yet, here I am living right next to a black cherry. There's a barred owl there, there's a white pine, but how many of us don't know actually what each one is named or know each one as the individual that it is? So what we found anecdotally on the farm is that people will come and experience the earth in firsthand terms, bare feet, harvesting in the woods, contemplating, doing labor under the sun, sweating. And that relational connection is actually what causes the transformation. Not a theory, but a very visceral, falling in love. Baba Diem said, we, you know, we protect only what we love.

And I would add we can only love what we know. And so, yeah, [00:40:00] maybe it's about getting dirty, you know?

Bollier: I think I would go a step further and say it's about sensory and embodied knowledge. Which is a whole different way of knowing, and I think experiential, of course. And I think that opens the floodgates to a different kind of, I don't know, subliminal knowledge, embodied knowledge.

But you've been living this far more than I, maybe you could speak to that. It seems that there's a liveliness associated with Soul Fire Farm that reflects this immersion in living creatures and systems and relationships with them, which to an outsider is remarkably compelling, but also quite alien.

Penniman: Yeah, I hear you and I do agree with you. I mean, there's a story that I like to tell about Kareem, a young person who came to the farm, he's an adult now, but he came as a teenager. Like so many groups of teens that arrive in their van from the city was so skeptical about getting out of [00:41:00] the van and getting involved with this place.

I mean, young people have ancestral trauma associations of slavery. They're afraid of bugs and dirt and all the things, and the only thing that got Kareem out of the van was that we were all going to start walking around the farm and leave him behind where he was afraid a bear would come and eat him.

So it was a muddy day. The children ends up taking off their shoes to protect, you know, their new kicks, their nice sneakers, and no one listened to a word on the tour because the squeals of mud under toes and worms across feet and little to frogs jumping, you know, it was just so overwhelmingly tactile. And that's fine, you know, we finished the walk about and came and sat down and Kareem said, you know, the strangest thing happened when I put my bare feet on the earth. It was like this memory of my grandmother came up through my feet and she had passed away long ago, but I remember now when we were, I was little, she would like take me to the garden and put a worm in my hand. And [00:42:00] I didn't think I had anything to do with this place, but I do, I have everything to do with this place.

I got a little tearful and then all the young people are getting a little tearful and talking about their grandmas. You can't intellectualize that.

Bollier: That's quite a story because no amount of preaching or educational seminars could have provoked that.

Penniman: Right. It's like you make the introduction and Mama Earth is just going to compost that trauma and give you back belonging and hope. It's like that's what she's here to do.

Bollier: Some of your conversations talk about precisely developing this synapse or connection with the earth. For example, there was a section of conversations you had called the Earth Song, music and the Earth about music and the earth and the larger section about the role of art and creativity in the earth.

Could you tell me and why the people you've interviewed think that's so important?

Penniman: So this was really fun. So the book was not pre-scripted, right? I had these conversations and then I had to pull out themes and figure out. So I was learning along the way. I would [00:43:00] not have told you when I started writing this book, that song and music were an integral part of how we relate to the earth.

But in the research, in the interviews, I was really struck by the ways that we learn song from the earth and share common language. For example, birds have taught us how to sing, right? So the ruby-crowned kinglit sings a full octave interval between the stanzas in their song and the canyon wren sings the chromatic scale and hermit thrush sings a pentatonic scale.

We learned Colin response from the marsh wren. The Hutu and Tutsi Peoples, their songs use the same scale with the ultralow frequency tones as elephants. And indigenous people on the Tanna Island of Vanutatu create songs that mimic the sounds of the volcano. So we're literally in conversation with the earth through song.

That's a language that we share as well as the [00:44:00] language of silence, the sanctity of quietude as the space for listening. The pause between the notes. What a magical thing to consider. It makes me even more, both my children are musicians, it makes me even more excited that they're musicians and I'm like, you speak the language of the earth better than I do.

Bollier: My friend Andrea Weber, who is one of his specialties is bio semiotics and how living creatures communicate with each other. And he uses the term bio poetics, which I think is a wonderful way for encapsulating how we communicate with earthly systems in a way that is artistic. An artistic commoner friend of mine said to me, 'Law is to capitalism as art is to the commons.' And I just love that notion because its opens up the richness of lived experience as an artistic experience you might say.

Penniman: Oh, I'd love to hear more about that. I mean, the way that I've sort of conceived of art in relationship to activism is that artists and creatives are the one [00:45:00] who quite literally can vision what is not yet here.

That's what art making is, right? And so it is that creative energy that's required to dream into new worlds. The rest of us, and I'll include myself, who are not so much creatives, are sort of building with the material that we see right around us, and we can only get so far with that. We need those folks that can blow the roof off and combine things in new ways and give us something we've never considered.

Bollier: I would only amend that to say the artist revealed not what is not here, but what simply hasn't been revealed to us. It's always been here. Because I think that it's more tuning into the right frequency…

Penniman: Whether it's the elephants or the volcano frequency or whatever frequency.

Bollier: Another provocative angle in *Black Earth Wisdom* was a chapter or set of conversations you had on queer earth biomimicry and how the binary genders that many people assume are totally natural nature would contradict; that there's [00:46:00] all sorts of queerness inherent in the natural world among symbiotic living systems.

Penniman: Absolutely.

Bollier: Could you talk a little bit more about that?

Penniman: For sure. And it felt so important to include this because one of the great myths that's promoted by conservative western society is that heterosexuality and the gender binary are natural and that everything else is some sort of aberration.

And in fact, as you mentioned, nature is quite queer. I mean, even just take the plant kingdom alone, you know, 90% of flowering plants have what's called perfect flowers, and I love that they're called perfect flowers because they have both male and female reproductive organs. So the actual, the gender fluidity, is perfection.

There also is same sex intimacy across the animal kingdom, including courtship and pair bonding sex, parental activities, affection, everything from swans to mallards to dolphins, bisons, [00:47:00] bats, monkeys, hyenas, even fruit flies and bedbugs have same sex pairings. And so I think that one, you know, shout out to our beautiful, queer, trans siblings like you're beautiful as you are, and my hope is that this chapter and this discourse encourages all of us to fully embrace and accept and celebrate the many ways that we express our gender and sexuality.

Bollier: Obviously we can't review the entire book in this interview, but I just invite you to call attention to any other sections or conversations you had that you found particularly inspirational or compelling.

Penniman: Oh, I love this conversation. This is fun. Yes, I know I got to choose. How do I choose? Well, since we're talking about the commons, I think it's important to highlight also the truth that nature is much more cooperative and generous than Western science would have us think. You know, we're often taught that competition is the primary driving force, sort of a certain view of survival of the fittest, when in fact, mutualistic interactions are [00:48:00] vital for ecosystem function and underpin around 80% of interactions among species. So that's everything from seed dispersal mechanisms to microarousal relationships with fungi that provide inorganic elements to plants, to even the evolution of the eukaryotic cell, which is the cells in our body. They came about through symbio-genesis, which is a collaboration between two protic cells.

We wouldn't have land plants without a symbiosis with microarousal fungi, and there are all sorts of examples in the animal kingdom of plants…just folks helping each other out, even though it decreases their own individual fitness ants and bees giving up their lives to protect their colonies or birds flying in a V formation.

So much so that modern scientists are now questioning the idea, the concept of the individual organism. Because it seems that evolution is actually acting on symbiotic groups, whether that's our gut bacteria together with us or a [00:49:00] lichen, which is a fungi and algae, that this idea of the individual needs to be complicated.

So to me, there's like no greater hallelujah to the idea of the commons than actually the dissolution of the concept of the individual self in nature.

Bollier: Well, especially when the very boundaries of what is an individual are so blurry when we have a biome of trillions of cells and what is the boundary of our individual? We're so embedded in a context of living systems. You get into Buddhism and the kind of artificiality of the self and the individual in the larger context.

Which reminds me, your approach to this, to the spirituality of relationship, to land, to other living systems, is very ecumenical. You cite the Torah, you cite the Bible, you cite the Koran.

You've already mentioned African spiritual traditions. Tell me, do you have a theory of your ecumenical belief? Why do you cite so many?

Penniman: This is a very insightful question that you're asking and is really at the core of by being [00:50:00], so yes. Yes, yes, yes to all of this, and thanks for shouting out the Dalai Lama, Buddhism and non-self, also, I'm a student of Buddhism as well, but I was raised by two Unitarian Universalist preachers, my mother being among the first Black ministers in that denomination. And for folks who don't know UU, it's a version of Christianity that's quite embracing of many faiths and practices and encourages us to find our own truth.

I was very involved in the church. I was my mom's director of religious-ed and a deep student of world religion. I mean, I think I read the Bible many times through before I finished elementary school, just as a hobby. But later on came to, I married a wonderful…my spouse is Jewish. I converted to become Jewish, I lived in West Africa and in Haiti studying traditional religions. My next door neighbor is a Buddhist monk. We've been friends for 20 years, and I chant and pray with her.

To me, religion is the beautiful attempt to answer the deepest questions of life. The why we're here, what is [00:51:00] meaning, what is it to be a good and whole person?

And they all have a little bit of the truth. It's sort of a, you know, in Buddhism they say the finger that points to the moon is not the moon. The moon being this sort of capital T truth, these fingers being all of our ways of attempting to know. But when there is overlap and intersection, I feel like that's when we start to reveal, get closer to the capital T, and we find that overlap and intersection in these teachings of compassion, of generosity, of non-self, of our connectedness to all things. And so I get really, really excited about that sort of intersecting space and the Venn diagram of our ways of knowing.

Bollier: Well, Leah, that's a wonderful way for us to end in terms of the spirit with which we approach Spirit Earth and the challenges ahead of us.

So I want to thank you so much for taking time to explain the journey you've been on, and I really hope a lot of people discover and absorb *Black Earth Wisdom*.

Penniman: Well, thank you for this delightful conversation. [00:52:00]