

EPISODE 6 - Ma'ikwe Ludwig

(music)

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This is Kosmos Live and I am your host Rhonda Fabian.

“By my best estimate, after looking at a lot of data, I think that what is sustainable is probably about 10% of the consumption of your average American at this point. That means we need to come way down. That's a 90% reduction in how your average American is living, in terms of the amount of resources consumed. That doesn't mean that it's going to be terrible, and some sort of horrible Stone Age existence. There's ways to do that and examples out there of doing that without it being a big deprivation trip.”

[Kosmos Live | That's Maikwe Ludwig, a longtime advocate of Cooperative Culture, and locally, self-determined solutions to climate disruption. She serves on the board of directors at the Fellowship for Intentional Community, and is the Executive Director of Commonomics USA. She writes, teaches, and organizes from her home base in Laramie, Wyoming. Welcome to Kosmos live, Maikwe.](#)

Ludwig | Well, thank you so much for having me.

[Kosmos Live | Maikwe, what is Cooperative Culture, exactly? How is it different from mainstream American culture?](#)

Ludwig | Well, it's a little bit hard to soundbite because it's actually a very big thing. The culture around us is like the water that we swim in, and so it takes a lot to unpack it. In a nutshell, the culture that we have in mainstream America, at this point, is one that really glorifies competition, and independence, and individuality. In fact, we've been measured, compared to a lot of other countries, and we're actually the most individualistic culture in the world. Our schools, in a lot of ways, are kind of competition factories. We're training our children, from a very young age in how to compete effectively. Partly because we are then launching them out into an economic system that's very competitive. We really teach very little about sharing, and cooperation, and empathy.

That's actually not working very well for us in a lot of ways. We have some of the worst mental health statistics in the world. We have a lot of societal acrimony that you can see in our political debates, and whatnot. Then you have something like social media, which actually could be this really amazing tool for our collective liberation and for organizing. In a lot of cases, it sort of devolves into this kind of right/wrong game. That's the milieu that we've all been raised in in the United States.

Cooperative Culture asks a really different set of questions. Not how can we effectively compete and how can we express our individuality? But more what's actually good for the whole? How can we share resources and work together productively? How can we show up for each other when things go wrong, and actually lean into empathy?

[Kosmos Live | We talk a lot about values in this series. I'm wondering if you can speak to cooperation as both a ... You call it the mother of all sustainability skills, so how is it both a skill and a value? How is it somehow related to nature itself?](#)

Ludwig | That's a great segue into that. Our culture is very much about independence, and nature is really very much about interdependence. Like in the natural world, there are wholly functional creatures unto themselves and yet they need all of those other creatures in order to survive. That's actually true for us, as well, but we've been sold this line by our culture that we can be totally independent operators.

One of the interesting things, when you look at those mental health statistics that I was mentioning, is how much actual PTSD our young people have. There's so much pressure on young people to figure out how to be fully independent. If you're not out of your parents' home at 18, and never come home, you're a failure. That's a really unhealthy setup. It actually isn't at all what the natural world is modeling for us.

It is true that cooperation is both a value, in and of itself, and a skillset. Cooperation means being able to share, being moved more by empathy than self-protection. It moves us toward both attitudes, as well as public policy that brings us together and finds our differences more interesting than threatening, which is one of the other things that our culture teaches us, is that differences are bad on some level. If we're going to take care, for instance, of our poor people, that probably means actually restructuring our economy, and coming from a very different mindset, which is both societal and cultural, but also internalized with our attitudes about what success and failure look like.

I'm really trying to push us toward something that has a very different values base to it, and is more about care than it is about judging each other as successes or failures based on the wider cultural standards. That's really the values divergence that I'm talking about here. To move away from competition, and toward actually learning how to take care of each other.

Kosmos Live | What brought you to this work, Maikwe? Do you live in a cooperative community of some sort?

Ludwig | I have for most of the last 20 years. Actually, my personal path was from growing up with a father who's an ecologist. I was a sustainability advocate from the time that I was probably 16-years-old, and so I've had 30 some years now of doing that work. One of the ways that I got into working with Cooperative Culture was through living in intentional communities, which are just groups of people that live together based on shared values.

My first community was one that was really good at the ecological stuff, and was really good at sharing, and so I got it that a lot of the things that I've been advocating for, in terms of my sustainability, activism, as well as my feminism and a bunch of other stuff. This was an environment where you could actually do that. You could actually live your values in a very concrete and direct way.

At some point, I got much more focused on the social systems part of it, the culture stuff, because I realized that a lot of communities fail, and a lot of social justice and activism organizations fail mostly because we don't really know how to cooperate. I've gotten more and more deeply into the social dynamics aspects of community over the last 20 years that I've been living in community.

Kosmos Live | Yeah, I understand and have seen, from my own experience, how these wonderfully intentioned initiatives in communities can sometimes fail. Sometimes it has to do, I

think, with the inner work. What kind of inner work must we do in order to be effective agents of change?

Ludwig | Well, and I agree with that, for sure. I think you're making a good diagnosis of it. Really, all cooperative endeavors, if you do them with depth and sincerity, are radical because they require us to move into a different skillset. For me, that inner work has a lot of different pieces to it. Let me just highlight a couple of them.

One of them is learning how to be curious in the face of differences and disagreements. I think that curiosity is a really underrated personal skill, and a really underrated piece of personal work. It's hard to get curious when you are standing in the face of somebody that you adamantly disagree with, and yet, if we can't get curious about how they got there, then we're not able to actually do work around bridge-building with people that we have differences with. Nobody thinks exactly the same way that we do and has the same approaches to things, and so there's a constant flow of opportunities to practice this curiosity. Sometimes, it's in small ways, and sometimes, it's in really big ways.

I think one of the reasons why it's really important is ... one of my mantras is that if you can't accurately hear what people are saying, you can't accurately care about them. You can't actually show up and give them what they're actually needing, if you don't understand where they're coming from, and what their needs are. I think curiosity is really essential.

The second one is compassion. Many of the world's spiritual traditions really focus on compassion, and for a good reason. This plays out in a lot of different ways, but one of the examples that I use is contrasting a compassionate response with a competitive response is what happened after hurricane Katrina came in and really destroyed whole communities. You saw this competitive culture response, where a lot of businesses swooped in, and they had business plans on the books for what happens when a disaster happens that really allowed them to take over whole communities, and insert themselves into those communities.

Then you had people who just dropped what they were doing and went to New Orleans, and showed up and said, "How can I serve? How can I actually be here and be present for people who have just been through a terrible tragedy? And what can I do?" That response, that, "What can I do?" is really what I mean by compassion. I don't mean sitting on your meditation mat, although that's great and important, too. I mean actually looking at, "How can I show up, and really, materially embody compassion with people around me?" That's really intense work, and it's a different kind of work than doing our meditative and contemplative work.

Then, the third one that I would highlight has a really different feel to it, from curiosity and compassion, and that's discernment. I think, sometimes in the progressive world, and in the alternative worlds, we somehow think that we need to leave our discernment at the door. I actually think that that's really destructive. I think it's important to be leading with curiosity and compassion, but yet, we've got to be able to draw distinctions between what's real and what isn't real, and between what actually serves the direction of the world that we want it to be going in.

I do a lot of work with intentional communities. This is a big problem in a lot of those communities, is that lack of willingness to say, "Actually, that's not true." Or, "Actually, that idea isn't as good as these other ideas," because, we're passing judgment on people's ideas and people's statements, and people's perspectives on things, and yet, we get community out of being curious and compassionate, but we get vibrancy and we get actual social change out of

our discernment. I think you have to pair those things together, and those are really different skills, and I think they need to be moving together. It's like if you have two horses that are pulling you along, you want those horses going in the same direction.

Kosmos Live | Those are excellent skills that you describe.

Kosmos Live | Maikwe, I'm going to ask you to use your crystal ball here. What changes do you see ahead for humanity if our current culture of isolation and greed is allowed to continue unchecked?

Ludwig | I see three main things that are really disturbing to me, that are the trajectory that we're on. The first one, and the one that is the focus of a lot of my work right now is climate disruption. As long as we stay in this mode of being hyper-consumers, and also hyper-emitters of carbon emissions and other greenhouse gases, we are really on a very negative track, in terms of where we're headed ecologically, and societally.

The second thing that I see that is really disturbing to me is the increasing disparities that we have in wealth and equity in the United States, and in the whole Western world. People who don't have a lot of resources, a, have a really hard time being creative. Like it's hard to contribute creatively to a changing world when you can't feed your children, and you don't have health insurance. It's bad for you to be in a state of constant emotional stress about your finances, and people tend to make poorer decisions, a lot of times, when your only option is to buy super cheap food because that's the amount of money that you have. You're contributing, unintentionally, to a lot of psychological problems being a lot worse. †

Then, I think the third trajectory that we're on that's really disturbing to me, is more about how we relate to each other. It's that lack of empathy that we're seeing among policymakers, and the lack of empathy and respectful dialogue that we're able to have with each other right now. It's really hard to solve problems with each other when we can't listen to each other.

Kosmos Live | Many people believe that science and technology and continued economic growth can fix what's broken in the world. What do you say about that?

Ludwig | There's a really fascinating book that somebody slipped me when I was at a speaking event a couple of years ago called *The Conundrum* by a guy named David Owen. The subtitle of it is something like, *How Scientific Innovation, Efficiency and Good Intentions Make the Climate Worse*. His basic point is that when we're coming from ... or the way that I interpreted his point anyway, is that when we're coming from a consumptive mindset, things like having a car with better efficiency, in a way, gives you mental permission to drive more, and there's a lot of ways that that kind of phenomenon has actually played out.

That said, we have all the tech that we need to solve the climate crisis. We don't actually need more tech. What we need is the political, and social, and cultural will to do something really different, and a different understanding of how our consumption patterns really affect the rest of the world. As for the idea that economic growth is going to save us, I actually think that is completely opposite of what's actually true. I think the problems that we have are mostly driven by our economic system, at this point, that needs to continue extracting from the planet value, needs to continue extracting from people, their labor, and the value of their labor. You simply can't keep growing an economy in a world of limited resources, and that is the world that we live in.

Kosmos Live | The global capitalist mindset.

Ludwig | Yep.

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Kosmos Live | 'd like to dig a little bit deeper into the idea of intersectionality. The idea that injustices of the world are inter-related. In your opinion, what are some of the underlying injustices? You've touched on this a little bit, but maybe we could go deeper. The underlying injustices contributing to climate disruption.

Ludwig | If you look at the countries that have historically contributed the most to the climate crisis, they are dominated by white people. If you look at where in the world the effects have been showing up the most strongly so far of climate disruption, whether that's countries, or regions within different countries, including the United States, those areas are predominantly brown and black people.

I firmly believe, at this point, that one of the reasons why we've let ourselves get away with that is racism. If you can't look at the news stories that are coming out about people suffering all over the world and feel genuinely, in your heart, that these are my people dying, these are my children dying, then you're going to let yourself get away with a lot. I think anti-racism work is really, really important for us to be doing right now, just to get back to a place where we can be coming from genuine empathy and responsibility for the ways that our actions are affecting other people.

The second oppression that I would highlight is class oppression. Our economic system is, as I was saying, fundamentally extractive. Capitalism is about building capital, and that capital gets built by extracting value from the natural world and value from workers. Our whole economic system, particularly in the United States, it's like it started out being built on slavery and continues to be built on the backs of people of color in the form of what is defacto slavery with prison labor, and a lot of industries that get a lot of their benefit from prison labor at this point.

Also women's work has ... traditional domestic work, which is still done more by women than men, is uncompensated. All of those systems, it's like we have the working class, we have people of color, and indigenous people, particularly with their land being stolen from them, and women. It's like our economy wouldn't function if we weren't abusing all of those different groups of people. That's another big piece of personal work. Doing your work around race and gender and class oppression, I think is a huge part of our spiritual work, at this point in the world.

Kosmos Live | I agree. I was just thinking about a statistic someone shared with me. Something along the lines that it took half the world's resources, at the time, to build the British Empire and the American Empire.

Ludwig | Wow.

Kosmos Live | That as these overdeveloped countries continue to consume at these huge rates, you also have countries that are less so-called developed, that are coming on line in terms of a burgeoning middle class, and using more and more resources of the world. It's, obviously, not a sustainable model.

Ludwig | Right. It isn't, at all. **By my best estimate, after looking at a lot of data, I think that what is sustainable is probably about 10% of the consumption of your average American at this point. That means we need to come way down. That's a 90% reduction in how your average American is living, in terms of the amount of resources consumed. That doesn't mean that it's going to be terrible, and some sort of horrible Stone Age existence. There's ways to do that and examples out there of doing that without it being a big deprivation trip.** That also means that there would be space in the world for other people to increase their consumption some. We need to really come down in the developed world, and we need to make space for other people to be able to get their needs met better.

Kosmos Live | In your book *Together Resilient: Building Community in the Age of Climate Disruption*, you offer some practical guidelines. Can you share with us some of these ideas about how communities can work together to build a more resilient future? A less consumptive one?

Ludwig | Yes, yeah, for sure. I think there's three different levels to it. One of them is something I've alluded to already, which is getting to a place where our public policy is based more on compassion and equity.

The second one is highlighting a lot of locally-based solutions that use community as a tool. There's a section in the book where I talk about a lot of really amazing urban agriculture projects that are happening in Detroit. I could have profiled all kinds of different cities. I picked Detroit because I knew people there. There's some amazing things happening, where they're reclaiming land in abandoned neighborhoods, and they're growing food together, and they're deepening their cooperative skills with each other in the process. They're also reclaiming a lot of power in their lives.

Then, I talk a lot in the book about intentional communities. There's a couple of communities in particular, that I highlight. One of them is Dancing Rabbit Ecovillage in Rutledge, Missouri. Dancing Rabbit is really an extraordinary community. They are actually making that 10% mark that I was talking about earlier in some of the most important areas that we can measure consumption with. They're actually doing it. They have cars, they have the internet, they eat just fine, they have homes. I mean none of this deprivation stuff that people picture when I say, "Yeah, you're gonna have to get it down to 10%." Well, that's not what you see at Dancing Rabbit. You actually see a really good, abundant, socially-connected and supportive life that people are being able to live on really low consumption.

I think intentional communities are some of the best kind of laboratories that we have for figuring out how do you actually do this living a low consumption and high integrity life? I point to that movement as a place where there's lots of different models, where there's interesting things happening. I think of them as being one of our R&D labs for how we actually do this. That's something that people can get together and organize. It's actually an incredibly fulfilling way to live life, and it's one that I've been engaged with for about 20 years.

Kosmos Live | That's wonderful. You touched on this, but one thing I've noticed is that a lot of these initiatives like Transition Towns, the Ecovillage Movement, various kinds of communal models based on principles of permaculture, and so on, they seem to thrive more readily in smaller towns, and in rural areas. When we talk about intentional community in urban areas most affected by economic disparity, what could an intentional community look like?

Ludwig | There's actually a lot of examples of intentional communities in urban environments, as well. One network of communities that I can highlight for you is there's a group of communities called the Catholic Worker Houses. They vary a little bit from community to community, but I think there's like 160 of them in the U.S. at this point. This is a movement happening within the communities movement.

They're focused on things like feeding homeless people, and some of them serve as halfway houses as people are coming out of prison, or coming out of mental health treatment, and that kind of thing, and they're doing some incredible work in cities. Cities have a lot of advantages to them, even in terms of the ecological stuff. You've got access to public transportation. Some of these communities dumpster-dive, and you can't do that in a really rural area because there's no dumpsters. There's just a whole bunch of stuff that urban environments provide that are different from what rural environments provide, and so the communities have a different flavor to them. Actually, urban communities are really vibrant and viable part of what is out there, and what is available at this point.

Kosmos Live | That's good to know. I guess another ... maybe it's a misconception that I have, is that where there's not a strong spiritual foundation, that sometimes these communities tend to come apart. Do you find that to be true or not? I'm thinking of monasteries that I've known, that have thrived for a long time. Do you think the spiritual component is important?

Ludwig | I think what's absolutely important is shared, articulated, agreed upon values. With spiritual communities, that package is often a lot easier to see from the outside looking in, but I think every really successful community that I know has that shared values base. I think spiritual communities often have an advantage, in that, because that's so on the table when you're going into them, but there's plenty of examples of secular communities that have found a different way to have that kind of shared values and shared language base. I think those are really critical.

Kosmos Live | Maikwe, how important is it to think about the places where we live on a sort of bioregional level? Maybe speak a little bit to the ideas of food, water and energy sovereignty. Do you talk about that much?

Ludwig | Yeah, great. There's a curriculum out there that was created by the Global Ecovillage Network that's called the Gaia Education Curriculum. The Global Ecovillage Network is really exactly what it sounds like. It's an international network of sustainability-oriented communities all over the world. They're in different climates, different socioeconomic situation, different political systems. The curriculum was really pulling together what are the commonalities that all ecovillages have, regardless of what those outside circumstances are? You need to engage socially, economically, ecologically, and what they call worldview, which was called spiritual back in the earliest iterations of the curriculum. They realized, at some point, like what we were just talking about, that it doesn't necessarily have to be spiritual, but it has to be values-based. The answers are very regionally-specific.

I've lived in intentional communities now in Michigan, and Missouri, and New Mexico, and now we're working on forming one in Laramie, and growing food is really, really different in all four of those places. You're going to be looking at the same things, like how do we grow food? How do we support ourselves? Where does our water come from? How do we get our energy? In Wyoming, I live in one of the fossil fuel capitals of the United States and green energy is staunchly resisted here by a lot of people, and that's really different than some other places.

When I lived in New Mexico 12 years ago, there was already readily available wind power. I do think that the answers vary from place to place, and they are absolutely bio-regionally-specific, which is also a good reason, when a community starts to actually connect with the elders in your area that are already there and know how to farm, and know how much rain you get, and all that kind of stuff. The same questions are going to pop up pretty universally when we are actually looking at how to live sustainably.

Kosmos Live | I'm still sort of ... my head is reeling a little bit about the 90% reduction in my consumption.

Ludwig | Just pause and feel that for a second, Rhonda. That is exactly what everybody feels when I say that.

Kosmos Live | Can you walk me through a typical day? How would my day be different?

Ludwig | In a lot of ways, it's not that different. Going back to the example at Dancing Rabbit. I lived at Dancing Rabbit for eight years. I got up in the morning from a bed, and I brushed my teeth and I made breakfast in a kitchen. In some ways, it's really not that different at all. What's different is that the water that I was using was, at least in part, caught off of roofs, instead of just coming from municipal water. The kitchen that I was doing that breakfast cooking in was a communal kitchen, that there were other people around. Other families were using that same kitchen. A lot of the food that I was eating was grown right on the property, or grown within a few miles of us, and we had set up relationships with local farmers to make that easier to do.

The energy that I was using was from solar and wind. The house that I was living in was a straw bale and cob hybrid that I had built myself. My kid was being educated by other people in the village, instead of being sent off to public school. When I wanted to take a car somewhere, I would sign out one of the four communal cars that are collectively owned by the community, instead of getting in my own car. A lot of it is just setting up the structures differently.

I think one of the other really tangible differences is that I would walk out my front door and I literally know everyone who lives in my village, and I know them pretty well, and I get a lot of hugs as I'm going through my day. I get a lot of people checking in and asking, "How are you?" And actually meaning it. Our standard thing ... and again, in American culture is like somebody asks you how you are, and the expected response is, "Fine, thanks, how are you?" It doesn't actually matter if your favorite uncle just died, or you just lost your job. You're sort of expected to play this game about, "I'm fine." That's not a game that we play in communities like Dancing Rabbit. I mean, we're really interested in showing up for each other, and that leads to a lot of really positive outcomes.

I spent probably less time in therapy and less time at the doctor because I had really good social support. In fact, I'm sure that that's true, at least in my own particular case, because I went through a couple of years of chronic illness, and the community really took care of me in a really direct way. The flavor of the life is really different.

Kosmos Live | What are some of the challenges that you've experienced living in cooperative communities?

Ludwig | That's funny. One of my throwaway lines is that, "Community would be so great if it wasn't for all the damn people."

[Kosmos Live | That's what I thought.](#)

Ludwig | Yeah, yeah. I mean, it is. The people stuff is really hard. A lot of that goes back to that cultural transition that I was talking about. We don't know how to resolve conflicts very well. We're all learning that as we go along, and that's a really messy thing to be learning when you're in an active conflict with someone. A lot of it is that social skills that we lack, make it really hard to pull off something like this, unless you're really committed to doing that work. I feel grateful that I was in a community for so long that was really committed to that work, because I got to see how tangible the outcomes are when people are willing to do that, but it's hard

[Kosmos Live | One great thing about intentional community and transition towns, and just building more cooperative communities is we don't have to wait for anyone's permission ...](#)

Ludwig | Yes.

[Kosmos Live |.. to do so. We don't have to go and reform the existing structures from within. We can simply begin a new with our own ideas and our own systems.](#)

Ludwig | That is especially exciting right now, where I feel like a lot of people are feeling kind of paralyzed, and not sure what they can do, or if they can do something. I just want to hold out a measure of hope, and a measure of proactiveness, that you can absolutely be making these changes, and recreating these structures in your life now. You're right. It doesn't matter what's happening in Washington. There are some things that would be easier, if we did some reform, and so I don't think we can ... I think if there were certain laws that were overturned, at this point, and if we did have a different economic system, it would be so much easier to do these communities, but we don't really have to wait.

[Kosmos Live | What are three, either takeaways, or three actions that someone listening to this podcast could use, or do to begin preparing for the profound changes that lie ahead?](#)

Ludwig | I think the first one is just continuing to do our spiritual work, and our personal growth work. Particularly, being willing to take a really hard look at what do our values actually mean materially? Like if I really believe in equity, or I really believe in compassion for other beings, like what does that mean in terms of my daily decisions, and being willing to do that kind of dig deep on that front? I think that's one of them. That's another thing. You don't need anybody's permission to do that, and there's so many resources out there, at this point, to connect those dots and put together that understanding. I think that's the first one.

The second one, I would say, which goes back to some of the political stuff that we were talking about, is to support and join the solidarity movement. This is going to be the Black Lives Matter and Standing Rock, and things like the New Economy Coalition, and really recognize that the racial and economic work that needs to be done right now is pretty essential. Older, wealthy, white people, and especially men, have done a pretty good job of blowing it, and I think we need to be really empowering other voices. If that means that we, as white people, and people with a certain amount of economic privilege deliberately step back and make space for those other voices, I think that we need to be doing that right now. That's also hard work to do, and so I want to recognize that.

The third thing is just finding and creating community. All the different variations that we've been talking about in this interview. Whether that's getting to know your neighbors and looking at local community supported agriculture projects, or supporting your urban farmers, or looking at doing something like an intentional community, and really sort of full-on changing the fundamental structures of your life, and leaning more into community and relationship with each other. Giving each other emotional support, and also, ultimately, materially supporting each other really directly by creating community together. It's just so much easier to do this stuff, when we're banded together and doing it. Even taking into account the challenges that I was talking about socially. The ability to actually change your life tangibly is much easier done with a group of people. That'd be the third thing. Create community in whatever form you can manage it.

Kosmos Live | Those are wonderful guidelines, and we'll certainly provide links to the various resources and organizations that you mentioned. I also want to mention again, that your book [Together Resilient: Building Community in the Age of Climate Disruption](#) is available and offers some practical guidelines.

Ludwig | I want to thank you so much, Maikwe, for being with us. It's really been a joy speaking with you. Thank you for joining us on Kosmos Live.

Kosmos Live | Thank you for having me. I appreciate it, Rhonda. Take care.