



*In collaboration with*  
**FAITH HARRIS,**  
Co-Director of Virginia Interfaith Power & Light

**Date:** March 13, 2023

**Interviewer(s):** Meghna Parameswaran

**00:00**    **Meghna Parameswaran**    **Okay... so I'm just going to repeat my introduction for the sake of the recording. But again, I'm Meghna, and I'm a second-year student at Duke. I'm studying International Comparative Studies and Environmental Science and Policy, and I'm excited to learn more about your background and your work thus far. I think we can start out, if you could just say a little bit about yourself, your work, how you came into it?**

**0:38**    **Faith Harris**    **Okay, sure. Happy to do that. I'm Faith Harris. I am currently the Executive Director for Virginia Interfaith Power & Light (IPL). We're a nonprofit working in the state of Virginia to grow healthy communities, collaborating with faith traditions of all backgrounds to do so. And what we hope to be able to do is to create a just, thriving world by the work that we do, and to achieve environmental justice and climate justice, as well.**

I came to this work—to Virginia—to work with Virginia IPL. I started in 2015 as a volunteer board member—or steering committee member, actually, because at the time, the organization was sort of on the wane, and it needed some new life infused in it. So, myself and a few others joined the board and became its guidance and guiding direction. We redirected the organization's work to focus more on environmental justice, rather than just climate change in general. And so, by doing that, we were immediately thrown into a number of fights—or, if you will,

struggles and challenges for environmental justice right here in the state of Virginia.

We were happy to join those challenges and join with community members to try to amplify their voices but also to help ensure that their wishes and their ability to participate was actually honored and respected by their leaders. So, we immediately got involved in a community called Union Hill in Buckingham County, where a pipeline and a compressor station seven times larger than ever had been built before were planned and proposed—part of the Atlantic Coast Pipeline. It was a pristine, beautiful rural community, historically a freedmen's community where people who had been enslaved there in the 1800s, after the Civil War had been able to work, earn money, and save money to purchase land. And these were their descendants who were being challenged with this compressor station and pipeline. In addition, we worked with an ashram,<sup>1</sup> a community at Yogaville,<sup>2</sup> which is a retreat center that had been there for maybe 25-30 years. And so, it was a kind of excursion into environmental justice in ways that provided us a great opportunity to learn and to grow and to be able to make some really meaningful relationships and create a network of activists and grassroots organizers who even 'til today are still involved in those issues.

But I came to be concerned about climate and environment over many years. I think I often say that I was shaped in that, (in) my formation as a young adult—we were working to see Earth Day established, we saw also the EPA established and the Clean Water and Air Act. And so, this was part of who I was. It was part of the formation of my person and my sense of civic responsibility. And so, I've always had concern and care for the environment and the Earth as part of who I was, as part of my faith tradition, part of my understanding of values and ethics, as well as growing up in context where—I grew up in poverty like many others, and living in communities that often were either neglected, disadvantaged because they had been neglected for disinvestment, or that were inundated or overburdened with polluting industry. So, this is

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<sup>1</sup> A monastic community

<sup>2</sup> Also known as Satchidananda Ashram

something that was just part of my life and my understanding of what it means to be living in America.

**5:55 M.P. Thank you... I think that we'll definitely talk more about your IPL involvement and how you got there, but I'd like to hear a little bit more about where you grew up and where you call home—when you were a child, and maybe now?**

**6:20 F.H.** Yeah, so both my parents are from Pittsburgh. My parents were people who worked in the steel mill, so I grew up around—originally, around that industry and the pollution. If you know anything about Pittsburgh in that time—the 60s—it was a really dirty city, in the sense of it had been where steel mills and coal, and it was just a lot of soot, and just a lot of that as a background. I'm also an Army brat so we lived (in) different places around the United States, as well as I lived for a time, for a couple of years in Thailand. And also, as a baby, I was in France. But most of my experience growing up, as, in my memory of growing up, is in New Jersey, on the shore. It's actually a beautiful area, as well, but growing up in communities of low wealth and poverty, oftentimes, again, there is either neglect or disinvestment, and that was true, also, of where I grew up. So I think, as a young person, I've always—even as a child playing outside, being outside, being in nature was always important to me, it was always restorative and refreshing. I really enjoyed playing with creatures, insects. I climbed the fence every day in the backyard over into the woods and got in trouble for it almost every day—for playing in the woods and playing in the creek and bringing home tadpoles and those kinds of things. So, I've always been clued in and connected to my surroundings and the environment.

But also, at the same time, there were always these construction projects and these other kinds of things that we had to navigate away from and against. And, also thinking, recognizing that my same community did not have parks and did not have a lot of green space for play and for enjoyment, or for picnics or for camping and that kind of thing. So, I think that was something

that I could say was a disadvantage as a child—that I didn't have that experience, although I found it wherever I could.

And so, again, my formation, especially as a young adult, a young person going into adulthood—“adulting” as they say now—I was aware of the importance of caring for our Earth and just recognizing—I remember that the Cuyahoga River<sup>3</sup> was on fire at one time, and I remember how we couldn't play or go to the park; It was a state park that was about 25 miles away from our home when I was a little older, (a) teenager, my family would go there, but we couldn't swim in the lake because the lake was so polluted. And this was all before the Clean Air Act and the Clean Water Act.<sup>4</sup> Now I go back, and I can go to that same park, and you can now actually use the lake because the Clean Water Act has cleaned it up. So those are the kinds of things that I think I remember growing up—and I grew up in New Jersey, which oftentimes, it's the Garden State, but oftentimes, people recognize that it has a great deal of industry, polluting industry, as part of the feature of where we live. And so, our rivers and our lakes and often streams were not clean, they were not pristine—you couldn't swim in them, you couldn't use them for recreation.

I would say I've had a different kind of trajectory. I'm a faith leader, a minister, and I also studied further in my studies to focus on theology and ethics, so that was always an undergirding for me. Even my theological journey included caring for the Earth, and I remember one of my first sermons had to do with creation, and the importance of creation, the importance of how humans and our interaction with creation was exploitive and extractive. And then, I was working for a seminary, in 2005 when Katrina happened in New Orleans, and I was very moved by that. I was struck—like many in our country—just about how devastating that storm had been to that city, but also, not just the way that the nature, right, had responded, but just how we didn't respond to the people and their needs. And so, six months after that, we, I organized, along with some other students; I was, at the time,

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<sup>3</sup> In Ohio, that runs into the Eerie Canal, famously [the Crooked River](#).

<sup>4</sup> In 1970 and 1972

Student Services Coordinator,<sup>5</sup> so I organized 45 students to go down to New Orleans to do some—half the students did intake for people who had been displaced, the other half helped some faith leaders clean up a church and try to make the church ready for people who were trying to come back to their homes in the Lower Ninth Ward.

And so, we spent about 12 days there doing that work, and from that point on, one of the most significant lessons from that experience was just how deserted the area was, the Ninth Ward was, but also that the churches were missing, right? There was this one lone older pastor trying to clean up his facility in order to welcome back and to care for the few people who had tried to come back and restore their homes. And we took a tour one day, and we went to one of the largest churches in—at the time, it was one of the largest churches in the United States—and it was completely abandoned. There was a security guard who told us, basically, “nobody is here, and that the pastor was now in another state and another city broadcasting his sermons from there.” And I just thought, ‘what an important lesson this was for faith leaders’—and I’m teaching at a seminary, working at a seminary—but faith leaders and clergy need to understand their role and their responsibility to the community, that they actually are the anchors of community and that if they’re not there, community cannot be restored, right? There’s nobody there to nurture, there’s nobody there to heal, there’s nobody there to inspire, there’s nobody there to give guidance and to ensure that, not just members have those things, but also that leaders are held accountable to take care of and to provide resources. And so that was critically important, and it really changed the entire trajectory of my life in many ways, I could say. From then on, that climate and environmental justice, and protecting the Earth—but also protecting people—became central, in that way. And so, during the Obama years, I participated in trying to get the Clean Power Plan passed,<sup>6</sup> also the ACA<sup>7</sup>—a number of things that I thought

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<sup>5</sup> Officially, Coordinator of Graduate Student Services, at Virginia Union University

<sup>6</sup> [Announced by President Obama](#) in August 2015, set the first-ever limits on carbon pollution from U.S. power plants.

<sup>7</sup> Affordable Care Act.

would bring investment and bring opportunity and care for the people who were least cared for and had least investment. Then, during the Clean Power Plan period, that's when I met and started working with Virginia IPL—volunteering with Virginia IPL, and some other nonprofits who were trying to see policy pass that would be supportive of communities, again, that have been neglected.

**15:54 M.P.** **Since you mentioned you moved around a lot as a kid, did you have the opportunity to cultivate a faith community, as you put it, from a young age? What role did faith play in your life when you were growing up?**

**16:06 F.H.** As an Army brat—that's the best way to say it—we mostly attended the services that were on the base, right? And so, because the way that the Army and many of the armed services operate, is that the chapel—there's a Protestant service, there's a Catholic service, and then there would be other traditions, Buddhist and maybe Jewish and other traditions. And so, the Protestant service might have any Protestant minister; We had Episcopal, we had Seventh-day Adventist, we had Southern Baptist, we had all different pastors and chaplains leading those services throughout the years, throughout my younger years.

So, I think I would say that I had a very eclectic perspective, which I think has benefited me and has made it more palatable to me to do this interfaith work... I have an affinity for learning, and I'm curious about other faith traditions and really want to help make the bridge with faith traditions to understand and even to, not only understand but to actually acknowledge their own doctrines and principles and ideas about the Earth and caring for our neighbor. And almost every tradition has that, and it's central to our faith. So that's the beauty of being able to do interfaith work.

I, like most college kids, waned away from my faith, or from faith, or from actual institution—from participating in kind of institutional religion, until I was in my mid-late 20s, maybe early 30s, and then I kind of participated in a number of faith

organizations until most recently—and then when I went to seminary, my focus and my vision really changed, and my understanding of faith and theology and all of those things really changed. I just began to seek—had different needs from a faith tradition. And so I currently worship with Unitarian Universalists (UUs) because I feel like there's a lot more diversity and more opportunity to think about our faith, not just accept ideas and doctrines and principles. And so that's really important to me—to be able to have that freedom. I appreciate being in community, in a faith community, I appreciate having the opportunity to share and to have fellowship and do those things. And so, if it weren't for having a tradition like UUs, who are very diverse and eclectic, I don't know that I would participate in an institutional tradition or faith right now, because I don't find—I haven't found any one tradition necessarily to be satisfying.

**19:51 M.P. Did that search for finding something that you identify with play a role in your brief trajectory away from institutional practice or was that kind of a different path?**

**20:09 F.H.** I think the brief going away just really had to do with life. I didn't actually make a plan or I didn't make a declaration, "I'm not going to do this anymore." I just got busy doing other things on Sundays, as people want to do. I just slept in or did other things, went to brunch, those kinds of things, and didn't really necessarily see the need for participating in an institutional tradition. It really wasn't actually anything conscious, I have to say that. It wasn't conscience, it just fell out of practice, basically.

**21:01 M.P. And, just thinking about family dynamics, how was your family about your, maybe, untraditional approach to faith? Were they accepting of that, maybe even supportive?**

**21:17 F.H.** My family is... currently, my family is—I have some who are Catholic, I have some who are Muslim. If I think about my extended family, there's probably every tradition represented. My immediate family—I have four sisters—they are pretty much Protestant, as well, some more conservative than others. One of my sisters married Catholic, so she converted to Catholicism and

all her children are Catholic, so there is some of that. But, again, I think faith and belief in a creator, or the idea of being ethical and being loving and just has always been something that has undergirded my family. My mother insisted on that. I even remember, in one of my earliest conversations with my mother, I remember her telling me her understanding of God at the time, and I would probably say it wasn't very orthodox. It was her telling me that God loved me, and that the love that God had was more than all the leaves on the ground—it was fall, I remember that—and that was her explanation. I was probably about four or five at the time.

And that stuck with me, this idea that there was this—and that this God would, or this being would, or this entity would answer my needs and care for my needs. And that probably stuck with me, more than any of our sermons. I can't remember a sermon from my childhood, but that, actually, I do remember. And so, I think she connected nature with, when I think about that, the whole idea of all the leaves on the ground—it was an immediate connection for me, with the sense of being loved and cared for and nurtured by nature, and by the environment, as well. So, yeah, I think my family has strong faith, but not necessarily strong institutional ties—although I've learned, more recently, that my grandfather was a deacon in an African Methodist Episcopal Church, which I never knew. I always knew that on Sundays, if we went to visit (him) in Pittsburgh, he was always dressed up, but I never associated that with his faith.

So, yeah, I think sometimes we talk about being nurtured, you're taught, but then there's this idea of being *caught*. You catch it, just by being around it. And so, I think that was more my experience. My own parents' experience with going to a church, or being involved in institutional religion was sporadic as well—because we moved so much, that was the other thing. Moving around, being stationed for 18 months here, maybe 20-something months there, we were often moving, and it was sometimes hard to get reestablished.



25:04 M.P.

**Wow, I think that's wonderful—the way that faith has been interwoven in your life in so many ways, and it seems that there's a very clear foundation in the connection between nature and faith for you. As that relates to activism, what made you first want to get involved in the activism and advocacy world, in connecting that with faith and the natural environment?**

25:38 F.H.

Well, I have to say... I grew up in the backdrop of the Civil Rights Movement, so I was too young to be involved, plus I lived on Army bases mostly in the North. So, even though there were children—lots of children involved in the Civil Rights Movement, in the protests and those kinds of things—but where I was, where I lived, and where I grew up, that was not a possibility. So that was something that was always—I took that to heart, the idea of justice, the idea of fairness, the idea of freedom. And so those things, I think, have always been important to me, have always been part of my understanding of what it means to be human, what it means to be a faithful human, what it means to be a just human, or a so-called ‘believing’ human.

So those things were always important to me, and I think that by the time I was able to go to college and go to school myself, a lot of that had waned and people were hitting Wall Street and all that kind of stuff, so there wasn't as much momentum. But it's always been important to me, and always, all of my work and school, it's always kind of led—I feel looking back on it—to me participating on this level, and just not ever finding the right place and space. And I think the reason why 2005 and... Hurricane Katrina was a catalyst for that because it all seemed to come together; My understanding of how important it was to acknowledge and respect our Earth, our understanding of what it meant to care for the poor, to care for those who were vulnerable, to care for those who were in need, and to advocate for them—not just care for them, but to be an advocate—to hold leaders accountable, and to make them aware of those needs, all kind of converged and came together for me...

And I think the other part of it, I have to say, is alongside of all of those other formations was my formation as a feminist, or womanist, my understanding of how women's rights and roles in the world have been curtailed by religion, in some ways. And so, all of that—especially when I was in seminary—really came to the forefront. And so, all of those things converged, and I recognized that, particularly in the Baptist tradition and the Black Baptist tradition—but Southern Baptist tradition as well—there's not as much as much opportunity for women to do their ministry. Even though you may have the same sense of call and purpose and vision and ethics and gifts and talents, there isn't often as much opportunity to serve, and to share those with the community members. And activism has never been that. Activism has always made room, and there's always been space—and actually, many young women, especially as we uncover the stories, we recognize that women have been on the forefront all along. Even when we only saw the men out front, it was actually women who organized it all, who logistically put it together, who often were the brains and the inspiration for those men that were out in front. And so, I recognized that this was a perfect opportunity for me to be able to share my gifts and my talents and my passions for something that I cared about anyway, and that actually, to me, in many ways, redefined our faith traditions, which goes back to why I am serving and worshipping with a more diverse community—because there's that freedom to redefine our theology and our faith. So, I would say that I've always had a pull, or a calling to be an activist, to speak out for those—to speak with—those who need to know that somebody cares. And that's really incredibly important to me.

**30:50 M.P.**

**Could you speak a little bit more to how you ended up at IPL? And, since this moment in 2005 was such an important... moment of convergence, where did your career go from there and your own personal aspirations?**

**31:10 F.H.**

So, I continued to work for—I was working at a seminary, in student services,<sup>8</sup> and I was also in a Th.D.<sup>9</sup> program at Boston

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<sup>8</sup> Virginia Union University's Samuel DeWitt Proctor School of Theology

<sup>9</sup> Doctor of Theology

University at the time—I had started that in 2000, and then I had taken a leave of absence and I was working for Virginia Union again. Then, in 2005, after that experience going with the students to New Orleans and spending that time there and recognizing that clergy—people preparing to be leaders and faith leaders—really needed to have this as a foundation for their understanding of what their work should be, I went back to school in 2007.

I think, again, I was volunteering on the Obama campaign, and then, as I said, when the Clean Power Plan came out—I think that was 2012... might have been 2015 by then...it *was* 2015—I was organizing and getting petitions signed for the Clean Power Plan, and I met a young lady who was, at the time, working as an organizer for the Sierra Club. And then the next week, she came to an event I hosted and posted up to help me get petitions signed for the Clean Power Plan, and then... I was also volunteering for another nonprofit that worked on—their focus was on all different kinds of policy and justice policies, so I was volunteering with them part time, as well. And I was invited, a couple weeks later, to a conversation to, again, relaunch or restore, bring some life into the Virginia Interfaith Power and Light—which had been established in 2004, but had ebbed and waned in between those times; there were good times, and then there were times when it wasn't doing much. And at the time, they had maybe a few hundred dollars in their budget, they were doing these Climate 101 workshops, they weren't doing much at all—kind of creating resources and lists of who's out there doing this work, but they weren't really doing a whole lot in terms of environmental justice, anyway.

So, we went to be volunteers, to learn about the organization, to become volunteers, and when we left, we were both on the board. And so it was like, “How did that happen?” From then on, we just started meeting, we met with a neighbor IPL up in D.C. who was trying to help us think about our infrastructure and how to set the organization on a good trajectory. I had the opportunity to talk to a funder who was visiting Virginia, about our hopes and dreams and our desires for our organization, and we were very fortunate that funder reached back out to us and offered to have us write a Letter

of Interest and then also submit a proposal, and they were the first to fund us. So, once we had that funding, we were able to hire the young lady who was working at the Sierra Club as our full-time director, and we also hired an assistant for her, full-time. That was in 2016, late '16.

We started organizing and reconnecting with Virginia IPL in late 2015, we were funded late 2016, and then we hired them in 2017. So that's where we were able to begin to actually put some meat on the skeleton that we had put together. And then right away, the people in Union Hill - Buckingham County, we connected with them and that's what really took a lot of the focus of our work. But we were very clear when we reestablished the organization that we didn't want to just do carbon reduction and Climate 101—we really wanted to focus on Black and Brown, and poor rural White and Black communities that had, again, been neglected and/or overburdened. And that experience with Buckingham County and the Union Hill really helped us define that better and shape that trajectory and that sense of purpose for the organization. Not long after that, our steering committee adopted the Jemez Principles.<sup>10</sup> We really started focusing the work on environmental justice, and holding leaders accountable, but also training and educating communities so that they could stand up for themselves.

**37:18 M.P. What were some of the biggest challenges you faced in starting and building this chapter of IPL?**

**37:27 F.H.** So, we're an affiliate of a larger organization, a national organization that has 40 affiliates around the country. I think the major challenge, of course, in the beginning was just not having funding, trying to do this as volunteers. So, once we received funding, it was just building out the organization, learning—the great benefit was that Kendyl (Crawford), who we hired as the director, was working on and finishing up a nonprofit Master's (degree) and certification, so it was really prescient for her, it was really current. So she was actually taking lessons from class and

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<sup>10</sup> A set of guidelines for democratic organizing. <https://www.ejnet.org/ej/jemez.pdf>

applying them to building out the organization, so that was very helpful.

I think the other challenges were the same challenges we still have: maintaining funding—but I think one of the other challenges... And to be fair I have to say, the faith community is a challenge, particularly the Christian faith community, because there is a kind of understanding that is pervasive among faith traditions that they understand their role and responsibility to creation, but yet that role and responsibility is quite perverted and corrupted. They've been influenced by the culture wars of the 70s and 80s, where becoming a “tree-hugger” was something that was actually proposed and made popular by a faith leader, Jerry Falwell,<sup>11</sup> if you remember—well you probably don't remember... but... there were lots of upheavals. At the time, actually, even one of our board members was someone who had been a really high-level leader in the Evangelical movement, and he was actually ostracized by those same people for actually talking about climate change and the coming climate crisis.

So there is a lot of misunderstanding, misinformation, pushback from many people of faith, so it's often a challenge to make those connections with those—And they're the ones we really need to make the connections with, so that they begin to understand how, in fact, they are actually being... affected by climate change, and their responsibility to hold leaders accountable. I often say the climate movement has spent a lot of time, and has been thwarted by, the idea of individual responsibility and this, “Oh I can recycle our way out of this,” “I can stop eating meat,” “I can stop”—all of those things are great, but the reality is that we're not going to make inroads without the leaders of industry and the leaders of government actually deciding to make these changes. And if they don't—and who has the ear of industry and government? It is, oftentimes, faith leaders who have an outsized influence, and can have an outsized influence, and so it's really important for them to understand the issues—factually, as they really are, and to not only just understand it but to care about it, to get passionate about

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<sup>11</sup> American Baptist pastor and conservative televangelist

it, be moved enough to use their influence to protect people and planet.

**41:48 M.P.**      **How are you navigating those conversations today, when science has become kind of a disputed topic throughout America? Is that something that your organization has had to grapple with?**

**42:00 F.H.**      Yes and no... For us it's a done deal. We don't really get into those kinds of arguments—although people try to engage us in those, we really try to focus on the facts, we try to focus on, not just the facts of the science, but the reality of our traditions. There's...I would say no Christian, no Muslim, no Abrahamic Jewish person—any of the Abrahamic traditions cannot really argue that the Earth and the environment, and the creation is not something that we should care about. It's just how we understand it, how we understand those... principles and doctrines from scripture, or mandates from scripture, from our sacred texts. And so it is, sometimes, having those theological conversations, which I feel—I don't know if every Director of IPL has the background, but I feel I have a little edge because I have a theological background and that was something that was very important to me, so it was something that I cared about throughout my theological education...so it was something that I kind of created answers for myself in my experience, so I feel like that's where I start.

And so I'm not getting into these arguments over the doctrine. I'm getting into arguments about what our responsibilities are as believers—that we have an ethical responsibility, even if... your theology is that the Earth is going to pass away and you're gonna get a new Heaven and a new Earth, and all that stuff, then you still have a responsibility to the people that are here, and caring for the current Earth that we have right now is important to the health—mental health, physical health, emotional, spiritual health—of the people that are currently on this planet. So, there's no way around that, right? You still have that responsibility.

**44:45 M.P.**            **Yeah, that's very profound, and I admire the way that you were able to link that because I think that's become a little bit blurry for a lot of people, that connection. In a similar vein, what has been your biggest personal triumph, in working at IPL—or favorite memory from your work?**

**45:11 F.H.**            Well, again, I absolutely fell in love with the people in Buckingham. But I also—there's a group in Bristol, far, far Southwest Virginia, that I've also fallen in love with. It's a group of ministers—Black, White, Brown—who have different backgrounds—Baptist, Presbyterian, Pentecostal—that are working together to close a... quarry landfill, that basically (is) a bowl of toxic soup, that has been spewing out these toxic fumes over the last five, six years, and people have been just... miserably inundated with this really, really vile air quality. And so much so that they sometimes have to leave the area in order to get away from it. But the people who are low-income can't really afford to do that, they can't go get a hotel in the neighboring county for a weekend to get away from it. And so, we've been working with them for the last year and a half, almost two years. And what I love about this work is, when we're at our best, we're fulfilling the goal or the mandate or the principle of being community—White, Black, Brown, all faith traditions, learning how to love one another, learning how to work with one another, becoming passionate and caring about the same things together. And there's just a lot of residual joy from that.

I get really excited about the fact that these men and women are working together for the same issue, that there's a lot of compromise, there's so much incredible respect shown to one another—I just get a lot of joy out of that. And so, for me, when I know that we have that—the opportunity to be in the midst of that, to help promote that, to amplify that, to encourage that—that is to me the reason for doing this work. That's a reason for living, really—to create a world where there's space where people can come together on the issues that are most important to life and actually work on solutions... work together to fix it, and do it in ways that also build friendship and love and joy. So... that's my

most important memory or what keeps me going and what makes this important to me.

**48:23 M.P. If you could give any advice to someone trying to create a space like that and connect diverse identities over similar passions, what words of wisdom would you give?**

**48:41 F.H.** Ooh, I don't know. I think the most important words of wisdom are to persevere, to continue. There are going to be challenges, there are going to be cultural differences, there's gonna be cultural misunderstandings, there's going to be values challenges, as well; But I think, if the goal is not to just close this landfill, not just to stop the Atlantic Coast Pipeline and the compressor station, but actually to actually come out in the light of day and be community, be together, learn about your neighbor, learn their needs, learn their joys, learn their challenges—that is the meaning of life. And it's really a lifetime lesson, right? You're never going to finish that job. It's something we do over and over again. But what we can look back on and say, you can expand your network, you can expand your influence, expand your understanding.

It does take curiosity, it does take a sense of purpose and well-being from the start, you can't just go in there for the purposes of extracting—you have to start with that. But I think if you start with those motives of, actually at the end of this experience, what I will have created, what I would have developed, what I would have experienced, is what the community, that effervescence, that spirituality, that emotional connection—that, I think, is (a) worthy goal. And actually, I think you can say at the end of your life, if you've done that all your life, you can say, “I've lived a good life; I may not be rich, I may not have gone to the moon, I may not have... built a billion-dollar industry, but I have actually experienced humanity; I've touched the human soul, and I've... had the human soul touch me.” And I think that is like, ‘ooh!’ That excites me. That makes me feel like, ‘this is what life is supposed to be—I've touched life.’

**51:43 M.P. Wow, that's incredible. You really hit the core purpose of living right there. I have never thought of it that way, and I**



**think that is a beautiful way of going about interacting with others—**

**52:03 F.H.** And it's hard. I don't mean to say that it's easy. It's hard. You're gonna get your feelings hurt, because everybody's not comin' to the public square for that, right? That's why, I said... "You have to persevere." You have to get back up every time you've been knocked down, every time you've been hurt, every time you've been rejected or ignored, you have to say, "Okay, my purpose is not this one thing; It is the one thing."

**52:40 M.P.** **Yeah, it looks like you've really grounded yourself in that purpose, which I'm sure this is a long life's work. So, is that how kind of you keep yourself from becoming exhausted or overburdened?**

**52:55 F.H.** It is, it actually is. And you're very right that it's a long-life work. I didn't know this at 25. I did know that I really had this incredible curiosity, I had this incredible passion for wanting to see justice in action. I didn't know how it all was going to work out, and I think I dabbled and tried a lot of different things and ways, but I do think that it is exactly what you just described. It is life's purpose, it is the synchronon<sup>12</sup>, as they say, it is what it means to be alive. And I don't think you can know it on the front end, you can only know it looking back over it. But if you catch it early, if you catch the bug early, then your life journey will take you that way—and if you listen to the universe, if you hear the call of the universe and you are in tune with your own intuition, and you follow that, and you have good motives, I don't think you can go wrong.

**54:20 M.P.** **Maybe this is a little bit too forward-looking, but I'm curious, then, what are your personal aspirations, in the environmental justice space or otherwise, and your next steps, personally?**

**54:37 F.H.** Personally... Well, I would have to probably say I'm more towards the end of my career than the beginning, obviously. My personal

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<sup>12</sup> Synchronicity – a collision of events where something other than chance is involved, such that it feels meaningful.

goals, and they are very aligned with my career goals, as well, and for the organization, I really want to see Virginia IPL become much more sustainable. And not to say that it's not sustainable now, but... we have a strategic plan where we're trying to increase our individual donations and donations from faith institutions over, again, some of our foundation funding. That just makes the organization much stronger. I think I also... I had this conversation with someone just recently, that I really want our organization to attract, particularly women—we're not against men—but I really want for women, especially women who have made the effort and made the expense to go to seminary and to really follow what they understood as a call to serve humanity, that they can find a place there, that we can help one or two more find that.

...I'd like to get to the place where we're so financially stable that we can have organizers across the state—we have one in, mostly around Richmond, and we travel to these other places—but I'd like to be able to hire people and be able to pay them well, I'd like to be able to pay our staff well for the hard work that they do... And I would like to see many many more faith communities begin to awaken to the idea, to the understanding of, that their purpose is really not to pass down tradition and practices, but it's really to help people engage life in the way that we were just discussing—to create community, to be community, one to another; And that if we can do that, we can solve climate issues, we can solve all of those issues, because people understand their role—it's not really to make money and extract as much as you can out of life, but it's actually to give... as much as you can to life, and to better life—not only for yourself and for your family, but for others, as well. And so, if we can get everybody to recognize that, or get... a critical mass of people to understand these issues, and to care enough about it to take action, then I feel like that's what Virginia IPL can do, and should be doing.

**58:05 M.P.**

**So, in the larger Environmental and Climate Justice movements, what progress do you think that we've made so**

**far and what projects or ideas do you think are still missing from the space?**

**58:23 F.H.**

Well, I think we've made a lot of really great progress. The fact that, even though it's hard to keep it... the fact that... last year, at least, we had the Inflation Reduction Act, the Infrastructure Bill, that those both actually centered, in really important ways, addressing (the) climate crisis—the recognition that environmental justice is actually a thing, that it's an important thing, and that it speaks to more than just the issues related to climate, but that it speaks to the actual culmination of all of the issues that have haunted this nation since its inception... the colonialism, the racism, the slavery, the Jim Crow, all of those things. If we address environmental justice, if we can achieve environmental justice, we're actually achieving healing those things, and becoming a new nation, in the sense of thinking about how the mistakes of the past, the evils of the past can be actually addressed, if we wish to do that.

It's hard work, it's painstaking work, it's not gonna happen overnight, but I think many more of even the Big Green organizations, and others have recognized the importance of environmental justice—that it's really not just about reducing carbon out of the atmosphere. We can do that, but we'll still have a lot of injustice because what's already been baked in, first of all. We know that people around the world—mostly Brown, Black, poor people who live off the land—are already experiencing the impacts of the climate crisis in devastating ways, losing their livelihoods, losing their homes. I think that becoming the narrative is... important, and I think it's beginning to—and the reason why I know it is, is because we have so much backlash against it. So that is what I think we've accomplished over the 40 years of the Environmental Justice Movement—the mainstreaming and making everyone recognize that you're not gonna fix the climate crisis if you don't fix this, too—actually, this is the fix...

1:01:31 M.P.

**Anything you think is missing right now—points that you believe should be focused on?**

1:01:40 F.H.

Of course, because I look at this through a faith lens, I think obviously the faith voice is not there. I also know that that's something we have to be very careful about because the faith voice is involved in a number of other so-called 'political... issues' that have gone really wrong, because it's only one vision of faith. That's why I think it's really important to have this diverse conversation—to be in this interfaith conversation.

So that's the only thing that I would say is missing. I think... we certainly need more representation from various—from diverse communities. We certainly need more African Americans, more Latino/Latina. I'd love to see more people from the continent of Asia involved in this work, as well. I just think it's such important work that it needs to be—instead of telling your kids to become doctors and lawyers, tell them to do this work, because this is the challenge of our day.

1:03:14 M.P.

**I want to be mindful of your time and not go too long, but I think my final question would just be: Throughout our conversation, you've been mentioning our role in preserving our Earth and preserving humanity, and I was just wondering if you could elaborate a little bit more on that—what is your vision for what we need to be doing, and the part we play?**

1:03:43 F.H.

So again, going back to what I said earlier about creating community—I think that if we're doing that, we're playing that role. I do think that, again, it's important for us to have personal ethics—recycling, not littering, not using single-use plastics, all of those things. But again, the more important and the more strategic action is to use our personal influence—voting, speaking out, helping to write policy, helping to see policy get passed, helping to hold... our leaders accountable to those policies, educating our communities, being in this conversation and continuing this conversation are the things that we can do.

The personal responsibility is being a faithful human being— whatever that means to you, from your tradition. But the ultimate fix, again, is industry and governments. And if we use our influence and power and our energy to focus on that, then I think that's what we should be doing.

**1:05:21 M.P.**            **Thank you so much. And is there anything else that we didn't get to discuss today or cover that you would like to talk about?**

**1:05:31 F.H.**            I cannot think of another thing. You have drained me of all of the wisdom that I possibly could have.

**1:05:38 M.P.**            **Hopefully not too exhaustingly. Well, then, all I have to say is thank you so much for your time and the wisdom, even if I drained it from you. And as far as just the next steps of the project, so you're aware of what it will look like: I'm going to transcribe this recording, and I'll probably send it out to you in the next couple of weeks, just so that you can make sure everything looks okay, and look and see if anything needs to be edited. And then, I'll keep you updated on storing the video and any presentations or educational opportunities that we're doing, so probably storing it in the (Duke) Archives, as well as communicating with our other collaborators, and I'll send you an email with this information as well, after we finish here. But any questions or comments or concerns?**

**1:06:36 F.H.**            No questions, but I just want to thank you. You're a delightful interviewer and... this has been fun, so thank you.

**1:06:45 M.P.**            **Thank you, that really means a lot. And it was very fun for me, too... Hope you have a good rest of your week.**

**1:06:52 F.H.**            You as well. Bye-bye.