



## **Conversation with Beth Sawin**

**Ashley Hopkinson**

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**Ashley Hopkinson: Could you introduce yourself?**

**Beth Sawin:** My name is Beth Sawin. I'm the Founder and Director of Multisolving Institute, which is a think-do tank that focuses on people finding ways to address multiple problems with single solutions.

**Ashley Hopkinson: When people are a part of an organization from the founding stage, it's usually set up to solve a problem. With the Institute, what was the problem you were setting out to solve, and how do you see yourself actively solving it as a part of the organization now?**

**Beth Sawin:** I'll come at that maybe a little bit sideways, but for most of my career I was very focused on really a single problem, which was climate change. I founded and led an organization called Climate Interactive, and the purpose of Climate Interactive, which still exists and is doing great work, was to build computer simulations about policy solutions to climate change.

That work took me to places like UN Climate Conferences. It was satisfying and rewarding. We were helping top decision makers ask what-if questions about the climate. Also, I eventually saw the limits of that framing, that leaders could only go so far in making progress because, in my view, they were framing everything within the narrow bounds of climate change being a problem of greenhouse gases. Which is true; climate change is caused by greenhouse gases.

The things that everyone wants to do to address climate change really came across as investments and costs: you're going to have to build new infrastructure, you're going to have to change the energy system, you're going to have to change how agriculture is done. It's difficult to push those kinds of investments forward. A lot of times—and this would've been even 10 years ago; it's shifted a little

bit—a lot of what would also improve when those solutions got implemented was not present in the conversation.

The most obvious one is health, because air pollution, which is partially caused by the burning of fossil fuels, is a really significant contributor to lots of illnesses that come from dirty air—things like respiratory illnesses, but also dementia and premature birth and asthma. In fact, the World Health Organization says that the costs of getting off of fossil fuels and meeting climate targets would be more than offset by the savings to our health systems.

You'd think, okay, so the benefits are outweighed by the costs, let's get this done. And yet here we are year after year, struggling to make it happen. My colleagues and I got very intrigued about if it really was true that just the health costs would pay for the climate transition, and we weren't even counting, say, all the good jobs that could be created or the improvement in soil fertility or the protection of biodiversity. Why were things feeling so stuck?

Kind of similar to your project, one thing we did was lots of interviews with people who were finding ways to address all these things at once instead of in silos and were making maybe faster progress. We came to see that beneath the climate problem, but beneath a lot of other problems too, the way we've organized the world into silos that prevent people finding these synergistic solutions. It turns out it's, in my view, more of a social system problem.

There are all these barriers, like discipline. Most of us are educated within a particular field, and if someone becomes a climate expert, they may not know a lot about public health. If someone becomes an expert in labor, they may not know about climate and health, for instance. There's disciplines and then there's where decisions get made. Those are usually made in departments within governments or within organizations. Then there's how budgets get allocated.

So in a state there might be a budget for housing and a budget for climate, and those are usually made in very different processes. How do you make sure that that new affordable housing is actually in places that will be safe from climate? Or how do you make sure that new affordable housing is energy efficient to help the governor meet her climate target? We just see so much potential in helping people bring these decisions together into one shared picture to find these synergies and to avoid all the regrets. We built the affordable housing, but it wasn't energy efficient [as an example].

You asked what's the problem that we focus on? I'd say the problem was we live in a complex, interconnected world, but our decision-making and our action is usually constrained by dividing that up into little pieces. Our mission is to support the people who are trying to put those pieces together.

**Ashley Hopkinson: With this type of work, where there isn't really a structure in place for multisolving, how have you been able to create some kind of structure and infrastructure around it to be able to invite people into these more synergetic ways of working?**

**Beth Sawin:** We call this multisolving, this idea of pursuing multiple goals in a single effort. Most of what we know about multisolving is by looking for bright spots where people have been successful at it and trying to understand what they did and how that came about.

We were funded by Robert Wood Johnson Foundation years ago to do a global scan for multisolving for climate and health. We looked all around the world, and we saw things like hospital programs focused on energy efficiency and cities that would close down their streets for walking and cycling and air-quality projects in Mexico City. On the surface, they were completely different from each other.

The goal of the research was to find out how to replicate these successes. At first we thought it would be like, okay, if you want to do a bicycle program like they did in this country, here's what they did and you should do that. We realized they were all very fit to their local conditions. They were very responsive to culture, very responsive to people's needs, to history. We ended up thinking and noticing what these projects had in common was not their specifics of sector or what they actually did. It was how people did it.

We talked about multisolving as a *way* more than a *what*. We think the way is the thing to share. If people want to build their capacity to multisolving, we suggest they focus on these attitudes and approaches that we see in common across all these projects.

There's different characteristics that fit into that way. A few examples: one of the most important is really insisting on equity amongst partners in a multisolving project. In different contexts, it might be different types of equity that really matter. It might be gender equity or racial equity, or in some countries, religious minorities.

Again, it's not one size fits all, but we say that multisolving projects, even if it costs more money, even if it takes more time, they make sure that everybody has a say, that everybody is involved and listened to. That's one part of what we call The Multisolving Way.

There are five elements we talk about. Equity is one of them. Connecting across silos is another, and that is a whole actual way of operating. It starts with curiosity. Expertise is really needed, but experts not so much. Does that make sense? The kind of expert who's really curious about the other domains that they don't know about. There's that kind of weaving of connection across silos. We see solidarity, which we contrast to a more transactional approach.

There's lots of alliances in this world to get that legislation passed. "I'll vote for this if you'll vote for that." In multisolving, it's more like what keeps you awake at night matters to me as much as what keeps me awake at night. If I'm a climate expert and you're a parent of a kid with asthma, we have a common interest in closing down that coal-fired power plant. But it's me actually caring not just that I could get your vote, but I care about your child.

I spent so many years in a more technical climate-change context. I saw lots of examples where that wasn't the case, where it was more instrumental and less about solidarity. We could go into all the elements, but that gives you a sense of some of them.

**Ashley Hopkinson: I would love to hear the fourth and the fifth. I've got equity, connecting across silos, solidarity—what's the fourth and the fifth?**

**Beth Sawin:** One is taking a systems view. Really, at the end of the day, what multisolving is doing is taking systems that have been fractured into little parts as though health is separate from equity, or that nature is separate from people. A systems view says we're going to put all those parts back together again. It also involves having a longer time horizon and asking what might happen next.

Lots of times people may have a success, but then the system pushes back and erodes that. If we're successful, asking that question, how might the system respond and can we be prepared for that? Another kind of systems orientation is to ask, how can our success build on itself? In multisolving projects, they often start pretty humble and small. They're not necessarily giant. I mean they can be, but more often they're organic.

It might be just a couple of people across a couple silos, and success kind of builds upon itself. There's a small result that attracts more energy and more attention. An example of that, a project that we learned from in New Zealand, was insulating homes, doing home weatherization. It was initially an energy and jobs program, but they did a health impact assessment of the people who lived in the homes, and they saw that they were actually having fewer hospitalizations and spending less on medication because their homes were healthier.

That led eventually to the Health Ministry becoming involved and a program where doctors could refer patients for home weatherization. So instead of medication, get new windows, or a new boiler. That didn't start as a jobs, health and energy program, but they noticed what was changing and that naturally led to that sort of growth. There'd be a lot more to say about systems thinking, but that sort of orientation.

Then the last one we call coherence, which is a little bit geeky. It comes from complexity theory and systems theory, but it talks about being aligned to vision and values and shared practices.

For instance, one project that we partnered with a group in Atlanta called Partnership for Southern Equity, which does a lot of work on health equity. That project was something called the Just Growth Circle, and it was focused on the growth of the urban environment. Like Atlanta was then and is still now booming; that was creating all kinds of problems like gentrification, but also things like stormwater flooding. They would build a big stadium and then a low-income neighborhood would get flooded every time it rained. This project brought together experts in climate, water, but also housing and affordability, jobs, and racial equity, which is the core focus of Partnership for Southern Equity.

One of the first things that this very diverse group did was come up with a consensus value statement of four values that they all shared. They were things like the residents of a neighborhood should have a say in the infrastructure that's built there. That project actually started before Trump was elected, carried on through those years, then it's still going on. And now we have the Biden Administration, the Inflation Reduction Act—suddenly opportunities, we couldn't have predicted a lot of what happened—but the thing about being organized around vision and values is they'll tell you what to do no matter what it is that you're facing.

It's a way to be improvisational in uncertain times, which I think even just based on the last three weeks in America, we can say those are probably good strategies. Who could have predicted where so much is right now?

**Ashley Hopkinson: In the time that you've been doing this work, I imagine that you collect a lot of lessons and a lot of insights. If someone wants to pick up multisolving, what is something that you can share that you think they might find helpful, something that you've learned along the way?**

**Beth Sawin:** Well, I have a book coming out in November that's everything that I know about the answer to that question.

I think a thing I've learned from watching multisolvers is that you really can start wherever you are with whatever you have. In my field of systems analysis, there's this idea of leverage points, of identifying these almost magical spots where if you can act there, everything about the system will shift. In theory, that's solid. I mean, the reasoning behind that is good. A lot of my systems teachers, that's what they taught me, but I spent a lot of years helping groups identify leverage points and then realizing they didn't have the power to act on them.

Like, all right, if I was the CEO or I was the president, I could push that leverage point, but I'm just a community leader or something like that. Multisolving, and this idea of acting from your values wherever you are, linking across silos wherever you are, it just provides so much.

The power you have is the power where you are as opposed to an analysis of something that you can't do. And yet what we see is that when people forge connections across silos, sometimes we talk about it as rewiring systems so that there are these connections of trusting relationships across silos. That changes the behavior of systems. In fact, the only thing in systems theory that changes systems is when you change their structure.

It may just look like a coffee when you're meeting with someone from a different department or another part of the city, but it's actually creating a new connection in the system.

Over the years, I've seen the power of that simple act to create possibilities that weren't there before in systems. Also, we're talking about uncertain times and destabilized times. One of the best investments for uncertainty is building the intelligence of systems and connecting people so that they can respond when something happens, which could be a natural disaster or a huge opportunity.

This particular week in America, people are like, wow, we might actually get a president who might continue investing in climate and health. We don't know yet, but the best way to be ready for that is to connect up across silos. We might also get a really regressive presidency where lots of vulnerable people are going to be in danger. Well, actually the best way to prepare for that is to connect across silos and be ready to take care of each other.

More and more, and this is probably partially just getting older and humbler, but I think there's some kind of shift in the world where things are less predictable. I just gravitate toward things that are worth doing no matter what.

**Ashley Hopkinson: I had a conversation a couple of weeks ago with a government official in Wales. We were talking about her work with the Future Generations Act: how is it possible to feel like you're making substantial change when things are on a four-year cycle? I can appreciate the context of what you're saying, that's just a part of grounding the work, that you have all these interconnections. It's not that who's in power doesn't matter, but it's that you have this interlaced network with which you can still try to find ways to be supportive across these causes.**

**Beth Sawin:** I learned a lot about this in the early years of the pandemic. That project I mentioned in Atlanta, for instance, we had set up a small grants program. We had a donor, and part of what we did

was give grants of a few thousand dollars to community-based organizations. The grants were all distributed right before the first months of the pandemic.

One group planned to do some community beautification of a park, and that was what they were going to do with their couple thousand dollars. But they pivoted in those first months. They were like, the senior citizens in this neighborhood need to be able to access healthcare on their phones. Telehealth was this new thing. So they did training on people's front porches like, here's how you use a phone to make an appointment with your doctor.

Those same networks that they had built to clean up the park served something that nobody could have predicted they would need to do. Examples like that have just really taught me that in multisolving projects, you get your objective accomplished, but it leaves behind this trace of people connected in new ways, and that is a real source of adaptive capacity and resilience for whatever's coming next. Of course, I'm not a community organizer and that's a whole skill set, but that's basically the point of that I think.

**Ashley Hopkinson: What do you think it'll take to demonstrate the value of multisolving? Where do you see it now in terms of climate and health and those intersections, and what do you think it'll take to demonstrate the value of multisolving with all these interdependencies?**

**Beth Sawin:** I wish I knew the answer to that, because there's so much great work that could absorb so much more investment than what's coming its way right now. Because this way of working can look kind of humble. It can look kind of like, what are people even getting done here? It can look like we're all sitting in a room and talking.

That Partnership for Southern Equity project folks met once a month or every other month for years. If you had a video camera, it would've just looked like a flip chart and coffee and bagels and talking. We saw everything that bubbled out of those connections and that was made possible. Now in that case, there is funding from the Bezos Earth Fund and funding from the USDA for Urban Forestry. That network that got built so gradually was able to tap into some of that.

For every project that gets to that level, there's so many more that could, and I do feel like part of the gap is both public and private funding, like philanthropy and government funding, which is still very [focused on]— show us the result that you're going to get. Show us the five-year plan.

Everything I'm telling you about is emergent. It happens out of the connections, and you can't predict exactly what will happen. You can just say, good things are going to come of this, trust me.

In systems theory, that's actually a very valid argument, but in funding, people don't take it seriously. One of the goals of my book is to give a little more academic bolstering to the approach and sharing examples from it. I wish I knew what more it would take. It is definitely seeing the world in a different way.

**Ashley Hopkinson: I remember during the pandemic here in New Orleans, it was like, I wonder why people aren't coming to the health center as much as they should to get the tests or the vaccinations? Then all of a sudden you saw mobile health units popping up over the city. That's transportation connected with health. I think there are little pockets where we do see some of that interdependency. To your point, that doesn't mean that that's always funded or that mobile health units become a permanent part of a city's infrastructure.**

**Beth Sawin:** Yeah, it feels like to me, the closer you get to people on the ground, the more you see multisolving, actually. In a neighborhood, it's kind of natural. People understand our health and our water and our kids are all connected because it's all right here in our neighborhood. It's almost like the higher you get within corporations and government where now, well, I only get to pay attention to water. I don't get to do anything about children.

I do think a lot of the innovations are coming from the grassroots up. How can organizations at higher levels that aren't structured to nurture that, do it a little better? I do think people are getting interested, and we definitely get inquiries from some of those types of agencies about what they could do differently.

**Ashley Hopkinson: With the work you're doing, how do you measure progress? Because as you were talking about, with projects like the Southern Equity project, it's gradual, and you know a good thing is going to come of it, but then you're in this system where there are all these success markers. How do you define your own metrics of success?**

**Beth Sawin:** That's a question that we hear a lot from the multi-solvers who are coming to us for community or training. We have two different things we offer them right now. One we call the dandelion, and it's a diagram that looks like a dandelion flower. We say that multisolving actually happens like a dandelion, and that most people focus on the bright yellow flowers, which is the health clinic, the climate legislation, the solar panels—and that's great, but there's a lot more going on than just the flowers.

We point people to the leaves, which is all that work that it took to get the clinic in the first place, all the meetings, all the advocacy. Even more important than that, underneath the soil, so much more out



of sight, the roots is where all of this building webs of connection and solidarity is happening. That's the part that's so hard to fund, that people are like, what are you even doing? But it's essential for everything else.

Then we also have people pay attention to the little white puffs of the dandelion flower that blow away in the wind. What changed in the world because there's this mobile health clinic now? That one child got the healthcare that she needed, and that meant she had more success in school. These webs of what emerges, people find very hard to see, but it doesn't mean that they aren't there.

One thing we try to help multisolvers do is think about paying attention to all of those layers. It's not that one is the most important, but what you look for to see progress is really different at each level. At the roots, you should be looking at how cross-sectoral our network is and celebrating—oh, we added a new partner with a focus on jobs—and qualitative things.

You might have to do interviews to find out how safe people feel in these conversations, or tracking the voices. Like are the young people speaking? Are the women of color being listened to? All that might be our metrics below. You could think about each layer. You would look for different things to see if you were having success.

We spent years trying to diagram multisolving. We had a circle, a cycle. No, it's a spiral, but actually it's all happening at once. You're simultaneously getting that health clinic built and staffed and building those relationships and tracking what's changed. It's like you have to do it all at once and you have to have a different attention to notice what's happening at each part.

When you asked what needs to change for this to be a more common way of working, I think there is also something about our metaphors becoming more biological and also more feminine. We've been talking about an awful lot of mending and tending and caring. When you think about your plant and being so careful with that root structure, we all know the people in movements who are the ones who are helping resolve conflicts.

It looks really easy to have a meeting where everyone gets listened to, but there's so much care in setting the conditions for that to happen. Often that care work is either invisible, which we could talk about a whole gender analysis of that, or underappreciated, under-compensated, not seen as a skill set.

We're getting now into my deeper theories of multisolving, but one thing that I talk about in my book is that I think we're in this moment of two different worldviews that are really fighting with each other, and one is the last 500 or more years of colonization and slavery and extractive economics from the

earth, but alongside of it, Indigenous people(s) holds a lot of this down—more understanding that we are all connected to each other and to the earth.

I think we have to move the whole society into that worldview if we're going to make it on this planet. Another thing about multisolving: it gets the health clinic built, it gets those new networks that provide our resilience, but it also gives people maybe their first taste of what it means to be with other people in this relational way that is caring, that is equitable, that moves at the speed of trust.

People may not have gotten that in their families or their education or how politics works. Another really important thing about multisolving is that it's sort of counter-cultural. This is a way we could be in the world. People may practice it as getting that health clinic built, but it may show up in the rest of their lives.

**Ashley Hopkinson: What are the challenges that you face in multisolving? What has helped you in addressing some of those challenges?**

**Beth Sawin:** A big one is perception of time. People think that it is going to take longer. They imagine, okay, we are facing legitimate crises, climate change and others. Time is actually short. As long as I've been working on climate change, for instance, people will say, yeah, well, equity is important, but climate change is a crisis. So sorry, we can't slow down this climate movement to make space for everyone.

That I don't believe is true. I think if we imagine that 30 years ago the climate movement had been truly multiracial, focused on everyone's civil rights, we would be in a different place. It's a perception that working in silos is faster and listening to each other bogs things down. That false perception, I think, is one of the big obstacles, and I don't know any way to overcome it beyond telling stories where it was different or people finally experiencing it for themselves.

**Ashley Hopkinson: Do you have a favorite story you'd like to share? A story of impact that you find really resonates with people?**

**Beth Sawin:** I guess maybe because we've been talking about it, I'm thinking of some of the stories in Atlanta with Partnership for Southern Equity, and I think they do counter that [idea that] it's going to take a long time. I mentioned those four consensus value statements that the group came up with. People, sometimes they hear me say that and they're like, oh my God, that sounds like it was so painful and took a long time.

And it did. It took care and meeting over multiple months to really nail it down. Once that existed, a really interesting thing happened. It was right around the holidays, and everyone had signed off, and we came back and there was a new green infrastructure [plan]—I can't remember if it was a master plan or a task force plan or something like that—coming out of a city department.

Somebody noticed that pretty much word-for-word, those four pretty radical principles—like communities should have a final say in the infrastructure that impacts them—was embedded in this official document from the city about how green infrastructure should work. We're like, huh, I wonder how did that happen? It wasn't like we got to pressure the mayor and try to get the language in.

Turned out that someone who'd been at these meetings about building the value statements had an official role in that department, and the plan came across her desk and she was like, I think these things fit here. And so she wrote them in, and then her boss was like, yeah, that sounds right. It was one of the easiest influences of an ordinance that I'd ever seen.

It looked like a process that was really slow. It was all that listening and “not that word, this word,” and then something happened almost effortlessly. I've just come to trust that those things will happen. You can't predict when, and you can't really control them, but they're kind of the flip side of it'll be slow and ponderous. Sometimes it will be slow, but sometimes it will be fast and effortless because of what you've built.

**Ashley Hopkinson: When it's really successful, how does multisolving get done? In the examples you've mentioned, what do you think were the ingredients that resulted in some change in the community?**

**Beth Sawin:** I think this is probably not going to be satisfying to you, but it's all so different, each example I can think of. The commonalities seem to be this high fidelity to these principles, like everyone matters. No one's safe until everyone's safe. We're going to listen to the whole, and then just hard work and persistence and that practical nitty-gritty side of it.

It definitely isn't, oh, we just all talk together and we have this feeling of oneness and then the world changes. No, it's people showing up and pounding the pavement and finding the dollars. Sometimes it is like an extraordinary person who goes the extra distance, but each of those extraordinary people is embedded in a fabric and nobody can—at least I can't—predict exactly which part of that fabric is going to be the part that matters, so you invest in all of it. You just don't know what conditions are coming next.

I think it's almost like a multi-level awareness. People who are very skillful at moving through their individual context but also connected to this cross-sectoral context, like that ordinance I was just telling you about. Someone knew how to move something through a bureaucracy. Another thing that I'm thinking about was an even bigger federal bureaucracy, and someone knew how you needed to phrase something in order to get it forward, but they were carrying some sense of the wider collective as they did it.

**Ashley Hopkinson: As someone who spends a lot of time in this space, what for you is missing in the conversation about climate and health? What would you like to see come to the surface more?**

**Beth Sawin:** I think here in the Global North, climate change is still too often talked about as though it's something in the future or something that happens to other people in other parts of the world. Every climate disaster changes that a little bit. People are starting to be like, oh no, I'm breathing wildfire smoke from British Columbia on the East Coast.

The awareness that this is here now and we need to deal with it is one thing that I definitely talk about a lot. Climate change is so much talked about as though we're going to have to sacrifice for the future. What multisolving says is, maybe, but also so much of what we need to do to address climate change is actually going to make people's lives better in the here and now. It's going to make our cities greener. It's going to make our air cleaner. If it's done right. I'm thinking about, like, the Green New Deal. It's going to have good jobs for everyone, and it could come with child care and healthcare. If our vision is expansive enough, this really hard thing we need to do to address climate change can also be a really beautiful thing for lots of other [problems].

These big transformations are only a sacrifice if you think we live in the best possible way. Of course, when it comes to health and equity, the evidence is so clear: there's so much room for improvement. If we have to change everything to address climate change, let's make it better for everyone.

**Ashley Hopkinson: What keeps you optimistic about this idea of healthy people, healthy planet? What keeps you in this work and keeps you hopeful about multisolving?**

**Beth Sawin:** One element is, I've worked on climate change now for 25 or more years, and it's gotten a lot less lonely. When I was younger, I had young kids at home at the time, and I was really despairing because so many people were not aware. Even though the situation is a lot more desperate now, I actually feel a lot less alone because so many fantastic people are dedicated to addressing this.

That's a source of energy for me, that sense of camaraderie. I get that question about hope a lot, and sometimes I don't even feel like it's hope anymore. It's like, you just got to do the best that you can where you are without really knowing what the outcome will be. In my spiritual practice, I probably ask more for courage and fortitude than for hope. Just let me do the right thing, the wise thing, and it's going to play out beyond our own lifetimes.

Also, I have really been having this sensation the last couple of weeks; I think I want to write something about it. I feel like on social media, we just keep toggling back and forth from overblown despair, like, "All is lost," to probably an overblown, "No, it's fine, Kamala's got it, it's going to be great." I'm like, this is a good development, [but] the problems are deeper than any one leader. I just like that equanimity. Courage and wisdom and equanimity, more than hope or despair, are what I'm trying to find.

**Ashley Hopkinson: Thank you, Beth.**

*Ashley Hopkinson is an award-winning journalist, newsroom entrepreneur and leader dedicated to excellent storytelling and mission-driven media. She currently manages the Solutions Insights Lab, an initiative of the Solutions Journalism Network. She is based in New Orleans, Louisiana.*

*\* This conversation has been edited and condensed.*