

Podcast Series: Holistic Nature of Us

Episode # 55 : Meet: Kelly Rafferty

<https://www.judithdreyer.com>

Hi I'm Judith Dreyer,

Thank you for joining me for this pod cast series "The Holistic Nature of Us".

My intent is to take us, you and I, into a better understanding of the concepts behind our holistic nature and how that ties directly to the holistic nature of the world around us. How can we connect the dots in practical ways that we are nature and nature is in us?

I feature a broad range of guests deeply concerned about the environmental issues of our time, and that includes the planet as well as us, authors and educators, practitioners and others whose passion for this earth helps us create bridges. These folks are innovators, action oriented, creating solutions in a variety of ways that honors ours and the planets holistic nature. I am honored to share their stories, their projects, their passion with all of you.

And today I'm delighted to introduce you to Kelly Rafferty. Kelly is a junior, an English major at the University of Connecticut in Storrs Connecticut. She is a member of the UConnPIRG organization which is student run and it's a student non-profit organization that tackles various projects campus wide. She happens to be particularly interested in the zero waste campaign, eliminating plastic bags on campus.

Hi Kelly, it's a pleasure to have you here today.

KELLY: It's a pleasure to be here too.

JUDITH: I'm excited for you tell us all about your world on campus making this great change. So, start telling us something about your interests.

KELLY: I got involved in kind of environmental activism in high school. I was part of a recycling club in high school, which was a very small

organization. I was president of it. We were working towards making school a bit more eco-friendly. We did a lot of clean-up days and that's kind of where the crux of my environmental interest started. Before that I had always been interested in nature, but I hadn't been necessarily interested in environmental issues and I think there my teacher really introduced me to what was actually happening in our communities. I learned that the town that I lived in at the time, Wilton, had a huge problem with idling. Our air quality was actually one of the lowest in Fairfield County. It was really, really bad and it was affecting the community. They had a really high rate of asthma and it was just not something that the town seemed to be doing so I actually ended up getting involved with an internship with this organization called Wilton Go Green. They're working on actually a no-idling campaign to stop people from idling their cars like, outside of Day Cares or schools. Any where in CT that's a public area you actually, it's like illegal idling your car. I learned that idling creates massive amounts of CO₂, far more than when you're just driving, and I had never even thought of any of these issues before really. I hadn't really considered it. I mean idling just seems like a silly little thing that you do on a daily basis. I think that's where I got interested in smaller issues that become very magnified.

So, when I went to college. I became involved with PIRG and bags were kind of a similar issue to idling for me. It's something that seems like it's very inconsequential. Everyday people use bags. It doesn't seem like a huge deal. You don't really know where they go. You put them in your trash; they're gone. And it just didn't seem that important. Then as I began to look into more of the issues associate with it, I realized that bags are a massive issue and they're a massively negative issue for communities. They cost millions of dollars every year to clean up for the state. They're a complete waste of money. We literally spend tax payer dollars to clean up bags that people get for free and that just seems like a huge waste of resources just in terms of that. But beyond resources, you can think of bags as basically solid oil. People tend to believe that bags are some other type of something. They think that they're, I don't know some people have even tried to argue and say that these plastic bags are made out of paper. And I'm like, no, that's not what they're made out of. They're made out of oil. That's how they make bags. And I think that there's just this big disconnect between what people think single use plastics are and what single use plastics actually are. And from a very early age you're not really told what exactly a plastic is. It's just this kind of great object that doesn't go anywhere. It stays nice for a very long time. It's solid and we're not really

told that it's actually solidified natural gas or that it's actually solidified through oil. And I think once I made the connection between the fact that refusing plastics is actually refusing fossil fuels, I think that's when I became far more motivated to get a bag ban passed on campus.

My work on campus started two semesters ago and that's when I started polling the university for their interest in this issue. I wanted to see, did students actually care about this? It's like a little study for myself. Okay what do the students actually think about bags? Was it something that they generally thought about and were concerned about or was it an issue that was really at the background of their minds? I basically went to all our dining halls and I told students, tried to get a pretty large sample size. I think at that point I got maybe between 600 survey responses for that. And I found that students were actually really interested in the idea of changing out some of these plastic bags on campus. They seemed actually kind of motivated, which was surprising to me, because you wouldn't have thought that just from being around plastic in our trash at school. And I was surprised that kids were coming up to me and telling me "in my town we don't use bags" or I'm from x,y,z, I'm from New Jersey and we don't use bags and surprised that CT does and surprised Mansfield does and that's when I noticed that, okay, students actually do care about this and this is something they'd love to see on campus. This is something that we can do actively together, and we can make an actually pretty dramatic change. After I polled students, we started doing some community engagement events. I think that's a really great way if you're planning to do a bag ban to get people involved, is to make it a community wide effort and to make it interesting. Not just stuff their head with facts but really have film screenings that show the impact of it far better than me speaking every could. Or do community wide events like, decorate your own bag, to get them kind of interested in this topic. Because not everybody automatically thinks of bags and says, yes that is something that I would like to ban.

JUDITH: Right.

KELLY: Yeah. We started doing some of that and I was a little worried. I was working with my other group members and a baker and my lead director Isabelle and I was like I don't really know how many people are going to come to these events, you know? I was a little worried but actually the community reception was really great. We had 80 kids come for a film screening about plastic bags. We screened the film "Bag It". If you're

interested at all about plastic bag bans in your community, I think it's an excellent film, it's a little bit of an older film. But what's nice about it is it was filmed at a time when these bans were not popular at all. California hadn't passed their bills. It was very preliminary research and it's a fascinating film. It really delves into the issue of why single use plastics are bad not just for the environment but for human health, animal health, just for the pure cleanliness factor of communities as well as issues of Human Rights in other countries too who end up receiving a lot of our single use plastic. After that semester was over and community events were kind of done, last semester and then a little bit of this semester was just focused on basically getting as many petitions as we could to make this happen. So, we'd stand in dining halls and ask kids as they were coming in, hey how do you feel about plastic bags? Do you not like plastic bags? Do you not want them to go on campus? Sign our petition. We don't want them either. We want you guys to use reusable bags and we want paper as the alternative but not the replacement. So that's what we started doing and eventually with the hard, hard work occurred all the volunteers were super dedicated to making this happen, we eventually got over 1,000 petitions and that was massive. We got that literally only in the span of like a few weeks.

JUDITH: Wow, that's very good, you know?

KELLY: Which was great! And I did not expect that to go as well as it did. I thought we were going to have to go to tables for days and days and days at a time, but we didn't. And afterwards we presented those petitions to a leader of the dining services for UCONN. He's the guy who orders all the bags and focuses on what direction the campus is going in terms of their single use items. He was actually really impressed. He said "wow, you know this is quite an effort that you've done. I don't think this is going to happen immediately" he said at first, but he said we're definitely going to be considering this. I think at that point they had already been a little bit considering it just because UCONN was trying to go into the zero waste direction. They were considering other initiatives on campus like they were turning our food into fuel with one of their initiatives. So, they were trying to definitely move us in a greener direction at that point. He was kind of receptive to that. And then after our preliminary meeting there was this big long lag of time where I wasn't sure what was going on. It was this interim period. At that time, we still were doing community engagement events because we felt we needed student voices behind this action. We needed people actually motivated for doing it and to understand why it was actually

important. It wasn't just this super force action of banning the bag. It was a way for a nuanced issue. And then we eventually, right as my semester was about to end and I was about to go home for a break, I got a call from Dining Services. They said they were not going to use plastic bags any more. We're going to switch to paper. We're going to offer reuseables for kids to buy in our, it's like basically it's this little store in the Student Union and we're going to offer reuseables for sale there. And I was elated! It was just so exciting and all of our 'grab and go' sandwiches, they also switched over to paper and not only that, there was a ten cents fee on paper bags in the union to discourage people from using them, which I think is one of the most effective tactics, personally, for getting people off single use items. And that was basically how we won. It was incredibly exciting and just recently, the lady that I had been working with in the community that's always advising the committee, an excellent group of ladies who have been working for three years in Mansfield as a Town to ban plastic bags, they finally got their ordinance passed. I think that was on Tuesday I believe. So now Mansfield and the University will both be bag, single use plastic bag free which is amazing.

JUDITH: That's amazing. That's quite an accomplishment, especially for under a year's worth of effort, you know, to get this kind of thing through. Because, as we both know, changing policy require patience, time and I love your, not only your enthusiasm (but you're right), you have to stay visible in order to make an impact. So that's really wonderful.

Let me ask you this, so you talked about the dining services but when I was reading the article about you that the president of the university sent out, I was wondering about the bookstore and other departments on campus. How are they doing with this whole thing?

KELLY: That's a very good point. So, the thing with the bookstore is a little weird. Basically, UCONN controls, I mean they kind of have their, they rent out to every business their space. Although the bookstore is called the UCONN Bookstore it's not a co-op anymore like it used to be. The university directly kind of owned the bookstores. You need to get a check like every year with the bookstore earnings. That's what I heard. I didn't go here when they used to do that. But it was about maybe 4 years ago, maybe 4-5 years ago. nThen Barnes and Noble ended up buying that space. They are not under the university's overseeing. Like Dining Services doesn't have any control over their bag ordering. That's a separate business.

I had spoken with them a year ago. They came to our fair, our green fair on Fairfield Way. They were talking about how they wanted to use more reusable bags at the bookstore but that they were focused on their, they basically had this coin program where if you refused to use a plastic bag they'd give you this little coin and then you would put it in a bin and they would donate whatever the cost of the bag was to an organization. And that is fine. That's definitely fine. I mean that's an attempt at doing something. But it wasn't, they diverted a good amount bags from landfills but it's obviously not as widespread as a bag ban would be and it's an interim thing but it's not really the goal. The man that I spoke with, he runs the bookstore, he was kind of like he was interested but he didn't really think that he could get paper bags within like a decent time frame. He was kind of like slow to start. So, I will definitely pursue that with him further but it's a little difficult because they're not under the university's watch. It's a private business technically.

JUDITH: Well I would think Barnes and Noble in general as a community based business that you would want to get on the bandwagon because you have the town behind you, number one, so there's a buzz in town wherever you go. People are going to be thinking about their bags because they can't do it in a local Starbucks, you know, or the local supermarket and then they come to the campus and the students hang out at the student union where the dining services are. They're not going to get bags there.

KELLY: Right.

JUDITH: I would think you've got a foot in the door at the very least and I can see where maybe your efforts will pay off in the long run.

KELLY: Yes, that's a good point though. I will definitely try to pursue action with him a little bit further. Because it's such a weird thing with the zoning, the bookstore that's near Starbucks and near Dog Lane Café, that bookstore is covered by the ordinance because that's town-wide property. But our bookstore, the one that's the UCONN branch one is obviously not. And it's just such a strange thing that the university doesn't have to follow any town ordinances. So that's why I had to go about the route of getting the bag ban just specifically on campus, because irregardless or not if it passed in Mansfield the university would not have to had followed it. Which is just, I don't know, I didn't know that before going in this direction

and it was definitely really surprising for me that that was the case. Obviously unfortunate but...

JUDITH: That's interesting. Well again, you're successful because you did the research, that's number one. But number two, none of us like to change and plastic bags have been a part of our lifestyle for a long time. I mean your generation grew up with them. My generation did not. For us, it was kind of like, wow isn't this amazing. You could carry something cold home or whatever and it didn't leak all over the place and your bag fall apart, you know? But now we have other materials that create carry bags for us that are very easy to put into a purse or to put in a backpack that you might have on campus to take with you. So that's really interesting. I really applaud your efforts, which is again why I'm grateful that you're here today to share your efforts with my audience.

KELLY: Thank you. I really appreciate that.

JUDITH: Alright, so let's talk about where you go from here. You've got it done in bookstore (in the student union). They brought in an alternative to carry bags. It's not paper and not plastic. Is it like a cloth type material?

KELLY: Yeah, it's a recycled cloth bag. It's made from recycled water bottles and they're very cheap. That's what's nice about them for students, they're a dollar and they hold a lot and they're packable so you can pack them really easily into your bag. Obviously, the nicest part about them is they're already recycled and they're really sturdy. So, it's the perfect vehicle for transporting stuff, which is great. I was so glad they decided to sell them. I wasn't even thinking in that direction. He offered that to me, and I was like, oh that's a wonderful idea. Let's generate a little revenue for the university and also keep bags that are like those.

JUDITH: Right. Well economics helps drive change too.

KELLY: Oh definitely.

JUDITH: So that's a really good point and it's interesting that the dining service chose a recycled water bottle bag, so they're already using something that's created a mess in our landfills.

KELLY: Yes. I believe it's water bottles. I'm like 90% sure. I know it's recycled plastic. I assume it's from water bottles just because a lot of that

material that I can see in the bags, that material is normally the water bottles. It's that kind of like thin billowy, almost like nylon material.

JUDITH: Right and plastic is plastic. It doesn't have to be just from a water bottle, you know? They're reusing stuff that we throw away all the time without a thought. I met a couple of counselors several years ago in the Northwest corner of CT. There's a camp out there. I had a health food store at the time. They came in and we got to talking. They were telling me that they have a song called 'Where is away?' And they teach it to the kids about throwing what they're using away. Where is away? We don't have that conscious dot connected with what we buy, what we throw away, where does it go? It's like out of sight, out of mind.

Can you give us any statistics about how bad the water bottle picture is today?

KELLY: Oh, about water bottles?

JUDITH: Or just plastics in general.

KELLY: Plastics in general are probably, just besides climate change in general, the second biggest issue we're facing right now as a country. The problem with single use plastic bags and single use plastic in general, especially in the U.S. is that we have abysmal recycling rates, absolutely abysmal. And the reason for that is most countries no longer want to take our recycling. China does not want our recycling. India is already getting fed up with accepting our very dirty recycling. Many of the other nations like Thailand and Vietnam also don't want our recycling. But China was the biggest importer of American garbage, basically and what they were doing was taking the recycling. People would literally live in these fields that were just dedicated to massive, massive heaps of plastic. They would live there. They would eat there. They worked there and by hand they would sort the recycling and they would melt it down using extraordinarily crude methods and create this kind of this like paste. And that past was what would be recycled. And I put that in air quotes because it wasn't really being recycled at all. It was just being made into the carcinogenic glut that was kind of a little bit useless, frankly. And this was not...I don't really believe it was even authorized by the Chinese Government. It was kind of on the down low renegade operation that people were doing just for subsidy, that was how they existed. And since China is moving , one of the directions they're

moving in is to have a greener I guess I don't want to say brand, but I guess their brand is supposed to be a little less polluting and they're trying to lift these people up out of poverty. They stopped accepting those extremely dirty recyclables. That's the only thing they can do with that is melt it down. It's not accepted. It was like if there's an absolute like...like there's no more. They do not accept that.

JUDITH: So where does it go now?

KELLY: So now it just goes, either it gets burned, it gets incinerated or it gets land filled. There's no real recycling in China. I believe our recycling to be, ah, a New York Times statistic, if I remember it correctly, I believe 90% of plastics are not recycled. It was just a massive...I mean 90% there's a minority actually being recycled and of those recycled ones it's very hard to even know if the recycling that we're talking about like with China where they're literally just melting it down into just this, I mean it's literally glut, it's not even like a product. It's just nothing. Or they're actually like in Germany being correctly recycled and turning it into a new bottle. The thing about plastic is, every time you recycle them, they're downgraded a level. So, as you probably know when you flip your bottle around you see a number there. And that number indicates what type of plastic it is. Like polyvinyl, like a hard plastic, propel ethylene that's another one that's like a hard plastic that you see in thick cups. Those are all different grades of plastic. And so, what happens when you recycle something like a water bottle, that plastic is downgraded. It is a less valuable type of plastic after it's recycled. And eventually you can't recycle it any more. There's a limit to how many times you can recycle plastic. So then like aluminum, no limit. You can recycle aluminum indefinitely. The aluminum we're using right now is aluminum from 40-50 years ago.

JUDITH: Hmm, how about that? Wow.

KELLY: Which is amazing. And people really try to...I mean when there was a push for plastic there was this whole thing against aluminum and aluminum was not the way of the future and plastics were the way of the future. It was supposed to be this really great thing. Plastics were supposed to be this fantastic solution to so many different problems and they became a fantastic problem to so many different solutions. Like they became the reverse of what the intent was to be.

And I mean obviously the U.S. could definitely improve their rates of recycling. I don't really think that would be that much of a change as it would be to stop using so much plastic. I think refuse is the first R. It's really refuse, reuse and then recycle. And I think we focus a lot on the last R which is recycle and we'd like to them to focus on the first R which is reduce. The fact of the matter is irregardless if the recycling rate became 90% of all plastic recycled instead of 10% it wouldn't really matter because of the massive quantity we're using. It is still be used and still being produced. It's still negative. There's no reason in 2019 to be using a plastic bottle for 5 minutes and then throwing it out. There's just no reason. And luckily, I've noticed that certain companies are kind of jumping on the bandwagon. There's this new service called Loop that I saw in the news. I believe it's Unilever is trying to create like basically a circular economy for what was once single use plastic. You'd have a metal ice cream container. You'd eat the ice cream. You'd bring it back to the store and it would be washed and reused. That's only available in major cities. I mean that's a great idea. I think it's a wonderful step but that leaves the vast majority of the country still doing exactly what they've always been doing and those are our major consumers. I think personal action is definitely important in order to make that change happen. I think we told our story to (?) that we care but I don't know how much they do. And I think that there are certain steps that you can take as an individual to make that point clear.

JUDITH: Yeah, I agree with you. And we forget that every time we buy something, we're casting a vote.

KELLY: Exactly.

JUDITH: And those votes get tallied every minute of every day and that's exactly what drives the market and the retail market. If we have everybody buying plastic this or that, they're going to keep producing this or that.

KELLY: Exactly.

JUDITH: The other issue that I don't think people are that aware of, I came across in one of the older documentaries. I think it's called Water. And they talked about a bottle making plant down in Texas. There was a huge, huge problem with many serious illnesses from the toxicity from making the plastics, etc. And again, we don't get that piece in the news as well. So, if we go back to a holistic concept, we're not just talking about quenching our

thirst via the use of a plastic bottle. We're talking about how that bottle was made and who it impacts including the environment as well as what happens when we toss it away.

KELLY: That is a great point, a very great one.

JUDITH: All right, so Kelly to wind this up what I would love you to do, is do you have three practical tips for all of us?

KELLY: Sure. My 1st tip is to **refuse plastic**. Let's say that you go in a restaurant and you're going to have a nice sit down meal, and you order a glass of water and you know that this water might come with a straw, just say no. Just say, hey, I like my glass of water with no straw, very simple. You just eliminated plastic from the environment. You just refused oil. You just refused something that is not going to break down in your lifetime and it just literally took like one second. I think that refuse is the easiest step that anybody could take. It's free. It doesn't cost you anything.

JUDITH: That's right.

KELLY: And you feel good after you do it because you're just eliminating something out of the waste stream.

So, then my 2nd tip has to do more with bags, is **reverse bags**. When you go to the grocery store a lot of people tell me that they're biggest problem is that they forget their bags, right? They have all these great intentions to go to the grocery store, oops they don't have their bags, or they left their bags in the car and they don't want to go back. So, what I say is, okay that's fine. You still need to use a bag. Basically, after you have all your groceries in your cart and you've been checked out, you put them back in your cart just as you would and when you go to your car your bags are already there and you put your groceries from your cart into your bags in your car, instead of bagging right then and there at check-out. It's actually really easy. I find that when I go to the grocery store, I actually find it easier than bringing my bags and having them pack them because sometimes people pack in very erratic ways. At the grocery store they put your eggs with your peas. It's like all over the place. You pack the way you want in your car – good to go. You've got it organized. They're there. You won't forget them if they're in your car and it's very simple.

So, my last tip is to do with your representatives and your actions. When you get something with crazy amounts of plastic at the grocery store, right? Like you get one apple. I've seen crazy things. Like I've seen one apple in a blister pack. That's silly. Like that is an absolute waste. When you go to the grocery store **take that apple out of that blister pack package and leave that package there.** That's what they do in Europe when they feel that their packaging is excessive. They literally physically take whatever the item is out of the package and leave it there. Consumers are disgusted with what's going on. That that is not okay. That that is a waste of energy, a waste of time and a waste of resources. And how else would somebody...how else would you keep corporations aware unless you're doing something a little bit dramatic? And yeah, some people might think that's a little showy, or like you know the grocery store will have to clean it up. Yes. But also, the simple fact of the matter is though if enough people do that and enough people are leaving their plastic packaging in the store and stores can physically see what they are generating, that has dramatic effect on what corporations want to do. No one wants their packaging just thrown away in an obvious location. Well now they can simply see what is going on. That happens in our homes every day when we throw it out. Now they can physically see the results of that in somewhere that they care about. I learned that from people...I was watching an interesting documentary about how to affect social change and I was seeing what other countries did. That was the number one way they said that they were able to get their corporations to use less packaging or to use more renewable resources for packaging. And there's so many alternatives out there now it's really just a matter of laziness on behalf of people who own these big distribution companies and then it's also a matter of money. You know people are concerned that this renewal packaging that is slightly more expensive when at the end of the day they're paying an artificially low price for something that never should be that cheap in itself so there is a true cost.

JUDITH: Yes, there is. Of course, there is. And again, that's called the power, thinking about the power of our choice. Everything that we choose has implications prior to us picking it up or picking it out. And what we do afterward. I like the fact that you've connected these dots in some very practical ways with just this very simple but profound campaign.

Do you have any other contact information that you'd like to share in any way before we close?

KELLY: Sure. Yeah. If you'd like to contact UConnPIRG our e-mail is uconnpirgstudents@gmail.com

JUDITH: Okay great. If other folks who are involved with campuses want to get a hold of you to see what you've done that's a great resource too that we can pass along.

All right Kelly. Well I can't thank you enough for your time. I really like your, like I said, your enthusiasm and the action that you've taken in very, very practical ways, because that is what's going to make a difference in the long run.

KELLY: Right. Thank you so much for having me on. I truly appreciate this opportunity.

JUDITH: Ah, you're welcome!

This is Judith Dreyer. I'm the author of "At the Garden's Gate", book and blog. My book is available through my website www.judithdreyer.com as well as several distribution arms such as Amazon, Nook, Goodreads and more. I'd like to remind all of you that a transcript is available for each podcast. And please like and share these podcasts. Let's get the word out and support each other.

And remember, **now** is the time for practical action and profound inner change so we value our world again.

Enjoy your day.