Life As It Is
"How to Save Time (by Doing Nothing)"
Episode #24 with Jenny Odell
October 25, 2023

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Jenny Odell: You know, I think climate grief is so much grief for something, and I think in that acknowledgement is this recognition that you don't really belong to yourself. I describe going to Elkhorn slew, seeing all of these birds. At that moment, there was such a profusion of them and they were so beautiful, but I also couldn't see them not against the backdrop of loss. In that moment, I realized that it doesn't really logically make sense to love anything, right? You know, from the point of total, utilitarian logic, why would you tie your fate to something that is endangered? and yet like that is the moment when you experience your deepest sense of humanity.

James Shaheen: Hello, I'm James Shaheen, and this is *Life As It Is*. I'm here with my co-host Sharon Salzberg, and you just heard writer and artist Jenny Odell. It can be so easy to feel like there's not enough time in the day. In her new book, *Saving Time: Discovering a Life Beyond the Clock*, Jenny examines the history behind our relationship to time, from the day-to-day pressures of productivity to the deeper existential dread underlying the climate crisis. In the process, she explores alternative ways of experiencing time that can help us get past the illusion of the separate self and instead open us to wonder and freedom. In our conversation with Jenny, we talk about why she sees burnout as a spiritual issue, the dangers of apocalyptic thinking, and how we can honor our grief without being overcome by it. So here's my conversation with Jenny Odell.

James Shaheen: OK, so I'm here with writer and artist Jenny Odell and my co-host Sharon Salzberg. Hi, Jenny. Hi, Sharon. Great to be with you both.

Jenny Odell: Hi, likewise.

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Sharon Salzberg: It's great to see you.

James Shaheen: So Jenny, I'll ask you what we ask everyone who joins us here. We're here to talk about your new book, *Saving Time: Discovering a Life Beyond the Clock*. So to start, can you tell us a bit about the book and what inspired you to write it?

Jenny Odell: Yeah, sure. So my previous book that came out in 2019 called *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy*, and I think as I was kind of going around talking about that book and hearing back from readers, one of the pieces of feedback that I felt like I was getting was that even a reader who agrees with some of the points in the book about trying to think outside of the frame of sort of standard productivity and feeling like you always need to be producing something that these were ideas they could get behind but were having a hard time thinking about how they would make that work in their lives just in terms of time.

So I would hear from people who had children, multiple jobs, or maybe didn't but were just thinking about someone in that position, like, what would that mean for them? And then at the same time, I myself was finding that I felt like I never had time. I was a full-time adjunct lecturer and also trying to make art because mostly my background is in art or had been up until that point, so it was honestly something that was annoying to me for a while. It's like one of those questions that feels annoying until you realize that that *is* the question, that it's something that's worth pursuing.

You know, it was actually before the pandemic started that I wrote the proposal for this book wanting to think through not only a more equitable collective relationship to time but also how did we even get to the point where we think of time as money? What is that history? And maybe if we understood that more, it would be easier to imagine other ways of thinking about time that aren't money.

James Shaheen: So let's talk about other ways we might think of time because like everybody else, I'm one of those people who thinks there isn't enough time in the day to get done what I think I'm supposed to get done, so I think of time in a linear sort of incremental way too just by default. So what are some of the alternative ways of experiencing time that you've found freeing?

Jenny Odell: I think that probably the biggest one was just acknowledging the social aspects of time. You know, if you look at time management, self-help books, a lot of them give the same—and they have for decades—given the same advice, which is to get a grid basically and log your time, and this is very much drawing from Taylorist practices in the factory and sort of like efficiency studies, and so that does give you the sense that time is stuff that you have—you know, I have mine and you have yours and there are ways of using it more efficiently but that have to do with just me individually.

And for me, thinking about how actually the way my time feels is very involved with other people, like who you answer to, for example, at work, women being expected to do more of the household duties, things that are social and have to do with power dynamics, whose time is valued, but also the fact that oftentimes, I think if you want more time or more control over your time, you need support from outside yourself, and that's just a very different way of thinking about it than I have my spreadsheet of hours and I'm just not doing a good enough job using them efficiently.

James Shaheen: Yeah, you really trace the history of looking at time in that way, and especially during the industrial revolution, these self-help books and time management books began to present themselves. But you offer ways of thinking of time that are "not reducible to standardized units, but instead the very medium of possibility." So can you say more about this?

How can time be a form of possibility instead of something that we consume or don't have enough of?

Jenny Odell: Yeah, I mean there's this kind of irony, I think, of that spreadsheet idea of time where, on the one hand, it feels like you should be going faster and faster, and it's often the way of thinking about time that goes hand in hand with the idea of acceleration or productivity, but it's also the form of time that just for me personally feels very related to determinism and feeling like time is going to plod forward in this way in these units forever until the end of time, right? And especially during the pandemic, the idea that every day was the same, especially without the social kind of shaping of time that we were used to. And so I find that that is a very deadening way of thinking about time. And it's also one that, for me, lends itself to things like climate dread, the idea that everything's always going to get worse, that it's always constantly linearly getting worse, and so I think when I talk about possibility, some of that was just what I drew from looking at examples of time in ecology, just like neighborhood ecology, things around me.

I talk about this Buckeye tree. It's a California Buckeye tree that I walked past probably every other day, if not more, during the pandemic and treating that as my clock or as a clock. It's a notable tree because it goes dormant in the summer, so right now if you were to walk past it, it would look dead. But it has the most amazing, most fragrant flowers. It's one of my favorite smells, and it's very easy to kind of watch it go through all the different stages, and I literally picked one branch that I would keep track of, and I was surprised at not only how sort of nonlinear it is—like the whole tree doesn't proceed at the same rate, right? Like one branch is flowering. Another one isn't. The tree across the way hasn't even started yet. But also just the the image right of the flowers appearing and then flowering and then the fruit appearing is there's something about growth and development in that image of time that I felt like was a very important antidote for me to that other understanding of time that feels a lot more like squares extending into the future.

James Shaheen: Right, so it's a sense of time that's more consistent with the varying rhythms of life.

Jenny Odell: Yeah. And new things appearing.

James Shaheen: Yeah. So much of how we perceive time is linked to how we pay attention, which is something that you were alluding to, paying attention to that one branch, and you suggest that through close observation, we can "unfreeze something in time." So can you say more about what it means to unfreeze something in time?

Jenny Odell: Yeah, I think for me, it's just an acknowledgment that other things around you are also changing and participating in time. So the complete opposite of this would be for me like a very alienated existence in which things in the world are just sort of there. Consumerism is a really good example of this, but I think there are less extreme versions of it. You know, even arguably someone who likes to go birdwatching like me, right, there's still a way of looking at birds where you would just sort of see them as like automatons, like they're just kind of there, they're doing the thing that they do, whereas your life plays out in real historical time and those changes are meaningful. So for me, unfreezing something in time is kind of paying enough attention to something to break it out of that way of looking. For me, choosing that branch of that tree was a way of unfreezing it in time. I mean, you should see how many photos I have on my camera roll of this one branch. But it becomes, through that process of observation, the aliveness of that tree becomes a lot more accessible to me, and so it's just sort of seeing something as a coparticipant with you in time the exact same way that time and life feels for you.

James Shaheen: That's nice. You know, for Buddhists, this will be particularly interesting. Referring again to the act of observation that you mentioned, you write that we are "releasing something or someone from their bounds as a supposed stable individual entity existing in abstract time, seeing them not only as existing within time but also as the ongoing

materialization of time itself." In other words, attention can free us from the notion of a stable sense of self. So can you say more about that?

Jenny Odell: Yeah. I think that somewhere around that same part of the book, I quote Henri Bergson, the philosopher, saying that time is sort of inscribed in things, that things can be a register in which time is inscribed, and I'm thinking about actually recently I was at Fort Funston, which is in San Francisco, and I had not been there before, and all along this part of the coast, we have these kind of big sandstone cliffs, or cliffs of different kinds of rocks, and that particular spot, there is a cliff that has a lot of layers. Even if you don't know, I'm very amateur at this point in terms of geology, but I'm very interested, and so there's all these kind of obvious layers, but there's one layer in the middle that's very pronounced. It's white. It almost looks like chalk, and I looked it up later and it turned out that that layer is from a volcanic eruption that happened pretty far north of here that blanketed everything with ash, this white ash. And then you see beyond that end, and then these other layers of rock are deposited.

I was just staring at this cliff for the longest time thinking like, I mean, we all sort of know that rocks are materializations of things that happened. Like if you want to describe what a type of rock is, usually the description of it is things that happened, right? But really just looking at this layer and thinking like that's not a representation of this volcanic eruption, like that actually is the ash, and some of it had fallen off of this cliff face onto the beach, so I just picked up this piece of white rock and it was just in my hand. And so I think that that's just like an amazing feeling, but also you at the same time can draw the same conclusions about yourself and that you are also in many ways a materialization of things that happen that is ongoing and constantly being built. And that is just a really nice, I think, counter to the way we're treated as consumers and also on social media as kind of these fixed units that have very specific attributes.

Sharon Salzberg: Well, this really reminds me so much of the kinds of experiences that one can have in meditation. So it made me curious, aside from the clearly contemplative exercise with that tree, do you have a meditation practice that you do?

Jenny Odell: I do. It's not a very consistent one. I wish that it were more consistent, but yes, I do try to meditate in the morning. I think that it's really important for me as a grounding kind of practice, because I'm a very curious person. That probably comes across in the book. So my brain sort of wants to fly off in all directions all the time, and that's definitely not helped by things like social media, and so I think that's been—when I can keep the practice consistent, it's been very helpful for me.

And then on the other side of things, I would say, I don't know if I can call this a practice because it's involuntary, but I very often throughout the day will be stopped by something. I live near one of those pedestrian stairways because I'm in kind of a hilly area, and the other day I was walking down the stairway thinking about something probably really silly, but it was very stressful to me at the time. My brows were furrowed. And a butterfly had landed on the steps in front of me. It's a Gulf fritillary, I looked it up, but I hadn't seen one around here before. I was unable to move. I just stood there for a really long time, and someone came up the stairs, and I am like one of those people who is just like, usually I would be like, "Oh, I don't want to look weird or like I'm staring at something." But I was like, no, I have to keep standing here looking at this butterfly because it was just like one of the most amazing things I'd ever seen.

When I was working at Stanford, this would happen to me a lot with birds because there are a lot of birds on that campus. So I don't know if I would describe that as meditating, and it's definitely not a practice, but I do think that I have kind of like contemplative moments that happen to me on a regular basis. And I feel like people who know me or who spend a lot of time with me kind of just have to put up with it. They know about it.

Sharon Salzberg: Well, I would call that meditation for sure. I remember going in the Himalayas high up into the mountains and seeing a Tibetan Lama, a very venerated older Tibetan Lama who called that short moments many times, you know, many times during the day, if you're lucky. I mean, there's every possibility of just being distracted and not even noticing the butterflies. So there's a practice there, you know?

Jenny Odell: Yeah, I love that.

Sharon Salzberg: And as you mentioned before, this really intrigued me, the book takes place against the backdrop of the pandemic, which was a time where our usual notions of time were in some ways upended or broken open. I certainly noticed that. I kept thinking, "This feels strange. I usually, I guess, mark time by, 'Oh, I have to catch that plane' or 'I'm going to see so-and-so because I'm in their town.'" And it was, as you said, the sameness of every day was kind of amazing. And so I'm wondering if you could describe how the lockdown changed your relationship to time as well as how you pay attention.

Jenny Odell: Yeah. I mean, I think I had the experience that maybe a lot of people who worked from home, especially on the computer a lot, had, which was I was teaching online, so I did have a schedule, but I wasn't going anywhere, and so it felt like, as I put in the book, work and leisure were two different tabs on my browser, and so it felt very undifferentiated,, and I think also maybe because I don't have children, we also don't have pets, so I just felt like I was kind of in this apartment, this unchanging apartment, and that every day felt very similar and without time, I guess.

And so one of the things that I did was I put a camera on a tripod and just pointed out the window and started taking these photos throughout the day without really understanding why. I think I just did it out of instinct because I needed to see evidence of change, and because it was March, there was actually a lot going on in the sky in terms of clouds and just even watching the

color of the sky change throughout the day, and realizing that I just really needed to see that, that not only was it changing moment to moment, but that you would never see any of those images again after that moment in the sky.

So I suspect that if I had written this not during the pandemic, I would have written some amount on this on unfreezing things in time and trying to be attentive to change. But I think that the way time felt for me during the pandemic made it a lot more pronounced, and it made it much more into, it was less of an intellectual exercise and more of a survival kind of thing. Like I actually need to see evidence of change and time for myself, and so I think the way that I wrote about it was different.

James Shaheen: You know, Jenny, you suggest that perhaps one of the gifts of the pandemic was the expansion of doubt, and you write, "Simply as a gap in the known, doubt can be the emergency exit that leads somewhere else." Can you say more about how doubt can help us exit our current ways of seeing and being?

Jenny Odell: Yeah. I mean, something that this book and my last book have in common is a concern on my part about not having enough time and space to think through something in a nuanced way, even when you want to, just not being given the opportunity. The obvious example of that, which I wrote about a lot on *How to Do Nothing*, is being expected to have a take immediately on Twitter about something that just happened. You know, I love spending time in archives and going through really old texts and primary sources and things like that, and I think I'm aware of how much time and patience it takes to get to the bottom of something or to get to the roots of why something is happening now at a time when we're often given very easy and inaccurate answers as to why something's happening.

For example, fires in California obviously have so much to do with climate change, but there's also a whole piece of it that was like land stewardship and fire suppression and things that are

more detailed than just like the world is burning, for example. But if you go on social media, especially when we had that day here in the Bay Area where the sky was orange, there was a lot of, I think, uncritical apocalyptic language without the nuances and details of why this was actually happening. And so the time and space that's needed to get to the bottom of things is something that I am constantly looking for and takes a lot of attention, and the feeling that you have time that I feel like is very hard to come by these days, harder and harder.

James Shaheen: Right, you know, you just mentioned the sky being orange and a sense of apocalypse, and you know, we had something similar here. The Canadian fires, the smoke from the Canadian fires came all the way down the East Coast. And you point out that it can be so easy to fall into apocalyptic thinking and what you call declinism, which you describe as the belief that a once stable society is headed for inevitable and irreversible doom. So can you walk us through some of the dangers of this view?

Jenny Odell: Well, actually, I think this can connect to what you were saying about doubt, which is that I think that declinism can kind of foreclose a really crucial space of questioning or imagination or whatever you want to call it that would allow you to imagine other pathways forward. You know, it may be the case that that space is vanishingly small, but it doesn't matter. It's very important. I think Rebecca Solnit has written really beautifully about this. What you believe very literally affects what it is possible for you to do, and that's not just some kind of like hand-wavy thing, right? Really, you see that individually in people, what they think they're capable of doing affects what they're able to do. But I think it's also obviously true collectively. So I worry a lot about not only giving up before it's over but how the world looks to someone who's given up.

James Shaheen: We had Rebecca Solnit on the show, and she did talk about emergence and what the etymology of the word emerge was, and it's very similar to your understanding of doubt as sort of a space or an opportunity. There's hope there still. But you also mentioned an equally

problematic idea, and that's nostalgia, which freezes an idealized version of the past and replaces the reality of change with a static image. So from a Buddhist perspective, this feels like a fundamental resistance or denial of impermanence.

Jenny Odell: Yeah, and to go back to the fire example, when I'm trying to describe that nostalgia in the book, I give the example of growing up in California and my parents and I driving up north and seeing unbroken forests as far as the eye can see and me as a child already thinking, "Oh, wow. That must be what primeval California looked like, and trees are good. It's good that we have so many trees," which is true, but at that age I was not aware of indigenous land practices or how much more of those particular mountains would have been meadows in the past, meadows maintained through fire sometimes. And so I think declinism goes hand in hand with this idea that things used to be better. And again, I have to say, a lot of things did used to be better. But a blanket notion that things were stable and they were a certain way for a long time up until now, now we're going over the edge, and I think it's kind of a myopic view in both directions. I think I'm much more interested in a notion of history where every moment is actually very contingent and at every moment things could have gone different ways and that if you look at history that way, the present moment appears very different, to me anyway. It looks like it could also go a lot of different ways.

James Shaheen: I have a funny version of what you were describing driving on the coast and seeing all the trees south of Los Angeles in Orange County. When I was very young, there were orange groves and orange groves and orange groves. And I was nostalgic for that until I finally realized how utterly unnatural those orange groves truly were. Anyway, Sharon.

Sharon Salzberg: Yeah, well, I grew up in New York City, so when I saw a tree, it was like "Wow, there's a tree." So you also discuss the phenomenon of climate grief, which is something we've been exploring on this podcast recently, and it's such a powerful question. How can we

hold our grief about the climate without getting stuck in it? Or how can we honor sorrow without letting it overcome us?

Jenny Odell: Yeah, definitely. I just wrote the foreword for a book of poetry coming out next year called *Near Earth Object* by my now friend, former thesis advisor when I was an undergrad in the English department at Berkeley. It's by John Shoptaw. I don't know that he would characterize it as poems about climate grief. I think it's about a lot more than that. But, you know, when I was writing the foreword and having read that book, it was very clear to me that poetry and poetics and art are really, really important parts of the answer for climate grief, as are collective practices and not mourning in isolation.

The beginning of that book has a poem called "For the Birds," and it's just this amazing cataloging of birds that come to his bird feeder but are coming in fewer numbers. But it never sort of succumbs to either: it's not like a nice poem about birds that doesn't exist in historical time with the climate crisis, but it's also not just a poem about there are fewer birds. It's so suffused with the love of the person who's looking at the birds who are coming to the bird feeder. And it's talking about them almost like people. The poem describes seeing something that he thinks is a hawk and then realizing that they're golden eagles who are refugees from the smoke from the fires. Reading that poem allows me to have all of the feelings that I need to have about what's happening in their full spectrum.

And it's not comfortable. But I don't want to know what happens if I don't have a place for that, and then because it's a poem, other people can read it and we can talk about it. We can feel it together. And in writing that foreword, it made me aware of how important the arts are for expressing these feelings collectively.

Sharon Salzberg: That's really such a powerful and important point. It reminds me, bell hooks was a friend of mine, and when I talked to her about this book I was writing about basically

mindfulness and social change, she said she didn't like the phrase social action because she was afraid it might only imply protesting and marching and things like that. And she looked at me and said, "What about art?" And just listening to you now, I had a whole new insight on one of the powers of art. I always thought of it as breaking boundaries and leading us to a new sense of possibility. But, of course, it's not feeling so alone.

Jenny Odell: Right, and I think also giving us language because I think something that I observed when I was teaching college students, and I do briefly mention this in the book, observing the grief and the kind of despair on their part but also a kind of paralysis that I think happens when you don't have the language to describe what you're feeling. And then it just feels scary. It doesn't feel like anything else.

Sharon Salzberg: That's wonderful. So you also suggest that grief can be incredibly useful as it can teach us new forms of subjecthood. So I wonder if you could say more about the types of subjecthood that grief makes possible.

Jenny Odell: Yeah. I mean, I think any experience of grief, I think climate grief is so much grief for something, right? I would say for someones. And I think in that acknowledgment is this recognition that you don't really belong to yourself. I have a kind of similar moment in *How to Do Nothing*, I describe going to Elkhorn slew and seeing all of these birds. It's actually a very similar feeling to that poem I just mentioned where at that moment, there was such a profusion of them and they were so beautiful, but I also couldn't see them not against the backdrop of loss. and in that moment, I sort of realized that it doesn't really logically make sense to love anything, right?

You know, from the point of just total utilitarian logic, why would you tie your fate to something that is endangered? And yet that is the moment when you experience your deepest sense of humanity. Just the experience of grief itself is like, "Oh, I care about something so much that it's

disassembling my ego." That thing that you're grieving for or that being has almost like the center of gravity is between you and that thing, and it has its own sort of like center.

Sharon Salzberg: You know, climate grief can also lead to burnout, and you focus particularly on the spiritual dimensions of burnout. So I'm wondering how you see burnout as a spiritual issue.

Jenny Odell: Yeah, I mean, I can say for me personally, so much of this book but a lot of my work has come out of time that I've spent in the Santa Cruz mountains. I grew up right next to them, close enough to them to be familiar with them. And I have noticed that if I don't go often enough, it's not that often, but if I don't go often enough, I start to experience something that I suspect is spiritual burnout. It's become very clear to me that that place and the things that are in it and the relationship that I have with those things is a source of energy for me that I cannot create for myself and actually wouldn't want to because I feel like that's not even how that works.

I was looking at an old journal the other day, I think I was in the middle of doing press for *How to Do Nothing*, and I said they shouldn't interview me. I wish they could interview the mountain. Because it didn't feel like it came from me, and if it did, it came from the relationship between me and the place, and so I think that in a lot of cases, there's going to be grief, but the thing that allows you to move forward through that is that source, the source of something that is giving you something that's giving you energy, something that you feel so strongly about is kind of pulling you through it. I think you can actually bear a lot when something like that is in front of you.

Sharon Salzberg: You write that one component of climate nihilism and burnout is the inability to recognize the fundamental uncertainty that lives at the heart of every single moment, which in

my mind brings us back to something you alluded to before when you said every moment is contingent, which also means there's a kind of connection at every moment. Is that right?

Jenny Odell: Yeah, and that you are there. I think that in writing *Saving Time*, I realized how separate the time of my life had felt from historical time. Even if you read the news a lot, there's still a sense that you're not actually—there can be a sense that you're not actually connected to that, that everyday life where you're just kind of trying to make it through the day is not really connected in any meaningful way to the things that you see play out on the historical stage. And that is such a disempowering feeling.

The Sydney Writers Festival asked me and a couple of other authors to write letters to the future earlier this summer, and my letter to the future basically is this. It's me talking to the people of the future saying that the thing that you and I have in common is that we live in a present and that every moment has been a present and that everything we do now just becomes the thing that someone in the future will take for granted, like all of the things, rights and things that we enjoy now, very much struggled for in the past.

I think intergenerational conversations are so important. My friend who wrote the poetry book that I wrote the foreword for is in his seventies, and I'm very lucky to have a handful of friends in their seventies. But I think that being able to take a longer historical view but within someone's lived individual life, I think that makes it a lot harder to take

James Shaheen: Jenny, you talk about burnout and the exhaustion that comes with that, but you also discuss another form of tiredness, what the writer Peter Handke calls tiredness that trusts in the world. Can you say more about this type of tiredness? How can surrendering to this type of tiredness actually open us up to something larger than ourselves?

Jenny Odell: Yeah, I think I would describe that kind of tiredness as sort of releasing one's grasp on the world—the acquisitive grasp, maybe I should specify, the kind of leaning forward, wanting something to happen in the next moment. When I was on a public radio show talking about *How to Do Nothing*, there was a woman who called in who had just been injured and I think was maybe also retired recently, and she said that she had been sitting in a chair in her backyard not moving and that a bird landed on her at one point because she was so still, and she said—and she was so sincere, she said, "It's been like the best time of my life."

If you were to ask someone, Do you want to sit in a chair? I mean, it's probably also a really nice backyard. But you know, that kind of being released from this need to always get to the next moment, to always want something from the next moment. Because the thing that kind of goes with that tiredness that he's describing is also essentially an egolessness. I think he says, "Now I was in the world again," or something like that, like in releasing that clenched feeling of "I'm me and I'm trying to get through the world and I'm trying to get the things that I need to get" and just letting go of that suddenly, I mean, in my personal experiences of this feeling, all of the sensory details of the world kind of flood back in and you're like, "Oh, right. I'm here, and these other things are here", and time feels very different.

James Shaheen: Yeah, one of the times in my life that I was most relaxed was when I was very sick, and I thought, Is this really what it takes for me to relax? But Handke describes these experiences as enabling "more of less of me," making room for everything else. So how can tiredness help us get out of our own way?

Jenny Odell: I think maybe it's just by slowing you down. I mean, it could be just as simple as that. I describe in that part of the book having an experience like that, where I wasn't sick, but I had pulled an all-nighter, and just the fact of being essentially immobilized on the couch. That was one of the first times that I saw the bird, consciously saw the birds I years later realized were cedar waxwings. But, you know, that being kind of my gateway bird experience, I don't think it's

a coincidence that that happened in a moment of openness, like forced openness, basically, where you notice things that are, I don't know, outside of your own head.

James Shaheen: I remember those all nighters.

Jenny Odell: I can't do that anymore.

James Shaheen: No, no, no. But you describe that experience as an opening onto infinity. Can you tell us more about that experience then?

Jenny Odell: Yeah, I remember it very vividly because the project that I was doing, I was making digital art at the time, so I had not only pulled an all-nighter, I'd been on the computer a lot, and then I'd gone to my day job where I also had to be on the computer a lot of the time. And so I got home, and I saw this cluster of so many birds, I now know that they do this. If you see cedar waxwings, they're always in a really big group. But they were at the top of this redwood, and I thought that I was hallucinating pears growing at the top.

I mean, I was very tired, and I had so little knowledge about birds at the time that I didn't even know how to go about finding what they were. So, anyway, years later, I figured out that they were cedar waxwings, who, at least in this area, aren't here all year, and in fact they're not here right now. They should be showing up soon, I think. And they also just in general move around a lot. Like they show up in a tree and they eat all the berries and then they go to the next area and they eat all the berries over there. Their tail colors have actually changed in response to, I can't remember what kind, there's some kind of ornamental plant that people use in the U. S. and it's actually changing their tail color, and so all of these things I think are examples of how the presence of these birds, it's not just that they're there, it's an expression of things that are happening in the environment: it's the time of year, it's the things that are fruiting, it's their own

sort of whims and behaviors and preferences, and so it's actually quite magical that they showed up in that moment. It pointed to a lot of other things that were also happening outside of me.

Like I was on, obviously, clock time. I had been trying to get something done on time. Meanwhile, there are these sorts of migrations happening in these larger climate patterns that were there all along. And it's like I just finally saw it.

James Shaheen: Yeah, you know, moments like the one you just described seem to unsettle the boundaries between us. Can you say more about what these experiences have taught you about what you call the illusion of the bounded self?

Jenny Odell: Yeah, I mean, even just what the self is is still a very active question for me. I wish I had it on my desk, but I literally just bought, I was at a used bookstore and I bought this reader that's just different thinkers throughout time on what is a person and what is a self.

But I guess it's only become more fascinatingly complicated for me through experiences like that. I am someone who has thought a lot about context, I think, for a long time. A lot of my art leading up to the books that I wrote kind of asked the question about how can you separate an individual thing from its context?

I was an artist in residence at a dump and I researched 200 objects, but their entire, like everything that I could find out about each one of them, and the conclusion that I came to was very similar, which was that this object you're holding in your hand is the crystallization of economic patterns. People thought they wanted this or people thought they could get people to want this. These materials were available and cheap at this time, right, and hence you have this thing that seems like it's just given, but actually all of these factors fed into it. So I think I've always been really interested in that in all domains.

So for the self, I do feel like I have some sort of core vaguely, but I do also feel like there's Mountain Jenny, and then there's Oakland Jenny, and there's Paralyzed by a Butterfly Jenny, and I'm very different around different people, and I think someone could think that and come to the conclusion that like, OK, there just is no self. It's all totally meaningless. I don't really think that. I see it more as sort of like, I guess I have a very ecological view of the self, right, like it's something that's alive. It has relationships and balances and it can be out of balance, and it's entirely made out of relationships.

Sharon Salzberg: Well, along those lines, in contrast to the notion of an isolated individual, you write that you've come to define being alive as an embrace. What does it mean that being alive is like an embrace?

Jenny Odell: Yeah, I think of it as a mix of sensitivity and then also just, I guess, love. I mean, I feel alive to the extent that I would see the birds at the top of the tree, you know, and not just see them but also feel moved by them. I think that is the kind of engine behind, for me, wanting to see what the next day brings and also wanting to see how I change in response to those things because when I think of the opposite of that, I mean, I kind of alluded to it earlier, but my nightmare is a life of just feeling like I'm just an isolated unit that's just incidentally here on earth for a while and like not feeling like I have any relationship to anything.

I mean, I'm someone who's very fortunate to have been able to mostly live in the same place my whole life, and that relationship that I have to this place is so, so meaningful. It's so much a part of who I am, and I feel like it's actually something that someone said to me in the book signing line recently was, "I don't just think that we see places. I think that places see us." I think that's sort of what I mean by the embrace is I want to feel like I'm sensitive to things that are happening around me, but I feel seen, that this is a reciprocal relationship, that I'm looking at a world that's also alive.

Sharon Salzberg: You say that in order for the embrace to be possible, the forward-leaning ego that grasps that time has to die, at least for the moment. So how does this happen?

Jenny Odell: Well, I guess you could pull an all-nighter or get really sick. Honestly though I think that there are a lot of different things that could happen and they all kind of fall under the category of interruption for me. I mean, I guess I was interrupted by that butterfly, right? Having something that is enough of an interruption that it cuts through that drive that you have. And I think that honestly, those things can be big or small. I mean, I can think of times when I went a different way to work or something, you know, and then I just realized how much I wasn't noticing and how much was going on outside of my little provincial way of thinking, and it sort of blew my mind, and all I did was I just took a different route to work. I think the pandemic kind of was that for some people. I mean, that was a huge interruption. It really rearranged people's lives, and just judging from what I've seen in terms of people not wanting to go back to the office, for example, or just not wanting to go back to the way things were, that interruption really opened up that space, I think.

Sharon Salzberg: And to go back to love for a moment, you quote the philosopher Jiddu Krishnamurti, who writes that when we are actually seeing, we're in a state of love and there's no yesterday and no tomorrow. Can you say more about this state of love?

Jenny Odell: Yeah, I think one of the reasons it feels related to time for me and why I love that notion of the no tomorrow and no yesterday is because there's nothing instrumental about love, and there's so much right now that feels instrumental or wants to be instrumental. In *How to Do Nothing*, I talked about the idea from Martin Buber, which is I think related, of I-thou versus I-it, that having an I-thou relationship to something is much closer to what I was saying earlier about the center of gravity, and I-it is much more like things exist in the world for me to either use them or ignore them or discard them. But, you know, anyone who's experienced even one second of love toward anything or anyone knows that the notion of gain or, I don't know, strategy or

anything like that really just doesn't make any sense. Like it is the ultimate end in and of itself. If you're there, you just want to be there, you know? And so it's this weird thing where I have the linear timeline of my life and there are like these sort of developments and I have a career and all this, but I also know that these moments that I've had, these interruptions where I felt just like a feeling of love for the place where I was that did feel like it stopped time, I don't really think of myself as having an age in those moments. It felt like they were all the same age. They're very strikingly similar, and I suspect they will continue to be similar.

Sharon Salzberg: Yeah, I mean, I hope this isn't too strategic, but I can see the path. It's like interruption and being willing to be interrupted, because I think there is, if not agency, there's some willingness there, you know? Otherwise we'd grab our mini iPad and go back to it. So it's the willingness to be interrupted and the quality of attention and love.

Jenny Odell: Yes. And I also think something I've been thinking about recently is I think on top of that, there's the sort of being able to catch yourself when you're falling into that kind of trap of starting to think about everything in a really instrumental way. I say this because, you know, I go to the Santa Cruz Mountains a handful of times a year, and sometimes I'll write a letter to myself when I'm there. It's like Mountain Jenny's letter to Oakland Jenny, right, and it's like, look, it's gonna happen. You're gonna get totally buried in this stuff and you're gonna stop paying attention and you're gonna think these things that are right in front of your face are so important. And you're going to feel vaguely miserable, but you're not going to know why.

And it's like you just have to like trust me, you just need to come back here. Just come back here, you know, and then when you get back here, you'll remember and then you write the next letter, right? But lately, I feel like those are so separate, and I'm really trying to find ways of having more of those moments, you know, somehow even in the midst of the times when it's the most difficult.

Sharon Salzberg: So it's exploring practices that can help us enter the state of love and seeing, really, in the moment.

James Shaheen: So, Jenny, I was going to tell you about how bad I am at leisure. The book made me consider that. It's yet another interruption of the butterfly sort. But, sadly, we're out of time. I just want to thank you so much for joining us. It's been a great pleasure. Maybe next time we'll talk about leisure. And for our listeners, be sure to pick up a copy of *Saving Time*, available now. We like to close these podcasts with a short guided meditation. So here I'll turn it over to Sharon.

Sharon Salzberg: Thank you. Thank you so much for an amazing conversation. Why don't we just sit together for a few minutes? If you like, you can close your eyes. Just be comfortable. Depending on where you are, close your eyes or not. And just notice what's happening in your body, what kinds of sensations are predominant, if any. You don't have to judge anything or produce anything or change anything. Simply notice, observe.

And whatever sounds may be predominant. I'm sitting here in Massachusetts, and it's raining and raining. Loud rain sounds. Of course, we might like certain sounds and not like others. But we don't have to chase after them to hold on or push away. Just sit and be and be in connection with, unless you are responsible for responding to the sound, just let it wash through you.

Notice if you have a predominant mood, sleepy, joyous, intrigued, tired, again, without judgment, without chasing after something. You don't even have to understand it in this moment. In this activity, simply be with. Observe. How is it? How is it changing?

Just see if you can settle your attention on the feeling of your breath. Just the normal, natural breath wherever it's clearest or strongest for you. The nostrils, or the chest, or the abdomen. Find that place. Bring your attention there and just rest.

See if you can feel one breath without concern for what's already gone by. Without leaning forward for even the very next breath. Just this one. And here we are. When you feel ready, you can open your eyes or lift your gaze, and we'll end the meditation.

James Shaheen: Thank you, Sharon. Thank you, Jenny. That was great.

Jenny Odell: Thank you.

Sharon Salzberg: Thank you.

James Shaheen: Congratulations again on the book.

Jenny Odell: Thanks.

James Shaheen: You've been listening to *Life As It Is* with Jenny Odell. We'd love to hear your thoughts about the podcast, so write us at feedback@tricycle.org to let us know what you think. If you enjoyed this episode, please consider leaving a review on Apple Podcasts. To keep up with the show, you can follow *Tricycle Talks* wherever you listen to podcasts. *Tricycle Talks* and *Life As It Is* are produced by Sarah Fleming and The Podglomerate. I'm James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. Thanks for listening!