Human Rights – Conversations Across Generations
Episode: Tara Van Ho
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MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 0:04
Hi, welcome to our podcast, Human Rights, Conversations Across Generations. I'm Meredith Lockwood, founder of Lockwood Creative, a purpose-driven creative agency. And I'm here with my dad.

BERT LOCKWOOD 0:16
And I'm Professor Bert Lockwood, the director of the Urban Morgan Institute for Human Rights at the University of Cincinnati College of Law.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 0:27
Together, we are your father-daughter co-hosts.

BERT LOCKWOOD 0:29
For over 50 years, I've had a front-row seat to the evolution of international human rights.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 0:35
And now, we're sharing that expertise with you by connecting to the powerful stories and insights of human rights voices from around the world.

BERT LOCKWOOD 0:43
We bridge the past and the present, making complex human rights issues more approachable and understandable.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 0:50
So, pull up a chair and join our table as we speak with Nobel Peace Prize recipients, political leaders and the world's leading human rights scholars and activists.

Track 7 1:04
Today we are joined by our friend, Tara Van Ho, professor of law and director of the International Legal Studies Program at St. Mary's University School of Law. Tara is a globally recognized scholar whose work focuses on business and human rights, corporate accountability, economic inequality, and international law. Before joining St. Mary's, she taught at the University of Essex School of Law and were closely within the Essex Human Rights Center, an institution deeply connected to many of the foundational figures in modern human rights law. This conversation is especially meaningful given Tara is a fellow Ohioan from Cleveland, her longstanding connection to the University of Cincinnati as an alum of the law school, and a fellow of the Urban Morgan Institute. our discussion a real sense of how community, and institutions continue to shape the field of human rights across generations and across borders. Without further ado, we welcome Tara to the show.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 2:12
we'd just love to start talking what drew you to university of Cincinnati I know my dad was one of your professors. You were part of the urban Morgan Institute of human rights, as well as the human rights quarterly. what was that experience that like?

TARA VAN HO 2:25
Yeah. I knew I knew I wanted to do human rights. Um, I also knew I didn't really want to be that far from my family. Um, and I wanted something that felt like a good community atmosphere. And so I visited I think while I was still in undergrad, I then took two years to go to Japan before I came back. but it just felt very much like a community atmosphere. and as you know, your dad is very personable. and so I remember having some early conversations with Bert about who had influenced me into going into human rights, why I felt this passion for it. And the importance of really having a chance to meet some of the senior scholars in the field, which is what three years at Cincinnati was, you know, every, I want to say every month or so. We had different high level, high profile guests in to talk to us about the work that they were doing. and when I was in my first year, I went into Bert sometime in January and said to him, I don't really, I know I want to do human rights. I don't really a hundred percent know what I want to do in human rights. 'So, send me to a place where the work is plentiful and the workers are few. in the future. And this was January 2003. And he said, you know, there's this woman in Denmark doing some really exciting work around business and human rights. And I think in the next five or 10 years, that's going to be a really important field. I think in the future, this is, this is where it's at. And so he sent me to Denmark to work at the Danish Institute for Human with Margaret Jungk, who later on was one of the first members of the UN working group on business and human rights. And I spent the summer looking at how businesses contributed to human rights abuses around the world and thinking through, you know, how are states harming human rights? rates, and then what our business is doing to facilitate that. It was transformational. I came back and knew that that's exactly what I wanted to do with my life. I wasn't 100% sure how you did that yet, particularly since the field hadn't emerged at all, you know. That was, as I said, January 2003, 2004, the UN heard for the first time from a subcommittee on human rights about UN draft norms on the responsibility of transnational corporations. And then those were rejected, and in 2005, which was the year I graduated from John Ruggie was appointed the first UN Special Rapporteur on Business and Human Rights. His title is a lot longer than that, but he started his mission in 2005. In 2008, he adopted sort of a framework, and in 2011, he adopted what are now known as the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. So thanks to Bert, I was literally on the ground as his field was developing.

BERT LOCKWOOD 5:27
Thank you. I had forgotten all that about the that's great. And with Margaret, she was an American, I think married to a Danish guy. now U. S. I she was in San Francisco for a while, but I think she may actually be in Washington but I think still work with the intersection of human rights and business. that. It was a shame we regularly sent people to Denmark. And then at one point, there was a change of government. And they wanted to discourage these types of

exchanges. And so the paperwork that was required to get summer was not worth the time for them to do it. And so that was the reason we stopped people. yeah, it was a great place. always remember Copenhagen for the merry-go-round in the center of the city.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 6:33
Oh, yeah, that was a great trip.

TARA VAN HO 6:35
Yeah.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 6:35
Yeah. Well, Dad, we didn't go back to University of Essex for our second time as a family in 2002 because you actually had been invited to Denmark. But things didn't work out. And then, you know, you got the call from Kevin and that they needed you. So we almost did Denmark versus Essex.

BERT LOCKWOOD 6:55
Okay. Again, things I don't remember.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 6:59
I do, because I thought that was kind of exciting, because we'd already been to England in 94 with the University of Essex. But I wouldn't have met my best friends. Shout out, Emily, Kira, Amy, if you're listening. And then I do want to ask about Japan, because we have a shared love of living abroad and cultures. What brought you to Japan and what was that like?

TARA VAN HO 7:17
me? So if I can be honest I knew I wanted to do law. I knew I wanted to do human rights. I also knew I just did not want to go straight from undergrad to law school. And everyone kept saying to me, you have to do it that way, because if you don't, you're just never going to go back to law school. And I thought, I don't think that's true. I think I'll go back to law school. I think I'll just do it in a place where I'm a little bit more focused as to what I want to do, where I have had a little bit more experience in the world. You know, I had never lived abroad until my junior year of undergrad. I come from a lower middle class family. At times we were part of the working poor. I didn't have people who had lived abroad before me. You know, the most that my parents had done was my mom did a one week, you know, it's Tuesday, it must be Belgium kind of trip in her undergrad. And so having studied abroad in my junior year, I worked for the British parliamentary group for world government and the NGO One World Trust and learned about human rights in that context. And that's what propelled me into law school. You know, it was 1998 when I was in London, for the first time. I'm sorry, I realize that we're sidetracking from Japan, I promise I'm coming back to it. Uh, but it was 1998, it was the term, it was, it was the autumn term and so, Augusto Pinochet was facing extradition to Spain. The UK announced that it would ratify the Rome Statute on the ICC, and we were dealing with the after effects of the Good Friday accords. And so, or Good Friday agreements. And so, the combination of things just really opened my eyes to the notion of international human rights, to its power and

its purpose in, in daily life. So when I came back to the States, I knew that's what I wanted to do, but I also knew that I needed a little bit more lived experience abroad. And so, I went to Japan to teach English. I went as part of a sister study program, between my home city, which is Euclid Ohio. So shout out to the Panthers. Um, and a small little village that at the time, nobody had ever heard of called Narahamachi Fukushima in Japan. around nine years after I left Japan, Narahamachi would become quite famous because it's one of the sites that was evacuated from the nuclear power plants. so, but at the time, nobody had heard of

BERT LOCKWOOD 9:49
Right.

TARA VAN HO 9:49
I was the only Westerner in the village. And I loved it so I , I, for many years assumed that I would go back there and then, um, at times. And then, and then the nuclear power plants, meltdown meant that most of the people that I knew there no longer live in Narahamachi and, the community dynamics have been upended. So I will still go back to Narahasam someday. I, uh, a huge part of my heart is still there. it was really, it was so fun. And I think in some so enlightening to be in a situation where when I landed, I couldn't read the language. I learned how to, I can't, I can't do it anymore, or at least I can't do it with any fluency anymore. Um, but to have integrated into a, into a village community there opened up my eyes to the way in which the language that we use, the way in which our expectations of culture and community shape our understanding of rights. They shape our understanding of ourselves. And to break out of that a little bit and experience it from a different lens was really impactful and really fun.

BERT LOCKWOOD 10:56
And did you stay with the family?

TARA VAN HO 10:58
No, I had my own little apartment that was kind of across the field, across the sports field from the junior high school where I taught. So every morning I would just walk across the field to see my students, which meant that also if I got sick, everybody in the village brought me food. Um, you know, people came over just to say hi. If I, you know, I remember I was there on 9-11. Um, and I was so, you know, I'd been up, it happened at night for Japan and I stayed up the entire night. And so in the morning, I, I just couldn't communicate what I needed to say in Japanese. I could barely function at all. So I just walked across the field and told them I was going home and going back to sleep. And I, I wasn't going to be able to be teaching for a couple of days and the community really did. You know, they brought me food. People came and checked on me regularly. It was, um, a quite, uh, difficult day to be as far from home as I was. And also it was quite nice to feel like I still had a community around me that was taking care of me.

BERT LOCKWOOD 12:01
Wow. uh, Tara, I was in Durban, South Africa, at a U. N. race conference. Tomain was part of the delegation as was Judge Jones, Nathaniel Jones. And, he decided Jones the conference was

effectively Um, and he said, let's go back a day early. Um, so we redid our travel when, and arrived back in the States on, uh, September 10th. yeah. And I think, you know, had we

TARA VAN HO 12:34
Wow.

BERT LOCKWOOD 12:35
stuck to our original things, we probably would have ended up in Iceland or someplace, uh, where they were diverting people,

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 12:42
Dad, could you tell our listeners, who Judge Jones is?

BERT LOCKWOOD 12:45
the Nathaniel Jones was one of the prominent, African-American judges in the United States. He was a judge on the, Sixth Circuit Federal Court of Appeals, which is the level of courts, just below the U. S. Supreme Court. And he had been the, um, head of the NAACP, legal office, prior to his appointment. He was the last, judge appointed by Jimmy Carter, who appointed him to the, um, uh, Sixth Circuit. he was originally from, um, Youngstown, Ohio. uh, he was just a, a, a wonderful, person and very generous with his, uh, time and, the law school adopted him because, uh, he had actually gone uh, Youngstown State Law School, which no longer existed. and uh, Cincinnati sort of became his, uh, his, his law school. Stephanie, his daughter, who graduated from Georgetown, a Morgan fellow, we, we miss him very much, A number of the students, uh, associated with the, uh, In, clerked for him, upon graduating. And that of course was a real, wonderful experience for

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 14:01
I know that, you know, for his legacy at university Cincinnati law school, Tara, I don't know if you know, b they now have the Nathaniel Jones Center on race, gender, and social justice. so in our show notes, I'll make sure to add that link for our listeners

BERT LOCKWOOD 14:15
Yep.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 14:15
if they'd like to learn more about him. but I think, you know, the sentiment of community living in Japan is something I reflect on presently in, in America, having like lived in Europe and India where cultures are more community focused. And I feel like sometimes in America, we've gotten very individualistic and that can polarize us. but what an amazing experience you had. And I have to ask one question as a fellow Ohioan, you know, you're from Cleveland over here, Cincinnati, growing, we both grew up in the eighties and nineties in Ohio. When you arrived to Japan, did you have experience eating? Japanese food, sushi, et cetera.

TARA VAN HO 14:53

No.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 14:54
For, okay.

TARA VAN HO 14:56
Not at all. I, by the way, my only experience with ramen had been, you know, the pot noodles that you get when you're an undergrad and you can't afford anything else.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 15:05
Oh, weren't they 25 cents? You go to Kroger's

TARA VAN HO 15:08
yeah.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 15:08
and they're on like the bottom shelf and I would stack up for 12 and my sodium.

TARA VAN HO 15:14
Yes, absolutely. And

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 15:16
Yeah. 50.

TARA VAN HO 15:16
I didn't know, it, right? Like, I didn't know that the noodles and the little flavor packet, which should actually just be called the sodium packet. Uh, I didn't know that that wasn't, you know, what ramen was. A I just remember eating ramen for the first time and I loved it so much. And whenever they would pick me up from the airport, you know, after, after my first term there, they would ask me, where do you want to for food? And obviously ramen for them is kind of like going, I don't want to say it's like going to McDonald's is a step up from that, but you know, it's going to Denny's. an I, I didn't care. They were like, you can have sushi, you can do whatever. I was like, I know, but I just really want some nice pork belly ramen. Uh, so Shiradashi ramen, and that's, that's what I would go for every single trip. And I think they thought that I was insane, but I, I loved it. And I, and I loved sushi to this day. It's still one of my comfort foods.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 16:12
Oh, I bet. And if you're craving noodles back when you, you know, landed in Ohio, would you ever just want Skyline? I mean that's a Cincinnati things? I don't think it was probably up your way, but you know, what a delicacy.

TARA VAN HO 16:24

Yeah. I, I'm going to admit here, I'm afraid that I'm about to lose, like they're going to revoke my JD here, but, um, Skyline, I just never got behind it. I tried it a few times. and I'm afraid that this might be the start of a really bad slap lawsuit here from Skyline.

BERT LOCKWOOD 16:42
Definitely, definitely an acquired taste.

TARA VAN HO 16:45
Yes. I think that's exactly it. It's an acquired taste. I like the chili when it's just the chili part. I like the hot dog when it's just a hot dog. And I like the spaghetti when it's just the spaghetti. When you put them all together.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 16:55
you two are very lawyers. You're being. Skyline. You guys, come on, you guys. It's honestly, you love or hate it. People think it's trash or it's absolutely delicious. I think it's absolutely delicious. Watch a lawyer be like.

TARA VAN HO 17:12
I'm like, oh my God, this is how I'm going to get trashed and no one's ever going to let me back in Cincinnati. And I love Cincinnati for so many

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 17:19
No,

TARA VAN HO 17:19
things.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 17:20
you are always.

TARA VAN HO 17:21
Thank you.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 17:22
back. Okay. So we're going to stay in Cincinnati now. Let's

TARA VAN HO 17:24
Yes.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 17:25
talk about all things, your experience as a student at the law school. what was was like being an Urban Morgan fellow, Human Rights Quarterly, how did it shape your experience as a law school student and going into the world of human rights?

TARA VAN HO 17:40
So let me start by saying that Bert was able to bring together a group of people who remain good friends of who challenged me, who made me a better lawyer, a better legal thinker. I want to give a shout out to some of them, Seán Arthurs and Erica Hall and Beth Mandel. Seán and I still both now work in business and human rights. He works for Earth Rights International. Erica Hall and I actually live in the same random little village close to the University of Essex. So we usually celebrate our birthdays together. We didn't this year, but normally we celebrate our birthdays together and see each other regularly. And bringing that sort of, as I said, that community together really allowed us to hammer out differences in our understandings of human rights. It allowed us to challenge each other quite significantly and to push each other into thinking about what strategic human rights litigation looks like. What does it mean to use the law to push for better protections for the most vulnerable in society? And, know, before we started, Bert mentioned that Nigel Rodley came over. That was the start of my third year in law school. And he the Bush administration's use of torture at Guantanamo Bay and at places like Abu Ghraib. And called for Americans to sort hold our politicians accountable. And to have that happen in Cincinnati, Ohio, wh is not, I'm sorry to say, the bastion of progressive politics. felt like it was a really important moment to just bear witness to that you would have someone from the international legal sphere come to what was and what I like to still think is a battleground and to talk about accountability and politics and to talk about the importance of protecting human rights. So that was quite fascinating. I think the other thing that was really important for me in my development as a lawyer, in addition to, as we talked about, the, the internship that I did after my first year, and in addition to the classes that I got to take, which between Burt and Ingrid Wirth were, were phenomenal classes on international law and human rights. But beyond that, you know, I was going to a place where the student population wasn't fully progressive. So it's not like I walked in and everyone around me agreed with me. Uh, instead it was three years of having people challenge your ideas. And I think in the last few years, having those kinds of friendships have become, it's become more difficult to find common ground, and to really engage with people who disagree with you politically. But at the time it was just part of living in Cincinnati. It was part of living and being a law student there that you got the opportunity to have your deep core beliefs challenged. And in having that happen, you strengthened your arguments for them. You were forced to really, or at least I was really forced to grapple with the assumptions that I was making about what the law is and what the law should be. And it's now something that I carry with me because if I'm writing a blog post or I'm writing a brief to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, or I'm preparing something for the UN Working Group on Business and Human Rights, or I'm talking to Twitter in all of those contexts. I'm, um, I'm thinking about what if it wasn't me saying this, what if it wasn't my position on this. It's made my new, my writing more nuanced. It's made my arguments stronger. Uh, that's not to suggest that I don't still carry with me normative beliefs in everything that I do. But first of all, I'm, I'm comfortable laying claim to those normative beliefs. So I'm comfortable saying, this is why human rights matters. This is why it matters to me. And this is why I'm operating from the premise that, you know, in my day to day work, why I'm operating from the premise that it takes precedence over corporate profits. And I think being in that, in that sort of community in Cincinnati really allowed me to

develop the right kind of language and the right kind of thinking to make me a more effective advocate, activist, and academic.

BERT LOCKWOOD 22:15
and I would uh, Tara, um, I think both Kevin Boyle and Nigel Rodley at Essex,

not ideological in that sense that they, as they framed their, um, arguments, they were sort of conscious of trying to persuade people. and, and recognize that, um, a good advocate is one is respecting other people's views and, attempting to persuade them through good arguments, if you, if you will. I would also say over time, and I, I, you know, this may be overstating it. But, the city of Cincinnati, has changed a great deal so that, you know, when I came here, it was totally Republican. now it's totally Democratic. and, uh, one of the things with respect influence and is lawyers. and frankly, many of our graduates, from the law school are in key positions of power, uh, including the mayor. uh, I think they have had a positive, uh, influence in terms of, the character of Cincinnati and, and concern the poor and social, economic, social causes as, as well.

TARA VAN HO 23:35
Yes, I should say Cincinnati has now, I think, replaced much of Northeast Ohio as the center of progressive politics within Ohio, unfortunately.

BERT LOCKWOOD 23:47
was going to say, uh, why unfortunate?

TARA VAN HO 23:49
I mean, unfortunately for me, good for Cincinnati. I Unfortunately for me, because sometimes I still wish that, that my area was still more progressive than it is. but from Cincinnati perspective, it's been really fun to watch that evolution and I'm going to give credit to another one of your fellows, Bert. Yvette Simpson.

BERT LOCKWOOD 24:07
Oh, yes.

TARA VAN HO 24:08
Who was on city council and who, uh, now has a national profile in progressive politics and, and really, was wonderful. She was, she was a year ahead of me at Cincinnati and, uh, was a, and is a good, dear friend of mine who I care greatly

BERT LOCKWOOD 24:24
Well, you had some great classmates.

TARA VAN HO 24:25
Oh my God. Amazing people. I lucked out, I have to admit.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 24:29
And we would love-

You are all involved.

TARA VAN HO 24:34
I am sure they would all be up for

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 24:36
And so your journey from Cincinnati, and if dad, I'm correct, it was per your recommendation, that Tara's next journey should take her to study Nigel Rodley and Kevin Boyle, who we've done an episode, remembering Sir Nigel Rodley's legacy, with his wife, Lynn, and we'll be doing an episode coming out soon for Kevin Boyle, who unfortunately passed away a few years ago, talking to his wife, Joan. but dad, you're the, the bridge that took Tara for an LLM and a PhD.

BERT LOCKWOOD 25:07
I, I think I recall the conversation Tara said she wanted to go into human rights. What would I recommend?

TARA VAN HO 25:15
Yes.

BERT LOCKWOOD 25:15
Um, and I I said go to Essex and study under Nigel Rodley and Kevin Boyle. Is that not a correct recollection?

TARA VAN HO 25:25
Correct. I'd been in private practice in corporate law and I called you. I was miserable. so, you know, one piece of advice to aspiring human rights lawyers is to not work against your own life purpose. But I, I did for a little bit. Um, and I called you and said, I need out. I need to start living my life purpose. I don't know how to get from where I am to a career in international human rights law. What do I do? And you said, well, what do you think you want to work on? And I said, some combination of torture and freedom of religion. And you said, go to Essex, study with Kevin Boyle and Nigel Rodley. am, I will forever be grateful to you, Bert, for those two conversations. The one where you sent me to Denmark and then the second where you sent me to Essex. I got to study with Kevin and Nigel and some of, uh, Kevin's last years. Teaching, um, Nigel then became the chair of my PhD supervisory board as well. and I saw him, you know, we were, we were working together when he passed away. And my goodness, I could not have asked for better teachers for what it means to be a human rights lawyer than the combination of the three of you, along with people like Clara Sandoval, who's, now with the global survivors fund and Sheldon Leader who has from, from teaching. both of whom are at Essex for my LLM year. it was truly, you know, you talk about a masters of law. It was a, it was a masters of human rights advocacy to study under them. Kevin used to talk to us about being the three A's advocate, academic and activist. And this goes to your point, Ber, about

how they, they were non-ideological. You know, when you're an activist, you meet people where they're at and you pull them in to, if you're doing it well, you pull them into a sense of ownership for a cause and a sense of alignment with their own ideals. Um, and as an advocate, you take those skills and you apply them in a courtroom or in a, before a UN working body or a treaty body or, you know, you, you take it into the institutions. and as an academic, um, and as an academic, you sort of sit back and you think about broad picture, how does the law work in practice? How does it need to be transformed? What tools are there and what tools are we missing? And you go into the deep analysis of things that most advocates and activists don't have an opportunity to do. and then you flip your roles over time and you take the skills from all three of those hats. And you apply them in each of the different spheres to make sure that you're always analyzing something deeply, but you're also bringing people with you on the journey. And you're doing that to challenge and change the institutions. And that thinking is one that still informs what I do and how I do it. And then Nigel, um, I mean, there's two things when I think about Nigel. The first is that he used to always say he's a public international lawyer first and a human rights advocate second or a human rights academic second. and it's true that that's what human rights lawyers should be doing because all of our institutional power, all of our, our norms stem from public international law and if we don't get that right first, then we're going to lose power when we try to challenge states because the state lawyers, the government lawyers, know about international law and they know what the boundaries are. And they have the power to shape it in a way that people on the outside don't always have the power to do. And so if we don't take the public international law side seriously, we lose some moral authority when we, when we're trying to make that institutional change. There's a second, there's a second Nigel story that I'll tell you guys about in a little bit, but I think,

BERT LOCKWOOD 29:24
yeah, I remember Chris Avery, at a conference we had honoring Nigel, uh, uh, uh, talked about going to interview, Nigel when Nigel was, the lawyer at Amnesty International and, Nigel said to him, there are three things you, need to be a, uh, human rights lawyer. Accuracy, accuracy, accuracy, and accuracy, which was quite Nigel. you know, he, he recognized that the power of NGOs only comes from the authority as to the facts that they are reporting. if they lose their credibility, the they lose their power to influence things. And so it's, extra special to, double check, triple check, whatever, to make sure that the information you're putting out there, is accurate. it's an important theme many may initially appreciate, but that, upon reflection great So what's your other Nigel story?

TARA VAN HO 30:29
Okay, before we get there, I have to jump in on the accuracy, accuracy, accuracy thing, because that's also one of my Nigel memories. And when I was writing what I think was probably still to this date, my most controversial business and human rights report, which was on the obligations of institutional investors in, for, for settlement activity in the West Bank. it's become a little less controversial but still gets me, you know, at least one hate email a year. I had a post-it note on my computer that said, accuracy, accuracy, accura, because it was a report that I knew the importance of, and that I knew I did not want to screw up in any way.

And actually, what it did was, instead of sort of the language that sometimes activists use, in terms of, you it's easy to take something and to try to get people to galvanize around it by using quite heavy language or quite emotive language. And actually, in that report, I tried to strip the emotions out of the language, because I wanted the facts themselves to carry the weight of, of the situation for the reader. And, I think that, uh, I think that that's a key thing that we sometimes don't see a lot of, or we don't see enough of in human rights work, is people really boiling down the essence of a situation to its most accurate description from an objective perspective, and letting that carry some weight for people. And I think we could do a little bit more of a little bit more of in the field. Okay, sorry. Second Nigel story. for my LLM dissertation, I was writing on the, ability to prosecute the lawyers who were behind the Guantanamo Bay torture policies. Uh, and the US's obligation under the convention against torture to do that. And Nigel was my supervisor and about a week before I was to submit the dissertation. we had a big group class dinner to say goodbye to everyone. And I sat across from Nigel his choice, not mine, cause I was still scared to, t admit this to him, but I was going to disagree with him in my dissertation on the issue of severity. when it comes to torture. So for the listeners, for torture to be torture under the UN convention, it has to be the intentional infliction of severe mental or physical pain by a state agent for one of several different purposes. and there's a debate in international law as to

or in human rights law

as to whether or not the severity has to meet a particular threshold or not. For a while there was a split between the European Court of Human Rights and the UN's Human Rights Committee on that issue. Now they've

they've merged a little bit more. Nigel's position was the severity doesn't have to be severe, right? and I

and I disagreed with that. But I was terrified to write that in my dissertation and to tell Nigel that. So we're sitting across from each other at dinner and I finally decide I'm gonna

I'm gonna make sure that he's okay with me disagreeing with him. And so I gathered all of my courage and I said to him, "So, Nigel, I hope it's okay but I am gonna be disagreeing with Manfed Novak a little bit on the definition of torture." all of my courage at that time did not

did not extend very far. So I

I whimmed out and blamed it on

on Manfred and he said, "Oh, I tend to agree with Manfred on

the definition of torture. What do you disagree with him on?" And I said, "Hmm, uh, the severity issue?" And Nigel says, "Oh yes, no, I

I tend to agree with Manfred." And I said, "I know, I just

I wasn't ready to tell you that I'm going to disagree with you in my dissertation." And I started to

to chuckle because I was embarrassed and

and feeling a little bit like a

a child. and he said

to me, Yeah, uh, he said, "My dear, at this point in your career, you are allowed to disagree with anyone as long as this is well-founded and well-reasoned. Do you have an adequate footnote for that?" And I said, "Yes, I think so." And he said, "Do you think that you argue it well?" And I said, "Yes, I think so." And he said, "That's all that you need. You are allowed to disagree with me and you are allowed to disagree with anyone." Uh, and he gave me a very

a very high mark. It

it would be equivalent to like an A-plus or an A-plus-plus in the US system. and so I was feeling very, uh, emboldened after that. And to this day, I carry that lesson with me, and I hope that it's one that I impart to my students, that the test of merit of an argument is not based off of who says it. It's based off of how well-founded it is and how well-reasoned it is. and I've discovered since that that's not necessarily a universal position amongst academics, which makes me sad, but it's one um, empowered me even as a PhD student. So I

I took a year out between my LLM and my PhD. Um, and by the end of my first year of my PhD, I was disagreeing with people who I don't think most PhD students disagree with or give feedback to in their first year. So it was, you know, Margot Solomon and Martin Scheinen and Luther Vanderhol and Mark Gibney that I was feeling empowered to disagree with because Nigel told me I could. Um, and later on people, other PhD students would be like, "I don't know that you should have

have said that to Margot Solomon, or "I don't know that you should have said that to Martin Scheinen." To both of their credits, Margot and Martin had no problem with me disagreeing with them or giving them feedback.

BERT LOCKWOOD 36:07
about

I'm talking to him tonight.

TARA VAN HO 36:10
Oh, Marcus. Oh, say hi to him for me. Um, we were just together a couple weeks ago in

in Brussels. Yeah, no, I

I mean, Mark is also great at being disagreed with, right? Uh, I think a lot of people

the more

you progress in your career, the more comfortable you are with people disagreeing with you. And so I think when you're talking about superstars like that in human rights, they can take it.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 36:35
And I think that's an incredible life lesson for really any person to carry with them. especially, you know, I think in current events and

in the state of our country Um, but I think knowing that, you know, it is okay to disagree with people, but you need to have accuracy and you need to have well researched thoughts and, people can tend to be very reactive and impulsive, without doing due diligence. So, I'm gonna carry that one around with me as well, from Nigel. And thank you so much for sharing that. That's very, very meaningful. and what was it like, what is it like actually going from studying, at University Essex under Nigel and Kevin and now you are part of the faculty and you joined in January, 2018. Is that a truly full circle moment?

TARA VAN HO 37:20
Yeah, it was, it's a very full circle moment. uh, I remember my first year back, it was quite intimidating. Uh, Sheldon, leader, was still on faculty, and Sheldon taught business and human rights, international investment, trade, and human rights, and was also my PhD student, or supervisor. So, he had served in multiple prongs in my life. He was also one of the founding fathers of the business and human rights academic movement. his children, uh, Dan Leader is his son and is a prominent business and human rights barrister in London. his daughter-in-law is a prominent business and human rights researcher with RAID UK. and we ended up teaching business and human rights in my first term back at Essex. And it was a surreal experience because there was a point at which I still felt like maybe actually I was more student than faculty. you know, I was still learning from Sheldon in so many and Nigel had just passed, uh, shortly before I got back to Essex. Kevin wasn't there anymore as well. and so to have come back to that, to the fold, while also missing these really prominent people in my life, was, and feeling responsibility to carry their legacy and their torch on, which I think is something that I still feel today that I always want to feel like I am doing them justice in my work. it was, it was heavy, but it was also really exciting. And, and now it's just kind of part and parcel of my everyday life. I love meeting our students every Uh, we once quite recently had a class of 108 students studying business and human rights. More often times, I mean, we had to break it down so that it wasn't 108 students in a classroom, but 108 taking it in a single Um, to see the questions that they ask, to see the, uh, fire that they have for having these conversations and for really learning about the issues and learning about, um, how you hold corporations accountable and what good corporate citizenship looks like. It's so much fun. It's, you know, it,

every year I feel like I'm taken back to when I was doing my master's degree. Uh, and it's fun to see both how far I've progressed, how far the field has progressed because I did it in 2008, 2009. So again, that was right when the UN developed a framework on business and human rights. And before they developed what are now the, the normative authoritative statement on business responsibilities, which is the UN guiding principles. to have seen the field develop in that way, to see my students develop each year from, you know, people who don't understand how a corporation works to people who can discuss with nuance how the corporate purpose and how the corporate veil impact, our ability to hold corporations accountable to change corporate conduct, to, who do really fun, deep dives on these issues in interesting ways, um, f a variety of different places. It's really an exceptional experience every year. I love it, so much. I think you can hear that from my, from my voice right now. I, I smile when I think of my students and to think of their progress in that one year.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 40:45
Could you tell us a little more about what it's like teaching this new generation, of students? when you and I were student and getting degrees, there were not degrees or classes like business and human rights or, in the field of sustainability and social impact. Those were not majors at business schools or liberal arts. And I recently was in New York City, uh, attending the climate reality projects, new training. That is hosted and founded by Al Gore. And I met amazing students in recent grads and they're telling me their majors and they're, they majored in sustainability and impact, climate and business. they're wanting to join ESG departments. Um, I found them so inspiring. They're so energetic. They're so passionate and they're so savvy about human rights business as well as sustainability. And climate. And I'm so excited for this new wave of students and this new generation coming in to blend their personal and professional passions.

TARA VAN HO 41:52
know, this generation gets a lot of flack from people. you know, I hear people talk about how they don't have any work ethic or they're not motivated. And that just is not my experience at all. And that just is not my experience at all. I find the students are quite excited to learn about these issues in greater depth. They come having a good real life experience of the worst excesses a business can impose on an individual. the worst abuses. And they come with knowledge of, um, of, of, of, of not just their own situation and their own lived experience, but how it's manifested in a lot of different communities. They also come with this incredible, you know, social native bent. That means they know how to connect and make communities across societies and cultures and languages. They understand the importance of that interconnectivity. Um, and the conversation being not just, what, how does the conversation I'm having in Colchester resonate? not just in the UK, but in places like Brazil and in Nigeria. And I think really fundamentally, they understand that that's not one conversation. It's a multitude. It's almost an onion of conversations with different layers to it. They also, I think in a way that even within my generation, it wasn't always true when we were They recognize that law often carries with it power structures. It can be an emancipatory force, but it also can be a force of oppression. And so they don't come assuming that the law itself is good or that the law as it is, is what they need to study. They come the law as it is, is what they need to

understand. And then the law as it should be is what they need to work towards. And I think that's so powerful. I just take so much from them every year. And I challenge me in my own assumptions in important ways. I think that's one of the joys of teaching is you get to throw out an idea or throw out an exam question and what the students generate with their own thoughtfulness, their own understanding of the law and what they come back to

BERT LOCKWOOD 44:20
Yeah.

TARA VAN HO 44:20
you

BERT LOCKWOOD 44:21
Tara, in your letter of recommendation, I'm not sure I'd go with the metaphor onion of conversation.

TARA VAN HO 44:31
Fair. Fair. That's a

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 44:33
And going more into your students. during the summer, you teach business and human rights, throughout the world at different schools. You've been to India, Italy, France, and Finland. Will you tell us more about those experiences?

TARA VAN HO 44:48
I love getting the opportunity to take business and human rights to wherever people want to learn about it. And that means having as many opportunities to talk to future advocates or existing advocates, but also local community members in, in places that are impacted by human business and human rights, violations. so each of those programs, as well as the one that I teach in Switzerland with the Geneva Academy, are for more advanced students who either have, um, professional experience or, or lived personal experience, or their advanced, students doing their LLMs or their PhDs. It's an opportunity to really go deeper into some specific issues, and the really fun thing about it for me has always been that those students, because they're already working in the field, I see them at future events. One of them, um, I was just with in Berlin, Denise Utlu, who is, I think, one of the coolest human beings that I know. he has a trained economic theory background, but he now works, as a Business and Human Rights practitioner for the German Institute for Human Rights. And I met him at the ABO Academy when I was teaching there, and he has been one of the leading forces for ensuring that national human rights institutions really take business and human rights seriously, and connect to each other on these issues, and learn from each other. So when I'm teaching at these different summer schools, it's really about how do we take the broad-based concepts, and the foundational knowledge that we all have, and how do we take it further? What does it mean to look at remedies, from a national, but also international perspective? What are we missing when we talk about existing

opportunities for remedies? And what are we talking about when it comes to the

BERT LOCKWOOD 46:41
existing

TARA VAN HO 46:41
relationship between sort of the state where the harm occurs and the state where the corporation is located? How do we blend and mix those together to create something that looks like justice victims of business abuse of human rights? And that's important because, I mean, justice in these situations would be that the violation never occurred in the first place, that the harm never occurred. but once that harm has occurred, what can we do that looks like justice? What can we do that helps restore people to the situation they should be in? and would have been in except for the violation? And that's quite powerful to be able to do that in a community of practitioners who are really looking at this from their own national lens and then learning from each other.

BERT LOCKWOOD 47:27
I wonder the, uh, Jordanian fellow that was the, Sure. Of human rights.

TARA VAN HO 47:33
Prince Said.

BERT LOCKWOOD 47:34
Yeah. Prince

TARA VAN HO 47:34
He

BERT LOCKWOOD 47:35
Said.

TARA VAN HO 47:35
shares my birthday, by the way.

BERT LOCKWOOD 47:36
oh, okay. Well, I a conversation with him at Utrecht. he, he was sort of the last speaker at this human rights conference. And he said he had just come from Geneva and he he had said what Joe Biden, had said. and that was, Biden had said, if you want to know, uh, country's commitment to human rights, look at its budget. the being that, you know, these things are so little and, uh, the irony is we look at what are the most effective ways of implementing human rights, and we tend to pick out special rapporteurs, like when Nigel was the special rapporteur on torture. And who are the special rapporteurs? I mean, they tend to be academics who have

full-time jobs, um, the don't get and they do this on top of their jobs. And, and that's what we look at is being, effective.

TARA VAN HO 48:44
yes,

BERT LOCKWOOD 48:45
uh, I think the point essentially being that, you know, we could make significant improvement if we had more resources to do it.

TARA VAN HO 48:54
I have a very similar response when businesses tell me that complying with human rights is too expensive, because they do, right? Including from their human rights team, they just say to me, Tara, I don't have the And I say, What is your budget? And you will have, I'm not going to name the company, uh, cause that will get me sued. Um,

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 49:13
noted.

TARA VAN HO 49:14
but there is, there is a large multinational corporation that everyone has heard of. And they went to the UN a few years ago, and from the floor, they said, you know, what we really need is streamlined reporting processes because it's, you know, it's just unsustainable. What you ask of us is too much. It's too much to spend time on these, on, on reporting. And my thing is, is the reporting requirements from all of the governments to date are so minimal asks, right? Like they, I could fill out most of the reporting requirements for most of the businesses in about 24 to 48 hours. you know, that, that might be a slight exaggeration, but it's not a significant exaggeration. And so I asked the person, you know, how big is your team? And she said, five. And I said, your, your human rights team for this company that has multiple subsidiaries and long supply chains. And is global in its reach. Your, your human rights team is five people. And she said, yes. And I said, so the problem is not that this stuff is costing too much. The problem is that your CEO and your CFO haven't given you enough money. And consistently that remains to be true. I, you know, we send students to work for businesses. I have a lot of friends who work for corporations. And when they come back to me, it's always the same conversation. It is always, we really want to do business and human rights correctly. But our budget is such that, you know, we have to fit within the business priorities. Several businesses that have stayed in Russia and have come to me to ask, how can we stay in Russia and comply with our human rights obligations? I say, you know, depending on, on what you're doing, the answer is you can't and you need to leave. And the response is often, we can't leave because the business decision has been made that this is too lucrative for us and we have to stay. And I say, that's, that's where the problem is, your budget is not behind your human rights commitment.

BERT LOCKWOOD 51:18

is not behind you. I,

TARA VAN HO 51:19
And your business orientation

BERT LOCKWOOD 51:21
yeah, I think that's true. I would add footnote. And relates an investigation I did with Father Drinan and Pinochet's Chile in 1986. on behalf of the, uh, International League for Human Rights. so we went down there and, I had arranged with Tuan Van Dongen, who was, uh, a, a dear friend who was, in the Dutch foreign ministry in charge of human rights. he identified for me someone from their mission. to Chile had, two or three people was the, the size of the mission, um, in, of the, the Netherlands to Chile. And he arranged for us to meet with and get briefed by one of their people that was following the human rights situation. so we did this and this guy laid out all this information. I mean, just, you know, documenting stuff. the next day we went to the U. S. mission and we what was going on with human rights. And they said, well, you know, we've had this cutback from, uh, 96 to, uh, 88 people and we just don't have the resources anymore to follow the human rights situation. And it was so telling.

TARA VAN HO 52:45
Yes. I started to chuckle early on while you were telling that because I knew exactly how that was going to probably play out. Um, it's, it's, it's sometimes embarrassing how little the U. S. behind our human rights commitment when we proclaim ourselves to be sort of the bastions of freedom for all of the world. And, you know, it, it, our budgets rarely match. You know, for years, Dennis Kucinich, who' the former mayor of Cleveland and then was a U. S. repres, he proposed that we have a Department of Peace equivalent to the Department of Defense and to fund it similarly. and obviously that got off the ground. I would like us just to have a National Human Rights Institute, something that's in align with the, the Paris principles on National Human Rights Institutions. that would have a budget from the government to monitor human rights domestically and then to look at how the U. S. is impacting human rights internationally.

BERT LOCKWOOD 53:40
Yeah.

TARA VAN HO 53:41
And if we just did that, you wouldn't, you know, it would be the two days of a defense budget or of the Pentagon's budget. And with that, we could transform the conversation on human within the U.

BERT LOCKWOOD 53:53
Now there, there is, there is a U. S. Institute of Peace, which is,

TARA VAN HO 53:57
Yes.

BERT LOCKWOOD 53:57
funded from Congress, uhm, does engage in, in studies, but you know, a lot of our foreign policy is sort of the alphabet soup, of these, uh, groups, that are former State Department people, I mean, it's, you know, exist in Washington that, uh, Well, I can't really say, you know, sort of, um, sort of, um, sort of do these studies and stuff, I, I somewhat skeptical with respect to the, level of candor and criticism because, well, I remember there was a major and a guy did a manuscript for me on this. A major fight with psychologists, um, with respect um, criticizing the U. S. on torture. there were all sorts of, psychologists and psychiatrists within, that organization that opposed criticizing the U. S. for torture because they depended on the US. Um, the Pentagon.

TARA VAN HO 54:56
Mm-hmm.

BERT LOCKWOOD 54:56
Um, and so it, uh, it was not the Pentagon. Um, and so it, it led to a real struggle which eventually those that wanted to be critical won, but it was a real, battle, uh, over that issue. But it's, it's partly the, how you groups through money that, you know, begin to rely on Um,

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 55:13
There's just one final, final question I really am passionate to ask her about, is her article she co-authored which is titled The Reckoning, a dialogue about racism, anti-racist, and business and human rights. That was, written in 2021, 2020 What inspired you to write it? And if there's any update you can give to us, because businesses started putting more funding into their DEI teams, um, academics, the universities started putting into that. Now we're seeing the backlash, due to many different reasons those departments are being cut, people are losing their jobs. would just love to grab a few minutes of your time to talk about it.

TARA VAN HO 55:58
Asking this, just a quick thing, uh, Meredith, that the co-authors are Erika George and Jenna Martin. and so it was the three of us who wrote it as a conversation. Uhm, this was one of those situations, and I think it's, A small piece of advice that I have for white anti-racists is, this came to me because I have a public profile on Twitter and I was asked to write the article on racism in business and human rights in response to the murder of George Floyd and, the protests that had been occurring globally by this point. and, you know, I grew up in a very racially, socioeconomically, diverse community, religiously diverse as well, called Euclid Ohio, I loved that place. And, uh, I loved that background because it, it taught me about racism from a lived experience. I also hated that, uhm, my upbringing that, that I learned about racism from a lived experience. Uhm, not as myself, but as what my classmates and my friends experienced. uhm, so I have long been passionate about racial justice. I think if you are, a child or a teenager and you witness, you witness as a white person, your black friends being treated differently than you. And you witness not just them being spoken to with less respect or less kindness or less friendliness, but being stopped by the police, being, uhm, less friendliness, but being stopped by the police, being, um, subjected to people following them around shops. it

changes, it should change you and it should make you passionate about these issues. And so I, I have long been passionate and I have long spoken out about racism within the academy, racism, on a day-to-day basis. So this came to me for that background and that, that public advocacy on these issues. but I knew that my voice as a white Midwestern girl was probably not the voice that needed to lead this conversation. So I actually reached out to Erica and Jenna and asked them if they wanted to do this. And, uh, they both said, I would love to do this, but I don't have time. And I said, what if we coauthored, but I also didn't time, uh, in, in the famous reality of being an academic, we all want to coauthor with each other. We just never have time to do so. and so I started thinking about what would it look like for the three of us to do this, in an authentic and important way. And we came up with this dialogic. I mean, we didn't come up with, we borrowed this dialogic method from other fields of, um, social sciences and, started on what I thought would be a very easy question to ask, which is, is business and human rights racist? my position is most social structures are, not because they intend to be, but because they carry with them the biases of the people who construct and it was quite interesting because I asked the question and there were three different answers, to the question. And we spent a great deal of time thinking about our own field and thinking about how businesses use, sort of advertising black lives, marketing rather than black lives matter to promote themselves. And you're right. Everybody galvanized around DEI budgets. You know, there was a whole discussion around decolonizing the curriculum, whole discussion around how do you embed your curriculum with anti-racist positions. And now we've had a significant backlash, you know, state governments in the U S are telling people you can't teach critical race theory. They don't know what critical race theory is, mind you. and if you ask them to define it, you get a whole hodgepodge of things that are not critical race theory. but they know that they don't like it because in their experience or in their own perspective, it's intended to make white people feel bad. And as a white person, I don't ever feel bad using critical race theory or, thinking about I, I think it's, it's our responsibility. It's, a moral imperative that we do that. we, we had this very long conversation. It was quite illuminating and having seen, having witnessed this backlash, it's, frustrating because it's not built, you know, we talked before about Nigel's position, that things should be well-founded and well-argued. And this backlash is, is neither. It's a backlash based off of feelings of, I don't want to feel guilty about being white. And I don't feel guilty about being white, but that doesn't mean that I don't recognize that there are social and political and economic structures that are meant to protect me, and that part of my responsibility as a human rights advocate is to help dismantle that, to allow for greater equality, but also for this meritocracy that we promise people, you know, this idea of the American dream was always built off of this promise that anyone could pull themselves up from their bootstraps if they were given the opportunity. That's not reflective in our society, and, you know, you hear people J. D. Vance come out and claim that that's what he's done, but as you and I will both know, Middletown, Ohio is not, you know, the bastion of Appalachia that he pretends that it is, and the opportunities to pull yourself up from the bootstraps, the opportunities who really engage in a meritocracy both within the U. S. and globally have shrunk over the years. and it's significantly harder if you are black, or if you are particularly a black woman, let alone a black woman with a name that people will associate with you being a black woman. Um, and so to recognize that and to say, actually, if I'm going to get ahead, I want it to be because the merit of my ideas and the merit

of my work allows me to get ahead, not because my name sounds whiter than someone else, or I look whiter. and you know, that, that for me is just really an important part of what we're supposed to be doing in society. Whether you're a human rights advocate or not, we have that moral responsibility to, to deconstruct the structures that keep people oppressed.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 1:02:19
I could not have said that better myself. And this is an open invitation for you to come back for part two. I would love to dive deeper to talk about anti-racism responsibility. just targeting myself and you white women, really as well as racism in business. And also I think with present day affairs, if you ever wanted to about the West Bank, um, I would absolutely

TARA VAN HO 1:02:40
yes,

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 1:02:40
love to dive into that. so on behalf of my dad and I, um, thank you so much. You have been so generous with your time. you know, you're a dear friend to our family. You're such an inspiration thank you so much for joining us.

TARA VAN HO 1:02:52
thank you

BERT LOCKWOOD 1:02:52
nice.

TARA VAN HO 1:02:53
both.

BERT LOCKWOOD 1:02:53
Thanks, Tara.

TARA VAN HO 1:02:54
This was so Thank

BERT LOCKWOOD 1:02:55
you.

TARA VAN HO 1:02:55
you. Love you guys.

BERT LOCKWOOD 1:02:56
Love

TARA VAN HO 1:02:56

Take care.

Track 7 1:03:00
thank you to our listeners for tuning in to this episode of Human Rights Conversations Across Generations. My dad and I want to extend our gratitude to Tara for joining us and getting a chance to walk down memory lane together. You can find links to Tara's and resources connected to our conversation in our show notes. if you enjoyed this episode, please remember to subscribe, rate, and review. Sharing conversations like this really helps more people engage thoughtfully with human rights issues and the broader questions shaping public life today. If you'd like to get in touch with us, please email us at humanrightsconversations at gmail.com. And you can learn more at my website, meredithlockwood.com. Thank you again for listening, and we'll see you next time.