

Transcript of Interview with Michelle Sparrow By Kit Heintzman

Interviewee: Michelle Sparrow

Interviewer: Kit Heintzman

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Location (Interviewee): Ottawa, Ontario

Location (Interviewer):

Transcriber: Angelica S Ramos

Some of the things we spoke about include:

Squatting at the beginning of the pandemic; unstable housing; limited internet access; social assistance. Living with partner of 14+ years; short term breakup mid-pandemic. Living with an unmedicated schizophrenic roommate. Living with a sexual predator; rape culture. Medical sexism and discrimination; no family doctor; poor access to mental healthcare. Difficulty accessing a food bank and dumpstering. Changing art styles with changing body/disability. Seeking healthcare for serious acute bleeding; treatment in the ER. Being estranged from parents; not being able to see biological child, who was adopted by a sibling, due to COVID bubble limitations. The importance of walkability during the pandemic. Psychedelics and mental health. Humans' place in nature, humans as nature. Not being able to afford proper veterinary care; pets (Legion and LeMieux), cats dying. Animals and PTSD. Reducing use of public transit during the pandemic. How television shows incorporated the pandemic in storytelling. The history of pandemics, vaccines, and medicine.

Kit Heintzman 00:00

Hello.

Michelle Sparrow 00:01

Hello.

Kit Heintzman 00:03

Would start by stating your full name, the date for time and your location.

Michelle Sparrow 00:09

My name is Michelle Sparrow, if you need middle name, Michelle Eileen Sparrow. It is 10:16 on the 30th of June 2022. And I'm in Ottawa, Ontario.

Kit Heintzman 00:23

And do you consent to having this interview recorded, digitally uploaded and publicly released under a Creative Commons license attribution noncommercial sharealike?

Michelle Sparrow 00:33

Yes.

Kit Heintzman 00:36

Thank you so much for being here. Would you just start by introducing yourself to anyone who might find themselves listening? What would you want them to know about you and the place you're speaking from?

Michelle Sparrow 00:46

Um, I am a person on disability living in Ottawa, I am identifying as an artist. I, my disability is is is not physical. I am I have issues which of course, everyone had issues going into the pandemic, but everyone's issues got put into high gear. So that's, that's been fun. No, that's really not been fun. I apologize. And that was sarcasm. I, I live with my partner of 14 years, I met him. And two days later, we moved in together. We've been inseparable ever since. And we live with our three cats. I think that's it.

Kit Heintzman 01:45

Tell me a story about your life during the pandemic.

Michelle Sparrow 01:49

Well, the pandemic hit, right as my partner was going through a mental breakdown. In 2011, his father passed away tragically, and due to illness, but because of the way he'd passed away, my partner actually had to clean up his brain matter. And anyways, he had never dealt with it with a psychiatrist. So right before the pandemic, we had lost our house. And he had been unable to continue working. And money was very low. Unfortunate, fortunately, unfortunately, we had found a place to squat. And that's when friends found us and you think that that's a good thing. But oh, my goodness, when pandemics going down, and everyone's life is in crisis, the the the people aren't, they don't have their heads on straight. And all these people found us who we couldn't get rid of. So first, our old roommate moved back in with us. And he used to be okay, but he also used to have medication for schizophrenia. So he was quite a chaotic element. And his his mental health was going down. And he wanted, he wanted weed all the time, from this dude, who I knew ever since he was four. But um, he had always been my sister stalker, though she'd never explained that to me. And so he turned his attention to me. And during the pandemic, he insisted that he needed a place to move in, because of his father being 70 and high risk. And I said, Well, I feel for you, but I'm at high risk, too. I have lots of breathing problems. Any given winter cold kill me, COVID definitely will, and I told him, No. And a week later, he moved in anyways, I didn't realize that he was already a sex offender. And suddenly, there was no escape. And he is also a drug dealer. And that's where all of our money kept getting funneled to without me wanting. It got really dark as things closed down, like there wasn't much food in the grocery stores that we could go do. And we kept trying to get to the food bank, but it's so far in Orleans. And the the predator who had moved into our house, stocking our every movement and he thought it was shameful to go to the food bank so he wouldn't let us. We ended up eating out of the giant Tiger dumpster for a while. It was a month at least things were just it was, pandemic made everyone go really, really crazy. And it was terrifying. Yeah. I'm losing my train of thought maybe you have a question. I'm sorry.

Kit Heintzman 05:24

You have nothing to apologize for. Do you remember when you first heard about the pandemic?

Michelle Sparrow 05:29

Yeah, it was our other crazy friend who we first thought was like, he's really unhinged. And surprisingly enough whole pandemic long. He was the only one who kept his job. Amazingly, but our friend Johnny comes in the door. The world's going to hell in a handbasket. We're just like, okay, Johnny, I yeah, whatever. And then, no, he was, he was totally right. And I didn't have a phone until 2020. I had just avoided technology. We didn't have the internet until that roommate moved back in with us and insisted on internet. So I didn't have this view to the outside world understanding of what was going on so much. So if it weren't for these fly by people coming in and giving us the rundown, it would have been just what we saw out the window, which was pretty much Orleans

ground to almost zombie like halt. have, you know, like the streets were empty. And then it was just joggers, because that was the only thing anyone could do. Lots and lots of joggers. But yeah, it was. I didn't have like, I said a phone till late in 2020. When actually it was because I was living with so many scary people that my sister set me up with her old phone and my friend set me up with some service. And finally, I was able to get like little reports on COVID and stuff. But uh, no, it was, I guess, January 2020, when we first started hearing about it. And yeah, it's all third hand information, second hand information at first.

Kit Heintzman 06:29

To the extent that you're comfortable sharing, would you say something about your relationship with health and healthcare infrastructure prior to the pandemic.

Michelle Sparrow 07:35

Before the pandemic, I had been seeing a psychiatrist regularly. It's really hard to find a psychiatrist you like, and I was so lucky to have been looking at dealing with psychiatrists ever since I was 11. So to find one that I stuck with, since I was 22, I think for like, we had been together for over a decade. And although every once in a while I'd that be too agoraphobic to leave the house and I wouldn't see her for a couple of months, over 10 years or more, you know, of course, good relationship, and then suddenly COVID And I couldn't get hold of her. I couldn't see her when I finally did get a hold of her. At first I was told that she had just dropped out of the business like Sorry, you don't have psychiatrists anymore. We don't know where she went, Oh, but Yoshi, my partner he tracked her down and then he found her she had changed hospitals. But although I've been in contact with her again, since COVID hit the the ability to get psychiatric care or any sort of counseling, especially for the crazy crap I was going through in my personal life, but with the people in my home. I still haven't been able to process any of that. And I'm really hoping that mental health gets more accessible soon. It seems that it's all gone online, which I'm only semi comfortable with since I'm new to phones and technology. That's what I have to say about that.

Kit Heintzman 09:22

What kind of art do you do?

Michelle Sparrow 09:25

I had done a lot of pencil art portraiture ink. My father was a cartoonist. So I was trained in that thing. But since my vision has been failing and my arthritis has been worsening, and also with the pandemic, we had to move and anyway my art style has had to evolve and change from strictly pen and paper to more fashion and collage, and and elements that aren't so very precise, I don't know if you're familiar with Frida Khalo's work. But as her health declined as she was actually reaching my age, you'll see her later paintings are so much more it's like the style is less perfected than at the beginning, because of how well how our bodies deteriorate. And I feel that my own style has become shaky in this way. But art is something that you are, not something that you do. And I'm discovering that I thought I'd lost my art. And I realized all these things I was doing were still art. And it's more so finding the art in the everyday.

Kit Heintzman 11:00

I'd love to hear more about your journey with housing. And like how that compares to a pre pandemic world for you.

Michelle Sparrow 11:10

Well, rent in Ottawa had been going up for a long time. But during the pandemic, there was a major rent crisis where, whereas bachelor's used to be anywhere between, let's say, 500 650, suddenly, we had to find a new place our house, our squat, really let's say, well, just full of black mold. And there was septic water. And I kept getting like horrible infections, internal bleeding. So um, we desperately need to find new house. And oh, my goodness, rent prices live are like 1250 for bachelor plus utilities, it was on my 1169 from the government, just not feasible. And with my partner being unable to work, we were both living off my one disability check. So I was amazingly grateful when, in the end, after two months of being homeless, not on the streets homeless, but we had to split up our cats we were crashing at in laws. Anyways, we finally found a two bedroom in Little Italy, which is, you know, close to the heartbeat of the city. We found two bedroom for 1100. All inclusive. And I'm like, Oh my God, that's great place to starve in public and private. Fabulous. Good. So, yeah, we got it. And we visit the food bank, which is nowhere near as nice as the food bank in Orleans. But you know, literally, beggars can't be choosers. And we've been there like a year and a half now and life is wonderfully simple and a lot less complicated. Or still, you know, it's pandemic still as things little bear and all the shelves and stuff. But oh, so much better than the squat we were in.

Kit Heintzman 13:28

When you were, when you're experiencing the infections and bleeding from the black mold, were you able to receive health care outside of the house? How did you how did you cope with that?

Michelle Sparrow 13:40

Um, I had to make a few trips to the hospital. It was recurring. And the hospital trips were very difficult to get to and really weird because the pandemic your all alone and very rushed attitude. I got better treatment than Yoshi did. We miss the entire summer of 2020 because he broke out in hives for three or four months. And when they broke out in the morning, I [inaudible] it like if it weren't for the fact that he fell asleep in that spot and woke up with all the same tattoos. I didn't recognize him man his ear was like it looked like cauliflower from boxing and his face was just a mess his whole body. We tried going to the hospital or we tried sending him to the hospital because I cant go in with them. And they wouldn't even give him an allergy pill. They just dismissed him as though you were a junkie or something. And he had to go back and they still dismissed him in the end he never really got help for it. Some friends purchased him some allergy medication and it did pretty much nothing he. Yeah, it was like, it was biblical. It was so like, the book of Job, you know, like, All he needed was broken pottery to scrape at his boils, you know, like it was bad. No, it was really hard to get any sort of medical attention for like, for anything. No infrastructure was so damaged. It just really wasn't set up for it.

Kit Heintzman 15:35

Do you know if he faced much discrimination in health care before that?

Michelle Sparrow 15:45

Um, yeah. Yeah. Back in. 17, or 16? I'm not sure. I think it's 2016. I got shingles. I didn't know I had shingles. I was visiting my child and my brother Sebastian, when I got a pinpoint headache. I actually have scarring from this. It erased my freckle on the end of my nose. I'm so sad. But I hate this horrible pain. And when, like, the headache didn't go away. It was growing and my skin was bubbling off my face. I went to the hospital. And I was there all day, waiting. Unfortunately, I think unfortunately, because I'm I, when I'm nervous. I'm quiet as a school mouse. But you know, he came to meet me after his shift at work. But he had been drinking. And so even though

we'd only been there for like half hour to an hour of my weight. When the doctor finally got to me, they gave me a sobriety test and sent me home. And I said my face doesn't normally look like this. My face is all swollen. They're like looks fine now. And I'm like, No, this is not how I look. Anyways, two days later, I went back in abject agony. And they're like, oh, yeah, infectious disease, you have to like be in quarantine. And for two weeks, people who are just like the people in et came in there in counter suits to give me IVs. You know, it's like, wow, that's it was a Friday night, like around midnight, when she gave me the sobriety test. I don't think she's gonna get demoted any lower than that. She's already on the [inaudible] early shift . But no, we, we do get discrimination. I actually am without a family doctor right now. Because my doctor I'd had since I was 11. Just she, she, she's Muslim. And she gets along great with my very pious parents, but she considers me to be a sinner. She thinks marijuana is a white powder injectable. She doesn't know what a blow job is. She She caused the first surgery I ever needed by tearing me open during the cervical exam. And then a couple years back, she did it again. While teaching a student doctor and he he's like, I'll get the lube. And she's like, No, I've seen it before. She doesn't need it. Don't know what that comment means. And then she made him wear two pairs of gloves. And when he was very, you know, gently and politely trying to find my cervix. He's like, I can't find the cervix here without lube. She's like, give it to me. And so there's a lot of doctors who I suppose just don't get us anyways. But no, I think there's a more so that that push of we don't want your kind, we're trying to deal with the respectable side of society. Get them well during the pandemic. I don't know. But no, it's a discrimination. I suppose. It's obvious they're looking for a new doctor.

Kit Heintzman 19:19

Talk to me about trying to find a new general practitioner.

Michelle Sparrow 19:24

Um, it's pretty impossible. It's like here are the three doctors in Ottawa that are accepting patients do you want the super green doctor and by green I mean green at the gills you know like new. You want the one that's way in the sticks there we in the sticks there are you know, it's it's not as someone who as a briefly mentioned suffers from agoraphobia. I can't. It's very difficult to get out of the house for health care, especially if I have to travel like who knows how many buses to get there. So, you know, it's it's tough. And I know even when I had had my child back in 2007, and had to find them, doctor, in the end, we found this person just trying to show their doctor ebook that they had written. I'm sorry, that's terribly worded. But you know, the same shameless self promotion type. And I'm like, this is this is what the government sent like, this is what's supposed to compete as a doctor. No, no, no. Read my book. Yeah, my one year olds not going to read your book.

Kit Heintzman 20:42

You've mentioned sort of getting more connected to the internet, during the pandemic. When that happened, what are some of the things you started to notice about this, like, online conversation happening about this thing that you were already going through?

Michelle Sparrow 21:00

Ah, there was just an overabundance of information. And so much of it was contradictory. And I suppose maybe someone who is around or has been using the internet for more years than I would perhaps know the better sources and stuff. But since everyone was just like, standing on their soapbox screaming about the pandemic, it was really hard to know where the truth lies, or want to like tune into any of it is just, I don't know you. You want to hear it all. But like, take it all with a grain of salt, and form your own opinions, which of course everyone

assuming. But, you know, don't spell them so loudly because they're just, no one knows for sure what's going on and all this chaos. But it definitely, it's, it's hard to get used to the whole online conversation and not just in terms of the pandemic. But like, for instance, you and I used to know each other, and I thought, oh, no, I'm so bad at phone calls. And then I realized, oh, wow, there's actually some people I can still phone calls with, you know, it's, it's, it's weird to get into this hole. Actually, there's one really great thing since I started being online. I've discovered long lost family in the Maritimes and all my mother's family are really great people who I've only just discovered, like I knew they were there. And it's, there's certain parts of the online experience I am truly enjoying. So it's weird.

Kit Heintzman 22:57

What's your connection with family been like over the last few years?

Michelle Sparrow 23:03

Well, I don't have contact with my parents due to religious differences. We split waves long ago. But the the I've got two siblings that I have a great relationship, or great relationships with my sister Nina and my brother Sebastian, and Sebastian adopted my child. Feneck. So I although I've been trying to, everyone had to make a bubble, right? And unfortunately, because I was living out in the sticks. And I understood why but man, did it hurt when Sebastian told me that I just wasn't a part of their bubble. And because of that reason, and also just difficulty getting there, and the only ride that was always offering was that predator that moved into our house anyways, I haven't seen very much of Sebastian and Feneck in the past two years. The pandemic really ground that to a halt. And I mean, like they were also being really careful for their own reasons, you know, trying to protect themselves. And as hard as it was on me, I think it was even harder on Feneck who although they they know the logistics of there's a pandemic and blah blah blah. It hurts you know, when when the I'm I'm Fenecks birth mother and they, anyways, oh, I'm sure they felt a certain feeling of abandonment, which I think maybe we all felt in some way. But there is also a feeling of guilt on my behalf. because I wanted to see a lot more of them. But it wasn't entirely my choice. Good news is in the past, since this year, things have been a lot better. And I've been back on track seeing my family every two weeks. Good news is when I moved in to in December 2020, actually was December 20, December 4 2020, on my birthday, as a birthday present from the universe we got that apartment, and it's walking distance to my sister Nina. So I've been seeing a lot more of her since then. And that's one thing oh my god, to be in walking distance during pandemic times to your loved ones is a really big blessing. So came a little late, but I'm really glad that I was able to keep contact with the family members that I've always loved and cherished.

Kit Heintzman 25:59

There's been this sort of whirlwind of other big social and political events over the last few years that aren't just the pandemic or the pandemic in isolation from other things. I'm wondering beyond COVID What have been some of the big social political issues on your mind?

Michelle Sparrow 26:20

Um, I suppose the thing that's been there was okay, I had a very weird perspective of all these celebrities that had been exposed as sexual predators because I was living with someone and there was a point where he was having a conversation with this other schizophrenic young man and and I know one of them is evil and the other ones influenceable And they were having a conversation about how rape doesn't exist these are the sorts of like the the to be around a rapist who's going oh, this stupid me too crap and all that just this this rage building within me

and and I of course, I didn't let that comment that the rape doesn't exist by I actually got a rapist to admit that he's a rapist. And like, you do realize like you're talking about like someone jumping into the bushes with a hammer type of violence. Like yeah, that's rare still happens. But like a the dissolving of one's will for another which is what I had to deal with for so he moved in in March, I think. And we finally fled at the end of September, and I spent so much time just like hiding in closets because that was the only way I could get away from him. But he'd brake down the door if I was in the bathroom. He wouldn't let me have phone conversations in private is just this this as as as women became less afraid to speak up and all this got exposed there was just so much of the the myopic hate filled minds just Oh, victim blaming and anyways, I know that this isn't a new social thing it's always been there but I don't know it's it's in my mind maybe just because of like I say the people I was around that it was such a big part of the narrative in my life. But anyways, always speak up don't be afraid. But it's, there's so many ramifications the the the predator had turned his attentions to me when Halloween 2019 We attended a party together. And what began as a massage turned into him assaulting me in front of a roomful of people. And that's when he started coming by the house all the time and you know, kind of, Oh, I'm gonna bring marijuana but just like, find him watching us, you know, like from corners, whatever. It's just I think it was no it was after right after he had moved in. Some of the roommates, the crazy one with his really sweet girlfriend found that guy he had given us basically basically give me some sort of date rape drug. And I was completely out of it. They found us in a compromising situation. But then the the boyfriend that had spotted with his girlfriend, he decided to suddenly recant, and when he was confronted about his actions, anyways. I am sorry, I'm still really damaged about it. I'm going off on a little bit of a tangent. But I know a lot, a lot of scary people out there, and I'm gonna get off this. Sorry. That's my thumb in front of me. Hi, I'm back. And I'm gonna get off this awkward conversational limb. Any questions?

Kit Heintzman 31:05

Yeah, let's, uh, let's give you a curveball in a really big other direction. What kind of have you been reading over a pandemic? Have you been watching anything?

Michelle Sparrow 31:14

Reading has been difficult because of my vision and keep losing glasses when they get them. But I've been trying, I don't know. Mostly, it's been lots of bingeing TV. It's hard to settle on a show with another person. I wish I was watching more documentaries. We've been spending a lot of the comfort shows, you know, and I feel kind of vegetative. I really want to. We've missed a few summers in a row. And I really want to take advantage of this summer. So I'm hoping that I'll do a little less vegging and a little bit more commuting. But I we have been watching more documentaries lately, which is nice. But you know when when things get rough Star Trek goes on and do what you can to make yourself feel comfortable.

Kit Heintzman 32:19

What does the word health mean to you?

Michelle Sparrow 32:22

Wow. Body body's a temple. We ought to treat it as such, but we never do. Because just like junk food. We like the things that are bad for us. But health is like happiness. It's not a destination. It's a goal. frame of mind. You know, it's it's a constant decision to live healthier. Yeah, you don't have to be healthy to try to live healthily, you know. And I think our health is something we neglect a lot. And I know from personal experience and from you know the lives that I was watching up close those that lived with me Why is it that we start putting our health

through the wringer as soon as things get tough, everyone, you're like, Oh, the world's gone to hell in a handbasket. Let's do our vices till there's no tomorrow, you know, like, but I am hoping it's getting old. I know it's getting old for me and I'm wanting to take care of myself more you know there's only I'm disenchanted with the whole let's let's put our bodies through the wringer.

Kit Heintzman 33:52

What are some of the things you want for your own health and the health of people in your life?

Michelle Sparrow 33:56

Um, I think we do too much to push ourselves. Whether it's like drinking coffee, so we can pound the pavement and get all our errands done or whatnot. We do too much to push ourselves. And we don't do enough to help ourselves blossom. And one thing a friend did for me just last fall, I had a horrible day saw a pedestrian hit by a car and I was all [makes noise]. And my friends like come on over you sound like you had a rotten day and he had the biggest bag of mushrooms I've ever seen. And he's just like, eat, eat till your heart's content. So I had a few big mouthfuls that I had trouble like chewing and swallowing because they're just so full of powdery yummy mushrooms. And oh my goodness, I felt my brain working well for like First time and I can't remember a time my brain ever felt like it was working that well, it's like I could see the pain and misery in my life, but be unaffected by it just for a little while, like I, you know, like, understood the ebb and flow. I even knew that that poor person I had seen hit their, their journey with us on this little blue marble is done for now. But we're all still in the cosmic journey together. And there's just so, so much good and healing. And I don't know if you've seen the Netflix documentary, fantastic fungi. But it is absolutely beautiful. And I'm not just talking psychedelic mushrooms, but the healing properties and the wonder of, well, nature in general. But I want to do more things that make my brain flourish that make my body well, as much as I love my coffee, I want to start drinking more tea again, because I know when I felt my most wonderful and when everyone's like, Oh, wow, your look like you're doing great. And it was a lot of tea. That was no booze. And that was a lot more mushrooms and, you know, beautiful, healthy, safe. Psychedelics for you know, it doesn't even need to be psychedelics, the right tea. Just make your mind like flower. And I want to start not pampering myself in the spa sense but you know, listening to my body's needs because it speaks we just gotta listen. MM coffee

Kit Heintzman 36:54

I have mine here [showing coffee cup] I have mine here.

Kit Heintzman 36:59

We're really in this moment where there's a sort of increasingly mainstreaming idea of the benefits of psychedelics and I just wanted to hear more from you about psychedelics and healing and health and experience.

Michelle Sparrow 37:21

Well, I find of course, the biggest danger is just fear. Cuz you if you give in to fear if you aren't there with someone who can, like guide you and calm you. Yeah, you can bad trip. But the wonderful thing about mushrooms and as I mentioned, I struggle with my mental health. So I've had so many bad trips, it's almost a roll of the actually, it's almost a flip of the coin, it's gonna go well or not. It all depends on your frame of mind. But even the most horrendous bad trips are like a beautiful catharsis the next day, like it's like, a intense therapy session. And all of these nightmarish thoughts or images. You feel like, like so stronger the next day you feel like you've overcome you've think things are wired better again, it's, it's this beautiful, very incoherently sensation.

And I think the more that we are learning about its benefits, and people aren't afraid about oh, my goodness, it's actually my brain bleeding and I'm dying, and I know it. Now that we know more about it, I think there's going to be a lot less of people assuming the worst and becoming horribly paranoid. And maybe bad trips will be less common, but I think the actual health benefits and the psychological benefits are just like, amazingly astounding, and in the documentary film, Nepal, Paul Stamets who like paved the road for my sorry, I'm not gonna use the fancy science, words and mispronounce it, but for mushroom healing and all that his you know, started back in the 60s, whatever. And the as the the documentary was being made by the fantastical fungi. His mother was going through breast cancer and one of her breasts was times size or larger. How many times larger than the other one that can't remember? But he's like, Oh, well, the mushrooms very mushrooms that I'm studying are supposed to help with cancer, and his mother's cancer went away, like completely, like, they were like your ad and there's nothing we can do for you. And your breast is three times the size of the other and say goodbye to your family. And she's better now, you know. And there's just I think there's so much untapped potential. Because as a society, we've been too afraid to go down this path. But Mother Nature is infinitely wise and gave her gave us all we need, you know, you just have to find it. Use it wisely. Yeah. And, you know, I've never quite well until I met my partner, I'd never quite got the idea of using mushrooms for recreation. I'm like, what you do this and watch a movie, but it's the sacred fungus it like, you know, gets you in touch with the higher power in your own heart and like the Earth is, ah, and DMT Oh, my goodness. Just a quick note on DMT. You know, that's what they do the Ayahuasca ceremonies from and all that. I finally did it for the first time this year. And although I can't tell you anything about the trip, because it's like one of those dreams where you wake up and you just know the feeling as you're waking. But it was the people who were there with me, they said that I went through like a seven minute long, full body orgasm. But I came back. I in Christian terms, I met God, but in like, that's just I was raised Christian. But I understand what the hippies are talking about when they you know, say that. Here's just this understanding of the cosmos, but for a second. And just this, this beautiful sense of Absolutely. Absolute well being like, you know, people think that humans are doing this damage to nature. Humans are nature, we aren't separated from the cosmos, we're part of the cosmos, everything that's happening is it's a natural process, and it's terrifying and beautiful and, and just, for a moment, have the peace of the universe within yourself. I think safe natural psychedelics are something that really needs to be explored. I'm gonna shut up about that.

Kit Heintzman 42:43

Can I ask a follow up question about that or would you like us to change?

Michelle Sparrow 42:47

Of course

Kit Heintzman 42:48

I'd love to know what it felt like to go into a space with to do an Ayahuasca ceremony during the pandemic. So what prompted the like the decision, then what was the ability then? And then what was it like to be in a group of people while the pandemic was still happening?

Michelle Sparrow 43:10

Well, um, I had wanted to do the full tea ceremony, but that's not something that you can really get your hands on without travel. So it was something I had been for many years wanting to do, but it was just by chance that I happen to be with people who had the DMT and you know, we're willing to share and it the only other experience that was somewhat similar in Energy Group was watching the movie Shortbus at the Bytown theater, or was it the

Mayfair which one's the one on Rediff anyways but that opening scene where he pisses in the tubs and comes in his own mouth like oh my God watching that in the group you know, a group of Yeah, they were all open minded, freaky types, but they were all like middle aged Guppy types as well that was like an amazing intensely cut the air kind of tension, like excited tension. And this was a very similar like, everyone, the room was alive with an energy actually the interesting thing about that time was I was the only one who broke on through I was I was the first one hit the pen. And it seemed everyone else got you know, oh, groovy. I was the only one to exit this plane and it was

Kit Heintzman 44:54

What does the word safety mean to you?

Michelle Sparrow 44:57

Wow. Um, Safety is a beautiful illusion. Safety is. Yeah, safety is a feeling. It's not reality. We think we make ourselves safe, we think we can keep others safe. That's just not true. I guess I'll just mentioned during the pandemic, I lost two of my cats. One was killed by the paranoid roommate, he had set, booby traps, and the other one died after prolonged illness. Medical health, help came too late, did save his brother but not him. And from from, you know, whether it's your pets, or your partner, or yourself, all these people I was trying to keep safe, and I wasn't able to keep any of us safe in. In the end, the only way I was able to try to keep us safe was to split us up and leave. I broke up with my partner of at the time, 13 years. And we were apart for six days. And I left him. And I knew that that was the only way we would get out of our horrible situation. If I kept kicking and screaming, so to speak. We need out of this squat we need away from these people we need you know, but um, safety is something sometimes you have taken your own own hands. You can't ever depend on it from someone else. But it's it's still it's still not not. Not something you can ever guarantee. We're back together though. And we're doing we're doing really well. It'll be our anniversary in two months, it'll be the 14 year mark. [both speaking] is the following.

Kit Heintzman 47:12

Is there anything more that you're willing to share about the decision to break up and then reunite?

Michelle Sparrow 47:19

Well, they say if you love something, let it go. If it comes back to you, it's yours. If it doesn't, it was never yours to begin with. And I very strongly believe that. When I did it, it was not at all because of lack of love. And 100% For just trying to as I honestly thought we were going to die if we continued with the mold and the toxicity and all that. And I figured even if it's 10 years down the road, hopefully he will heal enough to come follow me and we'll be together again. And I'm glad it only took six days for him to, well for us to gravitate together again. But um, no. He's mine and I'm his and it was meant to be because we found each other. Yeah, but um, sometimes you got to do what you got to do to keep things together even if it's pulling things apart. That's what I think.

Kit Heintzman 48:30

There's been a lot of loss during the pandemic. And I'd love to hear a bit about who, for the cats that you lost who they were in life and that you still have what that relationship is like.

Michelle Sparrow 48:48

Oh, well. When I met my partner, back in 2008, he had a one year old cat named Buddy Holly and brand new kitten named Dionysus or Die for short. And we've got our own place in short order and it came with a cat. We didn't end up keeping that cat because it had long hair and my allergies didn't agree but it knocked up our little female Die. And so when she was a year old, so we had the two year old buddy the one year old die and now kittens. And the first one Oh yeah. Both Die and Buddy were black. So at the kittens pop out first one's black, three generations black cats. He's mine. That's Legion. I fell in love. And then the second one was Bear. You know she's mother adopted that one. Unfortunately, he he only lived short life but it was I cut that one's umbilical cord. And then Lemieux we also kept him he got stuck like poohbear in the honey tree and I'd pull him out of his mother. And then the last one One was the only female and I'm like no Yoshi just three kittens. He's like, no, no, I swear there's going to be one more there's gonna be one more and I walk back in the room sure enough one more kitten, he called it. Anyways we found a home for that one as well. Can't keep that many cats as well. Yeah. So I've never had a family of cats before in fact, they've never had multiple cats before and cuddliness and the love and the lack of trauma, like they never been dragged away from their loved ones. And they were just this tight knit really supportive. Like of each other. And us I remember once I passed out getting out of the tub, and Hey, wake up to find Buddy Holly hopping in and out of the tub. Wow, wow. It looks so concerned. Just like wake up human. You know? They, they, they bathe with us. They did everything with us. And my ordeal with having to go through an adoption proceeding. It was my choice, but it wasn't easy. And on those days where it was hardest, Legion was my baby, you know, and he was just he was so my familiar. He was my helper animal like in the medical sense. He was my everything. And I used to joke with my partner Yoshi, I'm like, if I ever leave you for anyone, it's gonna be for that cat. Well, anyways, in 2017, that roommate moved in with us for the first time with the schizophrenic one. And first thing he insisted he's like, I'm moving in. But I need to start these home projects, like he insisted on removing the basement ceiling. And the little female got into the ceiling and she got grievously wounded. And within a week that had put her down. Lemieux is such a mama's boy. I've never witnessed a cat go through grief. But oh my god, like he they just cuddled all the time. And when she died, he took a little while to realize two days because it was a big house. And there was a there were two other cats behind besides her own. And we have one other cat besides. So there were a lot to cats. So it took them a while to realize this mom was missing. And when he realized he just started running around the house howling, screaming looking for the other two, like they had realized right away somehow in there watching him and like all Yoshi could do is just grab onto him and try to comfort the poor boy. I mean, like he had his brother and his grandfather that he was still really close with, but it was really hard on him. Then we lost the house. The roommate moved out, obviously. And actually, he abandoned one of his cats with us. And so we got an extra cat named Archie. He's a bengal. And he's declawed and he's all kinds of boarded up borderlines Hurry up. Oh my god, trauma. Word. I can't think of words. But he was traumatized by his experiences. And PTSD. Oh my god. I kept trying to say BPD he had all kinds of PTSD. So it was a it was a trial, but it was also really beautiful trying to help him heal. But also when that roommate had moved in fleas came with him. And we kept struggling to battle them, but it was killing Lemieux. And it was killing Legion. More than the rest. They were having these extreme reactions. And they went from 25 pound half maincoons Well, I mean, they're still half maincoons, but to 10 pounds, and they were just, they were just skin and bone. But they, when the roommate moved in again, he, like I said, set up those booby traps. And that took the grandfather cat. And then just three months later, Legion finally succumb. But Lemieux he got medical attention in time. Honestly, we couldn't afford the medical attention. We could afford some medical help. But the truly effective stuff and we'd take him to the vet and they're like, if you can't afford the upper echelon, you're going to be battling this for years. And sure enough, we were and the whole time we were battling this illness with the cats. Sorry, the room Sorry, I shouldn't have necessarily give away his name. But as the roommate had been around, and then eventually his cat showed the slightest symptoms, and he's

informs us he's had this cheap vet in his back pocket all along. Anyways, it wasn't him who made the appointment because he told us that after there was already an appointment made by that predator fella, of course, he just wanted us to be indebted to which we were we we had to pay him back for the vet bills, and the fumigation. All of which we couldn't have been able to afford and I will acknowledge that as evil as that man was, he saved Meu's life. Meu bounced, I was so certain Meu was going to be the one to die not Legion. Just that's the way that their house was going. But um, Meu is now once again a big bowling ball. He's 25 pounds of you know, helping me through my nightmares and just, you know, fat seal mode activated belly in the wonderfulness and you know he but he he also dealt with so much trauma that poor cat. He lost his mother's and he lost his grandfather. And then he lost his brother but uh, yeah. And Lemieux and his brother I don't know if you're familiar with the Egyptian gods Nut and Jeb, the sky god and oh, what's he is Jeb the earth. Anyways, I'm not gonna miss quote the facts but um, the way the gods are always positioned is one always arched overtop of the other one, which has always had the brothers would cuddle and now he doesn't have this cuddle buddy. And it keeps trying to go to our other two cats, but one's a uppity female and the other one's got the trauma that I had mentioned and neither of them want to cuddle but I do and I have my nightmares and and Lumineux seems to sense that and he's able to stop the worst of them and and I think I'm able to help him grieve and he's able to help me grieve and I've I've found strengthen him that I think, I, isn't isn't able to be found in humans and I don't mean that as a knock against any of the humans that I know and love but somehow we get us to get each other and are each other's pain on a level that no one else really does. And yeah, I've I've since lost a friend but I had never before experienced death so closely. And I suppose it's a good thing that a hidden animal first before a human that I love, but um I don't know the difference yet. You know, it's anyways, he was my baby. He was my baby, anyways. I still got one of my babies. And as beautiful it is as it is and wonderful. Sometimes the fact that he reminds me so much of my his brother is is really painful too. But I'm really beautiful is it's he's such a good boy. I kind of miss him right now. I'm at my in laws. Yeah, I wish that he were at my feet showing me it's all okay.

Kit Heintzman 58:55

There was such a narrow idea about what safety meant under COVID. Thinking under that sort of like really tiny framework. What were some of the things you were doing to try and keep yourself safer?

Michelle Sparrow 59:09

Well, at first, of course, I was much more stringent. I didn't want to leave the house. I didn't want to associate with anyone who wasn't. You know, like, okay, my bubble will be the people who live in the house. That's it. But as roommates, one being a drug dealer, and the other one being a very social butterfly, punk, constantly, there was a parade of strangers and everyone. So very quickly, the idea of narrowing down the number of people I came into contact with became just an exercise in futility. I first cleaned everything that came into the house like every beer can every you know, like, every molecule of everything. We even had one person who was staying at the house for a while would strip outside. But I think we all got a little lacks on the methods that we'd go through to ensure safety. Of course, I was conscious about the masks I kept trying to open doors with my elbows, you know. I don't know if everyone else use the wheelchair buttons, but I made great use of those with the elbow to the wheelchair button. Yeah, get in without touching anything. We stopped riding the bus. Which was, well, I mean, like, I've rode the bus a handful of times, but I used to ride the bus multiple times a day, you know, had a bus pass and all that. You know, I I go on the bus to visit Fenick and Sebastian, my family. And there's one other friend that I will occasionally get on the bus for but honestly, what with everyone concerned about the medical safety. Oh, that's my psychiatrist again.

Kit Heintzman 1:01:21

Do you want to take it? you really

Michelle Sparrow 1:01:24

Declined it. All right. Right. There's just riding public transportation is just dangerous in general. I mean, there's, it's I've been assaulted on the bus more times than I can count. So buses are germey and they're dangerous. So stay away. So I'm really glad to be living once again, in a neighborhood where things are walkable. And we still live in kind of a spot where the closest thing is still a 15 minute walk. But still 15 minute walk as opposed to an hour walk is yeah, good, good and less thing is a good thing. But I notice it's hard to stay safe during pandemic

Kit Heintzman 1:02:23

How are you feeling about the immediate future?

Michelle Sparrow 1:02:27

Hopeful, hopeful. I'm, especially since the restrictions regarding the pandemic are coming down more and more. I'm hoping that I'll be able to get better health care again. I'm hoping to find a family doctor. And well, as we know, my psychiatrist just called, I'll call her back. And hopefully we'll be seeing a little bit more of each other than we were. I'm feeling a lot better about where I'm living. That's for sure my house isn't trying to kill me anymore. Neither housemates Oh my god. Since my partner and I moved in to our I guess it was in 2011, late 2011. We moved in with roommates and had been with roommates until 2020. I was like, just so much of living with other adults in your life. You know, like in your in your personal living space. It is really hard to coexist with other people. So it's so nice to finally just be the two of us. And we live above a dry cleaner. So we don't even have any neighbors. It's amazing. Yeah, I our food bank isn't as nice as the one in Orleans. But that's okay. Foods back on the shelves in the stores more or less. Things are I think I am hopeful about or optimistic about about how life will be going. I don't think the pandemic is done, I think the idea that humans are like what we never used to have things killing us and now it's here haha, when are we going to beat it? It's like no, they've always been microbes around killing human beings for all of history. And this is just one more thing. We're gonna haveto forever get used too, like the flu or whatever. You know, it's just one more thing you got to be careful for. But that's always been the case. Think think things have changed in such a way that like for instance. We used to go to a lot of music festivals and concerts and stuff. I think mosh pits are going to become a thing of the past. I think sex might be done through plastic bags. But I think the world is going for a definitely a more a sterile environment. And you know, I suppose that can be a good thing. I'm going to miss the old world. It was wonderfully tactile and, you know, but um, no, I think so optimistic about the world we're living in right now. It's not perfect. It's big and scary, especially with the political decisions. Pandemic wise, though, and my own personal ship of my life. I think I'm trying to sail in steadier waters hoping

Kit Heintzman 1:05:42

Has your relationship with touch changed?

Michelle Sparrow 1:05:47

Yeah, I suppose so. But, uh, I think well, I mean, I think we're all a little bit more conscious of it now. But I'm conscious of it and less able to feel it I've got, I've got to go see a doctor. But I've been experiencing lots of loss of sensation in my hands and feet. Possibly other places, too. That's where I noticed that the most. But it's so strange. Being in a world that you're not supposed to physically interact with to a larger, larger extent, and not even being

able to physically feel it, but they do interact with it. It's I think. I, I think even in my own personal relationship with my partner, the idea of touch has changed a lot since the pandemic, of course, that might have something to do with the personal stuff I was going through with that predator in the house as well. But no, I think I think that's something that is drastically changing for everyone, or concept of touching intimacy, you know? That's an interesting question.

Kit Heintzman 1:07:12

What are some of your hopes for a longer term future?

Michelle Sparrow 1:07:15

Ah, wow, that I guess medical advances keep progressing and that we find safer ways to all interact in the same both emotionally but physically supportive way. Compared to this like online stuff, there's a lot more like mental health things where there'll be like, Oh, if you need mental health help, press here and stuff like that. And that's great. But uh, wow. Wow, well, what was my point? Yeah, but the whole human experience is becoming more and more detached. Other than that, and I it's, could you repeat? It was it was the thinker.

Kit Heintzman 1:08:16

You have nothing to be sorry for the question was about what some of your hopes for a longer term future?

Michelle Sparrow 1:08:22

Oh, yeah. Um, I, I hope that uh, like, I mean, there's been studies done of how touch is so important, like they did those studies were horrible studies. But where a chimp is given either a chicken wire mother that actually like not actual mother, but facsimile of a mother that actually produces milk or feeds them. And then a soft, more realistic feeling, mother that gives no nutrition and the babies prefer to starve in the touch of you know, and I think that's something we all like, we don't realize how very important it is to have that physical contact, you know, and I really hope that we don't start to suffer and wither as society as a people because of our fear of infection and our fear of the what could be if you know, like, because we really need that intimacy, you know. So I hope that we're able to find a way to keep having mosh pits and hugs. Yeah, that's my hope.

Kit Heintzman 1:09:47

Who's been your support system for the last couple of years?

Michelle Sparrow 1:09:54

My partner, of course, of course, he's also a cause of some of my worries, so I've got my brother Sebastian, and my sister Nina. And I also have my friend Rachel, and they have all been of great assistance. I saw Sebastian the least because as I mentioned, he had to keep Phenex safe. And but um, you know, if it weren't for those few lifelines, and honestly, let me not put too light a point on it. Rachel giving me They not only paid for my services, initially, they are still paying for me to have phone. So it's been two years of just out of the goodness of their heart. They want me to not ever be not able to call for help, you know? And Nina, this is Nina's old phone that I'm talking on. So if it weren't for those four people, and the cats Lemuex, Lucy and Archie love you guys too. But if it weren't for those supports, might have checked myself and drooling to the what did they call them? A loony bin. Anyway, but you know, I can't I can't thank my supports enough. They've been they've been wonderful.

Kit Heintzman 1:11:32

What are some of the ways that you've been taking care of yourself?

Michelle Sparrow 1:11:38

Not enough ways, that's for sure. I've been I've been isolating, which normally isn't a good thing. But I think it has been a good thing during the pandemic. Not only was it necessary for you know, there was the whole quarantine. But I think a lot of people are very scared, alone desperate. And as such they glom on and they it's like drowning people in the ocean grabbing onto each other, you know, and now we both drown. So, a little distance, or a lot, I think has been my main way of protecting myself. Yeah, I stay under my rock and my rock is nice and safe. Because a rock feels no pain and an island never cries.

Kit Heintzman 1:12:38

I'm coming to the end of my questions, and they'll sort of take a different route. The first is thinking about all of the work that people in the humanities and the social sciences do so people who study literature and film and political science. What should we be doing right now to help us understand the human side of COVID in the last couple of years?

Michelle Sparrow 1:13:01

Well, I do love I have been watching a lot of media as I mentioned, and I do love how TV shows have like they they also went through the pandemic you know and some of the the shows had their characters go through it too you know, and it's it's really fascinating to have that recorded for history sake for posterity sake, whatever. Because it affected us all in such strange little ways. Like even just pasts highs going down on shows, you know, and things like that. It's, it's, it's, I imagine the same as, oh, let's say the depression back in the 30s or whatever, it's a time that you really can't envision unless you're there and to get these little snapshots into what being there is like infinity you know, like and of course, none are springing to mind at the moment of shows that it can point to where like, just the tiny little things that we had to go through were so well portrayed. But um no, I think it's really important that even if it's fictional that these the struggle and the the, the day to day boringness even if at all got for it to be recorded. I think it's been done quite well. quite accurately. For the most part of course, and yeah, no, it's it's a really fascinating time to witness a little scary to live through but um, no, I think it's very important that it be time capsule and and I think it's being done pretty well.

Kit Heintzman 1:14:59

Do you think of This is a historic moment?

Michelle Sparrow 1:15:03

Aren't they all? Absolutely, absolutely. Even if it's just the beginning of a new chapter, or if it's a roadblock of like a speed bump along the road, I don't know, time will tell. But regardless, it is. Globally, acknowledged as like life got turned on its head. It's like someone wanted to see the snowflakes and little snow globe. There we go, there they are. And their life got turned upside down. And it's from I am, I am autistic, I have Asperger's syndrome. And part of that is feeling like an alien or fly on the wall observing humanity. And this is certainly an amazingly fascinating time to observe and experience of course, I'm not saying that I'm just a fly on the wall. But a fly goes through the rest rooms activities, too, doesn't it? Anyways, no, it's it's it's fascinating.

Kit Heintzman 1:16:09

What are some of the things in history you wish you knew more about or had been taught about younger?

Michelle Sparrow 1:16:17

Interesting, um, hard to say. But um, because because the pandemic brought things to to everyday life that were things I privately struggled with already, like isolation, stuff like that, you know? So it's not so much that I didn't know about these things or hadn't learned about these things yet, but things that like, for instance, the black plague, like these are things that I fascinate was fascinated by and did do a lot of study about. But um, I think more people needed to study about it at a you know, like way earlier, because there was just so much like, certain people are so stupid sometimes. They the assumptions, it's like, oh, well, I didn't catch it. So it's not real. And it's like, Oh, my goodness, you know, only one in five people caught the Black Plague not everyone on Earth drop dead. You think that the other like, four fifths were going, It's not real, like, come on. Like, just I think if, if more people were to be fascinated by history, like the way I am and the way that you are, I think, perhaps it would have been an easier transition through this difficult time. But um, no. The, I guess, I wish I also knew a lot more about more recent pandemics, because the big ones were the ones that I guess I focused on, but like, for instance, Freda had a boy, what's the one that shrivels the limbs, polio, and stuff like that, and all these illnesses that we, you know, for instance, got rid of because of vaccinations and you know, people? Speaking of vaccinations, I do understand the fear. I mean, like, back in the 70s. Sorry, I'm really bad at numbers. So I can tell a great story. But I can't remember the facts about the numbers today. Well, but I think it was in the 70s that the whole Thalidomide thing happened. And everyone's like, Here, take this, it'll help with your morning sickness, and babies born with slipper fins. And it's like, this is the sort of thing when there's not long enough to study and I don't mean just like the immediate effects, but the lifelong effects, the lasting effects. I totally understand the fear of putting something in your body that's supposed to, you know, change your [inaudible], I do understand the fear, but the vaccinations, I also understand the importance of because things like smallpox and whatnot, would still be things we struggle with. It's It's definitely been interesting, all the debate about that, but I did get one vaccination. kind of wish I'd gotten none. Cuz I don't know. Let's not debate that. I still don't have a strong opinion one way or the other. Just a lot of questions.

Kit Heintzman 1:19:48

I'd like you to imagine talking to a historian in the future, someone far away far enough away in time that they have no lived experience of this moment, what would you want them to, like hold while doing their project on the history of COVID-19? What would you want to be sure that they don't forget?

Michelle Sparrow 1:20:15

Um, I guess, how far like, what with as technology rose, the world became a smaller place where everything was more accessible, and everyone could get to everything and do anything they wanted, you can get on a train or a plane and be across the world in a matter of hours, right. But all the sudden, accessibility was gone. You know, and that I think, is like the biggest thing like, you couldn't access your medical care, you couldn't access food easily couldn't access, you know, anything. You weren't allowed to gather in groups. So all this, that we've been spoiled with an abundance of accessibility and ease of, well, ease of everything, suddenly everything grinds to a halt. And I think the main thing, that the main struggle we all had was just suddenly you couldn't, couldn't you can access anything you can get to anyone can. Anyways, it's it's like when you have a microwave, and you're suddenly spoiled by it, and you're like, oh, no, microwaves broken. How do I heat my coffee? We forget all the how tos. And I think a lot of people were very lost because of a sudden, total lack of infrastructure and accessibility.

Kit Heintzman 1:21:46

I want to thank you so much for the generosity of your time and the beauty of your answers. These are all of the questions that I know how to ask at this moment. But if there's anything you'd like to share that you haven't had the chance to please take some space to share it.

Michelle Sparrow 1:22:08

I, well, I'd like to thank you for the opportunity to share and my mind's full of a million things but so full just like the Mr. Burns syndrome. They can't get through the door. Simpson, [inaudible]. But no, there's there's nothing I can really point to. Except, oh, well, winters got easier and not having to leave the house in winter. Fabulous. Yeah. No, it's it's been a very, very interesting couple of years. And I just really appreciate my you giving me this opportunity to talk about it. Thank you, but nothing particularly springs to mind right now.