



## *Come Together* with David Baum

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### *EPISODE – Andrew Constantino: How to Live in the Rubble of Empire*

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<https://cometogether.me/andrew-constantino-how-to-live-in-the-rubble-of-empire/>

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**DAVID BAUM:** Hello everyone! I'm David Baum in Seattle. I'm talking with Andrew Constantino, who is the leader of a homeless encampment, a "tiny-house village," here in Seattle. Andrew was homeless himself, but because of his wisdom and his leadership capability, he was hired by the agency that runs the camp to be the "Site Coordinator." In that capacity he serves as organizer, counselor, and, when there is conflict, as judge. We are talking about what he has learned about human nature while living amongst the homeless, and serving as their leader. Hello, Andrew!

**ANDREW CONSTANTINO:** Hey David! How's it going?

**DAVID:** I'm okay! Could you describe more completely what your position and situation is there?

**ANDREW:** I work for a nonprofit in Seattle that hosts or "operates" the tiny-house villages here, pretty much all of them. I live at the village, so it's kind of like a property management kind of role. But since the social dynamics of a large group of people – at the village I'm at, there's 60 people on any given day – become kind of complex, they're a little more pressing than "a sink isn't working" type issues that you might experience at a normal property management. So I spend more time trying to make sure there's a healthy social dynamic – or at least not destructive – in dealing with some of those other types of issues.

**DAVID:** Okay! So, my little podcast is about the end of the world, and my question is: Do you guys know that the world is sort of changing and ending, now? Does that

permeate the psychological life of the camp at all?

**ANDREW:** For me personally, definitely; a hundred percent. I feel like I'm not only witnessing the collapse, but I'm witnessing it through the rubble that has already fallen. I have a vantage point from underground, in a way. I think that for many of the people that might find themselves homeless or staying at a tiny-house village, they're aware of it, and it's kinda like, putting their head in the sand. Worrying about escapism, the needs of today, and survival, is... Keeping busy, you know! Emotionally or mentally, keeping busy makes it so that you don't have to think about those greater issues.

**DAVID:** I think that's something the homeless share with everyone! That's a big topic in our Facebook group. You can't get anyone to pay attention; they're just bound up in their normal life!

But I think I heard you say that homeless people have already experienced a collapse in their lives. Tell me more about that.

**ANDREW:** I think it's like the first wave, right? Those waves seemed a little more subtle maybe in like the 70s, 80s, 90s. But now it affects more and more people. They've already experienced that there is no "safety net." There's no solid ground to stand on anymore.

But I think that, just like anyone else, a lot of people that have been homeless even for a decade or more, don't really understand who's at fault here. We tend to default to blaming each other and not seeing the commonalities that we all have. But I definitely think that the experience of living at or working for a tiny house village makes.... We joke that when the zombie apocalypse happens, these are the people that are the most prepared to survive.

**DAVID:** Why is that?

**ANDREW:** Because they know how to survive with nothing, including things like running water and electricity, including scarcity of food and clothing. Maybe someone who has a titanium bunker and a stockpile of weapons feels as though they're prepared. But they might get hungry, they might need power to turn on the lights in the bunker. People here have learned to live with nothing.

**DAVID:** Wow! You mentioned the sort of extraordinary kind of conflicts that you're responsible for dealing with. What kind of thing occupies your time, day to day?

**ANDREW:** "Billy ate Sally's cupcakes!" That type of shit. It's human beings living together. When human beings are together, then they find petty territories to enforce:

"You were on my porch!" "You used paint that I was going to use to paint something!" And that becomes major problems, huge violations of space that.... "Now you have to be kicked out and shunned from the group!" It's just humans "humaning;" that's how I see it. It's the same argument that you hear your brother and sister when you're eight years old, have. Those same things.

**DAVID:** Do you think that's inherent in human beings to fight like that?

**ANDREW:** Oh, Jesus, yeah! I mean now I see it constantly and I'm like: "At what point do you turn your animosity towards those who really are destroying the world and not against each other? At what point do you finally focus some of your anger and frustration towards a true enemy and not one another?"

**DAVID:** Okay. I'm going to go ahead and ask you: Who do you think the true enemy is, Andrew?

**ANDREW:** That's a good question! Really, I'd say human nature. That's why we feel that conflict within ourselves. And when Billy eats your cupcake, it's on you to find out "Why am I so angry about this? Why is it such an issue? Why is it hard to share my cupcake with Billy?" It's internal conflict. When you have a lot of wealth and power and status, then you're able to impose your greed, your selfishness, on massive groups of people. It's an internal conflict. I think that's the enemy; it's within. And maybe if there is an outward enemy, then it would be the ability to accumulate such wealth and power that you can impose it on others.

**DAVID:** I know – because you and I have worked on this together – that you and other people who work with you there put substantial effort into creating systems to ameliorate and solve and soothe these conflicts, so that people can live together functionally, if not in peace. I wonder if you could talk a little about the foundations of those efforts and where you've got to.

**ANDREW:** That is a hard part! Just like in mainstream society (or whatever you want to call it), there's a sense that there are professionals that will handle these things, and that they're going to do so in very transparent, fair, selfless ways. And those people don't exist, is what I've learned. There may be empty suits and empty titles occupying those positions, but those are just people with their own bias and their own.... They're tired today [for example.] They're feeling kind of sick, or you're really irritating.

I just don't think that these professionals really exist, that really know what they're doing. It takes a group of people coming to a consensus about what is fair and what is justice. When we start trying to make blanket rules over everything and expect the rules to

enforce themselves, that's when things start falling apart.

Of course there are going to be situations where, let's say, I threatened your life. Well, the group does not tolerate that, and the group feels as though there must be justice. And so I think in the hierarchy of needs – there's things like water or food, clothing, shelter – really justice is one of those hierarchy of needs! If human beings are going to live together in any size group, if there is no justice amongst them, if they do not feel as though people are treated fairly and held responsible for antisocial or negative behaviors, then they lose faith in the community itself.

And so mainly what we do is trying to dispel the idea that a policeman, because he has a badge, will solve your problems. Or that a judge, because he has a gavel, can solve your problems. It's on us that try to learn how to live together, and be forgiving, and be compassionate, and at the same time uphold a standard, and ourselves not be hypocritical, to live that as well.

**DAVID:** It sounds like a very dynamic thing, like you're responding in real time to people's issues because you don't have either authority figures or authoritative law to refer to. That must be exhausting.

**ANDREW:** It is! It never stops, and sometimes you think that you can fix everything and reach a new plateau where these problems no longer exist because we've already solved them. But I think that if we looked at human history, problems recur. Social ills recur over and over and over, and there's always new people, or young people. And it seems like everything's hopeless. You can't fix anything.

No! There's opportunities for emotional growth inside of that. If we could avert every crisis, it would be a disservice to human beings as a species. Crisis, inside of it, there's opportunities for us to learn and to grow, and we would not want to deny that to people. It makes it so they seek out wisdom from an older generation to help guide them. I think that it's a good thing. We don't want to climb every mountain or to resolve every problem permanently.

**DAVID:** Well, I happen to think that the upcoming climate apocalypse is primarily a signal or a phenomenon.... It exists to apply pressure to the human spirit to move in a particular direction. I think toward reunion with where we came from, with the ultimate divine. We've just reached the end. We've reached the end of the cycle where it's time to go home and this disaster is a reminder of that; it's pressure to do it.

**ANDREW:** I think that's interesting! The climate crisis that our planet faces could be seen as a sign that this golden empire that we've created, based on fossil fuels, that there's an underworld to what we're creating. As you create the golden shining empire,

you create the shadow side of it simultaneously. At some point, those two things need to be reconciled with one another. We can build a pyramid on the backs of slavery. We can build this mechanical society on the backs of destroying the planet. To have all the technological marvels, there is a cost!

I've come to think that this concept of progress, of ever evolving into greater states – we've kind of turned that into a material thing. There's a real falseness in there somewhere. It doesn't seem like our quality of life or the meaning of our lives grows. It seems like it's gotten smaller! In a movie or a comic book, there might be an alien invasion that unites humanity because now we have an enemy to fight. The climate crisis is that enemy within, that shadow side of our society, and it has the potential to unite us in a crisis to be better than we've ever been, in a deeper sense. So, hopefully we can rise to that challenge. I hope that we can. But, knowing people, I don't know if we can. I don't know if we can share a cupcake! I'm working on that. (Laughs)

**DAVID:** If we do see the collapse of what we would call maybe the middle-class or the bourgeois society, those people are going to be facing conditions they're really not used to. More like the kind of conditions that you and your clients or colleagues face every day. What advice would you have for the falling middle class?

**ANDREW:** Well, I give lots of tours of the tiny houses, talk to all kinds of people about it. Say I'm talking to young people. I'm like: "You could look at this as an anomaly, as triage to a crisis, as a response to some social ills. But this isn't stopping. This is growing. And your parents could be here one day. You could be here one day very, very easily! And it will only get easier."

I think that the thing that has really helped me to adapt is: Life is a series of experiences. Your own expectations of what it's supposed to be are the things that are going to make you unhappy. Feeling as though you're falling or failing is what is going to make you miserable and drive you into despair. But if you see it as "I'm having this experience; this is what's happening and I'm going to embrace it and make it as good as it can be," then it can actually be extremely fulfilling.

**DAVID:** And that's the story for now! That was Andrew Constantino, the leader of a homeless encampment, a tiny-house village, here in Seattle. I'll talk to Andrew again in another segment. I'm David Baum in Seattle. For information about my other interviews, please visit my website at: <https://cometogether.me/> Until we meet again, farewell!

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