

## Finding the Magic in Our Young Changemakers

### Forces for Nature Podcast, Episode 72

#### Episode Transcript

Host: Crystal DiMiceli

Guest: T. A. Barron

**Crystal:** I'm Crystal DiMiceli, and welcome to the Forces for Nature show.

Do you find yourself overwhelmed with all the doom and gloom you hear of these days? Do you feel like you, as just one person, can't really make a difference? Forces for Nature cuts through that negativity. In each episode, I interview somebody who is doing great things for animals and the environment. We talk about the challenge they're addressing, the solution they have found, what keeps them going, and we'll leave you with practical action tips so that you too can become a Force for Nature.

Today's guest is best-selling author, conservationist, and host of the Magic and Mountains podcast, T. A. Barron. I feel like this episode is like a poem because of the way that T. A. speaks. He's so illustrative, which should come as no surprise considering he's won many awards for the fantasy novels he's written, but it's the real-life stories that he honors that caught my attention.

He's the founder of the Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes, which since 2001 annually honors 25 outstanding young leaders, as young as eight years old, who have made significant positive impact on people, their communities, and the environment. It's these everyday heroes that can give us all hope.

**Crystal:** Thank you so much for joining me, T. A. Barron on the Forces for Nature podcast. It's so wonderful to have you.

**T. A. Barron:** I am delighted to be here with you, Crystal.

**Crystal:** I'm really excited to learn more about you and the work that you do because you're so multifaceted and multi-passionate and part of me wants to know how you do it all.

You, you were a businessman for many years and now you're most popularly known as a fantasy writer. However, you're quite an accomplished conservationist as well. How have you been able to integrate so much conservation work into what you do?

**T. A. Barron:** You just used the keyword crystal, which is integrate, because that's how I think about life.

Basically, if you care enough about something, then you find a way to do it in whatever way you can. And that's challenging and it's never perfect. It's certainly never perfect for me, but that's really what life is about. Is that invitation to integrate the core values, the things we really care about, with the way we live.

One way I put it, whenever I speak with young people or with conservation leaders or with educators, whoever, is, I invite them to see your life as a story. But this is a story you get to author. No one else but you is going to tell this story. So what kind of story do you want it to be, and that's the invitation.

We never completely succeed, but moving in that direction helps lead to an integrated, and I will also say a really meaningful, fulfilling life.

**Crystal:** I really like that perspective of looking at your life like a story, because that really helps to make you think about at the end of your days, what did, what do you want to recount to people and it helps to keep a good perspective.

**T. A. Barron:** Exactly.

**Crystal:** And speaking of stories, you are a wonderful storyteller, an award-winning one at that. Many of your books often contain elements of young heroism and nature, which I'm really interested about. What inspired this focus?

**T. A. Barron:** Let me answer that wonderful question, Crystal, in two parts.

So, I'm very blessed by having had nature early and throughout my life. I'll tell you a quick story about that. When I was just, I don't know, seven or eight years old, there was a huge snowstorm. And my mother bundled me up in one of those giant snowsuits that made it almost impossible to walk. You were more a beach ball than a child in those suits.

And I went outside and I remember I just played in the snow and I rolled and I, I tasted the snow. I was all there, all appreciating like most children are able to do. And then my mother who was a lifelong teacher came over and she had a certain gleam in her eye and she patted the top of one of those snow drifts and she said, do you know what? There are flowers under all that snow. There were flowers under there. And actually I thought she was completely crazy, but ultimately, over time, I realized she was right. Of course, in the springtime when the dandelions sprouted up in that very same spot and, and the purple pasque flowers were there. Wow. You know, she's right.

But then I realized over time that was the least of her point. It wasn't just about the magic of the seasons coming back around. This was about nature's power of transformation, nature's power of renewal. Now there's magic for you, right? And at last, after enough years in life, I began to realize what she was really saying was nature is all the time reminding us of, of the miracles of life and death and rebirth.

And, and also inviting us at the same time to, to rise in ourselves to a new renewal and, and to transform and to become and to allow springtime and, and whatever is going to blossom under the snow.

And I guess, I guess to put it in one more deeper sense, since we're having a real conversation here, thanks to your great questions. There are times in life when honestly, I feel surrounded by deep snow. And in the midst of all that, I remember those words. There are flowers under there. And it gives me hope. And that's one of the many gifts of nature.

So that's the first part of the answer to your question. And the second part is honestly about heroes. I have always had a deep belief in the power of every person. The magic that's inside every person, no matter what their background, no matter where they come from, no matter what they look like, act like, speak like. Where they live, who they are, in any sense, every child has a magical person down inside, and so does every adult.

And it's in that power that we can find our ways to make the world just a little bit better wherever we are. And so that's why, yes, in my books, they are all built around really those two values, the magic of nature. And the magic in every child.

**Crystal:** We're so aligned on that point. I just don't think I could have ever said it as beautifully. I fully agree with you.

**T. A. Barron:** I bet you say it equally beautifully in your own wonderful way. But that's, that's really how it's, it's boiled down for me and I, I now realize that everything I do, everything I try to say in, in writing and in stories or in my work as a conservationist really comes down to promoting those two ideas, those two values.

**Crystal:** You speak of hope, but hope can be a dangerous thing, or so the saying goes. But why would you say that hope is a crucial tool in the fight against climate change and in building a better world?

**T. A. Barron:** Hope is essential. It's nothing less than essential. I'll tell you a comment that my friend and inspiration Jane Goodall said to me recently.

We were talking about hope, and she said, look, it's really simple, Tom. Without hope, we don't stand a chance. We are defeated. But with hope, we have a chance to turn things around, to rise to our best, and to help our Earth and all of its creatures survive and thrive. That's really the heart of it. And sure, it's hard to find sometimes.

I've been thinking about this for a long time, and I, I realize now there are genuine reasons for hope, even though we don't read about them in the media very much. They are there and deserve to...

**Crystal:** The media doesn't want to talk about the good stuff.

**T. A. Barron:** They don't. It doesn't sell newspapers, that doesn't get eyeballs for newscasts as much as dire, dreadful predictions of, of horror and dysfunction do.

But the truth is, there are good reasons for hope. Let me give you two of them. One is nature's power of resilience. Nature is awesome in that way. Think about the ways that nature renews itself after a fire that the landscape comes back or after a drought, how, how plants regrow or after any number of disasters happen, how life finds a way to return that's miraculous.

And then here's another reason for hope, the energy and ideals of young people. I am always amazed by the beauty of young people's desire to live fully, rise and, and make the world right and ask the tough questions and be fully alive. Yeah, they really understand. So many young people know we can turn this around. We can save the earth and ourselves. And it inspires me all the time. Nothing rekindles my hope more than these young people.

**Crystal:** I want to seize this opportunity to expand on that because you've said before, we need heroes today more than ever. And based on your involvement with young changemakers through the Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes for over 20 years now, how would you say we can inspire young people and uplift the next generation of environmental activists?

**T. A. Barron:** The best thing we can do is how we live. It's really the examples we set in our lives, and it's also the stories that we tell, and that includes the stories of, of real people who are out there making a difference. Let's share those stories. That's really what the Barron Prize is really about. It's simply about turning the spotlight on these awesome young people who never got the memo that they don't have any power to make a difference. They, they are out there doing it.

Crystal, I would also say that heroes are important for another reason and, and the way I think about it, being a person who loves the mountains is that our heroes really are our trail guides on this wonderful, challenging, at times intensely beautiful hike we take that is called life.

Our heroes are the trail guides on the way. They remind us how far we can go or how high we can climb. And they show us by their examples that that's possible. And so that's why I believe we really do need our heroes. And we need to not worship them. They're human. They make mistakes. They're flawed. They're vulnerable. Just like the rest of us.

But we need the reminder that they have risen over great obstacles and so can we. That's why every story I tell, whether it's fictional or nonfictional, really centers on a person, a person who had to overcome something deeply difficult and found the way not just to help themselves, but to make our world just a little bit better.

**Crystal:** Speaking of, can you tell me a little bit more about the Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes that you founded?

**T. A. Barron:** This prize really is constantly renewing my hope, and I don't get credit for that. The kids, however, get credit for that. It's an amazing process, and now we have many, many hundreds of applications, and we choose 25 kids a year to honor between the ages of 8 and 18.

And they come from every possible background, but they share one thing in common, all of them. And that is they see themselves as a powerful force in their community, their world, and they just go out and do it. If you go to the Barron Prize website, which is simply [barronprize.org](http://barronprize.org),

and click on Meet the Winners, and scroll down through however many years you feel like of past winners of this prize, I promise you, no matter how despairing you felt before you did that, it will renew your hope.

You'll meet kids like Avalon in Florida, who spends her time helping to protect frogs in their environment. She's this phenomenal nine year old girl. Or Rahul, who found a way to deliver the equipment for clean drinking water to rural India, where he has distant relatives. Or Eric, who figured out a way to build a biodiesel production facility at his High School, or Joy Ying, one of my favorites, because she's got such a great sense of humor, who organized a way for kids to clean up the beaches around Chesapeake Bay in Maryland.

And she called it, because they were picking up a lot of cigarette butts and, and things like that on the, on the beach. She called it Get your Butts off the Beach as your project name.

There are so many examples and the key is that these young people don't live in a place of victimhood or trauma. No way. They live in a place of empowerment. And what can we do? Even in our young lives, our insufficient ways, what can we do that can help? And they do it. And it's, it's just beautiful.

**Crystal:** Oh my goodness. I want to, I want to be like all of them when I grow up.

**T. A. Barron:** You are. You are. You've put together this magnificent podcast that's reaching and inspiring people and even includes wayward authors from Colorado now and then.

**Crystal:** Oh, thank you. I mean, it's not easy. It's not easy to do all these things that these kids are doing, that adults are doing, that we are doing. What are some of the most significant challenges faced by these young leaders today, as observed through the experience of these Barron Prize winners, and how have they overcome these challenges?

**T. A. Barron:** That's a great question. Look, there are big problems facing us all today and young people know this. There are big problems with our climate or with ocean pollution or deforestation or biodiversity loss all around the world or destruction of wilderness or Any number of areas where you, you could, you could say, these are huge, giant, maybe intractable problems.

That's not the biggest challenge. To answer your question, I think the biggest challenge facing young people today is fighting against despair, is not losing hope, is resisting the temptation to feel powerless. No, it's really about saying. This is my life. This is my world. This is my story. What am I going to do with whatever I have to help change this narrative?

And so, you don't think about the loss of biodiversity and the terrible crisis of extinction as a totality. You think about, there are frogs in my backyard. How do I help them? How do I make sure that that wetland stays preserved. What organizations are out there that I can raise money to help support and maybe even create a nature center here that educates other young people about frogs and how beautiful and remarkable and vulnerable they are. That's the way to think.

So I think it's about resisting despair. And remembering that each of us has that magic inside to make a difference.

**Crystal:** You're right on with that because studies are showing and experts are saying that some of the best ways to reduce one's eco-anxiety, which is this despair about the environmental condition, is through taking action and focusing on what you can do, what you can control locally. Because if you look at the global problems, it becomes too overwhelming.

But if you're able to take action in your own little corner of the world. You, you're able to help dissolve that, that feeling of despair and the ego anxiety that might be resulting from all of the negative things that you're hearing.

**T. A. Barron:** Exactly right. You're spot on with that. Exactly right. I totally agree.

I will also say that's part of why I keep writing about young people who overcome tremendous obstacles. Whether they're in fantasy realms, like young Merlin, who washes ashore and ultimately becomes a great wizard or Kate who travels back in time and learns the secrets of the Halami Native Americans and ultimately comes back with what she needs to know to try to save that Redwood grove that she has discovered.

Whatever the story, there's always a sense of possibility against great odds. The heroes in my stories never know that, by the way, they don't believe that they're heroes. They don't believe they have anything special at all. But when they are almost crushed by reality, they somehow find that spark down inside and it allows them to rise and build a flame. A flame that continues to light their lives and illuminate the people around them.

**Crystal:** So the name of the prize is inspired by your mother, Gloria Barron. Why her? And what would she be most proud of about the prize?

**T. A. Barron:** Well, first, I'm laughing because her first feeling about having the prize named after her was total, utter embarrassment. But, but honestly, she would be moved to tears of joy by those individual stories and by the examples of inspiration and the power of each person. She would just be so deeply pleased.

My mother was a lifelong teacher and she taught in different ways. She certainly was my teacher and my siblings' teacher. I was one of seven kids and she also spent the bulk of her teaching life working in the Colorado school for the deaf and blind, and she created a curriculum about nature. Basically natural science that was touchable, not seeable.

And so for kids who had never seen the wings of an eagle or a soar overhead, watch that magnificent bird. She had a taxidermist friend bring in an eagle who had been killed somehow and then mounted. And so the kids could go up and actually feel this incredible wingspan.

And right next to it, she put a little taxidermied hummingbird, so the kids could feel the delicacy and the beauty of this hummingbird, comparing it to the eagle, all of that kind of way into nature.

That was her way. So it really drove home to me, each of us in our own capacities can live a heroic life that heroes really are.

Usually not known by anyone except the people in their immediate midst heroes are very different from celebrities. A real hero is just trying to help because their motivation is simply to make a difference to the people, the place the cause immediately with them and they don't want credit. They don't want fame and glory, they just want to help. And it's those unsung heroes that really knit our world together.

Crystal, they are the people who really hold us together and give us a chance to rise. And so I wanted to name this prize after someone who wasn't a well-known, um, greatly celebrated heroic figure. I wanted to name it after just my mom, who was a really good teacher. And that's really the origin of the whole thing. I think she'd be really pleased.

**Crystal:** I'm sure she would be really pleased and very proud and very impressed with the individuals that have come through with this award. So what have the winners gone on to do? Have you kept in touch after the award at all?

**T. A. Barron:** Yes. And, you know, you asked a great question there because that is the secret hidden gift that I never expected in this process. Twenty-one years ago, when I founded this prize, the last thing on my mind was, what are these kids going to become? But now some of them have had enough life that I, I am absolutely so inspired by the people they have become in the lives they living.

Let me give you a couple of examples. There's a wonderful young woman named Ashley Carter, who, when she came to the view of the prize, it was because she was really trying hard to find a way to send school materials to children in Tanzania. So these African children. Particularly girls were not getting an education because they lacked the, the equipment and the facility and the teaching power to do that.

And, and she wanted to try to help and she's really trying her hardest in her small way to do that. And, and we awarded her the, the prize that year. And it turns out, I didn't know this at the time. It turns out she was about to throw in the towel. She actually was about to quit because she wasn't getting any support and she didn't think she could do it.

And she's only a, an 11 year old girl for heaven's sakes. And how can she make a difference for girls in Africa who need an education. Well, it turned out that it, it wasn't the cash from the prize, it was the affirmation from the prize that really made a difference for Ashley and, and she got back to work.

She devoted tremendous effort in time. She ended up creating an entity that, that is an NGO today. It's called AfricAde. And, and for more than a decade, she was the CEO of AfricAde and now she's the chair of their board and has a lot of other projects that she's doing, all of which help young people get an education.

And in Africa she's orchestrated now efforts through several countries in East and Central Africa that have touched tens of thousands of lives. Young women who'd never otherwise would've gotten an education and she's still doing it today.

**Crystal:** You have lived such a full life with so many adventures and accomplishments.

Do you have a moment of pride or a success story when you said to yourself, this, this is why I do it.

**T. A. Barron:** I'm a very lucky guy, but you know, it really, it honestly, it comes down to those surprising moments where I realize something I might have said or done actually landed with someone, made a difference out there.

That's what it's all about. It's always deeply moving to me how stories touch people in ways that I had never expected and never knew it was possible. Even this very writing room where I'm sitting, I'm surrounded by creative art that has been sent to me by readers from all around the world. I have, for example, more wizards' staffs, I think, than any human being alive that people have carved and mailed to me.

You know, I'm just a bumbling author and I, and I try to do my best to tell a few good stories, really. And I'm constantly amazed by the power, not of me, but of story to transform people and touch people, don't they? They go beyond just the written word. They have the magic of empathy. Stories can help us understand other people who have completely different lives than ourselves.

And, and for me, it's also been a way to have empathy with nature, with the natural world. Could I give you one example of that?

**Crystal:** Sure. Yeah.

**T. A. Barron:** There's a place in one of the Merlin books where he has something terrible that's about to happen. And the only way he can survive is to find in himself the magic to transform into a deer and to run with the deer.

But here's what happens when Merlin becomes a deer:

Suddenly I heard more sounds than I had ever known existed. They washed over me in a constant stream. The continual pounding of my own hooves, the echoing reverberations through the soil, the whispers of a dragonfly's wings. And then I realized that somehow, in a mysterious way, I was listening not just to sounds, but to the land itself.

I could hear, not with my ears, but with my very bones, the tensing and flexing of the earth under my hooves, the changing flow of the wind all around me, the secret connections among all the creatures who shared these meadows. Whether they crawled, slithered, flew, or ran, not only did I hear them, I celebrated them.



For we were bound together as securely as a blade of grass is bound to the soil.

**Crystal:** Wonderful. That's so lovely. And that's from which one of your books? The first Merlin book?

**T. A. Barron:** That's from the third volume of The Merlin Saga, the one that's subtitled The Fires of Merlin, book 3. And as you can tell, they've been great journeys for Merlin, I know, but they've definitely also been a great experience for me to stretch in those ways and to widen my experience of being alive.

And I hope it's the same for anyone who reads those stories.

**Crystal:** Yeah, thank you for sharing that. And it's, it's so descriptive, like you can feel it, you can see it, you can taste it even. So thank you. We find ourselves in such uncharted territory when it comes to these environmental crises that we find ourselves in, from the climate to deforestation to marine pollution, et cetera.

How does that change our responsibility as creatives?

**T. A. Barron:** What a wonderful question. Look, we are part of this world. And I really think that part of the life of a true creative is not simply to entertain. It's to shed some light, reach out, give people empathy with each other. Give people hope where it seems impossible. Find a way to make your work lift people's hearts.

Stories have a great magic. I find it incredibly, immensely humbling all the time just to be part of that. And so I just think it's really important to go deeper than simple entertainment. Entertainment is fine. Don't get me wrong. It's fun. It can be tasty. It can be like a candy bar, but it doesn't really give us any lasting nutritional value.

And to me, a real meal, a great big Italian feast, that's what art really ought to be about. So in my, in my small and, and flawed way, that's the kind of art I'd like to try to deliver.

**Crystal:** Now, what would you say it looks like to do our part in protecting the natural world from our daily choices and our communities to philanthropic giving?

How can the listeners help wherever they are?

**T. A. Barron:** Look, this is what I would say to your listeners regarding environmental conservation, helping our planet right now. This is what I would say. The earth, this beautiful earth is our home, our only home. Nature sustains us, nurtures us, feeds us, inspires us, but nature is also in deep trouble.

Nature needs our help now. We are losing land, clean air, fresh water, beautiful trees, quiet places, our fellow creatures. But we have the opportunity to change that, to reclaim that, to help

the earth. So wherever you are out there, whatever you are doing, rise now to the aid of our beautiful, beautiful creatures' bountiful, but troubled home. For saving the earth is saving ourselves, and a whole lot more.

**Crystal:** We have the opportunity and the ability. As you've proven through what you've done and who you've supported, the changemakers you've supported with the Barron Prize. Any final messages or calls to action that you would like to leave our listeners with?

**T. A. Barron:** I would remind folks out there that applications are now open for another year of the Barron Prize. And so if you know a young person or are a young person who is doing something wonderful, please apply. I would also, on a more general note, I would just say, just like that boy who washed ashore, Merlin, all of us at some point in life feel like we've, we've been cast adrift and maybe feel all alone in an uncertain place and quite powerless and weak.

And yet, just like that boy, each of us does have something magical down inside. Remember your magic. That's my biggest request. Remember your magic and then find ways to bring that into the world.

**Crystal:** Wonderful. Thank you so much, T. A. Barron. This has been. It's so inspiring. Thank you for all that you do. You're making a difference.

**T. A. Barron:** Thank you, Crystal. I'm really delighted and honored to be included in your podcast.

**Crystal:** I've always said that there's magic in nature, and I love that T. A. uses that as a cornerstone in his work. And I also admire how he recognizes the heroism in everyday people, especially our younger generations. You don't need to be a part of some big conservation organization or be a multi-degree scientist or some headstrong politician to make change.

You just need passion and conviction and a little encouragement from things like the Barron Prize doesn't hurt either. Focus on what you can control. Um, what's within your reach? I know I need to be reminded of this all the times I feel overwhelmed and way too small. But be the hero of your own story, and let that ripple out into the greater world.

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And let me know what actions you have been taking. Adopting just one habit can be a game changer because imagine if a million people also adopted that. What difference for the world are you going to make today?