

Hi, and welcome to the Sustain OSS podcast. I'm your guest host today, Karen Sandler. This is the podcast where we talk about all things sustaining free and open source software. Only usually we only say open source. Today with me is my guest, Richard LaTower. Hey, Richard, I'm so glad you're here. Hi, how's it going? This is bizarre. So Richard was here at Fosse. We're here at Fosse free and open source software yearly, which is a new conference. Richard's here doing some podcasts. You may have listened to some already. And he's been interviewing people who had really important things to say. I realized that Richard was an amazing speaker here. So I hear and I want to interview him. So here we are. Who have you heard

that from? People. I need to find them and tell them to stop. I mean, all the talks seem really good. So I haven't been able to go to any of the talks. But yours was of particular interest. And I think that for your listeners in particular, who are thinking about all issues related to sustain, hearing what you, the host of this podcast, think about the sustain movement retrospectively and looking forward is one of the most critical things that this podcast can cover. That's fair. Like putting it in that context, I actually didn't talk that much about the movement. I talked about when people use the word sustainability in open source, where they use it and why, which was less about here's all the conferences we've had and every single working group and more about what does it mean when people say sustainability and where does that totally fail? And why does

that make no sense to them to use the term? I'm pretty jaded, held 250 podcasts now for sustain, something like that way more than been published because a lot of them were double episodes. And I also published on the Sustain Open Source Design podcast. I've also been to every sustained conference that was a solo conference. I haven't been to all the adjunct conferences like Oscar or the one that Ethereum and Denver, but I've been to all the main ones. And so I've seen a lot of the same community over the years and watched it change. The only person who's regularly paid through the grant for sustain. So the talk I gave was basically looking at what is sustained at all. And I broke down the different places where you apply the term. So first off, it looks at projects, sustainable projects. How do people think about sustainability for a project? Well, they want to have growth, they want to have diversity, they want to have more funding, kind of always up and up and up very rarely. We want to have sunset materials. We want to have an evolution to the next project. We want to have a trajectory out of the project for maintainers. So I talked about that a bit. I talked about sustainability for developers. What do we talk about when we talk about burnout and we talk about getting funding for

maintainers or recognition for their work, like all contributors like that. Then I talked about the ecosystem at large, which is I think what most people want to hear about. And I think about sustain. How do we fund maintainers going forward? How do we deal with issues of dependency and supply chain and security? And how do we deal with legal issues, license proliferation with AI having an issue in how people develop open source software and free software and Libra software? How do we deal with massive things like the cyber resiliency act, right? The CRA, which is going to impact how any European coder can release open source code and what they're liable for. Major issues affecting user rights and developer rights. And all of those fall under the sustained category. If you've listened to any of the podcasts, you're aware that some podcasts are different than other podcasts. There's all one I could have on academia, which would look nothing

like one with a solo maintainer, which looked nothing like one with a corporate sustained person, which looks nothing like random people who are like consultants working on like the small part of sustainability you've never even think about or open hardware. And so I sort of said, well, sustainability is really bad term, and we shouldn't use it. And all it really means is to keep one thing going. But to keep one thing going also hides the fact that maybe it's crap. It shouldn't keep going. And in fact, everything will stop going because the universe is going to explode. Entropy will kill us all. And that's okay. So what are we doing with software in the meantime? And I was thinking about, well, ultimately, protecting human rights, mitigating harm, stopping pain, and seeking joy and comfort in the pursuit of happiness, life and liberty. Those are the things that ultimately matter to me as a person. And I think to most people on any given day, after they've been fed and slept well, I loved all of that. And that's my talk. Okay. So listeners, press pause, go watch Richard's talk and come back. Well, it could be better than me because I wasn't there. And so I'm asking in the dark, but you'll be amused as I ask him these questions. So you spent the first part of your talk scoping the problem and explaining what you mean by different things. Then you talked about the things that have been done to kind of just address these issues. But then you ended with aspirational goals that are valuable to you. Well, yes, I spent the first bit talking about where sustain is used, the entire taxonomy of sustain in general, followed by we're all going to die, which was a really fun bit, followed by why don't we try and measure joy and impact in our communities instead of focusing on anything else? Because ultimately, that's what mattered. So wait, are we going to die because everyone when they could have been spending the last 10 years investing in technology that would make the world better instead focused on how to pay maintainers who are already predominantly working at large corporations to make more money, more money? No, but yes, but no, I think we're going to die because that's just the nature of mortality. And I'm just a Buddhist. Oh, some of us with heart condition and sooner than others. Yeah. Yeah. And that's not just how it is. And, you know, I never know when it's going to happen. It may be happening after I walk out of this conference building. It won't happen for a long time. Not on wood. But I bring that up because when we talk about sustainability, we always have this idea that things need to grow and continue. And I just argued that the life cycle of off software is a life cycle, which means it often ends. And so a sense of focusing on sustaining open source, don't bother, focus on where are you now? Are you bringing joy to yourself and bringing joy to your users? Is the code that you're using useful at bringing joy to other people or relieving suffering? If it's not, stop, go somewhere else. Do something else. The world is infinitely open to the possibilities of you showing care. And I just think that's a message that we don't talk about enough in the sustained podcast because we focus on, well, has your community grown recently? And what's your funding model? That's great. But like at the end of the day, I don't care about open source. I don't care about growth. I care about human rights, liberties and happiness for the people that I know and care for. That's amazing. This work is hard, Richard. This work in actually trying to make the world better through our technology is painful. And I can't say that often my work sparks joy, but I think it's worth doing because we'll prevent other people from having more pain in the future. And so I love the way that you're thinking about it. And I especially love your focus on, are we missing the point? And what should we focus on? But what I really want to know is what are you renaming this podcast to? I wasn't going to rename it. So

I did just say I don't like open source. I like open source. I think it's a really useful tool for doing these things. I think it's one way of licensing your software to allow other people to use it and maximize impact and find a community. All things which humans love. I'm not saying go search or dopamine all the time, but it's certainly really nice to have it as opposed to not having it. You can get it from impact as well as having joyful little butterflies when you see a really nicely written line of Lambda code. Good for you. What am I renaming the podcast? Sustain. Just just kind of rename it to sustain because I want to continue to allow people to think about the work they're doing in a way that gives them a story that makes them feel like there's a narrative because that's how humans think. We work in stories. We don't work in tweets. We don't work in code.

We work by having a narrative arc and all these wonderful heroes journeys all the time every day. And I just want people to recognize that and then think about, okay, where am I in the story right now? How can it be better at it? I'm not asking everyone to do a questionnaire with all of your users saying, have you found joy today? Tell me. Yes, no. It's just something to think about when you're thinking about, okay, is my project really that important? If not, maybe I should put up some boundaries and not answer that PR. Or maybe I should look for funding elsewhere. Or maybe I should... No, no, it's actually really important. Cool. Let's stay with it. Great. Or maybe I should license with copy left licensing so that more people could use it.

Best argument for copy left, I just heard from Kyle, which is that if we don't use GPL, it won't end up in our devices. We're going to end up with devices that lock us out of user protections, which is going to impact the lives of actually how... Millions of devices that come with user rights right now and we're like advocating and move away from it. In my head, it's always been cherry of the GPL because I feel like it's going to limit the impact of my code.

So I'd normally slap the MIT on everything. But now I'm thinking, well, I don't really care about the impact of my code as much, but I also care about where it's used. And it's more important to me that I don't erode the rights of others and myself through negligence. What kind of impact is the question, right? You may have reduced adoption, especially right away, but it might be a completely different kind of impact if you... Totally. Yeah. So what kind of scaffolding do you think that like we could work on as a community to kind of work on that new kind of idea of sustain?

I think we're doing it, just telling the stories. I don't have the only vision for sustain. This is Richard LaTower's vision. It literally had like a picture of a pico, which is a really cute mammal at the end because as well as birds, I think mammals are cool. I don't know. As always, just continue to tell stories and narratives. I'm always worried that I'm going to end up turning into that guy in the beach who's like, the future man, like do what you want to love. And like, you know, I don't want to be that. I just want to provide resources that tell people to rethink their relationship with technology where it's not a one-way street where you make it do something. It changes you as well. And I think all words are magic. Every single word you use is an act as well as a descriptive thing. It changes the world. And so I just want to continually do that in a way where I change people's minds for the better so they unlock and think about other possibilities for how they interface with their lives.

Do you think that all of this time that you spent thinking about the sustain movement and going to all of those events, talking to so many people, drawing out their stories, has that changed sort of the way that you view corporate power in this space?

Oh, massively. Oh, yeah. Totally changed over the past three or four years. And I've had people

notice that too. I no longer think of Google as the enemy. It is. So we're Microsoft. So it's Facebook. So I really know where I thought you were going. No. Like, they are horrible entities that contribute to death and enslavement. There's nothing else you could call kids in cages on the border, which is still happening. However, I've stopped thinking of everyone who works with those companies as bad and started thinking of them as part of a machine that they can't control where they're doing what they can in their personal lives to deal with the paradox of being alive. Karen, you and I both have US passports. We both pay US taxes. That means we contribute to the industrial military complex. And I've started to think of myself as actually having to live with the paradox of that, that I can do that at the same time as being a loving neighbor, as being a useful brother, as being a avid hiker. None of these things have to happen exclusionary to the other. They can happen in parallel. My goal is to continue to live with that paradox and do what I can to mitigate the negative side effects. And it's the same for anyone who works with these large companies. Most of them aren't out to screw you. And so hosting all these conversations, I don't really like talking this much about my own views. That's why I wanted to flip the tables. The problems I agree are completely systemic, right? And we as individuals play a role in that. But I guess the question is, at some point, do you think that I know this is also my own agenda, so I'm kind of pushing you in that direction. And I don't mean to, no, I do mean to. But the question is really, those people are not evil, but because they're working in those roles, I guess, do you feel like maybe by saying that they're not evil, you're giving them a huge pass to say? Well, it's a classic problem of like, do you change the system from inside or outside? And that's always something where we're going to have issues, right? We had that with Batman and Two-Face, like, oh, there's all sorts of examples in the world's mythos. People who have tried to fix it by being inside the system versus outside the system. I don't know the answer. I don't know the answer to most things. I know that I feel better working with a laptop than I would say, being my father, who is opted out of the entire system and lives on the beach all day and uses social security to live his life. That's a decision he's made. And like, that's really cool. He gets to see the sunrise every day, but he has little to no impact on society. I would rather try to help as opposed to just saying, I'm just going to follow my own gut instinct and do what I feel is good. Would we all be better off doing that? It's possible. I don't know, but I still feel like I have things to say and do, given the responsibilities I feel I have and also the privilege I've been given with my education, with my knowledge of the system. I think you've had a huge impact, I would say. I think you, I expect you to continue to have a huge impact. One more question before we go. Sure. If you think back to all of the conversations that you've had about the sustain movement, what is something that you think of that is really wonderful? Dominic Tarr. I mean, I say that every time. He's my favorite person. Oh, really? Yeah, because I thought it was going to be me. Yeah, you're right. You're cool. No, I, Dominic, sorry if you're listening. I know you don't like being in the spotlight. I just really liked the idea of a guy who wrote a lot of code that like fundamentally is used by every single person in the company that laid the foundation of the node ecosystem and then decided I'd rather be sailing now and just left and just like, yeah, I got PRs. I just don't want to deal with them and just moved on and spends his life pursuing wonder and joy. That's great. Do what you love. Literally do what you love doing. As long as it's not harmful to children, you know, but like, why not? So I think I just think that's great. And that was my favorite conversation because I feel like

he solved the problem. Okay, should we fund you? No, I'm good. Okay. Well, what about the issues? I don't want to do them. How's the view? It's really nice. You know, that was a good conversation. And that just made me feel like, okay, the majority of the stress that I see talking to people about open source and code and stuff could probably be answered if they just took a few weeks vacation and thought about like, do I really need to do this? Except that just as you pointed out, so many of these problems are systemic and we're going to need all of us to work together in order to be able to start doing anything about it. And what I love about you, Richard, is that you were sort of saying, I'm going to follow my joy. But then you're like, but I have so much impact to Yeah, yeah, it's tough. That's a constant struggle. I don't know the answer to that question. I do wonder whether or not it'd be better off writing a book and doing other stuff. So I don't know the answer. I am some species of birds of North America. Some species of birds of New England is probably going to come out this year. If you're interested, yeah, I am great.

There's an animal behavior conference going on here too at the same time. You talk about the Christian, no, women's rights thing. No, okay, because that's really interesting. An extra another conference, which is all about animal behavior. Yeah. And there's an attendee at both both conferences, and she ran out to record a sparrow. It's so cool. That's awesome. Okay, where is that? Yes, right at down of the hall. And I'll actually, do you have that person? Yes, I want to introduce you to this person. Amazing. By the way, women's rights are amazing and fantastic, just not within a Christian mind like context. That's why I said that just now, just in case anyone was unclear. So do not want to comment on that other conference. But what you want to comment on is Richard, I loved having you on my podcast. Is there anything else you wanted to add? How do we, what do I ask you? So you can find most of my stuff on, well, sustain OSS.org is what we've talked about here. That's a sustained podcast. You're listening to it now. Please like this podcast, please donate. That would be really sweet.

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