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Maria Guajardo: But in fact, I wanna be able to celebrate my complexity. So, don't simplify yourself. It doesn't serve anyone. Allow the difficulty of your complexity and the complexity of others to come forward, because that's where I believe transformation will occur.

Sam Fuqua: That's Maria Guajardo, and this is Well, That Went Sideways! A podcast that serves as a resource to help people have healthy, respectful communication. We present a diversity of ideas, tools, and techniques to help you transform conflict in relationships of all kinds. In this episode, we talk with Maria Guajardo about leadership and the value of non-Western perspectives in developing leadership skills. She's an author, educator, and administrator. Maria Guajardo spent twelve years as a dean and professor at Soka University in Japan.

I am Sam Fuqua, co-host of the program with Alexis Miles. Hi Alexis.

Alexis Miles: Hi Sam.

Sam Fuqua: And we're so pleased to be joined for this episode of Well, That Went Sideways! by Maria Guajardo. Welcome.

Maria Guajardo: Thank you so much.

Sam Fuqua: I'd like to start by asking you, uh, a little bit about your, your early days, your family, and your parents, in particular. How did your parents influence your career path?

Maria Guajardo: I'm the daughter of Mexican immigrants. Uh, they immigrated from the state of San Luis Potosi to the United States as migrant workers. I was born and raised in a migrant labor camp, no running water, no electricity. This is Central California. This is the United States of America. Um, so very modest beginnings, and the work ethic that my parents impressed upon my siblings, so we're six of us, the work ethic that they embodied truly spoke to the formation of my own values, my own non-negotiables, and my own worldview. They were both illiterate. Neither one of them knew how to read or write. Uh, imagine never having read a book, yet they valued education as the pathway for their children. All of us received an education. I did my undergraduate work at Harvard, received a PhD before the age of 30. And I would suggest to you that that work ethic was embedded at a very young age. It was much more appealing to go to school. I love school rather than working in the fields, picking grapes, olives, peaches. It wasn't a choice for me. I knew that being in the classroom, even though I initially only spoke Spanish and did not understand a word, I knew that the classroom was where I wanted to be.

Alexis Miles: Maria, could you say more about work ethic?

Maria Guajardo: I believe that each one of us benefits from understanding one's purpose. And, the work ethic that my parents, uh, presented to all of us, embedded in how we were raised, absolutely shaped my purpose. A work ethic is a style of, of how to approach life, and the approach was one of, uh, hard work, uh, sacrifices that one was willing to make, because the, the

north star that guided my parents was one that would allow each and every one of us certain pathways, certain decisions could be made from there. So, the work ethic shaped how I began to show up because that's how my parents showed up.

Alexis Miles: Maria, I'm thinking about that arc from being a child with parents who, who were migrant workers living in a camp, no running water, no electricity. The arc from there to Harvard to a published author of many books, to a person with an international perspective, that's quite an arc in one lifetime. Other than work ethic, if you had to identify the forces that sort of propelled you along that arc, what would that, that be?

Maria Guajardo: I think that this journey becomes one of finding home. How, how do we find home? How do we find that community that we belong to? And there were many forces, um, that propelled and pushed and, and drew one to different opportunities or that closed doors. And so, part of it has been, I think, an ongoing process, not only of creating home, that space in place for myself, but creating that for individuals that I have had the opportunity to work with. So, when my students at Soka University in Japan, I mean, I would have a class of 30 students, 15 different countries represented, speaking collectively 20 languages. Everyone was in the process of trying to navigate this concept of home. And, we're at that age when you're a college student, 18, 19, 20 years old, you're, you're trying to understand that formative structure for your life. And so, I would suggest that this, these early beginnings allowed me to then value, recognize, and pay tribute to the work that must be done as we move from one place to another.

Alexis Miles: It's almost as if all of our labors, whether conscious or unconscious, are on behalf of belonging, of finding home, of being seen, of being valued, of being respected, so that we can contribute the most that we can contribute in this life. So, that's what I think I heard you just say.

Maria Guajardo: Absolutely. It's, it's the work of becoming a better human being. And, we become better at this job that we have each been granted. We become better when we are in community with one another.

Sam Fuqua: Turning that to, uh, some of the challenges of becoming better human beings, what, what forces are, are in conflict with our, everybody's desire or what should be everybody's desire and, and our desire as a society to lift everybody up to their fullest?

Maria Guajardo: I love the complexity that we all hold as individuals. And, this complexity discourages some from connecting with others, um, drives some to be very individualistic. And I think that my own background was one of being collectivistic. Um, to have the value of family, of community, as part of my worldview, allowed me to understand that this was not about how can I get the furthest the fastest, but it was how can I build bridges? How can I reach behind and bring forward? And how can I continue to do that work? Because everyone, I believe, thrives when they are in relationship with others. And so, I love the concept of, of dialogic learning, and bringing that forward in order to make these connections. So, what stands in the way? A society that is fast-paced that asks you to, to identify yourself in 75 characters or less, that, uh, shortens your attention span so that we want instant, immediate gratification. There's so many, so many devices and tools that are standing in the way, and I, I think this is the moment when we are at a

crossroads needing to decide what really matters. What will we value? And what will we hold up in order to, to be our best self?

Alexis Miles: Some people don't believe that we are at a crossroads, or they would define the crossroads differently. What's one of the first questions we could collectively start asking ourselves about this moment that we're in that will help us navigate from where we are to, to a broader, kinder perspective of the world?

Maria Guajardo: I love the question, why do you do what you do? I love this question because this question propels us into a space of having to do self-examination, of having to reveal if one is willing to disclose what matters to one, and what has driven one, what has propelled someone forward. So, why do I do what I do? I believe that if we can take the time to sit with the difficult work of, uh, tension and paradox and, and while we may have differences, those differences of, well, my pivot point isn't yours, or my worldview isn't yours, if we can, if we can stop and truly ask, what matters at this moment, and to begin to recognize that these differences are not differences that we want to wipe away, but in fact, I wanna be able to celebrate my complexity. So, don't simplify yourself. It doesn't serve anyone. Allow the difficulty of your complexity and the complexity of others to come forward, because that's where I believe transformation will occur.

Sam Fuqua: Tell us what dialogic learning is.

Maria Guajardo: I love being able to work at using deep listening and connection with others. So to me, dialogue is not, as Paulo Freire put it, dialogue is not, uh, ping pong. It's not this concept of I talk, you talk, I talk, you talk. That is, that to me is not dialogue. That is conversation. Conversation, debate, orders, instructions, that's all a form of communication. But I want to pull back and suggest to, to the audience that dialogue is that moment when you allow yourself to be open to learning something new from another human being and allow yourself to change because of that information. It will require deep listening. It will require listening to understand, not listening to respond. And when we allow this of ourselves, it's quite the privilege to be able to give someone your undivided attention or for someone to offer the same to you. Dialogic learning is this experience of being able to hold space to deeply listen to another, and to allow yourself to be heard.

Alexis Miles: What you're describing sounds like what I witnessed between my grandmother and her friends. Sometimes they would call, they would say, "I'm gonna come sit with you." And they would literally be in a room sitting, and there wouldn't be that much dialogue, but the dialogue they had would be so precious and so intimate and so trusting. Um, so what you are talking about, I feel in my body like, ooh, that can be a little scary, or I could just feel defenses coming up. How do you engage in the act of that kind of honest communication?

Maria Guajardo: I think we have to allow ourselves to unlearn, relearn, and learn anew. This, this idea of what does it mean to, to engage in dialogue with someone else? I don't want to advocate for this idea that dialogue is all about transparency. I don't advocate for someone to come forward and just reveal all one's secrets. I don't think, at least let me speak for myself, I need to be able to establish trust with the other person, and to trust that you will not take the information I share and harm me. Trust that you will not do something with the information. So, so how do we

prepare for this? I think we prepare by taking baby steps. I have done this dialogic exercise with thousands of, of individuals all over the world, and I just ask two people to pair up, and to just, I, I'll pick a topic, I'll pick a question, and give them a timeframe, two minutes, three minutes, and that time is theirs to just share on that topic. And the other person's role is just to listen. And then, I say "time" and I have them switch. This has become one of the most transformational exercises, um, that I have ever done to, to have two individuals allow themselves, and to create that space to share. So, I'm not advocating for go and divulge your secrets to any stranger anywhere. I am asking myself and others, allow me to listen to you. I think this concept of being in a community of storytellers has some preciousness attached to it. Your grandmother, her friends who would come together to the kitchen table. Children, when they sit, and they do this, this sort of impromptu show and tell. I mean, this is the kind of work that we've done before, and then we become older, we go into adulthood, and we filter. What I'm asking is for those filters to rest a bit in order for us to connect.

Alexis Miles: And it sounds like doing it in bite sizes of two, starting off of two minutes each, is doable. Like, I can do that as I sit here thinking about it without my defenses coming up, um, because I'm just sharing about a, a designated topic for a couple of minutes, and then listening to somebody else share. And, and you said that's, that can be transformational.

Maria Guajardo: Hmm. And my job is not to question, not to repeat, not to, as your listener, my job is to listen to understand, not to reply. And, in society we have been trained to listen and then formulate our own question, "But, what about this?" And, and so we question, but every time we question, we then are asking the speaker to tell us the story we want to hear, not the story they want to tell. And that changes everything.

Alexis Miles: It sounds like what you're saying is that in this exercise as the listener, the only thing I have to do is sit down, sit back and relax, and just look at the world through your eyes. So, I don't need to try to figure anything out. Just listen to you.

Maria Guajardo: And in that process, we allow ourselves to engage at a, I would suggest to you at a deeper level, almost unconsciously. If I hadn't done this exercise with thousands of people in so many places, I would say to you, yeah, question, challenge me. Maybe this doesn't work. But, what I can say to you is that when we allow ourselves this approach to sustained engagement, and two minutes can be sustained engagement, new pathways open up internally and with the other.

Sam Fuqua: I'd like to ask you about leadership because a lot of your work has been focused around that, and you shared that you had just come back from, uh, giving a talk on leadership in early childhood education, what do you hold at the core of your teachings on leadership?

Maria Guajardo: Leadership to me is not a position or a title, although we equate leadership with the title of president, director, manager, supervisor. Today, leadership to me is a practice. It is a practice. How do I show up from the moment I wake up and open my eyes? What decisions am I making and for whom? So, leadership to me is a practice. It's personal, it's relational, and it will require you to make decisions. I would suggest every individual has the capacity to be in that leadership position of their own life. We are the leaders of our own life. Not everyone should be a

leader, as my students often reminded me. Well, yes, they, they have the title, but they don't look very leader-like or sound like leaders. And, and I, I accept that. So, leadership to me is a life philosophy for how I choose to make decisions, for how I choose to show up in the world every day. Leadership is my influence on a community for the greater good. And, this is actually an adapted definition from Peter Senge, a leadership scholar. But this idea that yes, leadership is about influence, but it's influence for a purpose. And, the purpose here is for the greater good, and that has many shapes and sides and shades to it. So, that to me is leadership. So, leadership is about undoing, unlearning that it has, that it belongs to a privileged few. Leadership is beginning to recognize that my mother, who was illiterate, who was a Mexican peasant, who came out of the jungles of Mexico, was one of the fiercest and most committed leaders that I ever met because I knew where she would stand and what she would advocate for. Her influence extended beyond imaginable boundaries. And so, that's what I want to suggest that leadership is practice and less position.

Alexis Miles: That's a beautiful illustration you gave with your mother and her fierceness. Can you give an example, um, in your life, for example, of when you used your influence as leadership? So that people can get a vision of what it's like to, to, as an individual exercise your own influence in a community.

Maria Guajardo: Well, there's so many, and I'm just trying to think of what can I share that isn't offending someone? Because, I often say, you know, leadership, you don't become a leader to create friendships. You, you become a leader, you step into your leadership practice to create change. We had talked a minute about early childhood education. There was an opportunity for us in Colorado, in Denver, to expand funding for early childhood education. What I love about the education field is that it is so political, and there are friends and foes at every corner. And, we were wanting to advance this sustained funding stream and it came down to the wire. It was the last minute a decision had to be made that would tip this funding stream in or out. I had to go up against a formidable foe who was thinking blue and not green, just to give an abstract. Um, and I decided that I knew what I believed would be the best position. That was what I advocated for, and, but it also brought a mountain of opposition against me. I knew that if I had wanted to not stir the water, I could have gone and acquiesce to the decisions that others were making. I understood that that was not the right decision if what I wanted to see was influence, positive influence for the greater good.

So, I made the decision to stand on my own, to go against, to, to seek out those that, uh, were going to be making these decisions, and, and it pa, I mean, it, it was drawn out for weeks, but it passed and, and we in fact, were able to bring millions of dollars, millions of new revenue for young children. But some of those individuals never spoke to me again. And that, I am willing to live with because thousands of families were able to find quality childcare due to this decision. Due to this action. I mean, it's challenging and maybe that's not the best of examples, but it, it comes to that point where you need to, you need to take a stand. It's, it's what I often call my non-negotiables. We each have non-negotiables, different than values. I mean, I can tell you my top three values, but non-negotiables is where I draw the line in the sand and say, no, this is as far as I go, and I won't budge. If the safety of children is at, at hand, this is where I draw the line. I will not allow to, for you to disrespect me. This is where I draw the line. We all have non-negotiables, some of which we can name and some of which are even unknown to us.

Sam Fuqua: Do you know the title of this podcast, Well, That Went Sideways! and the conversations, uh, broadly defined get into areas of conflict and how we resolve conflict, and we often ask our guests if they can recall a, a sideways moment in their life, uh, when things, kind of, got off track, how they reacted, what they learned from that. Any sideways moments you can share with us?

Maria Guajardo: Twelve years ago, I was invited to take a leadership position in Tokyo, Japan. It was a position in the field of education at a university. I was the founding dean for the faculty of International Liberal Arts, and I was excited about the opportunity. I was excited about creating a whole new pathway within higher education, and immediately found myself working with colleagues who had never worked with a woman in a leadership position. And typically, the only woman in the room was the one serving tea, and I did not serve tea. So, I thought, well, my position is Dean, I can do this. I, I can give the orders. I can give the mandates. I can give the direction. Until a colleague, bless his heart, said, "We don't care what you've done before. This is our university." That caused me to pause, to take a deep breath. It allowed me to sit in a very difficult space, but a space that I needed to sit in to understand my own arrogance, my own sense of self-righteousness. This, this Western view of command and control when it comes to a leadership position, right? All of a sudden, I was being told very clearly, "Mm-hmm. That doesn't work here." Well, I knew about diversity and equity, and I had done training to hundreds on cross-cultural competence. All of a sudden, the reality was something that I had not anticipated, and it was one of the best and most challenging professional experiences of my life. I'm happy to say that while it did go sideways, I marched forward. I continued to advance. I continue to ask, okay, so, so what do I have to learn? How do I show up in a space that's very Japanese, very international, and how can I put my Western arrogance on a back shelf long enough for me to learn a new strategy, a new approach, and a new way of being able to not only resolve conflict, but create and innovate. So, those twelve years changed the DNA in my body. It changed who I am as a human being. It was quite transformative. And, it was really that crucible experience, how do you sit in the fire and allow yourself to be forged by the, by the heat? It went sideways for a while.

Sam Fuqua: I'm intrigued. I would like to know more about, uh, the transformative nature of that experience, and could you just go into a little more detail about how that changed you? And, you have said that's, kind of, a fundamental part of your being now, someone who has that international experience.

Maria Guajardo: I had to unlearn. What I thought was the only way of approaching leadership if I were to take that specific example. I mean, I had been trained by the best. I was a leadership junkie before arriving in Japan. I had participated and been selected for fellowships, uh, prestigious fellowships in different countries. I had been to five of the executive leadership training programs at Harvard. I mean, I had been to so many, I could teach the darn thing, right? I mean, I thought I knew what no one ever said to me, and what I never stopped to ask was, is this Western view of leadership applicable to my 20-year-old student from Myanmar, to my 25-year-old graduate student from Mumbai, India? Where is the relevance of theory to the lived experience of those of us who come from diverse countries? I mean, some call it the Global South. I mean this, this paradox that Western leadership theory isn't applicable to the world was one of those stripping downs that I needed. And that is, that is absolutely the pivot for me to

begin to research and study and write and speak about leadership and its relevance. And hence, yeah, I, I had shared, I've got two books being, that have just been published on global leadership, but it really is an invitation to scholars and practitioners around the world, tell us your story. Allow us to learn from you because the conversation must be broader than it has been.

Alexis Miles: It, it's as if you are saying, "Oh, the way I see the world is based on a particular structure, and there are other ways of seeing the world." That seems like a big leap to come to the understanding that what feels like reality to me, and the way it should unfold, is not the same for other people. It could be different culture to culture, um, ethnic group to ethnic group. It could be gender based. It could be based on so many things. Am I following your thinking correctly?

Maria Guajardo: So, the structure, we live in established structures, and in the United States, that established structure is driven by power and privilege. And it is asking us not only to entertain, but to take seriously. How has that power and privilege limited our understanding, limited my understanding? Because, the reality is that there are multiple voices, multiple viewpoints, multiple mindsets about how to do good work in this world. Power and privilege as a structure serves some, but not all.

Alexis Miles: So, a question I could ask myself if I want to become more aware of the lenses I'm looking through, or the binders that I have, is, is there a possibility to see this differently?

Maria Guajardo: And I would say, Alexis, name, name, what privilege you do have. Students were always afraid, audience members were always afraid to name their privilege. We've been taught to feel shameful of the privileges that we have. We want to hide them, we want to negate them, and yet I would suggest to you, if you can name your privilege, then I'm going to challenge you to say, how might I use my privilege to serve others, right? When I graduated from university, I knew four languages. I now know five. It's not something to be embarrassed about. I can't remember the last time I was in a room with someone who was monolingual. Truly, I can't. And, I would suggest to you that being multilingual is a privilege. And it's a privilege that I can use to support, extend myself to others. So, privilege is not a bad thing unless you don't do anything with it. So yes, we have different worldviews. I would suggest a baby step. Name your privileges. They are multiple. The fact that we have computers to be conducting this podcast is a privilege. I did work with an organization in Lagos, Nigeria, and all the children, there were 20 of them, middle school, high school students gathered around a single cell phone because they did not have computers. They had one cell phone, and that was their access to me, right? So, let's name our privilege and then you know what, let's put it to work for the greater good.

Alexis Miles: Is there something that you think that all of us, all of our listeners should be thinking about as we move forward in this very complex world?

Maria Guajardo: As I mentioned, I have just recently returned to the United States after a dozen years abroad, and many question my decision and asked why go to the United States now? Things are in such flux. And my response to them was that now is the time I'm needed. Now is the time when, when the views of leadership are quite complex, quite chaotic, and challenging so many of us, I believe now is the time for us, for me, to be here, to be able to share my own values, non-negotiables, and a view of leadership that is not narrowly defined by a few. So, my



hope is that we will give ourselves permission to consider our own leadership practice, and how that could make such a contribution to reshaping the world that we're living in now.

Sam Fuqua: Maria Guajardo, it's been great to speak with you. Thank you.

Maria Guajardo: My pleasure. Thank you.

Sam Fuqua: Maria Guajardo is an author, educator, and administrator. She spent over a decade as a dean and professor at Soka University in Japan. And, she's co-editor of the new book, *Global Leadership for a Sustainable Future: Issues and Solutions in Public and Nonprofit Organizations*.

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