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Sam Fuqua: That's Cameron Powers 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.

On this episode, we talk with Cameron Powers about building personal relationships across cultures through music, and how that can be a helpful response to conflict. Cameron Powers was a world-traveling, multi-lingual musician and musicologist. At the time we recorded this interview, he had stage four cancer.

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

Alexis Miles: Hi Sam.

Sam Fuqua: And we are so pleased to be joined for this conversation by Cameron Powers. Welcome Cameron.

Cameron Powers: Thank you, Sam.

Sam Fuqua: Your journey is far and wide. It's taken you to so many places and over many years. Where does your journey begin?

Cameron Powers: Quick trajectory takes me from the Missouri rural music education that I got from Chuck Berry, Ike and Tina Turner because they were my popular neighborhood bands at the time.

I immediately went out at age 14 and bought an electric guitar. Then through the folk singing I did as a teenager, and playing rock and roll and blues, to Peru where I learned the, uh, Andean language and music of the Incas, to Greece, to Athens, where I lived, uh, with my Greek wife and was totally immersed in that culture.

And then from there, to honor the wishes of the dancers and my own curiosity, to Egypt and, uh, I, I landed in Egypt and it is the magic world that people suspect that it is. And of course, traveling into Baghdad when that city was in flames, to honor my Iraqi musician friends. And exploring Syria and Jordan followed all of that. So that's the trajectory for you.

Sam Fuqua: Well, we certainly want to hear more about those places in those times, as your life developed as this idea of music as a, a way of spreading peace and bridging cultures, began to develop. Was there, uh, a kind of central idea in your mind, or was it just kind of going where the muse led you?

Cameron Powers: It was a process of discovery from the moment I walked into a village. Three days walk from the end of the nearest road in Peru, and I noticed that all the villagers had fled because they were scared. They didn't know what to make of me and my girlfriend who were walking down their valley for three days. I pulled out my guitar and went into the village and played a song and they all came back and said, “We were having a party,” and they weren't worried about me. All the way from there to, uh, playing

in, uh, Egypt for 400 Egyptians at a village party, one of their favorite songs, and did the shock wave of love that went through all of us simply because I was bringing their music back to them.

As a gift, you know, made me realize, oh my God, I bet there's a lot of people in Cairo nearby drafting peace treaties, which are very good with words and could be torn up and shredded just as fast as they're written. This connection here in Egypt that I'm making between me as an American and them as Egyptians is not erased. It won't go away. It can't be shredded. It can't be torn up. And that proved to be true.

Alexis Miles: So, Cameron, what is it about connecting through music as opposed to connecting through a piece of paper, a peace treaty, for example, that causes it to endure over time? What's happening between people when there's music?

Cameron Powers: It's a pretty verbal place. It is language in the human evolution, which was a great gift for technological communication, but it's turned out to be very complicated for us people to use language, uh, and stay connected to our heart and gut feeling centers, and frequently, we make mistakes with words because we, as they say, people mistake the menu for the meal, you see what I'm saying?

You know, you see a picture of a delicious looking hamburger and when you bite into it, if you're lucky, it'll taste exactly the way you expected it to, but you don't even really notice unless something is grossly amiss because your taste buds don't even need to activate. You can eat the whole meal and still just do nothing, but eat the menu, your idea of that food. And you wake up later and you went, “I wonder if that was a good hamburger” and I, you know, it's like, I wasn't really paying attention. So we get short circuited by language and music and dance and drumming. They're all rapid portals into the pre-linguistic places that are psychic.

Alexis Miles: So are, are you saying that we can't really have real conflict resolution and conflict transformation? If we stay at the level of language that we have to go find a way into that pre-verbal space?

Cameron Powers: Well, I wish I could offer more hope for the language approach. But I've been listening to an awful lot of audio books about world history lately and my reading of history is that using language to solve conflict. Does it stick? That what sticks is mutual heartfelt action of some sort. So, I don't really think that the conflict resolution, through words, it can be an entryway into the heart, but it's funny how you just can't rely on it.

But when people get together in a dance to the same song and their bodies open and accept that telepathic energy field then people suddenly burst into a smile and something has shifted. And a funny thing is you can put those same two people in the same room together, at different rooms together, 10 years later, and they'll instantly break into the same smile because something cosmic remembers that deep connection. So, no, I don't have much hope for verbal resolutions. Sorry. I wish I did. No.

Sam Fuqua: I mean, I always felt like because everything is vibrating right at the subatomic level. That's why music more than any other art form to me has such power.

Cameron Powers: Yeah.

Sam Fuqua: I was really impressed in looking at your website and doing some research for this conversation at this scope of these projects called Musical Ambassadors for Peace and Musical Missions for peace. For listeners who aren't familiar with the work of these nonprofits, can you give us a, an overview? And the origin?

Cameron Powers: When I was, uh, here in Colorado in 2002, and I could tell that my government, in the form of George Bush, was planning to bag my friends' capital city, Baghdad, in Iraq, and I had such gratitude in my heart for Iraqi musician friends who had taught me the rudiments of their music and encouraged me for over 20 years. And I told Christina, I can't be in this country right now. So we flew to Jordan and we came back and we flew to Egypt. As the bombing of Baghdad started, we went up to Jordan and, uh, I took the instrument that is beloved for Arabic music, my oud, and we arrived at the border of Jordan and Iraq where we were immediately told that only military, medical or journalist official people were allowed crossing. I started playing them any Iraqi love song and the Jordanian soldiers guarding the border, they looked at me and stamped my passport. You know, if you know that song, you can go wherever you want to.

That's where family tribal musical connectivity is still really strong as Indian, indigenous, Middle East. And so after singing love songs in Baghdad and coming back to America, the Egyptians found out and they flew us to Cairo to be part of a, uh, children's hospital fundraiser, to sing in front of 60,000 Egyptians with all the other popular Egyptian pop stars. Then we were on Egyptian TV, and they made a big deal out of how we were the Americans who invaded Iraq with music instead of weapons.

And I came back to America after a while and I told people here about it and, and a woman said, I'm going to build a nonprofit around what you've been doing. 'Cause she knew how to do that. It had never occurred to me to do that, but pretty soon she gifted us with Musical Ambassadors of Peace as it's called now. And, um, it's been growing wonderfully ever since. So really that's how it got off the ground.

Sam Fuqua: Part of what I appreciated was there seemed to be an effort to help children learn music and learn instruments, which I think is so important for kids all over the world to have someone give them a chance to connect with music in that way.

Cameron Powers: Well, it goes one step beyond that Sam, is when we encourage children to learn music. We make sure that we're encouraging them to learn their own indigenous music style. In other words, we're not setting up programs for them to learn, to sing Italian opera in Damascus. We're setting up programs so that Iraqi refugee children in Damascus can learn Iraqi music and we'll pay the Iraqi musicians to teach them their own music.

Alexis Miles: Why is that so important, Cameron, that people learn their own indigenous music?

Cameron Powers: Well, for a couple of reasons, but the most obvious is the legacy of colonialism where European and American people frequently with good intentions go into other parts of the world and say, you know, Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, and they think they're bringing civilization, but they end up just burying the local civilization and, you know, with all of the revelations about the Native American schools and the forest sterilizations and, and a forbidding of the speaking of native language. We can see that the era of colonialism has left a nasty black stripe across so many people that thought they were doing good in the name of Western European civilization.

And so that's, that's a big part of it, but, um, why is it important to teach the indigenous music? Because not only you are, are you stepping around the legacy of colonialism, but you're stepping toward those other people in other parts of the world and saying, you know, I think you're beautiful. I think your music is beautiful and, and I hope you keep playing your stuff. 'Cause I want to hear it, and other people are going to want to hear it. And I just know that your kids are going to feel empowered if they know that the music they're performing came from the heart and soul of their own culture.

Alexis Miles: You have talked about the cultural traditions of the Inca, Egyptians, the Greeks. What can we, who are steeped in Western culture, learn from the cultural traditions of those, of those peoples?

Cameron Powers: Beautiful question. The biggest lesson I took away from living in a Peruvian village and spending eight years learning to speak the Inca language was about fear. They simply didn't have time for fear. If someone was dying in the village, I'd say, "Oh no! That's terrible," and they would look at me like I was crazy and I'd say, "Terrible?" No, it's not terrible. I mean, we'll miss him, but it's not terrible. And I realized I was unconsciously bringing my culture's fear of death into theirs, and I thought stop that, you know, um, there's something much deeper to take away here.

And then when it comes to lots of indigenous groups around the world that aren't as immersed in modern media and fear-based realities. Then, then the, uh, vibrational capacity for nonverbal communication is so much more developed and refined. Good example, there is walking into, uh, a shop in Egypt or Syria, and, you know, if you're not in a tourist zone where they're like hawking, because you look like a tourist, then you know, the first step is sit down, have a cup of tea. How's your mother? How's your father? How's your children? How's your family? And after 10 minutes of gentle politeness and sipping tea, okay now what did you walk into my store for? And by that time, these people have figured each other out. Their vibrational telepathic connectivity has been wide awake with all of its little antenna, and they know how to start about doing business or buying, selling something, or opening up, uh, a friendship or, you know, a music lesson, whatever you're there for, but they don't jump into it with words.

And when you walk down the streets in Egypt and Cairo, for example, uh, you know, people do have some command of English. Although I worked really hard on my Arabic skills. It's really funny the way they can finish your sentences for you in their broken English, because they already figured out what you are trying to say. How did they do that? Well, when your heart is that open, as those people's are, you can feel things go in and out. Of course love is, is the most beautiful feeling.

Sam Fuqua: How do we encourage both strengthening of indigenous musical cultures, but also an openness to other people's musical cultures?

Cameron Powers: Well, Sam, the openness in children is going to be there if they think music sounds cool. They'll want to learn about it and dance to it and feel it and hear it. No matter where it comes from, but when musicologists measure the, uh, reasons that a human being will choose one popular song as an immediate favorite over another, the absolute number one criterion is that it be familiar. If it's a song they already have heard, then they'll like it immediately. So I don't think we have to worry about people being curious about other kinds of music, if they're exposed to it. Um, and YouTube and a bunch of other, you know, social media platforms are taking care that there's a lot more, you know, exposure to. Um, music groups from, uh, um, Molly and, you know, um, all over the world.

Sam Fuqua: I think you're right. That one of the positive aspects of the Internet is the ability for anyone who's connected to, to find music from literally anywhere else on the planet. My concern is despite those opportunities, there's still this dominance of a, kind of a Western style pop music that is pushed because it makes money.

Cameron Powers: Yes, that will go on. And we're not in control of that. Sam, we can be creative in some other realm so that other options appear, but to take on the corporate autocracy, you know, personally is gonna just make us angry and then when we're angry, we don't function forever 'cause we get burned out. So when I dial into a TikTok, I hear lots of stuff from all over the world. You know, presentations of history, both recent and ancient that are from very diverse points of view. And music and dance from lots of parts of Mongolia or who knows where.

So I don't think it's worth spending our time and feeding off our frustration to fight the colonial legacy and the dominance of popular music when we could be spending all that time with our love energy, getting to know some people from Afghanistan and saying, hey, I want to learn your music. Let's sing together. That would be a better way to spend your time. And then if someone makes a video of it, then it'll go out on some social media and the world can discover it. Also, you know, if I listen to the, uh, radio programs all over the world, if I listen to radio programs in Turkey, they're not playing Western popular music. So I listen to radio from Greece. They're not playing Western popular... So there are some really thriving, vital musical cultures alive and well that, that are not just all about European music.

Alexis Miles: Cameron, that reminds me of something that you've, you've spoken about, learning how other people think and feel. So are you suggesting that by listening to the music of other cultures, that we begin to learn how they think and feel? Are you saying more that we, we need to actually interact with people, or maybe both in combination?

Cameron Powers: Well, the music is a great stepping stone. You know, if I hadn't been going to hear Ike and Tina Turner in the local roller skating rink when I was 14 years old, I wouldn't have picked up on the way African-Americans feel. But that being said, it helps to go a step further and learn languages as well as music. When I came back from my first mountaineering expedition in Peru, fascinated by the Inca culture, Quechua-speaking people, I enrolled in linguistic... I ended up going through three universities all the way up to working on a doctorate in linguistics so that I could learn the Inca language better. And after that, I had those tools, and when I was living in Greece, I was living with my girlfriend's family who spoke just Greek and I learned fast. Um, and later to learn Arabic, I brought all those tools.

So that's the mixture, uh, for learning, learning the music, learned to play it. Learned to dance with somebody from that culture. Started learning the language and then finally go back and dance some more with them and do some projects with them. You know, like our musical ambassadors all over the world, they're really active in Uganda right now. They're paying for the older folks to teach the younger folks the tribal dances and songs, and then they're showcasing the dance. And then they're having events where they can now just get up and boogie together, you know, tribes that were like because of colonial era, legacy, colonial era legacies or whatever, they were fighting each other in the Congo. Now they're dancing together.

Um, and it wouldn't have occurred to the Red Cross to like run that program, but it's just as important for the human soul as the, as the, uh, shelter and the food and the nourishment. 'Cause people wither away and die. If their, if their soul has no meaning or purpose left and no way to feel good. So, yeah, it's a mix of

all those different stages. I get frustrated with my American friends who say, well, if you don't learn a language as a child, you can't learn it. And I know for a fact, as an adult, that I can learn languages ten times faster than a child. I may not get the pronunciation quite as perfect as I would have if I was on a playground at six years old, but in terms of learning the whole verb structure and how a language works and how to speak it. An adult with intention can learn a lot of languages really deeply. And then of course, how people feel in that culture, uh, starts to become familiar. And that's a whole other cross-cultural soul education, which benefits ourselves and everyone around us.

Alexis Miles: So that cross-cultural education and you've referred to soul and heart education, what are some practical things people can do to start cultivating that? And, and I, I, I'm referring mainly to people who don't have the resources to travel to other countries, but who would like to do that? Like where they are, what are some practical things people could do to cultivate that?

Cameron Powers: There are refugee communities in every town in America. Recently, I was visiting some women in south Denver who were refugees from Iraq, and they actually stayed in our house in Boulder for a few months. And then they moved to Denver because their ability to create a new life was better there. And I was, uh, walking out of the door and I ran into somebody I knew. It was an Albanian gypsy guy that had played the clarinet, and I had built a band around him years earlier, but he had such an alcoholic, violent part of him after having been kept in Turkish prisons for so long that it was impossible to, to be co-musician and friend. Uh, I saw him walking down the sidewalk and I'm like, wow, what are you doing? How are you? You know? And we were both totally friendly to each other and, uh, He said he was delivering food to Iraqi refugees in that community. And it just made me cry, you know? ‘Cause I knew he’d come from such a difficult place and here he was giving. And of course he was learning a little bit about Iraqi culture in the process.

That's one idea.

Alexis Miles: And as you look back on your life and all of these relationships that you've developed with people all over the world, what is one lesson that you would like to share with everybody related to building relationships, resolving the conflicts that arise between and among people and having those kinds of heart connections that you've talked about? What is one thing you would like the world to know that you've discovered?

Cameron Powers: Well, I've discovered that although humans in their verbal minds love to hate and you know liberals are guilty of that too, but we all know that it's really important to go with the good, go with the love. But what I'd like to say is that when I sign a letter... A few years ago, instead of just writing ‘Love, Cameron’, I put ‘Love, love, love, Cameron’ because you know, you can go out and shoot somebody and the TV cameras will show up and it'll be on the news, and violence, you know, makes the news immediately, but acts of love take longer to be visible. And you might think, oh, this is frustrating. I'm doing good, I'm helping myself and others, and nothing's happening. My message to everybody is keep doing it because at some point the, uh, cosmic consciousness of the universe and humanity will pick up on it and they'll start shining it back on you. That's where patience becomes a virtue. But I feel like I can guarantee that if you spend a while persistently sending out the love, you'll start living in a field of love.

That's not just your own anymore, but it's shared a shared world of loving kindness, giving, helping. Yes, it's a reflection of all those years you spent consistently sending out love to others. But at that point, it takes wings of its own and you don't have to ever wonder or work at it anymore because the flood of beautiful

things that start materializing in your own life of the undeniable, unmistakable, it's so real and it's just so wonderful. I mean here I am. I suddenly, just a month ago, I found out I'm in stage four cancer. I'm probably not even likely to be here a week or two from now, but I am so bathed in this love field that I have no concerns. No regrets, nothing left undone. No fear of death. No, no. I don't really like pain and suffering a whole lot, so I'm doing what I can medically to alleviate that. But, but as for, you know, the absolute beauty of the, shared world of people that know that just shoveling out the love. As there's so much more benefit than shoveling out the violence, even though the violence all get the headline, the love wins by thousands of times in the long run.

Sam Fuqua: You previously told us about being in a Peruvian village and this idea of a fear of death was a concept that the folks in the village weren't aware of. And, and just listening to you talk about your death, uh, it really seems so different from how we sometimes frame that in our culture, right? Where we're, we are afraid of death, or we, we battle against this disease or we fight death. It's all very conflictual rhetoric, but you're in a different place clearly.

Cameron Powers: Yeah, I feel so blessed. Thanks to all of you sharing all this energy of, of, uh, ecstatic love, really, you know, I, I'm not hurting for anything, whether I'm alive or dead. And it doesn't mean I believe in some afterlife, particularly either I'm open to possibilities, but I don't have any expectations.

Alexis Miles: So Cameron, I'm curious. Do you have any last word you would like to share before we end this conversation?

Cameron Powers: Keep that light shining. Keep that little light shining. Keep dancing, keep drumming, keep singing. And if people send you love, if they say, wow you're really cool, I love you a lot, that was wonderful, don't get all modest and say, oh no, I don't deserve it, because that shuts your own heart down. You need to just say thank you, brother, sister. I feel your love and you'll feel your heart dilate. That's the moment that you say thank you. I guess that's what people mean by gratitude being a healthy thing, but when your own heart dilates and lets in more love, if you're not used to that, it'll actually feel a little scary and painful.

Your heart's not used to being wide open like an Egyptian's. So be prepared to just keep feeling it growing and growing and growing. Dance, sing, play. Sacred flirtation amongst all human beings. That's one of my favorite things to do as I don't violate anyone's space, but I constantly flirt with them. Go flirt.

Sam Fuqua: Musician and ambassador for peace, Cameron powers, a few days after we recorded this interview, he died on February 15th, 2022. To conclude the program, we have some of his music. This is a song called All the Moons. Cameron is singing and playing the oud, an Arabic string instrument.

That's Cameron Powers from his 2015 recording, Cameron Powers Project. You can find out more about his music and about the nonprofit Musical Ambassadors of Peace at the website cameronpowers.com.

Thanks for listening to Well, That Went Sideways! We produce new episodes twice a month. You can find them wherever you get your podcasts and on our website, sidewayspod.org. We also have information on our guests and links to more conflict resolution resources at the website, that's sidewayspod.org.

Our program is produced by Mary Zinn, Jes Rau, Norma Johnson, Alexis Miles, and me, Sam Fuqua. Our theme music is by Mike Stewart. And this podcast is a partnership with the Conflict Center, a Denver-based nonprofit that provides practical skills and training for addressing everyday conflicts. Find out more at conflictcenter.org.