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Sam Fuqua: That's Grace Gee, 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 Grace Gee about the healing power of art and storytelling. She is a Colorado-based artist, writer, and teacher, and much of our conversation centers on one of her recent projects called *Bubbling Up*. It's a public exhibit that invites members of the BIPOC community to write their stories of discrimination and injustice, and then non-BIPOC community members are invited to write a response.

I'm 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 edition of Well, That Went Sideways! by Grace Gee. Hello.

Grace Gee: Hi, Sam. Hi, Alexis.

Alexis Miles: Hi, Grace.

Sam Fuqua: Great to have you with us. One of the ways you identify yourself is as a Chinese Canadian. Can you talk a little bit about your, your upbringing and how that has influenced who you are today?

Grace Gee: Sure. I grew up in Canada, but I also lived in Hong Kong in, uh, in my teens, and I live in the US now. And so, I've traveled in Asia and Canada and the US quite a bit. And, I think the exposure I've had to people and cultures, different cultures, has really had me understand that no matter what our circumstances are, how we experience life is similar. And so my, my art is influenced in the, in that I feel like no matter what the expression is, no matter what the circumstance that brought me to pain or loss or joy, it is a shared, collective experience. And so, people can relate to, um, the art and the healing that happens.

Sam Fuqua: Was Canada a good place to grow up for someone who's Chinese Canadian?

Grace Gee: Uh, I think that it depends on, um, where you are, just like it depends on where you are here in the US. So, I did live in some places that were, um, more difficult to live in as a, as a Chinese person. Um, and then places that were easier to live in. And, they really did shape me in terms of who I am and how I navigate the world. A lot of the work that I'm doing right now currently is around diversity and equity, inclusion and uh, healing racism. So, there is absolutely a direct connection between my experiences and wanting to heal that for myself and then wanting to offer that to the collective to heal as well.

Sam Fuqua: How do you use your art to heal racism?

Grace Gee: That's a good question. I started a social justice healing art project called *Bubbling Up*, and I have fabricated these bubble-like forms for people to write their stories of discrimination or harassment on, and they represent the bubbles that some people who don't experience that discrimination live in. And so, it really is about all the stuff that's bubbling up and also sort of bursting that bubble through this project, allowing people who are not part of the global majority to read these stories and be touched by them, to learn from them, and maybe even to find themselves in, within these stories and realize perhaps where they have mis-stepped, unintentionally. I think there's a lot of, a lot of microaggressions aren't understood to be microaggressions by both the receiver and the giver. And, this project is one of those ways that I can, can educate and inform. So for me, this is an opportunity for people to tell their stories. And in telling those stories, they understand that they are not alone when they read the other stories and they get to express, sometimes for the first time, what has happened. And that seems to be a very common thing, is that people will say, "I've never told this story before, and it's such a relief to tell it."

Alexis Miles: Grace, when I hear you describe that project, it reminds me a little bit of Me Too, the Me Too movement. Because people telling this same story over and over and over seems to give it some weight, some gravitas, so that listeners begin to understand, oh, this is not just Grace's story or Alexis's story. This is a collective experience. And they, it seems that it may, it helps people to address it as something that's real and not just somebody's individual response. It, are you finding that?

Grace Gee: I absolutely am, from both sides of the, um, storytelling. So, the people who are telling the story realize, oh, you other people experience this too. Because I think so many times when we face racism and discrimination, we think, there's so much shame to it, right? And so we, we isolate, we don't talk about it, and then we think that we're alone. And to see your story told by another person is community building, is healing, and it creates this conversation, uh, amongst people who are participating. That is really beautiful. I think people do find community in that.

Alexis Miles: And when a person walks in, so they walk in through the door, could you describe what they see and what it looks like?

Grace Gee: Sure. I always have a little, uh, popup exhibit. So, I'll start with a few bubbles, and, um, these bubbles range from probably 14 inches to, you know, four inches. So, it's kind of like that bubbling, you know, different depths and different sizes. And then people who are not writing stories have a, an opportunity to respond on, um, an index card. So, like a three by six or four by six index card. So, those are interspersed within the bubbles. And also, I take pictures of the people who write stories so that they, you know, we can put a face to the story. It's, it, it personalizes it. So, mixed in with the bubbles are faces and responses. And, I just have a little mini sort of exhibit up so that people know what they're walking into and what they're contributing to. That's visually what they see. You know, I have a table with bubbles out and you know, I'm just inviting people to come and read, and then if they're so inspired, to write something. Or two bubbles or ten bubbles if they want.

Alexis Miles: And what has been the response so far?

Grace Gee: Uh, really positive. A lot of people engage. So, I think there are definitely people who walk past, they do not wanna engage in it at all. And then there are people who, who want to engage and they are, they are ones who will write long stories on bubbles, you know, or, or short stories on bubbles. And in, so, I always have a survey that people fill out and it's been so positive. I think, I think the number's something like 78 percent of people who participate in the um, in *Bubbling Up* say that they would like to volunteer for either a story gathering or making bubbles or putting up an exhibit, uh, which is phenomenal. And, um, I'm

getting a lot of people who are spreading the word. So, I think there's just a lot of engagement by a self-selected group of people. Let's just put it that way.

Sam Fuqua: How did you come upon the bubble as the, the vehicle? Which is whimsical, but also speaks to, you know, I live in Boulder, Colorado, for example, down the road from you. And, we sometimes talk about the Boulder bubble, which as I interpret that, is, uh, people who are largely white and affluent, kind of living in a bubble separate from the reality of, of our society. And that's, uh, of course a, a very simplistic view of it. But that's kind of one, uh, bubble metaphor that is used in my town.

Grace Gee: Yeah. And you're exactly right. That is exactly where that came from. As well as, um, I think that when we stuff our trauma, when we don't deal with our grief and our pain, it does bubble up. It bubbles up in so many different ways, in big ways, in small ways. It comes out when we least expect it, sometimes. And so, there's this bubbling up of this grief and also of this anger and injustice. So it's both, right? It's, it's that stuff that bubbles up, and it is bursting that bubble for people who are not experiencing it, who, who have said to me, "There's no racism in Boulder, is there?" So, I really felt like creating a project like this, uh, that visually you can understand, and is related to bursting the bubble, would be received well. You get to read stories, you don't, you're not lectured at. There's no long book to re, like it's lived experience. So you, you get to take in what you take in knowing that if you see a face, if you recognize a person on the wall, you know that their story's on the wall too. And you don't know whose is whose. So, I mean, this is what I wanted to do, was open up sort of what people walk around with that's invisible.

Sam Fuqua: Well, just to make this, uh, a little more real for our listeners, can you, can you share with us one of the stories that, uh, is in one of the bubbles, and perhaps a, a response to that story?

Grace Gee: Absolutely, Sam. Um, I have a few here. One of them right here is very simple. It says, "Why do you eat rice with everything?" And that's, you know, there's so much comment around food. The smelliness or the non-smelliness. The, what it is that we eat. That's very, a very common theme. Let me read this one, "I constantly feel tokenized at work as diversity, equity and inclusion has become the next big trend to show off how progressive the institution is, to recruit more students. I am being invited to more meetings just for show. My voice remains in an echo chamber, and sys, systemic issues are never addressed. Thank you for creating this space for community." Can I read this one as well? "At 15, I had a huge crush on a white friend who came from a rich, affluent family. He liked me back but didn't want to date me. I learned later that his parents didn't want him to date me and preferred him to date someone more appropriate, just, I mean, 'appropriate' despite them telling me, uh, I was very bright, smart, and pretty girl. I carried that with me for a long time, uh, believing that I would have to work twice as hard to overcome my 'disadvantages' when really they were racist." I have a couple, um, responses.

Sam Fuqua: For the listener, to set the stage, uh, someone looking at the bubbles, reading the story, is then invited to write their reaction on a card.

Grace Gee: That's right. Uh, here's one. "I can't imagine the pain of not feeling safe in your own home. Of feeling targeted in this way. I had a friend who grew up on a sheep farm whose fam, family also had a rifle at the front door to protect the sheep. I can't imagine the terror of needing to protect the humans in this way. I am so sorry." This one speaks directly to a specific bubble. This one speaks more generally as an affirmation, "Thank you for continuing to try to help us understand. It must be exhausting and frustrating. I don't understand. This isn't my lived experience. It isn't my sisters, my mother's, my family's experience. Please keep trying to help me understand. I want to understand. I want to do better. Hold me accountable." So, there's a range of responses.

Alexis Miles: What strikes me, Grace, is that this project seems to require people to be vulnerable. And can you talk about the role of vulnerability and healing?

Grace Gee: Yeah, I, I think it's, um, I think it's critical. I think without opening enough to be a little bit vulnerable, we can't really touch on the pain that needs healing. And if we can't touch it, we can't go there, right? We can't begin to shift it if we can't acknowledge it. So, it does absolutely require a certain level and people come in with whatever they're comfortable with, this much or this much, and they speak about it in their, the comment section of the survey afterwards. Sometimes it makes a big difference that it's anonymous, that they don't, they can tell their story and put it on the wall. Excuse me. Um, and then sometimes, um, sometimes I hear, I, I can't quite do it, you know, like, I'm not, I'm not comfortable writing a story. And, I always tell them they can send in a story anonymously on my website, and I'll put their story on the, on a bubble. And so I think it speaks to that, um, what I was talking about earlier, that some people just walk by because it is too, too much and they can't do it. But I want the opportunity to be there, and then they get to choose what, how, how vulnerable they are.

Sam Fuqua: I'm interested in, in another part of your work, which is, uh, helping people through transitions. Uh, could be a, a transition of loss or a transition of birth or, I, I think if I'm, uh, interpreting correctly, any major life transition, which all often brings up all kinds of conflicts within us and within our relationships with our loved ones. Um, how do you approach that work? What does it involve? Can you talk about the, that, that part of, of what you're doing?

Grace Gee: Sure. Um, transition work really, um, deals with, as you said, everything from birth to death. The good, the, you know, "positive" transitions are still stressful. And I use art, I use a number of different sort of modalities within art to access how we feel, and interpret what's going on in a way that is empowering.

Sam Fuqua: So, that might be, uh, creating a, a work of visual art that helps them to understand?

Grace Gee: Yep. It might be writing. It might be creating visual art. It might be movement. It depends on what is, um, asked for. Uh, we do, I do a lot of work with actually somatically, somatic work, and asking yourself, asking your body what is needed and then going from there. So it's, it's very personal because it's not one size fits all.

Sam Fuqua: Can you say a little bit more about that 'cause some folks might not know the term "somatic work" and, and what the connection is there?

Grace Gee: Sure. So, sometimes I do work where we will ask questions of the body to, to find out, to bypass that thinking brain and go straight through to the heart and how you feel, and asking the body what is needed. And it could be a range of things. It could be action, it could be emotion, it could be being, being comforted by words or by any number of, um, action really, through art, through movement. And in that, we're sort of bypassing this cognitive piece that often tells us, based on society, what's needed. Oh, you need to rest. Well, maybe you don't need to rest. Maybe you really just need to acknowledge your feelings. Maybe you need to be with yourself. And maybe that's all that's being asked for. And once you do that, the whole system settles, right? Your whole nervous system can settle, and you can, um, approach a transition in a very different way when your nervous system isn't jacked, lack of a better word.

Sam Fuqua: I mean, it definitely tracks with some of the other guests we've had on this program. We've talked about the physical responses to conflict and how can we center ourselves in our bodies when we're in potentially very intense conflict with another person.

Grace Gee: Right. And that conflict is recreated by our memories. So, we don't have to be currently in a conflict. We just have to be remembering it for our nervous system to be responding in the same way. So, to be able to breathe differently, to be able to, you know, whatever it is that's needed to, to bring that down, and then to move forward with something that is healing is, is that work of transitions.

Alexis Miles: I've read, and we talked a little bit about the fact that you have had this profound healing journey in your life, and in fact you almost died.

Grace Gee: Mm-hmm.

Alexis Miles: Can you talk about that and how that led to the work that you're currently doing, in part?

Grace Gee: Mm-hmm. Yeah, sure. In 2014, I, uh, went into the hospital, um, in septic shock, and had just multi-organ failure and was on life support for, part of that time, I had C. Diff so I was in isolation because I was really quite sick. And a couple of times during that month in hospital, I was told, um, or my then husband was told that I wasn't gonna make it through the night so come and say goodbye. And obviously, I survived. And, I came out of that with a really profound change in my relationship to myself and the world and really everything. And I, I decided, it's not even like I decided, I just came out of that with this understanding that I could not do things the way I was doing them. I took this as a wakeup call. As a, you need to, um, make some changes. So, it kind of broke me down all the way to the ground, broke me open and said, you know, rebuild. Rebuild in a way that, um, honors your life. Honors the second and third chance at living. So, I really try to do that every day. Be grateful that I'm here. Um, understand that we don't know how many, how much time we have, ever. We don't know that we have tomorrow. So, live today, um, fully, and without regret. And do the work, you know. I, I figured out what I was here to do and, and I'm determined to do it. And I feel I am doing it, but it can get bigger.

Alexis Miles: And part of that work is community healing?

Grace Gee: Absolutely. Yeah. It's, um, being able to affect change in my community and, you know, I grew up with racism at a very early age, and I think I've been thinking about how I could have any sort of part in changing that my whole life. And for most of my life I was quite despondent about it. I didn't think that there was really anything that could be done that would make any difference. And, um, I think this project does. In fact, I know this project does. So, um, one of the things I did, uh, was to, you know, sort of figure that out and what, what can I do? How can we affect change from the grassroots level, you know, one person at a time? You know, research shows that having these conversations with children changes the trajectory of their lives, right? Of what would normally be the racism or the discrimination that is just part of how we live. So, I love having *Bubbling Up* in libraries and in places where children will be there so that they can touch the bubbles and ask what it is, and "Mommy read this to me," or "Daddy, what is this?" You know? And, and then they get to open up these conversations.

Alexis Miles: Well, we like listeners to have a very doable, practical takeaway. So, what are a couple of things you could suggest for individuals to do who are interested in community healing or even healing themselves?

Grace Gee: Right. And healing yourself is the beginning of community healing or they're, they can be very intertwined. So, absolutely. And I, I am a big proponent of storytelling, sharing stories, whether that is anonymously or not anonymously. Regardless of what the topic is, whether it's discrimination or you know, any, any variety of things, I think finding your people, finding your group, right, and sharing your stories, understanding that there actually is a support group for everything out there. I lived in isolation around certain, um, subjects, around infertility and around racism, then, and I didn't understand that I wasn't alone. And that was, it was so hard. So, I think being in community, finding your support group, and doing whatever it is, whether it's writing, drawing, acting, you know, music, dancing, something that is an expression of what you're going through is the healing piece. And whether you share that, you know, or not is whether it is personal or whether it's community based.

Sam Fuqua: I think it's so important for everybody to know that they, they have that creative power in them and they have a story to tell.

Grace Gee: People say often I'm not creative, but again, this is sort of training, you know, it's kind of the same as I'm not pretty enough, you know, I, like, if there is only one standard and one mold, no, most of us will not fit into that. But the truth is we live our lives creatively all the time, you know. Creative problem solving. Creative, you know, ways of speaking with people. Our communication. I would argue that everybody has creativity in them, and if they accepted that, it would come out. But as long as you say, I'm not creative, or I can't draw or dance or whatever, then you really can't. So yes, we absolutely have it in us to, to do this work.

Alexis Miles: So Grace, it sounds like you're saying that we all are inherently creative. And the more we're able to act on that creativity, the more healing we have and the stronger our communities are and our relationships are with each other. Is that what you're saying?

Grace Gee: That is absolutely what I'm saying. Yes.

Alexis Miles: I had not thought of that before. The relationship between creativity and healing and community.

Grace Gee: I think art has the power to heal. Um, partly in that way that we bypass our thinking brain because we're so, sort of like linear, Cartesian, you know, car, cognitive, and to be able to bypass that, to reach our feelings and touch our hearts, that is healing. I also think that, um, what we do to heal ourselves, I'm understanding this now, can always be brought into community, right? I did this project that is not about equity and inclusion, it's about red flags in relationships, and I invited the community to come and tell their stories. They literally wrote on red and green flags about relational waves of being that, you know, are red flags. And the conversation, so the, it started with myself, right? So, I'm writing all these red flags, like, oh, should have seen that, should have seen that. And then, um, I realized if I open this up to the community, it's, it's available to everybody. So then, people came, wrote flags. And, I actually sell these kits that are red and green flags for people to purchase and do it on their own. So then that is how that goes. Starts with me doing my own work and goes out to the community. And then you walk into somebody's house and they have a string of red and green flags up, and you ask them, what's that about? And then that conversation starts, right? And then, and then they're talking about, oh, what are your red flags? Oh, you know, what are your green flags? What are you looking for in relationship? I mean, whether it's romantic relationship or business relationship or family relationships, it doesn't matter. It's, you know, it's all there.

Alexis Miles: And it reminds me of the *Bubbling Up* project. You make it tactile. So people actually get to see it, touch it, feel it.

Grace Gee: And people can. They can go up to this exhibit and touch it. It's totally fine.

Alexis Miles: And so just, I wanna make sure I understand it. So, the red flags are things we look out for. Oh, that's, that could be a dangerous area, that could be harmful. And the green flags are the positives. Oh, I should run in this direction. These are life supporting.

Grace Gee: Yes. Like, oh, that's what I want. I'm looking for this. I'm looking for somebody who can communicate, you know, who is honest. I'm not looking for somebody who lies, you know, or, you know, who, who puts me down in front of other people. So, I started with red flags, but I, I came to understand that's not the whole story, right? Uh, every relationship is filled with red and green flags, otherwise we wouldn't have been there. So, to tell the whole story, you just hope that the balance is, uh, greater on one side. And I think, you know, the kits are used in that way where people get to, um, write out these things, these red and green flags, and then use them as reference for when, when you start a new relationship, when you're going into the business with somebody, when you're interview, interviewing for a job, you get to sort of look at your lists and go, where am I? Where's the balance? And you, you run if the, if the balance is on the red and, uh, run, run towards, if the balance is on the green.

Alexis Miles: So, it sounds like this can be used both by individuals and by communities. So a community group could do this.

Grace Gee: Yes. Yes. An affinity group could do this. A department could say, this is how we wanna, this is what we're looking for in our clients. This is how we wanna speak to each other. This is how we wanna put ourselves out there in the world like this, not like this. For sure.

Alexis Miles: That sounds to me like it's because everybody gets to be involved in shaping that. That it could be even more powerful than like a vision statement for an organization. You know, that's written up on the wall. This is actually written, but it was written by the collective.

Grace Gee: Yes. In their own voices. So, that's a big piece of *Bubbling Up* as well as the flags, is that people, it's not cha, it's not an interpretation through me. Like I'm not interpreting your words. I am your voice, exactly how you are speaking is represented. And for *Bubbling Up*, that's important for a community that typically is underrepresented.

Sam Fuqua: Well, I know artists are always, uh, looking ahead and thinking of the next project. So in addition to the projects you've described, where, where are you going next with this work?

Grace Gee: Well, *Bubbling Up* is sort of in its inception, so I am continuing to gather stories and also exhibit in the studio. I am continuing to do my own fine art. Um, I do a lot of stitching and again, you know, it's healing work, so I'm just continuing with that and experimenting with new items and new techniques. So, that's very exciting. And then, um, *Bubbling Up* will just continue to grow, and I'm starting to open up to private as well as public sort of venues. And I did, uh, story gathering events with high school students at Boulder, Boulder High School, and so, and that was so great. I am really looking forward to working with more high school students 'cause I think that the earlier we catch people and that we can sort of point out what is racism, what is discrimination. Sometimes it's very obvious, but sometimes those microaggressions

just leave you feeling a certain way, but not really understanding why. And so that's, that's been important to me to be able to educate in that way. I mean, educate might not be the right way, but expose. Because when I was younger, I, I didn't really understand why certain things felt so awful. I just know that they felt awful when they were said to me, you know. The subtle things, right? So, to be able to expose that as, yes, this is racism, this is discrimination and you should call it out as that, and here's, here's what you can do if you're a bystander to that. You don't have to just be quiet. So, I'm excited about working with high school students and doing sort of more private events.

Sam Fuqua: Well, we look forward to, uh, to learning more about them and seeing them if we're able to. And folks, of course can find out more about your work on your website. Uh, Grace Gee, it's been really a pleasure to talk with you. Thank you so much.

Grace Gee: Thank you, Sam. Thank you, Alexis. It's been great to be with you.

Alexis Miles: It's been a pleasure. Thank you.

Sam Fuqua: Grace Gee is an artist, writer, and teacher. You can find out about her work at her website, healinggracestudio.com.

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