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Sam Fuqua: That's Heidi Burgess, 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 Heidi Burgess about intractable conflict and the challenges of dialogue. She is the co-founder and co-director of the *Conflict Information Consortium*. With her partner, Guy Burgess, they started the consortium while at the University of Colorado. Since their retirement, they continue to run it as an independent resource. They also maintain a website called *Beyond Intractability*.**

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

Alexis Miles: Hello, Sam.

Sam Fuqua: And we're really pleased to be joined for this episode by Heidi Burgess. Hello and welcome.

Heidi Burgess: Hello, and thank you for having me.

Sam Fuqua: Can we start, Heidi Burgess, with a definition of intractable conflict?

Heidi Burgess: Well, there's a very funny story in answer to that question. We define intractable conflicts as ones that have been going on for a very long time, and they're highly resistant to traditional conflict resolution techniques. However, intractable does not mean impossible. So, intractable conflicts can be transformed into much less destructive and more constructive conflicts and then eventually be resolved. The story is, when we started a project that was called the *Intractable Conflict Knowledge Base Project*, we got about 50 people from around the world together, the people who, at the time, were working in this area, and who knew a lot about what made conflicts intractable and what could be done about it. We got 50 percent scholars, 50 percent practitioners. And, we got into a huge argument as to whether there was such a thing as intractable conflict and whether we should call it that. And the practitioners didn't like that term because they felt that it meant they were a failure, uh, because it means that there's something that they can't fix, and of course, they can fix everything. So, they wanted us to change the term saying that if you're going to declare a failure from the outset, why is anybody going to pay attention? The scholars, on the other hand, who have been studying things like Israel-Palestine were quite insistent that there were such a things as intractable conflict. And, the Hewlett Foundation, who was funding us at the time, was very interested in intractable conflict. So, that was the deciding factor. We thought that we could get more money if we used the term. And we really believe it. And I think a lot of people who were looking at Israel now might agree with us that, yeah, there really are intractable conflicts. But the thing that I always emphasize is it doesn't mean it's impossible. It just means it's very hard.

Sam Fuqua: Well, can you offer an example of a, a well-known intractable conflict that did move into a phase that is perhaps not complete resolution, but much less destructive?

Heidi Burgess: The two that we talk about most are South Africa and Northern Ireland. Neither are perfect now, of course, but for people who are as old as I am, uh, who were alive during apartheid, you'd remember that we thought apartheid was going to end in an incredible blood, bloodbath. And, we were amazed and very relieved when it did not. Things aren't great in South Africa now. They're backsliding. The ANC lost for the first time a few days ago, but still there hasn't been a bloodbath. And, they have been moving, from what I've heard from people who live there, in a positive direction. Same with Northern Ireland. Uh, it's not great. There are still lots of problems, but nothing like what occurred during The Troubles. So, both of those conflicts, in my mind, have been transformed. For a long time, we thought the Cold War had been transformed. Uh, not so much anymore. But, um, those are the three that we talk about the most. And then there's ones that are not international, but lower level conflicts. So, conflicts between people, conflicts between organizations, communities. Uh, there's lots of conflicts that have gone on for say, even between families, for many, many years, and then something happens to transform them, and people get reconciled.

Alexis Miles: Heidi, would you consider gun control and abortion rights to be intractable conflicts?

Heidi Burgess: Abortion, certainly. Guns, not quite as sure about that one. But, one of the interesting things about abortion is 20, 30 years ago when I was teaching this stuff, we put a continuum up on the board the first day of class and had tractable conflicts over here, intractable conflicts over here, and we had students name various conflicts and then put them up on the continuum, and all the way farthest over to most intractable was abortion, and also was gay rights. This was before gay marriage had really become a thing. We're still talking about gay rights. And the interesting thing to me is gay rights, gay marriage has moved way, the way I'm looking, left, and abortion's still over here. And one of the really interesting questions is, why? What is it that happened that allowed us to make so much progress on one area and not on the other, when 20 years ago they looked equally stuck?

Alexis Miles: Well, that generates a lot of questions on my side. I first just want to stick with this point of the difference between intractable conflicts and other conflicts. Is the primary distinguishing factor longevity, the length of time it's been going on?

Heidi Burgess: That's a big one, although people will ask me well, how long is long, and it kind of depends on the context of the expectations. If you have something that you think should be really simple, and it's gone on for a year, you might say, yeah, that's intractable. Nobody would expect Israel-Palestine to get solved in a year. So, if that one were solved in a year, I'd say, no, there's no way it's intractable. So, it kind of is a comparison between expectations and what happens. Another thing that isn't part of the formal definition for us or for most people, but it's very relevant, is the degree of destructiveness. So, if a conflict's been going on for a long time, but nobody really cares, eh, okay, I'm not going to worry about that one a whole lot. But if people are really getting hurt, then that really contributes to our attention anyway, and we would call it a intractable conflict. I remember remembering at that very first meeting where we had such long discussions and arguments about it, there were a number of people who put in other factors as well, and I'm trying to remember what they were. I think that the primary ones were much harder than expected, not responding to, to traditional techniques, and doing a lot of harm.

Sam Fuqua: You co-authored a paper that's on the website, and I am going to quote from it, "In the public arena, in traditional and social media, and in interpersonal interactions, invectives have replaced constructive dialogue." How did that happen?

Heidi Burgess: I'm not sure I know. Part of it has to do I think with the nature of social media. Even if your name's up on social media it's, it's a more removed form of communication, and a lot of what happens on social media is anonymous. So, you aren't seeing people face-to-face. You're not getting immediate reactions, including very negative reactions. If you are off the wall, as a matter of fact, social media is structured that the more outrageous you are, probably the more likes you're going to get. So, it's a system that is designed really to encourage increasingly outrageous conversations, and I think it's, it's very damaging in that way. There's also a tendency, and this has been true forever, but I think it's getting to be more socially acceptable now, to paint everything in terms of black and white, us versus them. All of the conflicts that we look at, all of the ones that we would call intractable, are really extremely complex. And there's many different parties. There's many different issues. There's usually fault on all sides, and it's not a simple story of the good guys versus the bad guys, but that's the way people like to make it because they want to think that they're on the right side and the other folks are on the wrong side. And, it's hard to keep track of all the complexities. It's much easier to just tell a simple narrative of all my problems are due to them. And, they're bad. And, I'm going to make that clear on social media or in other interactions. And, not listen to the other side because I already know what they think, and I'm not interested. And, it just escalates conflicts and makes constructive conversations deteriorate very quickly.

Alexis Miles: You know, I was thinking about what you're saying about complexity, and the approach you use it, you use, I believe, requires a more systemic approach. It seems that people, in general, don't have the patience for a systemic approach.

Heidi Burgess: That's very true because it takes a lot of time to really learn what's going on and really get a handle on all the different aspects of these difficult conflicts. I mean, the one that we're spending most time looking at now is the red-blue divide in the United States. It's so much easier to just assume that it's all the Republicans' fault or it's all the Democrats' fault, depending on which side you're on. And, it's not fun, and it's not easy to look at yourself and ask, how am I contributing to the situation? And, how are external factors contributing to the situation? When we were teaching, we had students do something that we call conflict mapping, which is making a big diagram of all the factors that were leading to, for instance, the red-blue divide of the United States, and we'd give them post it notes and big pieces of paper and tell them to list all of the things that they thought might be contributing to the red-blue divide. And, they get 20, 30 things written down on post it notes, and then we tell them, okay, put them up on this piece of paper, which is up on a board. Put them all up and then start drawing arrows between them to show that, oh, for instance, aggressive comments on social media, get people riled up so that they go to work and they yell at their coworkers at work. And, you see, they ended up with what I call the spaghetti diagram. Arrows going every which way, and the main thing they learned from that, later they learned how to simplify the map and get something useful out of it. But the first lesson is, it's a whole lot more complicated than it's the Republicans fault.

So, yes, certainly, the Republicans have done things that make our divide much worse. So have the Democrats, in reality. So, have, unfortunately, the Russians and the Iranians and the Palestinians and the North Koreans. Everyone is quite happy to help make our divides worse than they were. Um, so there's just tons of stuff that's playing in, which means that unraveling it is very, very difficult. It's one of the things that leads to intractability is more complex you have, situation you have, the more problems you have to solve. The more difficult it is. You can't just bring in one mediator and sit people down. One of the stories that I like to tell is our first meeting to form *Beyond Intractability* just happened to happen fairly soon after 9/11. And, we, it was all scheduled before 9/11, and everybody had bought their plane tickets and all that. So, we

went ahead with it. We said, well, there's certainly something to talk about. And, one of the women who came to the meeting said, said, if I could just get George Bush and Osama bin Laden to sit down in a room with me, I could work this out. And I'm going, oh, yeah. I don't think your image of intractability and my image are at all the same, because I don't think you're going to sit down with Osama bin Laden and Bush and work this one out. Again, it was just way more complex than she was visualizing, and we're still seeing it playing out today.

Alexis Miles: So, given the current aversion to complexity and to taking a systemic approach, how do you entice people into conversation?

Heidi Burgess: You can have a constructive conversation without embracing the complexity. Conversations, I think, work best, it depends what the purpose of the conversation is, of course. But, most often, the folks that we're working with who are trying to deal with the red-blue divide are trying to improve the understanding between people on both sides. And, a well run dialogue is very effective at doing that for the people who are in the room. My concern about dialogue is that it's hard to get the benefits of the dialogue to go outside the room, but that's another matter. We can talk about that later. Inside the room, the typical way to handle it is to get people to tell stories. To talk about who they are, how they grew up, what it was that brought them to the place where they are now, and allowed them, cause them to formulate the opinions and attitudes that they had. And, stories are rich in complexity, but it doesn't seem complex because it's just a personal story.

And, well-facilitated people on all sides, far right, far left, if they're listening to stories and not allowed to jump in and interrupt and yell directives and that kind of thing, usually, really are moved by the stories that they hear. And, they come to understand that, wow, that person who voted for Trump actually is a decent person, and I can understand how they got to where they are, given what happened in their childhood, given the way that they were brought up, whatever, folks will come to understand the other. The problem with dialogues is that doesn't always translate into long-term attitude change. Folks go back to their circles, people are saying the same things about the other, as they've been saying all along, and you come to the conclusion either, well, this, that person was a special example. He or she was really reasonable, but most of them aren't. And you just get back in your milieu and you go back to the same patterns again. So, it's hard to maintain, and I also point out just the sheer arithmetic of a, dialogues typically happen with 20, 10 to 20 people in a room. We've got what, um, 300 million people in the United States right now. That number is probably way off. You can't possibly do dialogues with everybody. But, it's a really good way to get people to deal with complexity without even knowing that they're dealing with complexity.

Sam Fuqua: So, what do we do then when this leaves the room of 10 or 20 people and we want to apply some of these ideas to systemic change and resolving intractable conflicts at a, at a large scale? Is it even possible? What are the limits of that?

Heidi Burgess: Well, I've got two answers to that. One is that there have been organizations that have experimented with very large scale online dialogues. It's harder to control, and some of them, I gather, have been abject failures, but some of them have been apparently fairly successful. There is a possibility there. We have two approaches to answering that question. One is that you have to do lots and lots of things at the same time. We've come up with this notion that we call massively parallel peace building or problem solving. And the notion is that you need to have thousands or hundreds of thousands of people working in their own little places, their local places, doing their own things, roughly towards the same goal. So, the

goal in this case might be diminishing the red-blue divide, diminishing the hatred that we all feel for the other side. We're not expecting to have everybody think the same way that (a) wouldn't be good, and (b) isn't possible, but just getting people less hateful of each other, I think, is a goal that many of us would be willing, eager to embrace. And there's many, many different ways to do that. Dialogue is one, and there are hundreds of organizations now running thousands of dialogues all over the country, but there's lots of other things that are going on too, besides dialogues.

So, there's folks who are working on getting something called citizens assemblies going, where they bring citizens together to try to grapple with a particular local problem, um, and give advice to the city council or the county commissioners or whatever. There's different ways of doing public participation, other than hearings, which tend to get out of hand really quickly, but citizen advisory boards, public opinion polls, have been used quite successfully to get people's attitudes about things, and then develop policies based on those attitudes and then go back and pull people again so you have an iterative process of getting people involved in designing local policies. There's a lot of innovative stuff that's being done at the local level. Most of the people that we're working with and talking to said, stay local. Federal level is, is, some of them will say total loss, some of them will say much more difficult. We would agree with much more difficult. But the hope is, if you have a whole lot of success at breaking down barriers at the local level, then people at the federal level hopefully will notice. And in fact, it's not federal, it's halfway in between.

We're real, really, enthusiastic about the National Governors Association Disagree Better campaign. It's now being run by Jared Polis, who has taken over the National Association of Governors, and they're sponsoring this and the notion is that there's a better way that we could disagree, that we don't have to come to fisticuffs to disagree. So, this is it's, it's at the state level, but it's the National Association of Governors. So, it's being promulgated in all of the states. So, in that sense, it's, it's going national. It's getting quite a bit of play and they're doing interesting things. So, there's just a lot of interesting things going on. So, our notion is that you have to get lots of people working on little things locally, all adding up to something big, and also designing processes that are bigger, such as online dialogues with thousands of people. An organization called Search for Common Ground has been doing radio soap operas that they started in Burundi and they've taken in many different parts of the world. Very successful in getting people to change attitudes by having a soap opera where people are having the conflicts that are happening on the ground, and lo and behold, they work through them in a positive way. And, in Burundi, it really has changed the dynamics. And everybody, the media of choice in Burundi when they were doing this, was radio. They didn't have television. They didn't have print that much. So, um, everybody was tuning into the soap opera and learning better ways to handle conflict. And we think it's a fabulous way to scale up conflict education. So, and again, you can show the complexities. You can teach people skills, and it, it's exciting. It isn't dry and boring and academic and you're not turning people away. You're drawing people in.

Alexis Miles: Well, I know right now in the US, a lot of people have very, extremely strong feelings about Israel and Palestine. So, would something like that be useful to help people have conflict better or to at least come together more to find solutions rather than just attacking each other?

Heidi Burgess: I think it would. I think neither side in the United States, very few people really understand what's going on. Uh, certainly don't have a deep understanding of what's going on, and they're jumping to assumptions that aren't at all true, largely based on images that we have developed in the United States, and we have this simple oppressed-oppressor understanding of good guys and bad guys. And, the image is that Israel is the oppressor and the Palestinians are the oppressed. And I don't want to go into that because

that'll take us into a huge morass. But again, it is much more complex. And, I wish that before Americans took a stand one way or the other, and certainly before they went on marches or online protesting one way or the other, they took the time to learn something about what really is going on and, and what the history is, and what's going on now, and look at where their information is coming from, because this is a classic case of wild misinformation that's being spewed around and leading people to really dangerous and destructive assumptions.

Sam Fuqua: Let me follow up on that by asking you about the media. Even if the dialogues and the constructive actions you've described over the, this course of this interview were put in place, if people are still getting their information, uh, and consuming particular types of media that really skew perspective, I don't know that, that the, uh, the other stuff is going to work, you know.

Heidi Burgess: Yeah, well, I think you're right. I do think we need much better media. One of the factors that I think has led us to where we are now is the demise of local media. Uh, there used to be very vibrant local television stations, radio stations, um, newspapers, and now they've all been bought up, um, by a few monopolies that spread the same news all over the country. One of the things that really frustrates me about Boulder, uh, Sam, if you're in Boulder, is that The Daily Camera has been bought up by, I don't remember which conglomerate, and you can't get much local news about what's going on in Boulder. And, it's really hard to find out what the city council is up to, what they're thinking about, what the problems are, what the various options are. It's just not covered. And, this is doing a lot of damage to our local democracy and causing people to lose faith in democracy overall. And then, of course, we've got the extreme Fox News on the right and MSNBC on the left, and they're just battling it out.

There's an organization called All Sides Media, and another one that's called Ad Fontes Media, which both have what they call media bias charts. So, they have a chart that, their charts are different. It's interesting to compare where they agree and where they don't. Um, but they both have like an arc. And, up at the top in the center, the media entities that they see as being most neutral or balanced. So I, I tend to look at them and try to pay most attention to the media that they both agree are in the middle. And, the other thing I like about All Sides is if you go to All Sides website, or if you subscribe to them, they send out emails, they'll give you the left side of the story, the right side of the story, and you can then draw your own opinions of, do I agree with the left or do I agree with the right? But at least you've heard both sides. The problem with most people's consumption of the media is that we're completely siloed. So, we're only getting the left's point of view, and to the extent that we're getting the right's point of view, we're getting it filtered through the left. So, the left is telling us, well, all these crazies on the right are saying this, that, and the other thing. Well, if you go to the right media, you'll find out they actually aren't saying that.

So, we urge people to look at both sides and then draw their own judgment about what makes sense. But I totally agree with you. Media's a big part of our problem. And, part of, it's largely because of the way we finance the media. Media gets more money the more people they have watching them and they are reading them or listening to them. And, they get more people if they tell outrageous stories that get their audiences riled up. So, it's financially to the benefit of Fox News to be as outrageous as they possibly can. And, it's financially to the benefit of MSNBC to get their audience as riled up as they possibly can. And there isn't money in this balanced middle and somehow we've got to be able to deal with that problem, and I have to admit that's not one that I've grappled with. I hope somebody else would.

Sam Fuqua: Well, it did strike me as you were talking that perhaps there's a role for conflict resolution professionals in the media, uh, in the newsroom. I don't know.

Heidi Burgess: There's an organization that was started by a journalist named Amanda Ripley, who's fairly well known for a book that she wrote called *High Conflict*. Her organization, I think she's left it now, is called Solutions Journalism. And, the notion is that journalism ought to focus on problems that need solutions and focus on people and organizations who are coming up with solutions and write stories about them instead of stories about who's fighting whom over what. And, more and more newsrooms are signing up to be part of the Solutions Journalism Network, and that's a really positive thing. It would be great if we could get that really widely adopted. They're growing, I gather, pretty significantly. And there's an equivalent that I don't remember what it's called in Europe that has grown very significantly. So, there's hope there.

Alexis Miles: You used the word hope. What else gives you hope?

Heidi Burgess: The thing that gives me the most hope is that there are so many people and so many organizations that are doing useful things, good things to try to at least lower the heat here in the United States. I'm sure there's other stuff going on around the world, but I'm really focused now on the United States and that's where I know most about. We've been involved in a number of networks of organizations that are working on the red-blue divide and we go to one Zoom, uh, meeting that meets about every two weeks, often involving up to 50, 75 organizations, many of which are organizations of organizations. Like the Bridge Alliance is an organization that brings together lots of other organizations that are doing bridging work. And, you put it all together and we've got to be talking upwards of a million people who are already involved in what we call this massively parallel process to try to make things bigger. They're not visible. They're not being given the news coverage. So, very few people know they're out there. Very few people know what they're doing.

And this is one of the things that we're trying to do now with *Beyond Intractability* is raise their visibility because (a) I think it, it certainly gives me hope, and I think it'll, can give other people hope that there are answers. There are ways out of this. And, we shouldn't just crawl into a corner, stick our head in the sand and cry. Or, scream at our friends and quite possibly contribute to making things worse instead of making things better. There's lots going on and there is lots of ways that other people who would like to see things get better can get involved. You don't have to be a professional mediator. You don't have to be a conflict resolver. There's an org, uh, organization at a website called Citizens Connect, which is actually part of the Bridge Alliance, and I don't know the URL, but if you Google Citizens Connect, you'll get there right away. And, it lets you enter where you are, and then there's a pull down menu that can talk, where you can choose what issues you're concerned about, what kinds of things you might be interested in doing, and you can find out what are the organizations in your community that are doing things that you might be interested in. What are the organizations that are having meetings next week that you could go to. And it's for the whole country.

So, there is opportunity for everybody to get involved in helping make our politics better rather than worse. Helping strengthen our democracy instead of watching it go down the tubes. And I think hope comes from the fact that there are things going on, lots of things going on. And if we could get 10, 20, 100 times the number of people involved, it would just explode and be bigger than all of the negative stuff that's going on. Right now, unfortunately, the folks that we call bad faith actors are way ahead of us. They're playing the social media games much better than the conflict resolution folks are playing the social media games, but

we don't have to give up. We can play that game too. We just have to get involved and we have to start doing it.

Sam Fuqua: Heidi Burgess, thank you. We're appreciative of your time and of your work.

Heidi Burgess: Well, thanks very much for having me.

Sam Fuqua: Heidi Burgess is the co-founder and co-director of the *Conflict Information Consortium*. You can find them online at beyondintractability.org. Beyond Intractability also offers a free newsletter that you can sign up for at their website.

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