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Sam Fuqua: That's Ken Cloke on conflict and difficult conversations. And this is Well, That Went Sideways! A podcast that serves as a resource to help people have healthy, respectful, and non-violent communication. We present ideas, tools, and techniques to help you transform conflict in relationships of all kinds.

Jes Rau: Welcome to the episode of Well, That Went Sideways! I'm Jes Rau, joined by co-host, Sam Fuqua. And today our guest is Ken Cloke. Welcome Ken.

Ken Cloke: Thank you.

Sam Fuqua: Ken, it's great to speak with you. Ken, for folks who may not be familiar, is a mediator. He wrote a book in 2018 called *Politics Dialogue and The Evolution of Democracy*, and then the subtitle of that book is, *How to Discuss Race, Abortion, Immigration, Gun Control, Climate Change, Same Sex Marriage, and Other Hot Topics*. Certainly, Ken, as we record this conversation in mid-June, we have many hot topics, if you will, to say the least. We're in the midst of nationwide protests in the streets of, of many cities and towns around, uh, police brutality sparked, uh, by many incidences, most notably the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis Police. We are in the fourth month of a pandemic, and the restrictions put in place to control the spread of COVID-19 and address public health concerns. And we're just a few months away from a presidential election, uh, with a current president who seems to thrive on divisive rhetoric. So, what's top of mind for you during this time full of conflict?

Ken Cloke: Well, I think that this is really the hour for conflict resolution to come to the fore. Um, to start with, uh, I'd just like to add to the crises that you've mentioned. Uh, I think first of all, we've actually, we are in the middle right now of five crises. First, a social crisis sparked by the incident involving George Floyd and issues of racism and police brutality, but extending also to the role of the police and how they handle demonstrators, extending to violence and discrimination against women, LGBTQ people, Jews, Muslims, Chinese, uh, and others. Uh, a general, uh, social crisis over the issue of prejudice and discrimination. We're also in the middle of an economic crisis sparked by the global lockdown, but extending also to global poverty, to economic inequity, uh, exploitation, the prioritization of profits over people. And as you indicated, we've got a political crisis, uh, that's being, uh, uh, that's going to pivot, uh, in November of this year, uh, and, uh, is impacting all of the rest of this, but is also sparked to some extent by denials of the right to vote, um, uh, extending also to gerrymandering and even to democracy itself. We obviously have the health crisis, but we don't wanna lose sight of the fact that we have also a deep and profound ecological and environmental crisis that is sparked by global warming and species extinctions, but extends also to issues involving air, water, and soil pollution. Um, and our general attitude towards ecology and each of these is influencing the others. Um, each of them makes the others worse and harder to handle. Um, each of them requires a higher order of skill in problem solving. Here's the place where conflict resolution, I think, comes to our assistance because what it represents is precisely that higher order of problem solving that is required in order to tackle global problems in a diverse environment.

Sam Fuqua: Let's talk about how that works on an individual level. And one of the goals of this program is to give people practical information that they can use in their daily lives as they have these, uh, what can

be very difficult conversations. What are some things to keep in mind during those interactions? Or, is that the best place to start?

Ken Cloke: Well, actually we have, uh, at least three places that conflicts occur in, and we can start in any one of them, uh, because our approach to conflict is really very similar in each of those three locations. Uh, the first is that conflicts occur inside of us. Secondly, they occur relationally with others. And third, they occur in the systems and structures, uh, in the environment, um, uh, that surrounds us. So what we, what works is, first of all, uh, to recognize that conflict can be defined as a place where there are two or more truths. Each of one thinking that it's the only one that's true. So the first approach is to recognize that there can be multiple truths. So for example, if I were to ask your listeners to answer, uh, a set of questions, those questions could fall into three categories. Question one: Uh, "How old, who's the oldest person on this call?" and, "Who's the youngest person?" or, "Who's the tallest and who's the shortest?" And notice that there will be a single correct answer for everyone. Second, I can ask, "How old are you?" or "How tall are you?" And now there's a single correct answer for each person. But I could also ask, "What issues are you facing at whatever age you are at?" "What does your height mean to you?" Um, and those questions now evoke multiple correct answers for everybody.

So the first thing to recognize is that there can be diversity, um, in correctness, uh, that there can be multiple ways of approaching problems. And that's precisely what diversity is there for, is to give us a rich, uh, complex way of addressing our problems. A second, um, helpful thing is to, um, focus on the future rather than on the past. Not in, instead of trying to figure out who's at fault or what's wrong about the other person, ask people why that's important to them. Here's a question that's very powerful with relatives who have different ideas about politics, um, "What life experiences have you had that have led you to feel so deeply about this issue?" or, um, "What is underneath that position for you?" "Why, uh, have you adopted it?" "What does it mean to you?" Um, and those kinds of questions will help people deepen their conversation, um, because as soon as we, um, identify some label that we can attach to someone, we collapse the person into the label. Uh, and instead of having a real conversation, we just yell and scream at each other. Uh, a, another thing that I think that we can do is to focus on the problem as an 'it' rather than as a 'you'. If we can define the problem in terms of how people are behaving rather than as the problem being defined as a group of people, uh, then also we will be able to have a much better conversation and, uh, perhaps join in solving the problem.

Sam Fuqua: One of the chapters in your book, and perhaps one of the things that leads to the yelling and screaming, or in other cases, the total avoidance, uh, is this connection between neurophysiology and the morality of political conflicts. Can you talk a little bit more about that? If we're in a situation where a difficult subject comes up, what, what is happening in our brain?

Ken Cloke: Yeah, there's been a lot of really interesting research that has taken place on this, and what we've discovered is that, uh, any, uh, perception of the possibility of conflict, uh, is, uh, channeled through a little place in your brain located about in the middle of your brain, uh, that's called the amygdala. And amygdala means almond in Greek, and it's two little prongs that kind of stick out from the limbic system, uh, which is responsible for processing emotion. And what the amygdala do, does, amygdalae do is, um, that they, uh, do a threat detection. And if a threat is detected, a cascade of responses begins to take place. First, the amygdala can shut down the prefrontal cortex and hijack the brain. Uh, and that means rational thought may continue, but it isn't having any impact on behavior. Uh, it may also, uh, stop digestion and divert blood to your leg so you can run, and your arm so you can hit. Um, it will, uh, simplify whatever it is that the threat consists of, so that there may be a personality in the lion that is running towards you, but you're not interested in that personality. Uh, the lion becomes simplified, uh, to simply something that is

out to hurt you. Um, and then, uh, adrenaline is released, uh, in order to be able to dampen the pain response and give you extra energy so that you can escape. Uh, and the final thing that the amygdala does is it lays down memories very, very rapidly. It's responsible for remembering what it is that is happening to you that you wanna avoid in the future.

So now just imagine that you're sitting at home talking to your spouse and your amygdala gets triggered, or you're at work, uh, and somebody says something that's insulting to you. This is what is happening inside your brain and inside your body. And it turns out that this is not the only pathway. If it were, then, uh, there wouldn't be anything we could do about it. But there's a second pathway, and the second pathway is created by oxytocin. And instead of fight or flight, um, phy, neurophysiologists refer to this as tend and befriend. And this is acts of kindness that disarm and actually break down adrenaline within the system. Anytime that you take, uh, a threat and make it personal, uh, in the sense, not that you take it personally, but that the threat becomes something, uh, someone who is a person. Um, whenever you add complexity to it, whenever you, uh, look at the whole thing rather than just a small piece of it, um, you begin to break down that fight or flight reflex. Any acts of kindness and generosity also tend to break it down. So extending a helping hand to someone, um, seeing a photograph of a baby, uh, touch, all of those things are things that can uh, reverse that neurophysiology.

Sam Fuqua: Is there language we can use in the moment with the person who is triggering that response?

Ken Cloke: Yes. There are a number of things that can be done and, um, first let's take a look at what we do that isn't very helpful. If you think of, uh, your being right now in that conversation and ask, what is the very first word that is likely to come out of your mouth, and it's probably gonna be the word 'you', and that's gonna be followed by something negative. So the word 'you', if we just look at it as a pronoun, the form of the pronoun is an accusation. You are being accused of something, and what you're going to get in response to an accusation is a denial and a counter accusation, "No, I didn't, and you're something worse." And that's gonna go nowhere. So what you can do instead is you can shift the pronoun to, for example, an 'it'. Um, if you say, "You are lazy!" The person is going to say, "No, I'm not," and, "You are, um, not my boss," or whatever the response may happen to be. But instead, if you say, "There's a lot of work to be done. How should it be divided?" Nobody's going to slip into denial or a counter accusation. Um, and you can also describe it as a 'you', uh, I'm sorry, uh, shift the 'you' to an 'I', as in, um, "I would really like to take time off too, but I don't give myself permission to do that," or, "I really need a hand here. Can you help me out?" Um, in other words, it can become either a confession or a request. And finally, you can turn it into a 'we' as in, "There's a lot of work we have to do here. How should we divide it?" And that becomes then an invitation into collaboration. We can also shift the verb from 'you are' to 'you did'. And we can shift what the accusation is, but more deeply and profoundly, what we can do is we can ask the person a question. Uh, and if we come from a place of authentic curiosity, um, not trying to blame the other person, not trying to trap them, not being a lawyer, trying to nail them down on cross-examination, but really being curious about what is going on for them, uh, then what will happen is we'll have much more successful conversations.

Jes Rau: Because we're seeing so much with the election coming up, also with everything that's happening around race and power and privilege, there's a lot of side taking, um, and pushing people to try to take a side as well as in social media and other places, the unfriending if you're not on the person's side, and just wondering if you have thoughts for folks as they're trying to navigate what they're feeling like is a really moral or ethical conflict like we're seeing right now, and the side choosing that's happening.

Ken Cloke: Yes. Um, and I come to this question, uh, for myself, having been a part of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s and working in the South, uh, in southern Alabama and South Georgia, uh, and having been a, activist for a long period of time, uh, and I would say that choosing sides is actually choosing a direction in history, except that we don't have to be opposed to any one person. What we wanna be opposed to, isn't 'it', to a thing, to racism, uh, to brutality. Um, uh, so what we want to try to do is to, uh, instead of making enemies, uh, figure out how we can actually, um, uh, open our ranks, uh, so that people can join us as they have been doing across the country. Um, for example, in, uh, connection with, uh, the police, um, it is possible for us to describe the system, uh, and the culture of police organizations that encourages brutality, uh, without, um, uh, identifying that brutality with the person in a way that is judgmental and freezes them and prevents them, uh, through defensiveness from supporting, um, what we believe in as, uh, a kind of, um, invitation to everyone to participate in our social life and our political life. Uh, so a part of what democracy requires is inclusion. Uh, and that's inclusion not just of people who have been ex, in, excluded, but inclusion even of the ex, uh, of the, those who want to keep them out. Um, so there has to be room in a post-slavery society, not only for the former slave, but for the former master. And that means making the conversation into one, uh, in which the slave and the master are asked to be human to each other. So it's not a compromise between slavery and freedom. It is the complete abolition of slavery as a relationship, as a conversation, uh, as a form of domination, which takes place by creating a completely egalitarian conversation that is inclusive of everyone.

Jes Rau: So I think along with that there's so much fear of, of what that would, what that could look like or what might happen if we were to have those conversations. So whether it's a fear of loss of political power, a fear of, um, loss of, of our jobs, there's just so much fear that's fueling both, uh, where people are standing politically as well as within the other, all of the other crises, that you were talking about. Um, and how do you control or manage or work with fear within conflict, um, knowing that we need to be able to sit down together and humanize one another?

Ken Cloke: Excellent question, Jes. And here I would say that there is something in common between conflicts that take place between kids on a playground and conflicts between the heads of nation states. Uh, conflicts that are entirely internal and to, for each of us, and conflicts that are social and political. And here, basically, uh, what we discover if we look at not only fear, but at anger, um, is that these are not the deepest devotions. In fact, if we start with anger, we can see that oftentimes beneath anger is fear. And oftentimes beneath fear is the perception of the possibility of pain or loss or grief or guilt. And underneath that is caring. And here we discover something important. Nobody gets angry over things they don't care about. So let's have a conversation about what you care about. That's the first piece. The second piece is, just based on my own experience and I think the experience of lots of others, we, we tend to be frightened more when we're alone than when we're together. And, the individualistic culture that we have developed in the United States is very, very different and treats fear very differently than cultures in more collective, socially active, socially connected, um, uh, places around the world.

And I think that what we have discovered through these protests that have been taking place, uh, over the period of the last couple of weeks, uh, is that, um, there is something worse than fear. Um, uh, and that is the fear that comes to us when we feel powerless, when we feel that we're unable to have any impact on the world around us. The fear that happens when we do not stand up for what we believe in. And so, um, there are kind of two kinds of fear. Uh, there's the fear that is an appropriate appreciation of the possibility of some form of pain, um, some form of loss. And there is the paralyzing fear. Uh, the fear that, uh, actually results in greater violence because it doesn't believe that it can do anything about the situation. Um, but the fear that channels itself into, um, activity, into organizing, uh, into opposition, uh, to the various things that are dividing us like racism and sexism and homophobia, uh, these are, uh, forms of fear that actually



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bring us together, and in our togetherness, we experience a great deal less fear. We become more powerful. And we know that what we stand for has meaning. Um, and uh, the truth is it does have that meaning. So we are now in a position where we have the possibility of dramatically shifting the way that policing happens, uh, in our country. And by shifting that policing, we're also shifting, uh, the, our capacity to participate in a higher order of democracy than the one that we have had up until now.

Sam Fuqua: Ken Cloke is a mediator, trainer, and author of several books, including *Politics, Dialogue, and the Evolution of Democracy*. You can find out more at his website, kencloke.com. Cloke is spelled C L O K E.

Our podcast is called 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, 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.