



MIND & LIFE

Mind & Life Podcast Transcript

Ed Taylor – Leading by Example

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Opening Quote – Ed Taylor (00:04): *The kind of interactions that can happen in classrooms, the kind of work that we do in classrooms, can either be the source of great angst and even trauma for students, or they can be contemplative spaces as well, and places of healing, and places of joy, and places of learning. And to bring about classrooms like that, one has to be very intentional about who they are themselves, and be of clear mind and body coming into a classroom, to expect anything better for students. So it took a lot of work for me to figure out how to be aligned and also how to teach well and think well about the kind of classroom that I want to be in, and the kind of classroom that I want to teach in.*

Intro – Wendy Hasenkamp (00:45): Welcome to Mind & Life. I'm Wendy Hasenkamp. Today my guest is contemplative educator and leader Ed Taylor. Ed is the Vice Provost and Dean of Undergraduate Academic Affairs at the University of Washington, so he spends a lot of time thinking about the experience of students and how to enhance it. He's also a professor of education, and his interests there include moral and integrative education, leadership, and social justice. And as you'll hear, Ed is not only a scholar and a leader, but a storyteller and a kind of weaver of wisdom.

(01:23) In our conversation, we talk about his early experiences, learning the value of community, and his introduction to contemplative practice. He shares his path to becoming an educator and to embodying contemplative skills in the classroom. Then Ed reflects on the relevance of contemplation to wise and effective leadership, and he talks about systems thinking and the need to move from ego system to ecosystem awareness. He shares some of the amazing work he's been a part of at the University of Washington implementing systems change across multiple campuses, and letting students lead in defining the community they want. Within that, he describes a process that they undertook to normalize failure and model vulnerability for students—which I think is just awesome and something the world could use a lot more of. Ed also shares some reflections on the days after George Floyd was killed, and the process of imagining the world you want to live in when things are definitely not okay. This takes us into a discussion of his work on the role of Critical Race Theory in education, and we wrap up with Ed lifting up the need for us to name and confront societal problems—and find solutions—together as a community.

(02:47) Please do check the show notes for this one. We've linked to more resources from Ed, including some of his really powerful op-eds, which I highly recommend reading, and a fantastic conversation he had last summer with civil rights expert, Jon Powell (who we've also had on the podcast). That was at our Summer Research Institute, on othering and belonging.

(03:08) Ed is one of those people who really embodies the qualities we value in contemplative spaces: thoughtfulness, kindness, integrity, compassion. I find that whenever I share space with Ed, I just feel better, more hopeful, more connected, and I think more deeply about our world and our place in it. I hope this energy comes through for you as well. I'm so happy to share with you, Ed Taylor.

Wendy Hasenkamp (03:35): I am so pleased to be joined today by Ed Taylor. Ed, thank you so much for being here.

Ed Taylor (03:45): Wendy, what an honor to join you.

Wendy Hasenkamp (03:46): I really am curious how you ended up doing the work that you're doing and how you became interested in education and leadership, and then kind of where the contemplative side wove in as well.

Ed Taylor (04:01): I'm smiling as you ask that question, Wendy, because I don't think a day goes by that I don't ask myself how I ended up in the work that I'm doing, and how I ended up in contemplative work as well. I'm in leadership in higher education at a university in Washington, at the University of Washington. It was not necessarily a goal of mine to be a professor or a... I serve as a dean right now of undergraduate education. The roots of how I got here, Wendy, if you don't mind indulging me for a moment, has to do with my own growing up and my own experiences in community. And for me, my life story is one of just interconnectedness. It's just one of being connected in community.

(04:51) And for me, I'd say that the first part of it all started with, I'd say it starts with play. My family moved from New York City to a little town in central California, in the Central Valley of California. There were about 12,000 people in the town at the time. And my family, my mother and my sisters, we hovered around or below the poverty line. And in no way do I want to romanticize poverty, but there are some gifts that came with having very little, other than each other and having public spaces. So we had public schools, and there were public parks, and there were public celebrations and festivals. And it was a time and place when one could live modestly, but as young kids, as we started our schooling, we would walk to school each day and we'd walk through parks and we'd walk through community, and we'd walk together.

(05:47) There was a big public park next to my home and it was a place where we learned how to play together. And one of the things that I learned right away is that if you're in a park by yourself, it's one thing, but you need other kids to be able to play. And the kind of games that we played, the more kids that participated, the better the games were. So we created this kind of an ecosystem where, on a Saturday morning or a Sunday morning, we would just go to the park and kids would know to come. And if there weren't games there, we would make up games, we'd make up ways to play.

(06:23) And we also found ways to make sure that whoever was there—whosoever will, let them come, irrespective of ability and language—that you could be a part of whatever game that we were creating. So we had this system that we were creating and this little exercise that we were doing of learning how to play together, and how to be together, and how to even deal with issues of joy and participation, even creating little moral rules. Vivian Paley wrote this wonderful book, *You Can't Say You Can't Play*, and I think she wrote that in 1995. But we had figured it out pretty quickly that if you told the kid that they can't play tag, that they'd have to walk through the park and go home. And so we had a sense of what constituted fairness and participation.

(07:12) And over the years, I've read my share of poetry, and Rilke comes to mind in my own childhood. He says, "I lived my life in various circles that reach across the..." He says, "across the world." But I lived my life in various circles that reached across the community. And so just learning how to play together was important for me. And much of that happened at a school house.

(07:36) I'd say that a second opportunity and learning for me was, my mother would put together enough money to send me to a summer camp. And the summer camp happened to be up in the Sequoia Mountains and the Sequoia National Forest. And so as a kid, as an 11-year-old, I went to a place called Camp Sequoia each summer. And I'd stand in the presence of these giant sequoia and redwood trees. And it was the closest thing to a spiritual experience that one can have at that age, because these are trees that are 200 feet tall and 26 feet in diameter, and they can live up to 3,000 years old. And once you learn that and you think, "I'm 11. If I live a really full and purposeful life and I live to be let's say 90, I will never live as long as these redwood trees." So there's something really humbling about being in the presence of this kind of environment that taught me how to be present and in nature, how to be in awe of nature, how to be quiet.

(08:44) And so those two things... and that I had really the—what I'd call a karmic opportunity—I got a job as a 15 or 16-year-old at a preschool, and that changed my life, and that actually turned me toward my desire to be an educator.

Wendy Hasenkamp (09:03): Wonderful. And then did you develop more formal engagement with contemplation and contemplative practices later on in life? And can you speak a little bit about the weaving of that into your work in education?

Ed Taylor (09:17): So I wouldn't call this formal, but let me tell you about the informal introduction to contemplation, because it really did start at this preschool for me. So this was a program for youth—and I presume at the time they were even using the language of "at-risk" youth, of which I was one—that would create summer job opportunities for kids and young people. And so I was assigned to a preschool during the summers, and here was my job. I would show up just before noon, and so we'd have lunch or snack time, and then we would go out and play for a while. There's that theme of play once again. And then we'd come back and I would either read to them, and if I'd read every book in the classroom, of which there was about a dozen, I would end up just telling stories. So we would weave stories together and I'd make it as creative as I possibly could, and the stories would involve them, and it would involve play, and it would involve mystery.

(10:21) And then, here's where my introduction to contemplation came. By late afternoon, my job was single-handedly to take the 20 kids in this classroom, I'd put on Hawaiian music... This is going to date me a little bit. I'd put a record on, Hawaiian music, slow contemplative music. The kids would get their mats, those mats that kids would get in preschool, and they'd all lay down. And I'd move from one child to the next and have them breathe, until all 20 kids were silent, for about 30 minutes. And they rested.

(11:10) And so this combination of play and story, and then resting the mind, became a kind of practice for me. I went to college and decided to study psychology, in part because of that experience, and got introduced to both psychology and got introduced to Eastern philosophy and Eastern religion. And my intention was to become a clinician, a therapist, which I did in the first part of my career. And I was involved in some formal training because I became a clinical social worker, or therapist in a clinic, a research clinic that did anger dyscontrol, that worked with perpetrators. And that's a strong word,

because ultimately these were folks that ended up engaging in forms of violence. But my work was to help shape and develop, and do research and do cognitive behavioral work, in a clinic that dealt with people who had anger dyscontrol.

(12:11) And this was not to eliminate anger in human beings, but to recognize that anger's a part of our normal human emotion, just as anxiety is and just as sadness is. But we realized that there were so many people in our country and around our world who had a problem with their anger, and that was if it's too intense, if it lasts too long, if it's too frequent, then it becomes a problem. And oftentimes these were people that were court-referred to our program. And so I helped develop, along with other psychologists, a clinical program to deal with anger and arousal. And some of that involved formal meditation teaching. And part of what this involved, and this goes back 20 years or so, [was] looking at the gap between what people thought they did and thought they experienced—what was going on in their heads—and what their bodies actually did.

(13:03) And this gap... Because in this program, these were, most often they were men who ended up losing control of their anger and being referred to this program. So I over time, dealt with, served, worked with hundreds into the thousands of men, and most often the explanation coming in was, "An incident happened, but that wasn't me. That's not who I am. That thing happened." But they disassociate themselves with the actual incident by saying, "That wasn't me."

(13:35) So we went about this project and this work in a six-month program, cognitive behavioral approach, to actually reintroducing people to themselves, and actually doing the work of engaging both the mind and the body. And it was really powerful work and important work, in which teaching mindfulness and teaching meditation became core to that work, and bringing people back in touch with what was happening, and what stories they were telling themselves and how they reacted to those stories.

(14:09) I'll give an example. A common kind of thing that would occur would be, "I was driving down the freeway minding my own business, it was the evening, trying to get home. And there was a car behind me flickering their lights and driving erratically. And it was a big car, and I knew that this person was trying to be obnoxious and trying to do harm, and they were just really being horrible. So when we got to a stop sign, I'd had enough. I got out of my car and I let them have it. But that's not who I really am," they'd say. "I just lost it for a moment."

(14:42) I as the clinician would have the actual report of what happened, and you'd hear a very different story. And this might be a woman—this was an actual story—a woman who had flown into town to see her mother who was ill. She rented a car, and was trying to get the lights to work on this rental car and was trying to get this car to work, and gets to a stop sign. And this guy comes out and just lets her have it.

(15:07) And so reconciling this story—what was going on in this person's head in the first place, what story that he was telling himself about the car behind him. And so we'd go about the work of reintroducing people to themselves. We would actually videotape... and again I say men because most often, 99% of the people in this program were men. We'd re-introduce them to themselves. We'd actually videotape them. We'd have them reenact the circumstance that got them into the program in the first place, by actually videotaping them in the car. Like, "Hold the steering wheel the way that you were, hold the body position that you were in." And we'd have somebody actually enact, act with them,

somebody else in the program who would be in the car behind them. And we'd reenact it and we'd videotape them, and reintroduce them to themselves.

(15:52) We'd have them watch and they'd go, "Wait a minute, that is me. Look at me. I'm bigger than I thought I was. I'm angrier than I thought. Look at the veins, look at my eyes." And then we'd recreate the situation again after having taught some mind work. "What are alternative explanations to what was happening with that car behind you? What if it was a woman in the car that was coming to visit her mother? What if it was a 16-year-old that was learning to drive?" Bring closure to the stories that we are telling ourselves and go to the body. And in some ways, we were engaging in a practice that was not unlike Tsoknyi Rinpoche, that dropping from the head to the body, and learning how to drive again without that story that leads you to jumping out of the car and engaging in violence.

(16:38) So I would teach meditation in this clinic, and we'd teach cognitive behavioral practices that would involve almost a handshake method of reintroducing yourself to yourself, saying, "Yes, that was me, and this anger is a part of me, but the stories I'm telling myself actually lead to forms of dyscontrol." So that was kind of my formal introduction to the clinical side and the research side of the integration of meditation and mindful practices to reduction of anger dyscontrol.

Wendy Hasenkamp (17:11): That's fascinating. I really appreciate you bringing up the emphasis also on the body, and tuning into the signals from the body. I think that's such an important part of many, many contemplative practices. And we can often cut off from that and miss that important information.

(17:30) And what was coming up for me as I was listening—you have such a calm presence and demeanor. And I'm imagining you working with these people who have lots of anger and having that maybe come towards you, or be expressed in your presence. And I can just imagine that it, I don't know, you have a way of dissolving it or something. But I'm really curious, for you, I'm sure you went through a lot of training too, to be able to hold that and deal with that, and how does that show up for you as a clinician in your body? Or just working with that on the other side?

Ed Taylor (18:07): That's such a wonderful question. When I became an educator, so I kind of transitioned from that work, but kept some of those principles and practices. But to teach this kind of work, one has to actually practice it themselves. And I can't tell you the number of occasions when... In my role now, in my leadership role, I live close enough to our campus where I can walk to work. It's about a 15 minute walk. And there were times when I would lose track of my own thoughts, that racing mind, and I would walk to work, looking at my calendar and telling myself, "This is going to be an awful day. Look at, I've got this budget meeting. I've got this meeting with this faculty member. I've got this student complaint." And by the time I got to campus, I had created in my head what was, in effect, a day that was going to be just absolutely miserable. And I'd find myself getting there and going, "I'm so unhappy right now and I haven't even started my day."

(19:04) Now what I was missing was, on the walk to campus, from my home to the university, I walk over a drawbridge that crosses over a body of water where people row down below. There are rowers in shells, single sculls or eight-person sculls. And if I stop and I look down, I can actually count the number of strokes. And they row in silence, and they're rowing right underneath me. And I've had to go back to developing this practice myself of just being mindful—the gap between what my head is telling me and what I'm experiencing in my body. So I stop on this bridge every day and I take a look, and I look for rowers coming through, and I count the number of strokes. And they're oftentimes just silent strokes,

they're just little ripples in the water, not splashing, but ripples in the water. And I take my time and move through.

(19:57) I've tried to integrate some of these practices both when I was a clinician, but also in my own teaching. And that became for me something pretty powerful, as a professor, realizing that the kind of interactions that can happen in classrooms, the kind of work that we do in classrooms can either be the source of great angst and even trauma for students, or they can be contemplative spaces as well, and places of healing, and places of joy, and places of learning. And to bring about classrooms like that one has to be very intentional about who they are themselves, and be of clear mind and body coming into a classroom, to expect anything better for students. So it took a lot of work for me to figure out how to be aligned, and also how to teach well and think well about the kind of classroom that I want to be in, and the kind of classroom that I want to teach in.

(20:51) – *musical interlude* –

Wendy Hasenkamp (21:23): Some of what you were saying may be already tipping over into this space, but I wanted to chat with you too about... You have a lot of experience obviously in leadership positions, and I'm thinking about the contemplative angle there as well. And I'd just love to hear your reflections on the relevance of contemplation for wise and effective leadership.

Ed Taylor (21:45): This has been so important for me because so much of what I've learned and what I experienced was about how I am in the world, and how I want to be, and it centered my own mind and my own body. I was invited in 2015 to join the Academy for Contemplative Ethical Leadership and joined on the faculty, a group of really interesting and thoughtful practitioners and thought leaders, Otto Scharmer, and Sharon Parks, Dan Goleman was part of the faculty, Mirabai Bush. And the whole theme of the conference was to move from ego system awareness to ecosystem awareness—to bring leadership and ethical leadership into the conversation, in part because the premise was, many of the social problems, and so many of the crises that we face now, are systems problems. And the response to these systemic problems needs to be systemic leadership, needs to be systemic change.

(22:48) So when you look at the environmental crisis, when you look at the crisis related to race in America, or the prison system, or the healthcare system, these are systemic problems. And so leadership needs to think in terms of systems that can begin to reduce the kinds of harms that systems in fact have created. My friends and colleagues in South Africa are very clear about the fact that apartheid was never a natural set of circumstances. It was a policy. It was a policy aimed at creating a system that would do harm. And the resolution to that is actually thinking about systems that can actually engage in repair. So this ethical leadership conference worked with the premise that there is a role for mindfulness and neuroscience and leadership, that we have serious work to do to think about how we bring contemplative practice and mindfulness to the work of leadership and engaging in systems.

(23:51) My colleague Jon Powell, he and I in dialogue have talked about, he's used the canary in a coal mine [analogy]. He's said, with regard to race in American, and perhaps race in the world, that the problem is not the canaries; we're all products of the coal mine. And we ought to be less hard on each other, less hard on the canaries, and harder on the system, and figuring out how to chip away at systems that do harm. I agree with Jon in that regard, and there's a role for leadership in this regard.

(24:22) And in my own work, in part because of the work of Mind & Life and the connections to Mind & Life, I've been able to try and think well about my own campus as a system. We are a tri-campus, we don't call ourselves a system, but we're three campuses with about 50,000 students. So it's been a powerful moment, these last few years, guided by some of the learnings and some of the teachings that I've been a part of, to actually think about, can these concepts be applied to an entire system, to an entire university? Not just a classroom, not just individuals, but to an entire campus, and perhaps to universities writ large. I'm at a public research university. So the idea of bringing approaches of mindfulness and compassion into the discourse of the university is a way of thinking about how to bring about systemic change in the way that we do work in the university, given the potential and promise of universities in the first place.

Wendy Hasenkamp (25:21): Do you have any examples of that kind of shift that you're trying to incorporate? Does it involve specific programs or... I mean I can see already in you, you embody these qualities and that's one way of slowly being able to influence a system. But just curious [about] other ways.

Ed Taylor (25:42): Yes, and actually what's important in doing systems work is to actually think about... We know that the intersection of policy, of knowledge and learning and research, are important to systems change. We actually created something on our campus, and it's called the Resilience Lab. And we started with students as the center—which was, we knew that lots of students were coming in and experiencing lots of angst, and lots of depression and despair, because they've failed for the first time, because they're encountering moments and they're encountering stressors that they've not encountered before. And they've actually, in many cases, failed for the first time.

(26:27) And so we created a concept—a colleague of mine, Anne Browning, and the Resilience Lab—a concept called Failing Forward. And we didn't start with students telling stories about failure. We asked our campus leadership, we asked our presidents, we asked our deans, we asked our top faculty to talk not about their success resumes, not about how they became accomplished professors and how they became distinguished teachers or Fulbrights, not their success resume, but we wanted them to talk about their own formation and their own development, and ways in which they themselves have failed forward. We know the end of the story, that they became successful. But we wanted them to tell stories to students about the ways in which they've failed and the manner in which they've gotten back up and moved forward.

(27:13) So we were holding forums that hundreds of students would come to, and we'd have our most accomplished biology faculty sit down and say, "When I was a graduate student, I wrote my dissertation three times. And I told myself, if I have to write this dissertation for a fourth time, I'm just not going to finish. And not only am I not going to finish, this may be the end of my understanding of myself." And they would go into these stories that would have the room just absolutely silent. And then they'd talk about what kind of skills and knowledge and habits led them to just keep moving forward. We held these sessions over and over and over again, inviting our leaders to actually show some level of vulnerability and teach that to students by modeling it. And those were wonderful sessions.

(28:03) We've expanded that work from the unit of analysis being the students, but now the unit of analysis being the classroom, the institution itself. And I'll give you a systems example. In March 2020, when the pandemic was coming to full force, we were the first campus, I believe—if not the first, one of the first—to tell students that they had to leave the university, tell our entire community they had to leave the university and stay home, and the students would have to go on online, they'd have to learn

online. To do that took a tremendous amount of, again, intersection of research, of knowledge and awareness, and policy, to ask three campuses and an entire student body to go [home](#).

(28:48) The work that we had to do in 2021, in autumn 2021, was invite this community of people to come back to campus again. I was able to, and here's the leadership issue, to sit with Megan Kennedy, who heads up our Resilience Lab now. And we did a public forum, a public conversation that was distributed throughout the university, and there was an article attached to this as well. We did a video together about what it means to come back together again. And we talked about resilience, we talked about compassion, we talked about care, we talked about mindfulness.

(29:28) We knew at that point that in higher education, 50% of students, over 50%, had reported higher rates of anxiety and depression and fear. And that's not a counseling problem. You can't hire enough counselors to actually address that problem. That's a systems problem. So we found ourselves talking about—how do we become an institution, how do we become campuses that are places of care, and that are places that are committed to developing habits of mind and heart that allow us to come back and be in community together?

(30:03) Something that was really important also, and a moment that I learned a tremendous amount... We put together a committee of students and some staff, a small committee, to think about how we're going to do this well, how we're going to bring people back into community well, after many have been vaccinated, we think that we flattened the curve some. And I was sitting with a group of students and we were talking about how to message differently, and how I as a dean and our president and others can and should message to students. And the students were smiling during this conversation. They said, "You know, we have to tell you the truth. Students tend not to listen. They don't read their email, and they don't read emails from deans and presidents, and if there's too many, we're just going to hit delete. What you want to do now is you want to influence the student community. And the best way to influence students is to have students talk to each other."

(30:54) And they themselves came up with something called, they call it the Husky PACK. And the acronym stands for—and just think about this in light of the things that we're talking about now—the P stands for personal responsibility. They said, "For us to come back to campus as students, as 18, 19, 20, 30-year olds, we need to take personal responsibility for ourselves and for others." The A is awareness. "We need to be aware of what's happening around us. We need to be aware of how others are, of how we are in relation to others." The C is commitment. "We need to be committed to doing well by each other, not just while we're in each other's presence, but while we're by ourselves." Part of our concern was, sure, students will wear masks if we ask them in classrooms, but on a Thursday night or a Friday night, when they're together, will they do the right thing? So C was commitment. And the K, this came from students themselves. They said, "For this to work and for us to come back, kindness has to be a factor. We need to be kind to ourselves, and we need to be kind to each other."

(32:00) So they came up with the PACK. And in my mind, I was so proud as I listened to them come up with this idea, and they kept working through, "What does kindness look like? Well, we can't ask people to be kind to each other unless they're kind to themselves." And they would have these conversations. And I thought, "Okay, something about this is working." We were able to bring nearly 50,000 students back into community together in large measure because they decided to influence themselves. It led me to believe that these ideas of mindfulness, of compassion, these habits of mind and habits of heart, can actually be communal. They can be shared. They can be values and ethics driven, and they can actually shape the culture of a community. They can be part of a system.

(32:46) So we went from this moment where there was a tremendous amount of harm, to a discourse of care and coming back together and coming home, and creating the kind of environment where we would all be safe. And that was driven in large part by time spent together, thinking well together about the kinds of practices that we think can work systemically. And we're now back together. We have a lot of work to do, but we're back together.

Wendy Hasenkamp (33:11): Wow. I love that sharing, thank you. So much there. The normalizing of failure and modeling of vulnerability in the leadership I think is huge in that resilience program that you mentioned. I love that. I feel like that should be implemented at all universities. And then just the approach of letting the students lead and really emphasizing community. I feel that you've really drawn that from what you were sharing of your early experiences in childhood, being embedded in community, and still lifting that up and really emphasizing that, which is beautiful.

Ed Taylor (33:50): It was hard for me to come to terms with the fact that students don't read my emails, that they hit delete. *[laughter]* But I was encouraged and inspired to realize that students are prepared for taking responsibility for each other, from that ego system awareness to ecosystem awareness. And so this idea of leadership, and I go back to that contemplative ethical leadership, I saw that in play in real time. And so if we can apply that kind of thinking and that kind of engagement to entire systems, I see so many opportunities for change and hope.

Wendy Hasenkamp (34:29): And I love the way that your work involves and embodies these contemplative qualities, like mindfulness and compassion, but it's not really foregrounding that. I feel like that happens so much in this field—that those become the buzzwords and the skills that are trained and all the emphasis gets put on them. But I feel like what you're doing is advancing that even further to, those just become an embodied part of these larger values and ethics. And to enact systems change through that... it's beautiful work.

Ed Taylor (35:03): Well, we'll see if there's evidence that the changes that we've seen that have brought us back together—we know that they've been substantive because we're back together now. And it's really remarkable to think back to during the pandemic, what we didn't know at the time and what we were afraid of, and the extent to which fear was driving so much of our behavior, and we were isolated. And there was a point at which, if I walked into my building and I touched the doorknob, people would come and clean behind me. And everywhere I went, if I entered a door, the custodial staff would, this is during the pandemic, after we'd moved people off the campus, that people would clean up behind me because we were so afraid of how this virus was going to impact and lives were going to be lost.

(35:52) So we were just in isolation with a tremendous amount of fear. And so this learning together, and imagining ways to come back and desiring to be back together, was a powerful driver for us. And we're still in the process of it. So again, it gives me hope for how we think about other stubbornly persistent problems in our society, that we can use similar practices and similar motivations, that perhaps we can make progress in other areas as well.

(36:22) – *musical interlude* –

Wendy Hasenkamp (36:22): I wanted to share this quote, something you wrote. This was a few days after George Floyd was murdered, and you were reflecting on the state of things at the time, which was

extremely difficult. And you said, "I have seen fires burn in my community before. I'm interested in the kind of flame that will inspire people to vote, to reform systems, to save lives and to serve, protect, and build."

(37:06): And I feel like what you were just describing is such a beautiful example of that. And I'm remembering, at that time especially, there was such uprising and so much anger. And when people [are] working for systems change, there can sometimes be one approach of just tear it down, this system will never be able to be saved and we need to start again, and kind of burn it all down. And then another approach of working within a system to try to change, which I feel like is what you have implemented. I'm just wondering if you want to share any reflections on how you think about that difficult dynamic.

Ed Taylor (37:46): You're referring to a moment in 2020... I'm actually getting moved as I think about this 'cause I haven't thought back to this very much. I was sitting at home, I was alone, and we were all sheltered in place because of the pandemic. And after George Floyd was killed and people began to watch the video, from where I was sitting, I live in the city of Seattle, I could hear the sirens and I could see the smoke. And my city, as in many cities around the United States as the world was watching, our city was coming apart. And I could smell the smoke from the fires. And so on top of the sheltering in place, there was a buzzer that went off—an alarm went off in the city, my phone started buzzing—and we had a curfew on top of sheltering in place. So now isolation on top of isolation.

(38:41) And I thought to myself, what do we do now? And so what I did was I sat and I did a breathing exercise. And when you're sitting in a room by yourself, it's such a powerful thing. It's just kind of a Rilke moment, being in a room, feeling the room, being present in the room, being alone. Learning how to be alone in those moments, but smelling the smoke. And so I've got to get to a place of hope. People were calling each other at that time, and I was getting lots of phone calls. And my phone was buzzing, people were texting, "Are you okay?" And after about the 10th ask, I decided that one thing I'm going to do is I'm going to sit down and just write a piece. If I write it for myself, that's fine. If it ends up being published, then so be it.

(39:29) But the title was, *I'm Not Okay*. And in it, I just wrote that no one I know is okay with the circumstances in our country and in our world right now, given what we've seen. So no, I'm not okay. And I tried to write a few words about the kind of community that I want to live in. So rather than let it burn, and react to the burning—because we were being so reactionary at the time—so I thought, let this be a moment where I try to imagine the kind of community that I want to be in, even if it's using my imagination to try and create a vision of what a more hopeful, healthy community might look like. And that might be a starting point. So that was the intention of that, to just, to start with, how kind it is to ask, are you okay? But to also start with the premise that things, by virtue of what's happening now, are not okay.

(40:26) I wrote a second piece... So I wrote that, and it took about 30 minutes, and wrote that and set it aside. And then I wrote another one that was even more, it was kind of dark at the moment because the title of it was, *I Think About Dying*. Because what got me at that moment, as I watched the smoke from our city bellowing, and as I heard the sirens, I realized I hadn't watched the video. And so I decided to sit down and pick up my phone and cue up the video of George Floyd being killed. And that devastated me. And not for the reasons that many people were reacting to. What devastated me was, I watched, and I watched an officer's knee on the neck of a man who resembled me in some way. And I watched him take his last breaths. And I watched him call for his mother.

(41:22) And I wanted to write about how important just the act of breathing is, and that we've missed in this reactionary moment the power of breathing itself. And I sort of left with this idea that we ought to take our last breaths, and not have them taken from us, that the breath and Buddhist traditions and spiritual traditions is so sacred. And so I wanted to write about, and just hold for a moment and pay attention to, that act of breathing. And then the end of one's breathing. I'd watched that in 2014 with Eric Garner as well, where he had to utter the words, "I can't breathe." So for me, I found myself just thinking about this act of breathing, and the sacredness of breathing... and the realization that I'm looking at my phone and I'm watching the end of a life, and with the swipe of my thumb, I can turn to a cat video and make myself happy again.

(42:27) So I wrote two pieces. One was, *I'm Not Okay*. And the other one was called, *I Think About Dying*. That one got sent to a local radio station. They said, "You know Ed, if you say I think about dying, people are going to worry about you and they're going to think you're really not okay, so why don't we call it something else?" So I'd written two pieces in about the span of a half an hour that were intended to just go back to paying attention to the sanctity of life, the sanctity of breathing, and to begin to imagine, even if it's not in reality now, to begin to imagine the kind of communities that we want to live in, to give ourselves some hope so that we're not in conflict constantly.

Wendy Hasenkamp (43:06): Yeah, your op-eds are beautiful and powerful. We'll link to a lot of them in the show notes, this one in particular. So speaking of George Floyd and everything that followed, and the significant increase in consciousness, hopefully, in this country, around race, I know that you are also a scholar of critical race theory, and that has become a contentious issue also in this country for a number of reasons. So I wonder if you could reflect on, maybe first, for any listeners who aren't familiar with what critical race theory is, kind of describe it and maybe describe a bit of what has been happening around that in this country, and then maybe your thoughts on its role in education and importance?

Ed Taylor (43:59): It's so interesting to hear you say I'm a scholar of critical race theory, because I'll tell you how I started writing about critical race theory. The theory, the work, the research was actually happening in critical legal studies. Derrick Bell and Kimberlé Crenshaw and others were writing just powerful and critical work around the systems of oppression that seemed to persist. And a couple of my colleagues, Gloria Ladson-Billings and William Tate—who's now the president at LSU, and Gloria Ladson-Billings is just a wonderful scholar of education—started writing about critical race theory and education.

(44:38) And so I wrote an initial piece where I wanted to understand, what is critical race theory? Does it have a contribution to make to education? And I was interested in a particular issue, which was I had visited a set of schools in Clarendon, South Carolina. And I was walking around the school and I noticed that the school was totally segregated, completely segregated, but yet there were pictures of Thurgood Marshall on the walls, newspaper postings of Thurgood Marshall. And I asked the principal of the school, "Tell me why you have pictures of Marshall?" And they said, "Well, this was one of the schools that they used for the Brown versus Board of Education case in 1954." But yet more than 50 years later, the school was wholly segregated.

(45:27) So I found myself asking, why is it that efforts to try and integrate and desegregate legally, why those laws and policies don't work? Why do we keep moving toward progress and then taking steps backwards, moving toward progress and taking steps backwards again? And I was compelled by a tenet

of critical race theory that the problems associated with race—one might argue even some of the environmental justice issues, some of the environmental problems—are here with us. They're here to stay. They aren't going to go away, as much as I want to hope them to go away. But they're part of the landscape of who we are right now, and they will shape the rest of my life.

[\(46:13\)](#) Just as... again I go back to South Africa. Just as those who live in southern Africa know that apartheid has permanent implications, that they will spend the rest of their lives addressing issues of racial discrimination. That's the work that we will do in the United States as well, and all parts of the world. And so that's a tenet of critical race theory. And in some ways that was meant to be able to say, is this a useful lens for us to understand how we want to be in the world, and how we'll need to be in the world?

[\(46:42\)](#) So I was trying to look at this theory and write, and bring together writing, so that other theorists and policy makers could wrestle together and be honest with each other about why some problems persist. Do we really want them to go away? Whose interests are being served by the way that things are? Is this how we want things to be? To engage in really critical scholarly conversation about how to get to real and honest solutions. And that involves some truth telling, and that involves some reconciliation and repair.

[\(47:14\)](#) So to think that that body of work, that is meant to wrestle with and come to terms with certain truths around so many of the crises that we face now—the prison industrial system, policing in America. It's not about individual police, it's about systems. And it's about wrestling with and thinking well about public safety. And thinking about what it means as human beings in this country and in this world to live together, and to confront some of the problems that are human made problems, and to come to system solutions.

[\(47:52\)](#) So to think that critical race theory has been stood up as a straw man to talk about, and actually create fear, by saying, "Well, elementary school kids are being taught to hate themselves." That was never the premise of critical race theory. But what it did was it introduced me again to a kind of discourse that we have—perhaps in the world and perhaps in the United States—that is keeping us from getting to a conversation about genuine interconnectedness and the importance of living lives together, where we work together toward solutions to some of the persistent problems in our nation, and in our world.

[\(48:31\)](#) And that means first and foremost, addressing those problems. And it's not a matter of blame or shame, but it's about thinking well about, where are those places where we may spend the rest of our lives having to deal with and address problems that we have together created, and we have to together resolve. So I saw moving into critical race theory as in some ways a hopeful activity, to call ourselves to consciousness and to work together. But that's not how it's being played out right now. So we have work to do, and I'm up for the long struggle.

Wendy Hasenkamp [\(49:07\)](#): Well, as we're coming to a close, do you have any topics that we haven't touched on that you want to speak to, or any big picture reflections to share with the audience about the role of contemplation perhaps, or just take homes from your work?

Ed Taylor [\(49:25\)](#): Um... jon powell was one of your interviews. And I think at the intersection of my own thinking and my own work, these ideas of bridging and belonging are actually central to my work. And it's not antithetical to critical race theory. I think what critical race theory does is give us a sense of

urgency around the need to connect, and to connect across difference. And if I, in my own leadership, and in our work that brings contemplative practice into systems change, I do think that wisdom traditions, that contemplative practice has something to say about, and the science of that work has something to say about how we address environmental issues, environmental justice issues. And I've got a particular mind to be thinking about and caring about bridging around race. Jon has said time and time [again], and I agree with him, that the alternative to bridging is that we break. And the other places where I've done some writing is around bridging and connecting across racial divides.

(50:33): And so the work of bridging, of belonging, of expanding the circle of human concern is the work that will, in my mind, enable us to both live well and to imagine future generations that will live well far beyond this moment in time. So I remain optimistic and I remain hopeful.

Wendy Hasenkamp (51:01): Well, thank you so much, Ed. This has been a true joy to speak to you, and it's been such a personal pleasure to get to know you, and I've had the good fortune to be on a number of committees with you over the last few years.

Ed Taylor (51:17): It's an honor to spend time with you, Wendy.

Wendy Hasenkamp (51:18): Thank you so much for joining us today, and for all the good work you do in the world.

Ed Taylor (51:22): Thank you, Wendy, and you too. My gratitude to you. Take good care.

Outro – Wendy Hasenkamp (51:31): *This episode was edited and produced by me and Phil Walker, and music on the show is from Blue Dot Sessions and Universal. Show notes and resources for this and other episodes can be found at podcasts.mindandlife.org. If you enjoyed this episode, please rate and review us on Apple Podcasts, and share it with a friend. And if something in this conversation sparked insight for you, let us know. You can send an email or voice memo to podcast@mindandlife.org.*

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