



MIND & LIFE

Mind & Life Podcast Transcript

Diana Chapman Walsh – Contemplative Leadership

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Opening Quote – Diana Chapman Walsh (00:00:04): *Leaders, by virtue of the role they're playing, have the ability to cast shadow or light on other people. And I think if you're really committed to be taking that in, you have to be vulnerable yourself. You have to be able to put yourself there, in that other person's position. And if we bring our questions together—not just our answers, but our questions—maybe we'll see something that we haven't seen yet. Maybe there's somebody else who's got a totally different life experience and a different perspective who can shine light on this thing in a different way. So this idea of pooling knowledge and wisdom and insight is absolutely fundamental. And can you do that if you're not willing to put yourself on the line and be vulnerable?*

Intro – Wendy Hasenkamp (00:00:45): Welcome to Mind & Life. I'm Wendy Hasenkamp. Today I'm speaking with educational leader, writer, and climate activist, Diana Chapman Walsh. Diana had a long and successful career in public health at Boston and Harvard Universities, and then, became the president of Wellesley College, a position she held for 14 years. She was also on the board of the Mind & Life Institute under our previous president, Arthur Zajonc, which is how I first got to know her.

(00:01:18) As you'll hear, Diana has for decades been advocating that education can be both an intellectual and a spiritual journey, that those two modes of inquiry can complement each other and work together rather than be at odds. She's become an icon in educational leadership, and I love how she brings both systems thinking and contemplative wisdom into everything she does.

(00:01:44) We talk about all this in the show today, as well as her more recent work in the climate space, and a community and practice she helped launch called the Council on the Uncertain Human Future. She's also recently published a memoir called *The Claims of Life*, which I found to be packed with wisdom—not only for official leaders, but for all of us wanting to live a more authentic, connected and meaningful life.

(00:02:12) You'll find links to all this in the show notes as well as to a Mind & Life conversation that Diana moderated between the Dalai Lama and climate activist Greta Thunberg. That dialogue then became the basis for Susan Bauer-Wu's recent book, *A Future We Can Love*. So lots to explore there. Diana has such a warm, thoughtful, and genuine presence. This conversation gave me a fresh perspective on leadership and how all of us are actually leaders in our own circles. I hope it does the same for you. I'm so happy to share with you Diana Chapman Walsh.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:02:51): It is my absolute pleasure to be joined today by Diana Chapman Walsh. Diana, welcome to the show, and thank you so much for being here.

Diana Chapman Walsh (00:02:59): Thank you, Wendy for having me here. I'm a fan! I listen to almost everyone when they come up.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:03:04): That's so good to hear. Well, I've been reading your memoir and I'm really loving it. I have to come clean and admit I'm only halfway through. But I'm really looking forward to finishing it, and it's been such a great way to get to know you even better, and so much of what you've done in your amazing career. I thought maybe we could start with a bit of your intersection with the contemplative space. We'll obviously get into a lot about your experience in the leadership world, but could you share a little bit about where contemplation came into your life? I knew you were raised in the Quaker tradition, but then it evolved later as well.

Diana Chapman Walsh (00:03:40): Yeah, I was thinking a little bit about that in anticipation of being with you, and it's an interesting question. In the memoir, I write at some length about a fellowship I had that was funded by the Kellogg Foundation (the Kellogg National Foundation, the breakfast cereal people). It was a three-year experience, and it was an extraordinary experience with a cohort of very remarkable people. We had wonderful adventures of various kinds, external and internal—we traveled the world, we went off, we had a little fund we could tap into for small group activities. We were given our first, if you can believe this, our first laptop, and our first connection to sort of an early version of the internet... It's just hard to believe, antediluvian times. *[laughter]* This was all new to us, but it was. So, connecting to each other.

(00:04:28) And there was a subgroup of people who kept talking about spirituality. I remember at our very first meeting as we were getting to know each other and everybody was sort of feeling each other out, and feeling out the whole program e.g., what's this going to be? And there were people who were talking about spirituality, in sort of... almost in quiet tones. And I kept hearing them, "Well, let's have a little group and talk about spirituality." And that was a word that I wasn't even comfortable with in those days. You're right, I did have roots in Quakerism, and so I had a little bit of that connection—questions, I think about a larger world of spirit. But I was very much in and of the academy, a place where even that word 'spirituality' was viewed with some suspicion, if not contempt. So there was a little unease with it.

(00:05:18) But these people were really good people and I got to know them better and better. And it was clear they were doing something that I wanted. It was something about opening up to a world of emotion in a different way than I had done. I was sort of buttoned down, I guess, in those days. But even so, I wasn't sure how much to get involved. Then, one of them flew to Boston to see me, and recruited me to join a group that she was starting, it was going to be a small spirituality group. And so I joined it. And it was amazing. There were six of us, we went on five different retreats, weekend retreats with facilitators, and we went very deep with each other. And I realized there was a lot of unfinished emotional business in my heart and soul that needed a chance to come out and be respected, and be honored, and be understood, and to be then embraced. And I don't think I had had an awareness of that, except for those experiences.

(00:06:21) After that... we meditated when we went on these retreats, so I started a meditation practice. I found Jon Kabat-Zinn's work (I can't remember at what point). So for a very long time, I was faithfully meditating every day. I had these... they were little cassette tapes, *[laughter]*—I still have them somewhere, I don't have anything that I can play them on any more—of his whole Mindfulness-Based

Stress Reduction teachings, and all the meditations, and some yoga practices and all of that. And I did that for a very long time before I met Jon, and then started experimenting with other different kinds of practices. So it was all sort of self-taught. So that was the very beginning.

(00:07:06) Then, I also came into contact with a man named Parker Palmer, who is a deep intellectual and deeply spiritual and is able somehow to bring those two aspects of his life and his gift together in a very meaningful way for people. Parker was always on the fringes of the academy. He didn't want to be all the way in because he needed to be standing outside with a somewhat critical eye and gimlet eye to what was going on there, but also inviting people into a different world that he understood deeply.

(00:07:41) So he was invited by one of these fellows, one of the ones who was interested in spirituality, to facilitate a week-long retreat for a group of us. I missed the first one because I was still a little unsure about whether this is the world I wanted to join. But I kept hearing afterwards that this first retreat facilitated by this man Parker Palmer was so wonderful. And the people who had found it so meaningful were people I trusted in and respected. So I decided to sign up for the second one. I write about that in the book. I don't know if you've come to that chapter yet...

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:08:13): Yes, yeah.

Diana Chapman Walsh (00:08:13): But I had a very big experience there where... it was remarkable. It was really a spiritual awakening, I have to say. I mean, whatever that means to anybody. Something very profound happened, and it manifested in poetry that kept coming to me and through me, so it felt during the weekend. But then just a clear... I left there very clear that I was on a different path. And that this path was exciting and interesting and different and challenging, and that I needed to open myself to it as fully as I could. That there would be things on this path that would be tremendously valuable to me, and there have been. So that was sort of the beginning of it.

(00:08:55) Then I became the president of Wellesley, and I inherited a program that was a multi-faith program of religious and spiritual life. And they'd just hired a dean of religious and spiritual life a year before I came, who was a remarkable man. And he was struggling a little. The faculty were hemming him in a little bit, and not sure that... The idea was, education is a spiritual journey as well as an intellectual one, that the two can go hand in hand. They do not have to be in opposition to each other. It's not that you are drawn to truth that is received, but not empirically verified. Those two can be in combination in beautiful ways. But there was unease on the faculty about this program and where it was going.

(00:09:45) And it was just clear to me as a brand new president that there was something over there that was innovative and important, and something that I cared deeply about. So I threw my prestige as the president behind it—to a degree that made some faculty uneasy at first, sort of, "Whoa, what is this?" Even to the point where at one point there was a foundation called The Fetzer Institute in Kalamazoo, Michigan that was funding these kinds of activities in higher education and in other settings. And I was invited to a meeting at the Fetzer Institute. It was to be a meeting of presidents leading universities. One of the people who was there was the head of the California Institute for Integral Studies. His name was Joe Subbiondo. I remember, I came in and it wasn't very long after I arrived, and he pulled me aside and he said, "I've been watching you." And I said, "Really?" He said, "Yeah, you're out on a limb." I said, "Really?" And he said, "Yeah, I'm waiting to see if they saw the limb off, but so far you seem to be surviving." *[laughter]* The gist of his comment was to be the president of an elite institution in the Northeast like Wellesley College, and to be saying these things—that education is as much as spiritual journey as an intellectual one, that the two are not only compatible, but they integrate and

reinforce each other—was a little radical, he thought, and he was surprised. So at that point, Arthur was involved at The Fetzer Institute.

Wendy Hasenkamp ([00:11:18](#)): Arthur Zajonc?

Diana Chapman Walsh ([00:11:19](#)): Yes, Arthur Zajonc, thank you. Arthur Zajonc. It was a quirky little foundation. The word 'love' was in their mission statement for sure, and some other things that one doesn't normally see in mission statements (in those days anyway) of foundations. So that's where we first met, and he and I and this man, Parker Palmer, became friends.

([00:11:40](#)) Then Arthur came to me and asked whether I'd be interested in hosting meetings in the living room of the President's House (this was after I'd been selected and appointed president) with a group of people that included Peter Senge and Otto Scharmer and Jon Kabat-Zinn, and David Scott, who was the president at that point of UMass, and a few other people to dream about a different kind of university. A university that would integrate spirituality, systems thinking, that would be very much rooted in contemplative practice. That was the basic idea. And so we met maybe eight or nine times in my living room, and I got to know Arthur better there. So it was sort of step by step.

([00:12:25](#)) Then the other thing that was happening at Wellesley that was unusual was, because we had this multi-faith program, we had a Buddhist advisor. And there would be events on campus that brought some really interesting luminaries. We had a group of first Buddhist monks, and then later Buddhist nuns, who made a sand mandala on the campus, who spent a whole week doing that in this beautiful way with these wonderful little instruments and this absolutely gorgeous creation. People came from all over to watch it happen. And as you know, at the very end, they just sweep it up in these white sheets. And they carried it off and dropped the sand into the bed of a little stream that I crossed every day to get from the campus to the President's House. So I would see this colored sand in the bed of the stream for weeks and weeks, even months after that. And so that happened twice, and it was extraordinary, and lots of us got involved in watching that and caring about it.

([00:13:29](#)) We also had a visit from Thich Nhat Hanh, who spent a day on campus with us, and walked us all over campus doing walking meditation. So we had all of that. We also had an amazing visit from Maha Ghosananda. I write about it in the chapter on fundraising, it's called the Tin Cup, and the whole process... presidents obviously always have to do a lot of that. It's a big part of the experience. Then, after a little while after I got the right person lined up to be my vice president for resource development and so on, we of course had to start a campaign. So I was thinking a lot about, "Okay, now what does this mean, and how do we do it? How do we even think about this?" Money is so prominent now in higher education, and I didn't want to have it be about the money particularly, or exclusively certainly. So how do we think about this? And then, I had this amazing encounter.

([00:14:19](#)) It started out, I was at my home. It was Friday, I'd gone home quickly to change my shoes because my feet were hurting, and there was something I had to do. And when I came out, the doorbell rang as I'm leaving, and I was never home in midday in the President's House, and I never answered the door, but I opened the door and there was this little entourage. It was monks and they were in robes, saffron robes. And our Buddhist advisor said, "Oh, President Walsh, I'm so glad we found you here. We brought you the Dalai Lama from Cambodia." And I thought, "Really? I thought there was only one Dalai Lama." But oh, well, so I said, "Okay."

([00:15:01](#)) And I had a bagel at that point. I'd grabbed a bagel because I'd missed lunch. And I had each slice and each of two hands, and I went like this and put my hands together and bowed. [*laughter*] I felt

so silly. So then, I reached out and I handed him the half of the bagel that I really wanted, which was the one that had all the cinnamon on top. I handed it to him, he took it graciously. Later, the Buddhist advisor told me that he didn't eat after noon, so he gave it to someone else. *[laughter]*

[\(00:15:25\)](#) I greeted them in a friendly way and all of that, and I went on about my business. And all day I chided myself for, how important could these meetings have been? Here I had a chance to meet... because I went home and looked him up, of course, and he was one of the most important religious leaders in the world. Maha Ghosananda, he was remarkable. And I'd just sort of brushed him off because I'm a busy person. I have a busy day. I have things to do. So I was chastened by that.

[\(00:15:58\)](#) Then, as chance would have it, was parent and family weekend, and on those weekends there was a service in the chapel that this dean of religious and spiritual life, Victor Kazanjian always led. So we were at that service and Victor was disappointed because the turnout wasn't what it usually was. Usually, the chapel was absolutely filled. So afterward, he was grumbling, and I said, "Well, come on over to the house. Let's just sit on the terrace and talk." So we're sitting there and Victor says, "You know, I shouldn't be complaining so much, because on Friday, Maha Ghosananda was here—on our campus—and he spent two hours in the chapel basement in our little meditation room with six students. And he gave them his full attention. It didn't matter to him that he's one of the most important religious figures in the world."

[\(00:16:53\)](#) And just then, we felt this presence. It was really weird. He said that, and I felt something, and I looked up—it was this very large terrace—and I looked over to my left where the stairs came up from the lake, and there he was standing at the top of the stairs. I found out later from the Buddhist chaplain that in both instances, he had broken away from the program. The first one on Friday, he dragged them all to my front door, for some reason, nobody knew why. Then on Sunday, he had broken away, he was walking with people around the lake, and he just wandered off and came up.

[\(00:17:31\)](#) So then we invited him, we pulled up another chair, we sat with him. He stayed for about an hour. He had a vest on, he was pulling things out of his pocket. He had a passport that was wrapped up in bubble wrap. He made a joke about the Buddhist injunction to travel light, he was violating that. *[laughter]* He had his book, the English translation of his book, and it was wrapped up in something else. And we just had this beautiful, beautiful encounter.

[\(00:17:57\)](#) And I then realized that he had just brought me the answer to my question about what our campaign could be. So I'd be traveling around to these Wellesley enclaves, meeting with Wellesley alums and talking to them about their experience, and what was important to them about it... what they wanted to make sure would still be there for future generations. And I could pull things out of my pocket and we could talk about what we cared about. Wouldn't that be a different way to think about a fundraising campaign?

[\(00:18:27\)](#) So I told this story to the campaign development committee and we all agreed that that was a good way for us to think about the campaign. And we did, and it was very successful. So, yeah, these wonderful emissaries from a world beyond that showed up on the Wellesley campus.

[\(00:18:43\)](#) – *musical interlude* –

Wendy Hasenkamp [\(00:19:19\)](#): Well, I love the way that you've woven spirituality, as you say, which is a taboo word sometimes in academic settings, into your leadership and your experience there at Wellesley, and just the way you are in the world. Very early, when I was reading your memoir, it struck

me (I made a note) that the self-reflection that you provide is really impressive—looking with a critical eye at, early on your family dynamics, and then just continually yourself and how you're showing up throughout. I really appreciate how you weave that in the book and how you bring that as such a major point in your leadership. So I was wondering if you could share a little bit about your thoughts on self-reflection and knowing yourself deeply. I know you share at the end five key principles for leadership that are really helpful, and one of them is 'continually questioning yourself.' I wonder if you can just share a little bit about that.

Diana Chapman Walsh (00:20:24): Right. So I was an introverted person. I was kind of shy. I wasn't so sure of myself as a child. I didn't think I was smart, I write about that in the book a lot. People I've recently met, there's a neighbor very near here whom I've only known since I moved out here, and this person I am now. She read the book and she was so surprised that I had these uncertainties and insecurities. She's just always thought of me as this really strong, powerful, impressive person. But I've never thought of myself that way particularly.

(00:21:00) I've always had a very rich interior life, and it's often involved writing things down. I have kept journals all my life, and especially when I'm struggling with something, when I think I've done something wrong and hurt somebody's feelings, or when I've been asked to do something and I feel like I didn't do it as well as I want it to do it. This goes way, way back to my earliest memories. When something like that has happened, the only way I can put it to rest is to really process it. Otherwise, it just comes back, and it eats at me. So that was the experience when I was younger and didn't have a meditation practice, didn't have these other tools to use, right?

(00:21:48) So I'd sit down and I'd write about it, and I'd work it through, I'd work it through. And often at the end, there would be a kind of resolution, "Okay, that's what you did wrong. Don't do it that way. Do it this way." Sometimes in that interior dialogue, in fact often actually, there would also arise at some point—maybe with interactions, it wasn't just completely private—but I would suddenly realize, "Wait a minute, I'm catastrophizing this thing. My understanding of what happened here isn't consistent with the evidence. I don't really have it right. I'm being way too critical of myself. I'm beating up on myself, and yet I'm now starting to notice that person I thought I had so badly injured seems to have moved on, and it wasn't such a big deal. I am making more of it than he or she is."

(00:22:45) So this whole process of almost growing myself up. I had a very fine childhood. I had very lovely parents. We had everything we needed. But there was a kind of sterility, an emotional sterility in the environment in which I grew up. It wasn't anybody's fault. My father, he was orphaned when he was 12. His father, I think the day after he was born, ran down the cellar stairs, hit his head and died. His mother never recovered from the trauma of that, and he died, because he was a lawyer, without any kind of will. So my father was at ward of the bank. So he grew up in very thin emotional soil, and it affected very much who he was. He was a man of very, very few words and some struggles, and some of the struggles were with alcohol. And then, my mother was sort of covering... Anyway, it wasn't terrible. There are so many people who've grown up in really, really terrible situations, and it wasn't like that at all. But it sort of left me to raise myself a little bit, I think in a way, with this interiority that was always a big part of my story. So I'd read poetry and other things that I'd save quotations that really spoke to me and memorize them and go back to them. So that's who I was, and that's in the book.

(00:24:12) Then, as I'm coming out in the world and doing fine and actually there aren't so many catastrophes and failures to have to process, but I'm still processing things, first on my own in that way. I have notebooks, I still have them, and there's going to be a moment, and I think it's coming soon, but I'm just going to have to ditch them all because what are they for? But I think part of the reason for

writing this memoir was that I knew I had all of that, that I wanted a chance to pull it together as best I could, and sort of see what shape the whole arc of it took, and what was there to be learned from it, and maybe offered to other people that might find it helpful.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:24:54): Along those lines, and you were just doing this in your answer, you embody vulnerability, I think, in a really beautiful way. And I think that's a rare quality in leaders. You share some stories in the book too, about how, when you show up in vulnerable ways, how people respond to that. Do you have thoughts and reflections to share about the power of vulnerability, and of course, some of the challenges inside of that, and where you place that in your view of leadership?

Diana Chapman Walsh (00:25:33): I could begin with a writing of Parker Palmer's that had a big influence on me, actually, as I thought about leadership, and this pretty carefully refined set of five principles. All of that really began with an insight from something he'd written. It's called *Leading From Within*. He describes situations in which people are really robbed of their authenticity, robbed of even their identity, in work situations. One of his examples is the receptionist at a doctor's office who says, "Dr. Smith's office, this is Judy," or something, who is hemmed into a very small sense of self and that kind of thing. And that leaders by virtue of what they're doing and the role they're playing, have the ability to cast shadow or light on other people. And the bigger the leadership role, the larger the shadow or light is that the leader is able to cast. So if you're not, as a leader, if you're not making a conscious effort all the time to pay attention to how you're showing up, to who you are, to what you're bringing to your encounter with other people, if you're not monitoring that in a careful way, then you're diminishing other people who are around you. You're robbing them of their identity, and of their pleasure and of their joy in the work that they're doing. So it's a huge responsibility to be aware of the impact you're having.

(00:27:08) And I think if you're really committed to be taking that in, you have to be vulnerable yourself. You have to be able to put yourself there in that other person's position, and experience in the moment what it's like. And yet, and the thing I do write about, when you're in a leadership role and people are expecting you to make sure that things are happening and under control, and somebody knows where the keys are and what has to happen, and that everything will be all right, you sure don't want to reveal to people in a way that will worry or threaten or even frighten them, that you're not on top of things, that you're so vulnerable that you can't summon the resources you need to be effective.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:27:53): Right, I think that's one of the tricks is, vulnerability is often perceived as a weakness. But in fact, I feel like it's very often a strength.

Diana Chapman Walsh (00:28:01): It's very often a strength. But it's really about humanity. It's about inviting humanity into the room, inviting people to bring themselves fully into the room with whatever is going on with them, and that it's okay. It gives permission. The way I would think about it was, if I were in a situation where I was feeling like I was in freefall, I was not in control in the way that I needed to be, that I wouldn't reveal. I would keep that under wraps. I would 'fake it until you can make it' kind of a thing. Get through it, process it, think about it. What happened? Why did it happen? How can I do better next time? But then, I would also have that experience as something that, in some other way, I could share with people about, "It's not always easy. There are times when you lose the confidence in your ability to solve a problem, and you can get beyond that."

(00:29:01) The rule was to share the vulnerability that's an indicator of a kind of authenticity, that you're over here and I'm over there, and we're both human beings. We each have different roles to play. We're each doing our best to bring to our role all that we can that will be helpful and useful. And sometimes

we're not totally sure of ourselves, that we can deliver on every aspect of it, but we're committed and we're going to stay with it and we're in it together.

[\(00:29:29\)](#) I think that the other thing is that for me, there's something about a refusal to reveal uncertainty—we'll call it uncertainty as opposed to vulnerability—is very lonely. It shuts you off from everybody else because you don't want them to see that you're uncertain. "Oh my god!" So you have to stand tall and square your shoulders and act like you are omniscient, omnipotent, and all the things people wish leaders would be all the time. And then you don't get the input from other people, the things they can bring.

[\(00:30:05\)](#) But if you say, "Hey, we're in this together, let's come together. Let's figure this out together. You have a piece of it. I have a piece of it." If we bring our questions together—not just our answers, but our questions—maybe we'll see something that we haven't seen yet, something that's more complex, that's even deeper than we thought it was. Maybe there's somebody else who's got a totally different life experience and a different perspective who can shine light on this thing in a different way. So this idea of partnerships and collaborations and pooling knowledge and wisdom and insight is absolutely fundamental. And can you do that if you're not willing to put yourself on the line and be vulnerable now and then? I'm not sure you can. I think you have to hold yourself in a different way.

Wendy Hasenkamp [\(00:30:50\)](#): Yeah, I appreciate one of the things you're touching on there is about... Part of being vulnerable, I think, it implies—it just non-verbally transmits—that you yourself have a sense of safety and acceptance with yourself. And it feels like then, of course in a position as a leader, you're a role model, you're kind of modeling that acceptance and safety. And you're instilling that in the community that you're working with.

Diana Chapman Walsh [\(00:31:20\)](#): Yes. You've just said it beautifully. So it converts vulnerability to a strength. And people see that it is that, right? That's why it's important that you bring it only when you feel...

Wendy Hasenkamp [\(00:31:32\)](#): When you do feel safe.

Diana Chapman Walsh [\(00:31:35\)](#): Safe, right. Then other people see, "Okay, she's just a regular person."

Wendy Hasenkamp [\(00:31:39\)](#): Exactly. That's making me think of, really this interesting and powerful dynamic that happens where the qualities of the leader, for good or bad, just trickle into the whole system that they are working with. I've seen this happen so many times, and I wonder your experience about that. I imagine, of course, as a leader you're so under the microscope. It's must be such a mirror of all of your qualities, foibles, strengths, all of it. I'm just wondering if you can reflect on... I find it fascinating how the person at the top just sets the culture and the tone of the whole process in some ways. So I wonder your thoughts on that.

Diana Chapman Walsh [\(00:32:30\)](#): That was something I also had to learn 'on the run.' At the beginning, the dean of the college, who was the most senior academic official in the college said, "You know, you may not like this, Diana, but the president here is like the queen. She's kind of up on a pedestal. And you're just going to have to get used to it." And I'm thinking, "Really? I don't know what that will be like."

(00:32:53) So that was a process, and it meant that you were always under scrutiny, so you had to be a little careful. There were times... early on, there was a party for the long service employees, and it had been very formal before. The human resources department had organized it, and they'd given me these index cards, and they wanted me to read these citations exactly. And I thought that seemed not very friendly, so I was kind of chatting people up and being much more relaxed. And I got a very angry anonymous letter saying, "Wait a minute, this is a very important event, and you just made it into something casual. We're watching you." [laughter] Those kinds of things, you live and learn that there's certain things you have to be aware of. You have to be aware that you're constantly under scrutiny, that's true.

(00:33:46) But I also knew that there were things about the culture of Wellesley, a kind of uptightness, a kind of perfectionism, that had been true when I was a student that was true. A kind of judgment of... You know, the culture of critique in academia is so powerful and so strong. So I actually knew that I wanted to represent a different way that we could be together. That it would be sort of like the talk show host that you're choosing to be, right? [laughter] I would invite people in a different way, and that we would be purposeful and determined and focused about delivering on our goals. We had very systematic goals that we developed and worked on, my senior team and all. We would bring this compassion and connection—and really love—to each other in the way we did our work. I guess I knew I really wouldn't be able to survive if I didn't do it that way.

(00:34:45) – musical interlude –

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:35:16): As you're describing your approach to leadership... I hesitate to use these masculine/feminine dichotomy, archetypal terms, but it really is a more inclusive, relational approach than I think probably what you walked into as an expectation of leadership, certainly at that time. So I wonder if you could share, before we get into the qualities, maybe just the context and the lay of the land of coming in, leadership as a woman, what was expected, and how it looks maybe today versus then?

Diana Chapman Walsh (00:35:54): So gender, yeah. One is very careful about not essentializing. I mean, I certainly wouldn't make any claims about women being leaders who are better able to summon these qualities of compassion and collaboration.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:36:10): Right, yeah, I shouldn't even use those terms. I just don't know how...

Diana Chapman Walsh (00:36:14): Well, there is this—there was, I think it's less and less common—this stereotype of the male model of in-charge authoritative leadership that is setting all of the terms, the conditions. That is totally in charge, and the power goes down through the system, the authority and the power goes down through these layers in the system. And the terms are set at the top, and woe be unto you if you have a different idea down in layer four or five or six, because it's not going to be very easy to communicate it in a way that will have an impact. And these systems are still the dominant systems in our culture. I mean, there was just a big article in the New York Times about medical care. The physicians and nurses are starting to unionize because these large for-profit healthcare systems are organized in that way. That you aren't part of a process of defining the terms, of bringing what you see and what you know. And so maybe we don't have to label it masculine. Maybe we have to label it the modern industrial...

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:37:28): Yes, hierarchical, individualist...

Diana Chapman Walsh ([00:37:31](#)): Yeah. There's a term, the industrial growth society. This is the wonderful Joanna Macy, right? Joanna Macy uses this term, the industrial growth society. Now, every word there. But it is organized for the most part in hierarchies. And it's organized to grow. And to grow it needs to make profit, and to make profit is the overriding value and goal. So other things are pushed aside. So that is a model of organizational practice that is still very much with us. In some ways, in terrifying ways, seems to be gaining dominance around the world, at the same time that these other visions for how we can organize ourselves are also growing and strength and dissemination, and impact, and possibility. So I think it's a 'both and.'

Wendy Hasenkamp ([00:38:35](#)): Maybe we can quickly go through the five principles that you provide. I really appreciate you extracting those out of your many experiences, it's so useful.

Diana Chapman Walsh ([00:38:47](#)): So over these years at Wellesley, I was developing set of principles that—I wasn't inventing them completely, they were coming from all kinds of other places and ideas and sources and experiences—but the five principles that for me would be necessary in order for me to believe that I was a trustworthy leader. And they have a kind of integration, they all relate to each other, but just very quickly.

([00:39:12](#)) The first one is we can question ourselves. And that's because effective leadership comes from an inner core of integrity, and yet is not fixed, stubborn, or implacable. Leaders we trust are open to thoughtful influence. They're aware that they can't have all the answers because they only have one perspective, so all of that. We see a trustworthy leader questioning him or herself, open to influence from other people. That's the first one.

([00:39:39](#)) The second one, because we don't have all the answers, we can (I felt I should) establish partnerships as the real units for getting the work done, and take them seriously and invest in making sure that those partnerships had integrity. So sitting down with people at the beginning when they were hired, but then repeatedly, to sort through what had happened, especially when there's some kind of rupture, something went wrong—I was hearing stories about somebody, that person was hearing stories about me, that somehow we weren't communicating well, or that we were going off in different directions—to sit down and work it through. And that was partly because when a leadership team is moving an agenda in an organization, it's pushing people to change. And the system, reified as an entity, the system doesn't want to change. So the very best way to disarm the leaders is to split them, right? To step in. So you need to keep paying attention to those partnerships.

([00:40:39](#)) The third one is a little more complicated, but very important—to resist the use of force, except as a last resort.

Wendy Hasenkamp ([00:40:46](#)): I found this one very interesting, yeah.

Diana Chapman Walsh ([00:40:48](#)): People would come in and they'd want me to solve some problem. They were really stuck and they were really pissed off at each other. Somebody, I remember one department, they were so angry at the department chair, they wanted me to take his house away and give him a less good college house to live in. I thought, "Now, there's a creative punishment!" *[laughter]* But that was extreme. But, "The leader should fix it. There's something bad going on here. You've got to fix it and use your power." So then, if you sit there and say, "Well, hmm, let's think about this a little more. Are we so sure that that person is doing everything that's causing the problem?" And they're all thinking, "What a wishy-washy leader. I wanted you to fix it. Come on and fix it."

(00:41:30) But my experience, and also my deep belief is, it doesn't solve the problem. And then you end up with cycles of repetition and escalation, and then they're back again and they're back again. You have to find a way in an organization, to find the most local place where conflict or a stuck situation can be resolved, so that the people who are experiencing it, who are stuck in it, can work it out themselves. You usually have to send them some extra resources to help them work it out. I mean, if they could do it themselves easily, they would've done it. But to say no, no, no, we're not going to use force. We're not going to say, "This is the answer. Go for it." We're going to say, "It's for you to work it out. You have the ability to work it out, and I'm counting on you to work it out yourselves."

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:42:17): Yeah, I think what you're pointing to there is so interesting—this tendency that I feel like we have to want to just point to the one cause, or the single problem that is the cause. And it's never that simple. So I just really appreciate the nuance that you're bringing there of, let's look a little deeper and see more of the context of what's happening. I feel like that's sorely needed.

Diana Chapman Walsh (00:42:39): That's a really good catch, Wendy, because that's true of all five of these in some ways. They're all about, "Oops, it's not as simple as we thought." Oops, the leader doesn't have all the answers. Oops, guess what? It doesn't matter how smart he or she is or how much experience. It's not going to do it. Or, oops, these two people are trying to work together, or this leadership team or this cabinet and oops, they're stuck. It doesn't go so well sometimes, and they get inputs that confuse them about what's going on. So you have to work at those partnerships and make sure that they're solid, and be very clear about that—and have the people who are working with you signed on to the fact that sometimes you're going to ask them to do some hard work repairing broken relationships. And then, oops, the simple solution of let's just point to that piece of the problem and remove it or correct it, then suddenly everything will be fine.

(00:43:39) The fourth one is very much also in that vein, because it's honoring diversity—understanding that the voices on the margins so often hold the buried wisdom that can help an organization move beyond its self-delusions, and its historical shame, in some ways. Diversity is certainly an index of respect for others, of making sure others belong and feel that they belong. But much more than that, it's a vital resource for moving forward towards a higher level of functioning and a greater understanding of the value of everybody in the organization and what they can bring to it.

(00:44:20) Then, the last one is creating communities—a community and multiple communities—of mutual support and appreciation. There were so many ways as the leader, but also as people who were under me leading subsets units of this organization, there were so many ways we could become isolated, distracted, and derailed. And so we had to be very, very conscious about the ways in which we were weaving these really strong threads of community at different levels all around. That was absolutely essential to our success going forward. Parker Palmer used to talk about the difference between a community and an organization or an institution. A community is a place where people can feel, and be seen, heard, known and appreciated for who they are, can be loved.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:45:17): Back to that vulnerability too.

Diana Chapman Walsh (00:45:19): Yeah, the vulnerability.

(00:45:19) – musical interlude –

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:45:52): I love these insights. I mean, there's so many insights in the book, but the way that you've distilled them down. And it struck me when I was reading them—obviously, they're

really important qualities for leadership, and trustworthy leadership—but I think it's also, it's not just for people who view themselves in leadership positions. You could say in a way, we're all leaders in our various relationships and roles, but I mean, these are just values for being a human, right? For creating meaningful relationships and doing good in the world. So I just want to name that I feel like your experience is often viewed in this umbrella of leadership, or that kind of conceptual bucket. But actually, these are completely applicable to anyone. And that started me thinking about the ways that we all serve as leaders in our own worlds, and circles of relations.

Diana Chapman Walsh ([00:46:55](#)): I love what you're saying. I think, for some reason it triggered something. See if it resonates with you. So I told you I did some [meditation from] Jon Kabat-Zinn for a long time, and then various other people. One of the various other people is John Makransky, who I got to know, who's just a splendid human being. It's this idea of benefactor moments. And by benefactor moments, he uses this, I mean he has a very obviously scholarly view of all this, but...

Wendy Hasenkamp ([00:47:30](#)): Yeah, we've covered some of his practices on the show before.

Diana Chapman Walsh ([00:47:33](#)): Oh, good, good. But this idea of walking out the door and being open to these moments of meaning in interactions, just ordinary interactions through the day. There's something about that openness, if you really have it, that can completely shift mundane moments.

Wendy Hasenkamp ([00:47:58](#)): Yeah I think what I hear you speaking to is just kind of this inherent web of connectedness that we all have and the ways that we're all always influencing each other, right? And I think in this individualistic culture, we're not trained to think about that, or to notice that.

Diana Chapman Walsh ([00:48:16](#)): Yes, the interconnectedness. I mean, as we think about the climate crisis, that's the problem.

Wendy Hasenkamp ([00:48:22](#)): Yeah that was going to be my next topic that I wanted to chat with you about. I know that that's been your recent career trajectory and interest. I know you were one of the co-founders of a group called the Council on the Uncertain Human Future. Do you want to talk briefly about that group? What is a council, and what are the goals of that group?

Diana Chapman Walsh ([00:48:44](#)): Yeah, so we founded it in 2014. I founded it with a dear friend from Wellesley named Sarah Buie. I got to know her because she came to see me in the President's House, to see if I would give a speech, a keynote speech at a conference she was leading. She had a grant from the Ford Foundation to do a project called Difficult Dialogues. Sarah was running the Humanities Center at Clark University—it was a terrific place and she was doing great work. So, Difficult Dialogues. I agreed and I went and gave the opening keynote. And about two years later, she came to me and I was just finishing my presidency at Wellesley. She said, "You know, I've been thinking about these Difficult Dialogues. And the most difficult one of all is the one about climate, because it isn't happening." People are just not talking about it, and there's lots of data on that. She had a colleague who had been one of her graduate students who was very, very deeply into the climate crisis. Her name is Susi Moser, she's one of the leading voices. There are a number of important voices, Susi's is one. She was a geographer who was a specialist on climate communication, but also writes a lot on hope and how to sustain hope.

([00:49:51](#)) So the conversation wasn't happening at all, or it wasn't happening to speak of, or in a meaningful way among the great public around the world. But among the experts in the field, of which Susi was one, there was an awareness that they had information that was so difficult and frightening that they were living with, and they were learning to live with it, and they had their own support

systems to process it and live with it. But that you really needed to have a container to hold it, if you were going to go really deep into it—into not only the facts and the figures, but also the feelings and the realities and the fears. All of it. And that it had to be contained in some way, and that's part of the reason why the conversations weren't happening, the dialogue wasn't happening in the way it needed to happen was that people didn't have those containers, and they didn't really know how to find them. So they'd just rather not go there. I remember at one point somebody said to me, "Okay, so help me understand, you want me to talk about climate? So, you want me to sit down with you and talk about how we're all going to die? And that my son, my beloved son, isn't going to have any kind of a future? Ah, let's see, I think I'd rather not do that right now. I have an important life, an important job. I'm a physician. I'm treating people with cancer. I'm doing my very best. What benefit will there be in our doing that?" And it was not a bad question, right?

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:51:21): Yeah. And this is now the umbrella term of 'eco-anxiety,' right? Of just... we don't know what to do with this reality.

Diana Chapman Walsh (00:51:28): Eco-anxiety. Where do we go with it? One of the things Sarah had done in running the program at Clark was she'd experimented with all kinds of different dialogic forms, and there are lots and lots of them. So we decided to use the Way of Council, which is this Indigenous practice. It's very well-developed. There are organizations that study it and practice it and teach it and sustain it. The Way of Council. It's the idea of, it's the one that in which you have an object in your hand (it used to be a talking stick, but it could be anything), and you sit in a small circle. You go around and they're simple practices. You speak when you have the object and otherwise don't. There's no crosstalk, you don't engage somebody across the circle. You don't give advice, nothing like that. You speak from the heart, to the heart. You try, and the hardest thing of all really is, you try not to be developing your thought that you hope to share into the circle while someone else is speaking.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:52:29): That is very hard. *[laughter]*

Diana Chapman Walsh (00:52:30): Really exercise that discipline, so that when that object lands in your palm... We were using a beautiful marble, like a big marble that was carried for me to the International Space Station and back by our astronaut. So we had this marble that had been back and forth to outer space, which was kind of fun. And we put together an amazing group of 12 women as a kind of prototype, as a pilot. Let's see how this goes. We met five different times in these circles. And we'd have a nice meal beforehand and then the circle would last for an hour or so. We'd do it in a lovely setting, and there'd be something in the middle that would bring in nature, something beautiful from nature. And we had prompts and we carefully developed the prompts, the questions. Over the four sessions, they had an arc. They had an arc each time, and then over the four times, a larger arc that held the four.

(00:53:29) Part of the assumption was that the circle itself has a wisdom of its own. There's some collective experience that we humans can have if we get out of our way that's very, very powerful. If we can shut down some of our habitual ways of interacting and asserting ourselves and being quick to judge, or quick to move on, and all of this. So silences were very welcome in the circle. You could sit there holding that little marble for as long as you needed to hold it before something arose in you that you felt like you wanted to bring. So in some ways, going to the Quaker tradition too in part, that was very natural to me.

(00:54:15) So it started out with, what do we see? What are we seeing about what's happening to our planet? And you'd go around and you'd offer something, some one thing. You wouldn't be trying to give the whole story, the whole complicated story [of climate change]. Then, sometimes we'd have a second

round, "Well, okay, the tree outside my window looks like it's dying." Or, "I don't hear birdsong as much as I used to," whatever it might be. So pretty soon you're developing this bigger picture. And then, how do we understand the meaning behind that? Why do we think these things are happening? Of course, all of these questions are way overdetermined. There are many, many answers, right? And then eventually, you move on to questions about, given what we know and what we've seen, who do we choose to be? Who do we choose to be in this moment of crisis? And then, what do we choose to do? So it has that kind of an arc.

(00:55:15) Susan Bauer-Wu has written a lovely book, *A Future We Can Love*, which has a kind of arc that's not so different from this arc. So, from information and understanding and the emotional impact of all of that, and processing that... How does it affect my life? How do I live with it? How do I deal with it? How do I talk about it? Those kinds of things. Then finally to, who can I be? Who can we be? If there's something coming that's just beyond our imagination, it's an absolute collapse, which more and more people are believing may be the case. So if we're headed into that, I mean, what does that mean? What does that mean for us, as human beings? How can we hang on to some part of our humanity through this process? What kind of action can we take? Susan does a great job in her book of pulling together a dozen or so of the lists that people have created of next steps, things to do. There's so much work to be done.

(00:56:18) So that's what those councils have been. We did this one group and we've done it over and over. But we first felt that being in the room together, that sort of whole-bodied experience of it... Lama Willa Miller was part of it. She's obviously as you know, such a deep, deep teacher of the embodiedness of all of this, that the wisdom is in our bodies, so much of it.

(00:56:45) So that group has continued, and what we found is the group will come back in different forms. We did this at MIT later on. We ran councils, and it was during Covid. So one of the things that Covid taught us, to our amazement and to our benefit, was that you can do this online. Who knew? I mean, it seemed like such a personal, embodied, high-touch, the high-touch quality of it. It seemed to be so important that we were breathing the same air, in and out, and as we were going through these emotional experiences, but it turns out we can even do it online. So we did, I think something like 70 members of the MIT faculty and staff went through over the Covid years.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:57:31): And it's small groups of eight or so?

Diana Chapman Walsh (00:57:34): Yeah, it could be 12, it could be-

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:57:36): 8 to 12, yeah.

Diana Chapman Walsh (00:57:38): Facilitated. So there's always a facilitator who has the prompts and who's practiced as a facilitator, who starts out and reminds everyone of the agreements, and keeps it on track and moving. It's always two hours. So it continues to grow and to spread. It's one of many such things, there's so many.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:57:59): It feels like a big outcome from that, I don't know if it's one of the explicit goals, but is just building community and creating spaces of trust.

Diana Chapman Walsh (00:58:10): Yes.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:58:14): It's an interesting question, sometimes people ask, what gives you hope? I wonder sometimes whether everybody orients around hope as a necessary piece, but is that something that you try to hold onto?

Diana Chapman Walsh (00:58:31): Yeah, the word uncertain was selected purposefully in this name of this little organization, the Uncertain Human Future. There is uncertainty. We really don't know, even now. It's not that I don't believe all the science, I do, and all the IPCC reports and the integrity of those scientists and the brilliance of them and the commitment of them. And these feedback loops... Susan Bauer-Wu in her book, did a wonderful job of playing with the theme of feedback loops and extending it.

(00:59:07) So, nature has these feedback loops and there are lots of them. You know, if it gets hotter, then there are consequences of the heat itself, and that creates more dry air, and that creates more fires. All of these natural feedback loops. But the beauty of it is they can be reversed, and when they're reversed, as they are reversed, they can become part of the solution. It's nature's own healing systems. So if the great Boreal forests can be regenerated, and these people who've planted hundreds of thousands of trees, or the regenerative farming techniques can be implemented widely, and then the soils can come back. There's so many ways that Nature—if we just give her half a chance—will heal the wounds that we've inflicted on her. So there's certainly hope in that.

(01:00:03) And then, what Susan does in a lovely way, I think, is she plays with that idea of this feedback loop, of these mechanisms that can develop a life of their own and expand and extend and reach farther and farther. And she talks about it in human terms—that people, as they talk to each other and convince each other and create organizations, that they themselves can become a kind of regenerating feedback loop. And there's more and more of them, and eventually, maybe we can cut through the stranglehold that the fossil fuel industry has on our governments, on our decision-making bodies.

(01:00:49) We don't know. We don't know what the tipping point is for the planet's people. We don't know at what point we go in the street and try to get the attention of people who are making decisions... But maybe it isn't the decision-makers. We don't know what it could take. I mean, we saw emissions go dramatically down during the pandemic, so what does that mean?

Wendy Hasenkamp (01:01:17): Right. That's an interesting thing about tipping points is they are so incremental up until that moment, until they're not. So when you're in that incremental phase, you don't know.

Diana Chapman Walsh (01:01:27): You don't necessarily see it. You know, there is this piece of hope—I guess it's a piece of hope to hold onto—that it could be equally true for social systems, not just physical systems.

Wendy Hasenkamp (01:01:40): Yeah. Well, as we're wrapping up, is there anything that you wanted to touch on that we haven't talked about, or any take-home lessons to share from your experience?

Diana Chapman Walsh (01:01:49): Well, I wrote the book to tell the story of this journey and to invite other people in to a place where they could be reflecting on their own lives. Not that I'm asking other people to write memoirs or anything, but I hope it's a kind of permission to be telling stories about our lives in a way, and how they unfolded and what we learned along the way. So I don't know what I expected, but I've been so really moved and gratified by the way people have responded to this book, which says to me, to other people, tell your stories. Claim your stories. Name your stories. Find your stories. Tell your stories. They're beautiful, all your stories are beautiful, I'm sure.

Wendy Hasenkamp ([01:02:27](#)): Well, the way you tell yours is with so much heart, and so much care. I just really appreciate you for the way you are in the world, and the way you show up. Like we were saying, we all influence each other all the time. And you shift systems, and you shift communities that you've been a part of—and those have been many and significant. So, deep bows to you for all that you've brought.

Diana Chapman Walsh ([01:02:57](#)): Thank you, Wendy, so much. Wow.

Wendy Hasenkamp ([01:02:59](#)): It's really been a joy to chat today.

Diana Chapman Walsh ([01:03:02](#)): Well, a deep bow to you. I just admire you so much and all you've brought and done for Mind & Life, and for the larger world. This has just been a real pleasure to spend this time with you. Thank you.

Outro – Wendy Hasenkamp ([01:03:18](#)): *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 podcast.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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