



MIND & LIFE

Mind & Life Podcast Transcript

Working Within Systems: Shifting mindsets and holding complexity

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Jamie (00:00)

Welcome to the Mind and Life Podcast. I'm Jamie Bristow, your guest host for this episode. So far in this mini-series, we've mostly begun with a particular inner approach, whether trauma healing, the work that reconnects, or mindfulness-based practice, and asked what that approach might offer to systems change. In this episode, I want to turn the lens around. Rather than starting with a modality, we're going to start with the system itself, with the larger patterns we're caught up in. The dynamics we're trying to shift, and the question of what kinds of inner change might help us work with complexity more wisely.

To work at the system's level is to look beyond isolated events and begin noticing patterns, relationships, feedback loops, power dynamics, and the deeper structures that generate what shows up on the surface. It's to ask not only what is happening, but what keeps producing these recurring outcomes and where the deeper leverage points for change might lie.

Among the deepest leverage points in any system are the worldviews and meaning-making systems that underpin it: The assumptions, beliefs, and stories, often invisible, that determine what problems we can see, what solutions seem imaginable, and what counts as progress. Shifting those is slow, difficult work, but it may be among the most consequential work available to us. Inner and contemplative approaches are among the few that operate at this level. And they're also, for related reasons, vital for navigating the complexity of systems work itself.

Large systems are hard to grasp. They are dynamic, nonlinear, and full of unintended consequences. They stretch beyond one person's perspective. And because we're always located somewhere within them, we do not perceive them from nowhere. We perceive them through bodies, histories, identities, worldviews, values, emotions, and biases. The systems thinker is never outside of the system. And that's one of the reasons contemplative and embodied approaches become so relevant here.

Because if our own patterns of attention, reactivity, and projection shape how we read a situation, then inner work is not a decorative extra. It may be part of what makes wise assistance practice possible in the first place.

So to help me unpack and explore all this, I'm joined by three esteemed guests. We have Wakanyi Macharia-Hoffman, who is an Ubuntu philosophy thinker, the founder of African Folktales Project, and the director of African AI Design Research at Inclusive AI Lab, Utrecht University.

Thomas Lagrande, who is lead advisor for the UNDP convened Conscious Food Systems Alliance, and the author of Politics of Being, Wisdom and Science for a New Development Paradigm.

And Rachel Lilly, who is an associate professor at the University of Birmingham, where she is program director of the MSc in systems thinking and leadership, and pioneers the integration of embodied practice and inner inquiry into systems practice.

Okay. Well, thank you so much for joining us, ~ you three. And I'd love to ask you, Rachel, to get us kicked off because we've known each other for some time. We have a sort of shared background working with mindfulness and yoga and contemplative approaches and sustainability. And I'm sure we've used the word systems thinking quite a lot over the 12 or so years that we've known each other. But more recently, you've been really getting into systems thinking in the professional and academic discipline. And you now teach a masters program on the subject. So what have you learned, I guess, coming from the sustainability and contemplative world as a base of thinking and now really focused on systems work?

Rachel (03:39)

Yeah, thank you, Jamie. And thanks for that introduction and for the opportunity to discuss this topic, which is so vital. And I guess what I learned was how systems thinking needed to understand the inner work, but not quite as I had thought it. Being outside the systems discipline, perhaps, is one way of putting it. The systems thinking, you know, has 50 years, well, longer, probably a lot longer, you know, thinking and evolution and application and practice in it. And I started to liken it maybe when I was thinking about this to, you know, CBT and how CBT became MBCT.

Jamie (04:23)

Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy as a extension of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, right?

Rachel (04:28)

Yeah, so Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, which obviously is a very technical, actually, CBT, isn't it? And mindfulness, because of certain aspects about CBT that really link to mindfulness, there was a recognition of how these two might fit together. But then there was a lot of work to actually put them together. So what I realized was the integration of what we're calling inner work into systems thinking for me requires the same amount of work. Now that's not to, as one version, as one version of inner work in this space, because I believe as we will all represent, there's lots of versions of what inner work might look like in this space. But one version is a much more integrated inner work in systems practice. And I'll give you one example so that, you know, just to start us off. So obviously in systems thinking, well, there's two concepts that are really, really important.

One is boundaries. What are you deciding is in your system? What are you deciding is out of your system? Because the minute you change your boundaries within a system, you completely change how you're seeing system. But you need a boundary because you can't look at a whole system. You know, that's not possible. So that boundary judgment is actually a judgment that requires quite a lot of self-awareness, you know.

And attention practice is in a way a boundary practice. What am I including? What am I not including? So for my students, they actually spend quite a long time about, although it sounds straightforward, it's quite a deep kind of, it requires a lot of thought about what we mean by

boundaries. And I work with Gerald Midgley, who's a professor in Hull, who became known for boundaries being key in systems thinking. But bringing this

Jamie (05:58)
Yeah, interesting.

Rachel (06:20)
attention practice in and the felt sense, how the felt sense creates a boundary because something feels right, something feels wrong. So we're working with attention. We're working with the somatic experience of a boundary, which is actually really important because people often don't really notice that there's a felt sense of something being right or wrong.

Jamie (06:41)
Hmm. When something's in or out?

Rachel (06:44)
Yeah, something's in or out. Yeah, right or wrong, in or out, a felt sense of ease with one option of something being in a system and a sense of disease with something else being in a system. So you're working with nervous systems when you're working with boundaries. And similarly, perspectives. I'll finish with this. One thing about perspectives is systems thinking even to date believes that doesn't really understand the complexity of the inner perspective. So it kind of stops really with methods that support dialogue. Not really acknowledging that dialogue is coming from an inner dimension where we're dealing with attention, we're dealing with emotion, we're dealing with, you might call values. I tend to work with predictions and priors from predicted mind theory. And we're dealing with the fact that because of predictive mind, we generate our own realities. So we're generating our own systems. So perspectives are lot more complex than systems thinking actually understood. And what this work really brings just on those two systems concepts is really helpful inner practices to support working with those concepts and ideas.

Jamie (08:04)
Hmm, I think that's super interesting. I remember Mark Williams talking about how he, John Teasdale, and Zindel Segal, went over to speak to Jon Kabat-Zinn because as they started to realize that CBT could helpfully be combined with mindfulness. And then having a sense that they thought they'd go over there for a weekend, to pick it up and then sort of get going with it. And then had this real you know sense of 'wow, there's a lot here we need to learn before we can actually innovate with this'.

But would you say in general, systems thinking has tended to be quite sort of verbal, conceptual, and thinking about sort of structures and and physical systems? It's the beginning of its journey towards considering the inner dimension and particularly the embodied inner dimension of systems thinkers themselves?

Rachel (08:47)
Sometimes we talk about systems thinking in four waves: The early systems thinking was all about hard systems, you know, which is more what I'm hearing you talking about there. But then it did evolve into understanding there are humans in systems and there is a human perceiving system. And we have to take that into account. And so then actually for many years, it's understood that the human is central to a system and the perception of the system.

It's a really important aspect of systems and systems change and how we see and work with systems. What this brings is an understanding of the complexity of a perspective and a group of perspectives. And one thing I have kind of evolved is an idea that now I've got a little slide where you've got kind of human perception with its nervous system and you know,

the whole perceptive system as we know it, and our understandings of that are evolving, then contributing to ~ groups of those systems coming together, as individuals, as we know, as meditators, I'm sure we have multiple perspectives. We don't have one perspective. And yet in a way, the system's approaches are designed with the idea that we have one perspective and it's straightforward.

Now we, all of us know, I'm sure, that we don't have one perspective. We ourselves have multiple perspectives, multiple identities. And so what this inner dimension piece has offered is a massive unpacking of that, which then significantly challenges and evolves the discipline of systems thinking.

Jamie (10:33)
Mm-hmm.

Yeah, interesting. And do you think that the work of, say, Nora Bateson and her Warm Data approach and Peter Senge and Meta Bowl with their Compassionate Systems Framework have had some impact in this world? And I think I've had some sense from the systems thinkers I know in the civil service in the UK that they've started to be interested in Theory U, but have these been quite separate worlds, do you think?

Rachel (10:56)

I I worked a lot with Theory U in the early days, certainly in Wales and in Scotland, it was very widely used. My understanding was maybe not so much in the UK central civil service. But I think these are all aspects of the evolution of this. I mean, Peter Senge used the idea of mental models quite a lot in his work in systems thinking. And I have a kind of...

quite a critique of that because it's actually quite a simplistic view of how minds work. So I think these are all, you know, stepping stones along the way, really. And obviously, Nora, with her background and her parentage and everything, know, warm data labs also play, they're a practical form of working with systems. It's like you say, with the mindfulness-based cognitive therapy.

This is a massive topic when we start to unpack it and what we need are the spaces really where we can discuss this and evolve the different strands that this is going to look like. It's like I say, inner work will come out in multiple ways, as I'm sure my colleagues here will also, my friends here will also speak to.

Jamie (12:14)

Yeah, well on that note, turning now to Thomas, with a particular look at the food and agriculture system that you spend your life now considering, could you help us consider what is included, to Rachel's point, in and out of the food system? Where are the boundaries? When we say the food system, what does it entail?

Thomas (12:39)

Sure, Jamie, thanks for inviting me in that conversation and thanks, Rachel, for the introduction. Yeah, when we talk about food systems, we are talking about a whole range of actors and their activities, which spans from food production to food consumption, including aggregation, processing, distribution, and disposal of food products.

So food products are the ones that originate from agriculture, forestry, or fisheries, and we are also considering the broader economic, social, and natural environments in which they are embedded. So this is important to understand because it invites us to have a more holistic decision making. So let's say when we are designing a policy or an intervention, we should consider its impact on all these different dimensions. So for example, in the recent if you look at the last few decades, there have been you know improvements from an economic perspective on food systems. These have grown as economic activities, but they have also created important negative externalities, negative impacts on human health and the environment. So there are, for example, some economic studies that say that these negative impacts according to FAO amount to between ten and thirteen trillion dollars. And when we compare that to the value of food production is only four trillion dollars.

The value of food systems, you know, with all the value aggregation along the value chains goes up to fifteen to nineteen trillion dollars. So which means you know if we're only considering the economic dimensions, we miss a lot around you know the full picture and we may not take the right policies that optimize the value of food systems for the whole society.

Jamie (15:00)

Hmm. Wow. And could you say a little bit more about some of those sort of negative impacts? You know, why is thinking about food systems so key for human health, for sustainability, et cetera? Why is this such a big part of the puzzle?

Thomas (15:16)

Sure. So these negative externalities, when at least when they are measures in terms of economic value, you know, they're also some something that may not be able to fully measure or question the way they are measured. But most of this negative impact actually comes from its impact on human health. We know nutrition plays a very important role on human health, and we have you know some two point five billion people that are actually overweight and that creates a lot of health problems, right? We have 900 million adults who are obese. And yeah, that creates, you know, we hear a lot recently about the role also of ultra processed food that are, you know, becoming more and more, you know, centered in the way we consume food. The other part of these negative externalities are the environmental impact. So the food systems is the biggest driver of environmental degradation. It's responsible for eighty percent of tropical deforestation, where most of the terrestrial biodiversity is. It's also responsible for roughly a third of greenhouse gases emissions that are causing climate change.

So, you know, they create ~ their negative impact on climate and biodiversity also as a huge cost for societies.

Jamie (16:53)

Wow, so it's hugely important and huge, right? This is touching every corner of the planet and so many different parts of our lives and different sectors. Why is it important to think about it in a holistic way? I know that Andrew Bovarnik, who is the head of food and agriculture at UNDP, I think, Thomas, is that right? You know, yeah, so had the insight that traditional change approaches weren't working and

Thomas (17:14)
food system.

Jamie (17:21)
a shift in consciousness was required. That was the original insight that he convened, you know, many volunteers and experts to help him think through that. And you're leading the alliance that resulted from it. Why do you think Andrew had that insight? You know, like why haven't traditional approaches worked and what might be needed?

Thomas (17:40)
Yeah, I think we have to realize that like many of us, this comes from his own personal journey where he realized and when he started to look inside of himself, he was able to understand more things and maybe you know start a process of transformation and could see how that process of transformation, personal process, relates to some of the challenges that we are facing in the world and the need for greater awareness, greater compassion, greater nature connection, for example. And he has worked very much on the technical level, the policies, working with governments, multi-stakeholders, processes, and realized that you know there was this missing piece of, you could call it inner transformation.

Especially in the work he was doing, he was already very engaged in trying to foster deeper collaboration among stakeholders working on the same subject or value chains in the case of green commodities, for example. And so they had developed some approaches to foster greater collaboration, but realized that these were not effective as they should be because they were missing that important dimension of consciousness now. So that's why he decided to explore ~ this aspect and then set up this conscious food systems alliance.

Jamie (19:10)
Yeah, thank you, Thomas. Really important work there in such a mainstream and influential context. Well, Wakanyi, you're also working with quite an influential system or sector, trying to work with the tech industry and AI in particular. Could you help us understand how that different sort of system fits together. Again, sort of like, you know, where are its boundaries? How does it sit within society?

Wakanyi (19:43)
Yeah, thank you so much, Jamie, for that question. And thank you, Rachel and Thomas for grounding us in systems thinking. I would like us to unpack this word 'system'. What do we actually mean when we're talking about systems? What is a system? So I like to push back on the idea of systems as something that is outside of us. System is us. We are the system, right? Systema. If you go back to the original meaning of the word systema means, you know, an organized whole.

Wakanyi (20:14)
So how are we organising ourselves into wholeness? So there's smaller versions of the whole, right? As Rachel said, you might require a boundary around yourself just as one system within of yourself. And as a community, you're also a system, right? You're coming together and you're connecting in particular ways, but that doesn't mean bonded together for better or worse. When a system fails, it is because we have not accepted the boundaries that exist between different things. And so from that perspective, when I look at technology, AI in itself is based on algorithms, right? And again, we must unpack what does that mean? What is an algorithm? An

algorithm is a rule-based set of steps for solving problems. So beneath every one of those LLMs that we have, whether that's Claude or...

Jamie (21:04)

That's the large language model, yeah, for anyone who's been living underneath a rock.

Wakanyi (21:08)

Yes, exactly. Each one of them has an algorithm. And I think the only company that's been able to actually publicly publish their algorithm has been Anthropic, if I'm not wrong. I think Microsoft haven't. Again, don't quote me on that, but we can look into that. But as far as I know at the moment, unless we know what the big set of rules underneath the cloud's machine, we understand what the question is or how it's supposed to respond to the questions that people might pose to this system. So for me, that is the beginning. I look at these systems as there is a logic underneath it all that is shaping the way society is organized, that is organizing us into a whole, if that's what system means, when we look at AI systems, they are trying to organize us into a particular wholeness. And what that particular wholeness is, is also dependent on how we as members of the system that did not invent AI, did not particularly create it, but we are actually part of its logic of thinking. So there's a feedback loop. So there is, I look at that human in the loop, not just at the design stage, the technologists that are creating the code or writing the code or collecting data and training the models. But I'm also looking particularly, I'm more interested in the rest of us, the eight billion of us that may think that we can opt out of this system, but we are entangled in a system that we might not be fully understanding how we help to shape it. So that's sort of, for me, I have to get down to that basic level of what are we actually solving as a whole? What is this wholeness that we're getting into? What is the question that we're sitting with? When I sit in those rooms with technologists, my first question, well actually I begin with two parts. So the first part is you are technical engineers and you've been trained to come up with technical solutions for the system, the system being human beings, right? However, what you are actually are social engineers of humanity. So you have technical solutions to problems that we have in our system, in our society, right? So flipping that mindset from, you know, because most technologists would say, well, I've just only been trained - went to engineering school and I was trained to come up with, you know, how to make a screwdriver work. I don't have anything to do with relational problems. But then I'm like, no, hang on a second. Actually, your first point of contact is that there is a relational problem that you're trying to find a screwdriver to fix in society. So see yourself as part of that problem and see what is the problem you're trying to solve within yourself, in that field of relationships with that technical solution that you now are capable of coming up with. that, you know, grounding us back to human relationships that we perform and we encounter in our relational field that then create systems that are either healthy or unhealthy, depending on what the quality of the relationships that we hold.

Jamie (24:27)

Well, we'll come back to ask a little bit more about what you're doing to try and yes shift some of the values at the at the core of these endeavors in a moment. But but first, ~ Rachel, could you tell us a little bit about the work you've done, practically speaking, to bring these worlds together, the inner and the the systems thinker? You've worked with policymakers in the Welsh government and and now, as you've mentioned,

students on your systems thinking masters. So so practically, what do people do to use contemplative or inner approaches to hold complexity better and intervene in systems?

Rachel (25:07)

Yeah, thank you, Jamie, and so much in what Thomas and Wakanyi have said, really, we could have quite a kind of really interesting conversation here, I feel. So, yeah, I started off actually, because I was looking at some of your papers, Jamie, with them that you wrote with Christine Walmsler and that sense of maybe just delivering slightly adapted MBSR courses in Welsh government. That was my starting point. In a context where Welsh government were trying to integrate psychology into policymaking through behavior change. So it's the first time really that policymakers had really understood that human beings, and we've talked about it here —logic, rationality—how are we understanding logic and rationality in the policy space? And we realized we're using a version of rationality that comes from economic, homo, what's his name? Economics...that's the one.

Jamie (26:04)

Economicus.

Outdated model of the human mind, right?

Rachel (26:10)

which is an outdated model of rationality. But that is how a lot of policy is done, how it's this idea of rationality where it's just all about information deficit. I mean, you'll know this as well, Jamie, idea that if we just tell people things, they will then change. And this is probably where we were starting out on our early journeys with this. And behavior change was one of the first things that came along. And some of the behavior change is more systemic, I think, than others, but it's there. And so we do, teach people contemplative practice and will that in itself, if they're also trying to deliver policies in this space around behavior, will that in itself start to change how they see it and do it? And my experience in those early days where people do not make the leap, that they can quite easily do mindfulness and do an MBSR adapted course. Number one, we all know how hard that is to get into the workplace, actually. That's another big issue, just because people don't have time and it's not the resource to do it. But then will they make the leap? And my experience, as I say, was that they didn't.

Jamie (27:21)

The leap to making more informed decisions, with a bet with a better model of mind.

Rachel (27:28)

Yeah, so for example, in some of the papers that you wrote, for example, you talk about mindset, so you talk about values, for instance. If you teach an MBSR course, mindfulness-based stress relief, or some version of it, will they then go and take that and use that in their work in ways that are really going to make a difference? Now, we have seen that it makes a difference in terms of how they feel and maybe how they relate to other people, particularly on the programme slightly.

But it doesn't really make fundamental changes because they then go back into a system, we talk about systems, which don't allow them to do these things.

Jamie (28:08)

Yeah, we found some limits in the British parliamentary system, right? There was a lot of hope for particularly those who had been on the course together, they had different relationships and debated in different ways. But you have hundreds of years of cultural accretion here, you know, and the physical structure of the place, the procedures. It's a lot for individuals to overcome.

And with a lot of churn in parliamentarians, you know, there's potential there, but without a systems view, I completely with you, yeah.

Rachel (28:35)

Yeah, so the system they're in is, and we know this of a lot of transformational training, that people go on the training, then they go back into the system and the system resists. The system is itself 'autopoetic', which is Maturana, you know, it just attempts to replicate itself and will continue to do so. And we as humans within that system will then be part of that autopoetic system.

So then it spoke to me to how you then integrate more effectively this inner work and this aspects of the inner work into processes that are attempting to change systems and that have evolved and are being used in those systems to change those systems. And even there will be some resistance to those change methods as well. So you've still got this in slight layers. But systems change itself.

In fact, has got more and more traction in recent years as has behaviour change and the integration of the two. So my journey then took me as I went from finishing the PhD into getting this role as developing a whole new programme on systems thinking and leadership in practice. Because that's the other thing that was missing from systems thinking is that because systems resist change, how do we enact systemic leadership that's actually going to change systems and support people through that change process? And both systems thinking and actually systemic adaptive leadership, they all start really from a premise. One lens we can look at this through is they start from a premise that human beings do not actually see reality. We come back to the, they are not rational. They are not logical in the ways that we talk about it. and in fact, Gregory Bateson, Nora Bateson's father, one of his early statements was the reason we've got effectively this kind of polycrisis at the time is because there's a complete mismatch between what's happening out there and what humans are perceiving. So,

Jamie (30:52)

Mm-hmm.

Rachel (30:54)

The starting place for our masters became what do we understand about how human beings perceive the world about our own perceptive systems. And so we're then on the straight away we're on that inner journey because what we realize within and I think this is a key, this is something I've asked to audiences globally is what do they understand about their own perceptive system? What in their education, anywhere.

And most people will look slightly perplexed and awkward and embarrassed that this thing that we're using now, that everyone is using to make sense of the world, and which then leads to action and behavior, they don't actually have much of a clue of the mechanisms behind this. And my view is that a lot of people who've engaged in contemplative practice or any form of reflection and inquiry have

attempted to find something to help them with this. But you don't study psychology or neuroscience in the UK and you might not study it at all. You might study it at 16 at A level. But I now found this to be true across the world. Well, the places I've been anyway so far. So that is our first inquiry in the masters, which immediately brings us to attention.

which immediately brings us to theories of cognition, theories of emotion, which, as we've discussed previously, Jamie, have massively changed. So the mind is now seen as more generative than reactive.

Jamie (32:33)

Could you unpack that just a little bit? In brief.

Rachel (32:34)

Yes.

In brief. Yeah, well, so I suppose with the, it was with the invention of the fMRI scanner and Carl Friston's work at the time, he, now don't ask me exactly how, but he came up with the theory of the mind being more predictive. And I think that was related in part to what they saw within scanners as well, that there was more kind of mental energy attempting to make sense of the world.

So the signals going out were stronger than the signals coming back in. And I guess, Wakanyi, I'm sure we'll speak to this.

Jamie (33:15)

So we don't see the world as it is, we see the world as we are to some extent.

Rachel (33:19)

As we are and as we expect to see and we start to act in the world as though the thing that we expect to happen based on prior experience is going to happen again. And in doing so we bring about the world as it was before, which is the auto poetic and which speaks to AI. So the problem in essence is much worse than bias. We talk about bias as though there's some thing that's outside of the bias that can somehow see the bias and change it in a way, but the default method that the mind makes sense of the world is one using prior experience. It can do no other than treat the world as it previously expected, but it can learn, it can learn. But the learning signals are weaker than the generative signal that we're using to make sense of the world. So the key point I'm going to say is that the more stressed we are, the more noise there is in the system, the more something is new and novel and complex, the harder it is for us to pick up that weaker error signal and learn and do something new.

Jamie (34:34)

Have a genuine beginner's mind. So it's an issue, it's self-regulation challenge. It's a challenge of perception and interrogating beliefs and all of that kind of stuff that comes with a contemplative practice of inquiry and insight.

Rachel (34:50)

You need to slow it all down. Yeah, you need to be checking your own assumptions. But these practices are enormously helpful, as well as others in this space. Which is why, I think if I remember the start of this question, I ultimately evolved something called somatic inquiry for systems thinkers, which is attention practice, body scanning, as a practice, working with the system, basically.

Jamie (35:17)

Mm-hmm. Right. Great. Thank you. So Thomas, you're taking these practices to different parts of the food system from sort of farmers in rural areas in in Egypt, or rather you're supporting

others who are doing it and connecting them and sort of fostering the ecosystem of different approaches. But yeah, that goes from working with indigenous groups and farmers right the way up to sort of ~ executives in in great big agribusiness. Could you just give us a sense of what the Conscious Food Systems Alliance is and and and yeah, and and and how you're, to Rachel's point, helping to develop self regulation and insight and sort of values awareness, etcetera.

Thomas (35:58)

Sure, Jamie. Yes, so the Conscious Food Systems Alliance is a global movement focused on helping ~ the stakeholders involved in food systems in cultivating what we call the inner capacities that we think are required for food systems transformation. So in essence we are first a global community of practice and learning, helping ~ people all over food systems in all over the world be able to connect, to learn from each other, and to collaborate. We are also helping them directly cultivate these inner capacities through a conscious food systems leadership program. We're running now the ~ sixth core of it, and we also are providing technical assistance and funding for activities on the ground. And ~ we have seen

Yeah, a lot of momentum around our work, and we are now preparing for the first global conscious food systems summit organized with the government of Bhutan in September, with ~ many of the most ~ important organizations involved in food systems, helping us joining ~ their forces for this event, as they really think this is being more and more recognized as a very important issue for the global food systems agenda.

Jamie (37:29)

Mm. Could you give us an an example of one of these programs, maybe at the different levels? Like what participants in some of these programs experience?

Thomas (37:38)

Sure. So for example, we have been supporting training and deep conversations with farming communities. For example, in India, with the framing of human values, ~ which they have found is ~ helpful to anchor, I would say, more ~ solidly the agroecological transition into a different

worldview and relationship in particular with nature. And ~ we are working, for example, also with SEKEM in Egypt, which is a famous initiative who have been able to green the dessert to biodynamic agriculture. And their approach is centering very much ~ consciousness. You know, the the founder came started the organization with a with a tractor and piano because he believed that you know, cultural and inner development is an integral part of that transformation.

They have been very successful and they are providing, for example, to their employees half a day per week for their own inner cultural development. Another piece when it comes to, for example, the work on policy, how we are designing these multi-stakeholder conversations, and how can we start looking at these policy issues?

From a place of connection to self, others, and nature, for ~ through some practices or retreats. And also what we have seen is that in general, as we are bringing people together and we are starting from that place of inner connection, inner transformation, we are creating a space for people to feel much more connected to each other, and that has really strengthen or completely change the way people can actually collaborate and allow also for deeper conversation. Often it

feels that you know what we can feel or approach personally the subjects are stakes and ~ often are not part of the conversation which are rather focused on technical issues. And we feel that when we are enable people to bring their whole selves in these conversations, they are deeper and often very important issues that can be surfaced, which are usually not in more technical discussions.

Jamie (40:15)

Right, yeah. I mean, the very fact that the UN has been convening this and and and, you know, fostering this network is itself a powerful mechanism of change, because it brings that sort legitimacy and credibility. How credible have people found this, you know, in the wider system? Is there a lot of appetite for this? Do you have to sell it very hard? Does it feel kind of woo or does it feel overdue in some way? Like, yeah, how hard is your work to get different parts of this system engaged in these new ways?

Thomas (40:48)

Yeah, so we have started to work on that five years ago and launched it three and a half years ago. At the beginning, you know, we were ourselves, you know, really exploring how what should be, you know, the language and you know the direction we should give to this work. And I would say now we are much more clear, mature, we bring the evidence and the right arguments. And we have indeed, as I was saying, for this global summit, most influential organization in this space.

That are including many UN agencies that are really taking this very seriously and engaging in the summit. So let's say we have the UN Food Systems Coordination Hub that is in charge of this agenda in the whole UN systems, FAO, WHO, the Global Environment Facility, which is the biggest environmental fund in the world, the agroecology coalition. So I would say most of the main actors, at least, you know, I would say more on the public side: international organisations, NGOs, we'll have also now numerous governments also coming to the summit. So I would say we are really, yeah, seen as a very ~ relevant piece of the global food systems agenda at the moment through these many organisations.

Jamie (42:07)

Hmm. Well, that's encouraging to hear. Well, Wakanyi, in this miniseries we've already heard a little bit about Ubuntu. Martin Kalungu-Banda, who is a member of the Presencing Institute team, gave us a sort of a light touch introduction in the context of the work of the Presencing Institute and Theory U. And that's one of the the main lenses or bits of your thinking and your work that you're bringing to the AI world. Could you tell us a little bit about how you're trying to intervene and shift the ways people are thinking, feeling and being in that world.

Wakanyi (42:40)

Yeah, well Ubuntu, as you know, is this sort of African moral conception of personhood, what it means to be a person. It's normally captured in the saying, a person is a person through other person, or the more popular slogan is, am because of who we are. And Ubuntu, for me, I deepen that even more than that slogan. And I say Ubuntu is relational intelligence made visible in our systems.

Now, for a system to flourish, a healthy system needs to have healthy relationships. And the way in which we can see those healthy relationships from an Ubuntu perspective is through care and repair and reciprocity made visible. So can our AI systems actually make visible care,

repair and reciprocity? Do we feel cared for or are we just having sort of a transactional experience?

With our LLMs, with our large language models and other AI systems, or are we actually revealing human care that is then mirrored back by these systems? So that's, you could dig into that much further. But to answer your question directly, so if from an Ubuntu perspective, I'm looking at systems that make care and repair and reciprocity visible, then what I'm fundamentally asking the technologists behind our systems, our technology systems is how does care, repair and reciprocity show up in you to begin with? So I bring it back because Ubuntu, there is that element of I. I am because of who we are. We tend to focus on the we, right? This idea of a healthy flourishing Ubuntu community. Everybody's holding hands and we're all happy. But there is the aspect of the 'I' - the examined and the developed and the developing 'I'. So that inner developing self, sense of self has to be consciously aware of the way in which it makes visible care, repair and reciprocity. So for example, take you, right, Jamie, right? How does Wakanyi or Jamie actually care about themselves? How do people establish that Jamie cares about himself? Right? We can probably see in the way that you carry yourself.

we can see in the choices that you make, right? The food that you choose to eat or the amount of sleep that you get, you know, just even just the basic, the bare basics, the way that you speak, the way that you relate to others. And we can also, we all fundamentally know if a five-year-old would tell someone who cares for themselves and a person who's sort of careless, right? We don't look for role models within groups of people that are, you know, abusing substances, for example, right? That's not a model of a person that actually cares, right? So beginning with that perspective of the individual that makes visible care, repair, and reciprocity within themselves, then I ask of our tech companies to look at whether or not the algorithm that they have built that is now embedded in our AI systems, does it have this care, repair, reciprocity loop embedded within it?

And there is an Ubuntu optimization algorithm that was developed in South Africa by some South African tech scholars and philosophers actually in conjunction with some colleagues in Japan. And they came up with Ubuntu optimization algorithm, which actually performs significantly differently from other algorithms that are optimized for profit and maximizing productivity. Whereas the Ubuntu optimization algorithm maximizes for collaboration, which is embedded in the Ubuntu way.

Jamie (46:31)

So the algorithm would be different and it would create a different LLM. The model would be different and and and so my felt sense of it when I'm interacting with it would be different, the different sort of outputs it would give me and it would shape my writing in a different way or my coding or whatever else. Those of the different philosophical principles.

Wakanyi (46:34)

Absolutely.

Absolutely.

Exactly. We wouldn't have to ask an LLM to speak nicely or to sort of confirm your biases. And bias, again, Rachel, I agree 100 % with you. Bias in and of itself is not a bad thing or a good thing. It is a default of us human beings because we do tend to look at things from my own kaleidoscopic view. I can't see the whole. I need others. So that's Ubuntu. I need others in order

to see the wholeness of the system. So that sort of system that acknowledges that we are biased because that's who we are, we are individuals to begin with, right? Then allows, if it was built from an Ubuntu perspective, would include that reality that in order to see wholeness, we need to make visible repair and care and reciprocity. And by reciprocity, I mean how well you go back to care and repair.

And it's not just within human systems. Ubuntu is not just about people and people only. It is also about humans and the land, how much we care about the land. That should also be made visible in our air systems. So demanding that our air systems actually reveal the environmental impact is not something that should be surprising. It should be part of the algorithm. It should show you at the end of the day, hey, Jamie, by the way, all those questions that you asked.

All those reports that you produce actually took X amount of water from Congo, from a river in the Congo, Brazil or whatever. Like that should be obvious. It shouldn't be something that we demand of later on. And in that way, that sort of Ubuntu optimized AI is helping you cognitively remember that you are responsible for how you shape the system that you live in, right? That your own decisions as an individual actually affect the whole. That's the I am because of who we are and that you take responsibility for your part in the wholeness.

Jamie (48:49)

Hmm. Anecdotally, meditation practice is quite popular in the Valley or in the you know in the tech world, but maybe in quite narrow ways or you know narrow telos, or you know, the reason why they're doing it might be about optimization. Do you encourage contemplative practices? And if so, how differently would you suggest the tech world engages with them?

'Cause I know you do embodiment practices in your own workshops, right? With with tech folk, but is it also a recommendation that they have some form of awareness practice and what would you recommend?

Wakanyi (49:26)

Absolutely. think we all need to be more aware and we need to have the capacity to be able to have that intentional thinking, intentional being, right? Because we are very much distracted by a lot of noise, but I don't necessarily go there with the intention of encouraging mindfulness or not. Whatever the practice is that could help you become more of an expanded version of yourself. I'm all for it. What I do bring in is a litmus test of Ubuntu.

And that litmus test is actually something that I've been developing at the lab, at our Inclusive Air Lab, and it's called R.E.A.L. And R.E.A.L. is an acronym for Relatability, Embodied, Adoptable and Loving Kind. And with that, then I pause for very simple questions to sort of help people to establish how well you understand your Ubuntu, your growing humanity.

Jamie (50:10)

Nice

Wakanyi (50:23)

that is in relationship with others. So that's relational intelligence in practice. So this is sort of a litmus test for it. And those questions are very specific and they always sort of revert back to how I show up in that relational field and how my own decisions are actually shaping the soil, right? The soil that we all rely on and not so much the fruits of the tree that we tend to see and

focus on, but how we're actually making decisions at the ground level that shape the way that our systems then grow, healthy or unhealthy.

Jamie (50:59)

Hmm. Yeah, right. Rachel, what what are your thoughts about the future and where this is going? ~ I say this, I mean the meeting of inner approaches and and systems work.

Rachel (51:13)

Yeah, well, we're here, aren't we? And we're talking about it. And there's three of us talking about it in related but different ways. And this is very different to how it was 12 years ago when you and I started out on this. I mean, there's so much more I could have said about, you know, technically what we've done and examples of how that's being applied. How can we create the kind of labs, the kind of thinking spaces where we can evolve it because I've now got a good number of students who are very passionate about this. It's really meaningful for them in their work. actually, maybe I'll just give a little vignette of this, is I've had two cohorts of my masters students at the masters program have come to an end. And at the end, they have to do a kind of presentation as to where they've got to. And the most common story that they offer is, well, I joined this course, it was all about systems thinking and leadership. And I was really expecting to get a set of tools, a set of understanding and tools of ways that I could deal with, work with systems. And again, remember, they're working in very complex and chaotic environments. So they hope they would come away with more tools in the bag to deal with this. But they said, but I've actually been transformed.

Jamie (52:41)

Hmm.

Rachel (52:42)

I've actually had a transformational experience and I see the world really differently. And that is actually making me a much better systems practitioner. And the thing, you we haven't gone completely through everything we integrate, but it's around attention, understanding attention, theories of mind, theories of emotion, body scanning, somatic work, also quite intense coaching to really encourage people to... consider their identity construction on all kind of levels, their positionality within the world, but also their histories and how that is really contributing to how they're navigating power and difference. So they come away saying, this has been massively transformational.

Jamie (53:29)

So I'm sure there are many practitioners and innovators and and researchers who work with contemplative practices and inner-led approaches listening, who are interested in systems thinking as a profession, as an academic discipline has been piqued. What would you recommend to the field, as it were, for us to move towards a better understanding of the systems expertise that there is?

Rachel (53:56)

So, you know, we're dealing with high levels of complexity here and we're dealing with a real change, a real shift in how we might see things and do things. This is new, you know, so there's not much out there. So I would encourage anyone, we need to create platforms, ways of sharing that information. I actually think it's hard for all of us when these transformational practices have been so transformational, for us personally to actually be not attached to particular ways of seeing how this needs to be integrated. I think one of the key elements, if I might say, is

exercising non-attachment actually, because our own expectations, our own priors relative to what deep and personal practices and we need to exercise a little bit of non-attachment and kind of think, well, we actually need to see this problem very differently in very many different ways, if you like, Jamie. And so holding that space of being in the uncertainty, I guess, which is massive in systems change and complexity, how to stay with uncertainty, how to keep open to the many ways that this might be being integrated and making a difference.

Again, how can we join together to create the spaces where we can explore that and really be open to what's emerging, to what's emerging? And there are lots of things emerging.

Jamie (55:35)

Mm. Yeah, that's such a powerful point. There's so much potential here. And we are feeling, I think, a cohering of what you might call inner-led change or, you know, inner approaches to meeting the problems of the world. And also there are little subfields, what I sometimes call base camps. In fact, the final episode of this miniseries, we're going to talking about mapping and ecosystem development and how we pull some of that together.

But it can be that we have, you know, from my perspective, like mindfulness, for instance, I did, you know, I was advocating for that primarily for 10 years. You can be quite attached to that particular discipline or family of approaches. And this conversation is very interesting, starting with the systems view first and then thinking about of all the things that are in offer, what's the most appropriate for this context, or ~ you know, combination of approaches is ~ a different way of going about it. Thomas, where are things going with the Conscious Food Systems Alliance?

Like, what are your plans, aspirations, long term goals?

Thomas (56:36)

Thank you, Jamie, and happy to build ~ for this transition. What Rachel just said about you know the need to stay emergent. I think this has been very alive for us, maybe sometimes not necessarily chosen, you know, also because of short-term funding and and these kind of things. But I think this has at the end played on our favor to really rather than which is a bit the old kind of mindset, at least in our field, you know, where we have these five years project with a logical framework and we implement things in a very kind of linear kind of thinking. With this, you know, I I don't think we could have planned, let's say, to have three years after launching an initiative have a global summit of this kind with that kind of momentum. And I think at the moment we are also really looking forward of what wants to emerge through that.

We want also to support more the implementation, whether it is with farmers, farming communities, with policymakers, or how to bring that also in the ways of working and organisational cultures. I think the implementation is really important. There's a strong also dynamic around regionalisation in terms of our own organisation within this alliance. And we have mentioned this Conscious Food Systems Leadership Programme and we're getting organised now to have more regional cohorts facilitated by regional facilitators. In terms of implementation, it's also how we can build these conscious food systems at the local level. Yeah, and you know, the whole how do we build the governance of the alliance, the organization. And I think what we are drawn also to evolve beyond food, we think that agenda around.

Inner transformation for systemic change. We feel we have learned a lot in our space in food systems that can be applied to other sectors. ~ Very next to food systems, food systems are really embedded also in the environment and climate agenda. But at the summit, we'll have our first high-level day. We'll be, you know, more broader than food. And I think we want to elevate this agenda in a way that is more strategic because at the end, you know.

When we help people to transform, it doesn't matter only for when they are involved in food systems, but it can, you know, I think consciousness is what is more systemic in society. So we and when we work on that, we are impacting all the different systems in which we are involved in. So I think the more we'll be able also to elevate strategically on the role of inner transformation, for example, to address the poly crisis, we could say, as a framing, the more we will be able to be more influential and also make our case more strongly. I think it becomes the more you're systemic about it, about consciousness, the more you can, you know, really picture the importance of it for the the times we are in.

Jamie (59:49)

That's partly a challenge of sort of language and the right framing for the right place. One of the framings that what that Wakanyi and I have both worked on is the Inner Development Goals with the what's now called the Inner Development Guide, with twenty-five skills, qualities, and ~ abilities or capacities that have been derived through a global survey of I think twenty, thirty thousand people in 190 countries, I think I think it is. So we do have this sort of global language to talk about how in and I think systems thinking is one of the twenty-five skills on the guide, as well as like kind of complexity awareness and critical critical thinking in the kind of thinking domain. And what can you what is possible, do you think, with the work that the Interdevelopment Goals has done and and we and we've been touching on here today, to bring this into sort of mainstream and high level, high level discourse? What's the role of the IDGs and where could this go?

Wakanyi (1:00:47)

Right. So I sit on the advisory board, the transition board for the IDGs. It's transitioning from a sort of centralized organization out of Sweden and then sort of spreading out, decentralizing and being able to accommodate or make visible the ways in which other parts of the world grapple with the concept of inner development. we know this, you know, this was sort of the biggest criticism of the IDGs is that, well, we can't have this top down, sort of, Swedish led idea of inner development, which is very much one particular culture. We are thinking, going back to the idea of algorithm, right? This way, sets of rules from a particular culture cannot define, surely cannot, and we know that it's not possible. But what I sit with from the IDGs perspective is that what the IDGs have been able to do is to create the language around inner work. And that language is really naming without being explicit, but I'm explicit about it, that the big elephant in our system of humanity is care. And that we sort of avoid, we stumble around care. We know that we care. You know, if you ask anybody, do you care or not? Obviously everyone cares about something. And first and foremost, you care about your own existence, your being here. And so from that Ubuntu perspective, care is really what we are holding in our hands and asking ourselves, how do we make care visible?

Because care is a natural instinct. And if we make it seem as if it's something that only is experienced outside of ourselves, or only when I need something, then it changes what it is, the quality of care within yourself. A system that cares is healthy, is flourishing. A system in which people don't care about each other, obviously in the end will destroy itself. It will go into self-destruction, right?

And that's where we're at right now. So when I present this real Ubuntu litmus test, what I'm actually trying to get us to sit with is that we as humanity or we as a community of life actually, within other communities of life on this planet and beyond, we are here because we care. And without care, there are real repercussions.

We see that obviously with food systems, for example, and I just came from a workshop on Ubuntu Futures in Tanzania, looking at food systems and food security or food insecurity on the continent. And there are certain cultural practices that were embedded in African indigenous communities that revealed the ways in which people cared for each other so that no one was left hungry, for example. And now those practices have sort of been pushed back and what we've put in is this machine, whatever the machine might be, whether that is the government machine or the humanitarian machine that does not interact with the communities on the ground that actually have solutions to their own food insecurity. So by ensuring that we look at care as a whole, care is something we share, then our systems should be able to reflect, whether that's AI systems or government systems, should be able to reflect that quality of care in the solutions and in the tools that we develop. So that's where I'm going with this concept here.

Jamie (1:04:10)

Hmm. Yes. That sounds like on one level such a rudimentary and basic thing in that we should act around the care that we all have for our communities, for our world, for what we care about, but also radical at the same time. Yeah. Beautiful. That's all we have time for today, I'm afraid. So Wakanyi, Thomas, Rachel, thank you so much for this really generative conversation.

Wakanyi (1:04:27)

That's right.

Jamie (1:04:38)

Thank you to everyone who's been listening for your attention. We'll put the links in the show notes to everything that's been mentioned and a few more besides. We have one more episode in this miniseries coming up on mapping and ecosystem development. So tune in for that. And in the meantime, love and strength to you all. Go well.