

EPISODE 36

[INTRODUCTION]

[0:00:05] ANNOUNCER: You are listening to 10,000 Swamp Leaders, leadership conversations that explore adapting and thriving in a complex world, with Rick Torseth and guests.

[INTERVIEW]

[0:00:20] RT: Hello, everyone. Welcome to 10,000 Swamp Leaders Podcast. This is a podcast where we hold a space for conversations with people who have raised a hand and made a decision to lead on what I would call a swamp issue. Something that matters so much to them that they have altered their work, they've altered their life, so they can make that difference. In short, what we're doing is talking to change leaders, people who are really affecting the world in positive ways.

Today, my guest is somebody that I met, I think, Rachel, in November. Rachel Musson here. She is the Founding Director of ThoughtBox Education in United Kingdom. But as I learned, all around the world, actually. Rachel, welcome to the podcast.

[0:01:04] RM: Thank you, Rick. It's a pleasure to be here.

[0:01:06] RT: Hey, it's going to be good. You're up to a lot of things. Where I want to start is I want you to help the listeners have a context. Tell them what you want them to know about you and the work, and that will get us rolling and then we can go from there.

[0:01:20] RM: Thank you. It's such an interesting startup, because of which avenue to go down. One of the things I've realized recently, even though I've been running this organization for eight years and I left the classroom 11 years ago, I still feel that I'm a teacher. I was a teacher for a long time. This work is very much rooted in my love of education, my love of children and my deep desire to support a healthy education system. I guess, what I want people to know about me is the identities that we become are always part of the continued conversations that we're in.

I guess, the other thing I would like to lead with is this appreciation I have of authentic leadership, and of living by the values with which you were working and sharing and preaching, for want of a better phrase. The joy I find in having a purpose-led livelihood, whereby the way I live is feeding into the work I do and the work I do is supporting the way I live. It's the co-creative space, I am living what I'm supporting and sharing. That is a joyful space.

[0:02:29] RT: Okay, so let's help people understand a little bit about ThoughtBox Education, because that's what you built. When I was getting ready for our conversation, the question I had was, you left teaching to start this. What is ThoughtBox Education, and what was going on that caused you in that education space to say, "We need this in the world"?

[0:02:54] RM: I mean, there's two avenues to go down. Just a quick summary of ThoughtBox. We're a social enterprise, really working to support healthier futures in education, through what we call a triple wellbeing culture. We very much looked at the root causes of our planetary crisis, whether that's through the mental health pandemic, whether that's through social injustices on the rise, or the planetary emergency that we're facing, and thinking about how we can move forward to start addressing those root causes and actually having healthy relations as the foundation of our schools. That's the foundation of ThoughtBox is triple wellbeing culture, and we support schools in that and I can talk a little bit more about that later.

In terms of where this came from, I guess, for me, one of the most important teachers in my life is my gut. I'm very much a woman who listens to the gut feeling. I just remember being in the classroom 12, 13, 14 years ago and thinking, "This is not right. The way that this education system is actually hurting, rather than helping children. This is not what education should be." When I criticize the education system, I just need to put my hands up and say, "I do not for a second criticize the teachers, the children, the people in it. I critique the system as it was designed, which was for industrial area that doesn't exist anymore and the recognition that it's not fit the purpose." My criticism is never of the individuals. It's about the system at large.

When I was in it, I just really felt like it was hurting, rather than helping the majority of people in it. I just knew, I couldn't be in that. Also, I'd had this profound experience in Tanzania. I'd taken a student group over to Tanzania the year before for a cross-cultural learning program. I remember being in this very remote community, this very, very beautiful mountain space, where

people were living incredibly harmoniously, relationally to each other, to the planet around them. Something in me was like, “I think I need to just come here and learn a little bit more about what it means to be human and live well together.”

I listened to my gut, which made absolutely no sense, because it was saying like, “Leave England. Leave your career and go and live in a mountain in Tanzania with no income.” So, I did. That journey was a real journey of unlearning, for me personally, of unlearning of all the things I've learned up to that space in my life, that it told me what life was about. In that process, I recognized the myriad of ways of being, of seeing and of living in this world and how many of the stories that I've been told are actually part of quite a destructive narrative that we're perpetuating so many of these crises that we're facing.

Yet, if I took those stories away and learned other stories, I could live in a way that was much more healthy for myself, much more in sync with living in balance and much more relational with both other people and the natural world. That time in Tanzania was pivotal for me and my own appreciation of how to live well and do well and be well. Also, it began this learning journey of what – I used to call it sustainable education, but that word is now moved into regenerative. What regenerative education can look like? What can education look like, which both supports the child, the context, the community, the lands, the educator and is serving all of them?

There are so many examples across the world of education that is helping people to thrive. That was a journey really, of looking and listening and learning what education could be. Then that translated into the very beginnings of the ThoughtBox journey that we're on now.

[0:06:37] RT: I want to come back to a couple of pieces. You tweaked my interest off of what I – a note I made. You say on your website that you call yourself an inconvenient woman. I'm beginning to get a sense of what that might actually look like in the real world. Would you amplify that a little bit? Because it sounds like, that is somehow part of what was informing your trip to Tanzania, or shaped you coming home from Tanzania.

[0:07:01] RM: Yeah. It is, maybe I say it tongue in cheek. Well, I do. I introduce myself in most trainings and spaces I'm in as an inconvenient woman, because partly, when I'm in an education space, I want a lot of teacher training programs. The model of education, certainly in a

mainstream space is decompartmentalize. It's tick box. It's abstract. As an organization, we do a lot of work in climate change, in sustainability, in mental health, in social justice. I go into a room to do a training. In an ideal world, people want me to say, "Okay, the way to teach children about climate change is to talk about carbon offsetting and tipping points and species regeneration, and you can do it in an hour. Here you go."

Whereas, what I say is, firstly, you can't do that. Secondly, all of the issues that we need to be exploring with children are emotional. We've got to start welcoming how we feel into those learning spaces. Thirdly, there is no end point. We will never be able to say, tick, we've done climate change. We don't need to cover that again. This learning is lifelong. The inconvenience on one's part is that I'm welcoming a very different way of responding to some of these issues, which many teachers are doing anyway.

The second inconvenience is I'm welcoming the humanity into the classroom. Again, with this learning, when we're talking about racial injustice, when we're talking about species collapse, when we're talking about mental health, we as an educator are not immune from these conversations. We all live in the same world. The narrative of education has not welcomed the humanity of the teacher into that space. They are almost like, children used to be so amused, or terrified if they saw you in a supermarket when you're a teacher, because you're supposed to live underneath your desk. You're not a human in that narrative.

The idea of a teacher being in a classroom and saying, "Oh, you know what? I'm a bit scared, too, about that," or, "I worry about that, too," or, "Oh, that makes me feel angry, or anxious as well." It's not what often happens. Some teachers will just do that naturally, but it's not often welcomed in. Yet, when that humanity comes back into the classroom, the entire dynamic changes for the better. It takes that bravery of that teacher to step into that space and start to feel comfortable in an uncomfortable space. That's, again, some of the training that we do, our courageous conversations training is really helping teachers to just feel comfortable just being human.

It's not suddenly opening a therapy center in your classroom. It's just recognizing that as human beings, we have feelings and they direct and dictate and get in the way of the learning space, so let's actually welcome them in. The inconvenience in that part is I'm also asking, or welcoming,

or we are as an organization, welcoming teachers to also face their own emotions about the planetary crisis that we're in. That is inconvenient, because we're not giving space for teachers to talk about how they feel with the world around them. That's not part of any education, training, or support space for teachers. We're just saying, "There's loads of things going on. Help the children deal with it."

Again, it's that inconvenience of actually, what happens if we support each other, start having these conversations? Having conversations where there is no end point, where you as a teacher don't need to know the answers, and where you are an active learner in the process. I'd like to imagine that I'm inconvenient at the beginning of the conversation and a igniter by the end of it, of possibilities of doing things slightly differently.

[0:10:46] RT: I am imagining, having been educated in the Catholic school first, then in public school and a long time ago, but I can certainly see that what you're addressing was also prevalent back in that time. I'm wondering, what was the difference between what you thought you would encounter, versus what you actually encountered when you return from Tanzania with these ideas and you're going into a system?

I want to talk about systems thinking here, so maybe you loop it in here, because I know that's a big deal for you. How did you enter into this deal, knowing that you had this "already always conversation about how we do education here," and you're showing up as an inconvenient woman, you wanting to poke that system into a different direction? What was that like and what did you learn, because people – I think, when we talk about this work as somebody who's made a decision to raise your hand and lead and create thought back to education, we realize instantly, leading is a choice and activity, it's not a role. You don't have much authority to make the system change. What did you encounter? I'm going to assume you had to adapt some of your lofty ideas to make them work in the real world. Tell people a little bit about all that.

[0:12:02] RM: Yeah. It's a place that we call the bridge. I dance across the bridge on a daily basis. That bridge space is the bridge between what is a dying system, and whether we are ready to accept it or not. The education system as it stands is not working. It will not sustain itself. It's falling apart. We've just had an agreement for a national teacher strike in the UK. It's

across the world in mainstream models. As a system, any system is in the final stages. As new paradigms of different forms of education are emerging, there is quite a chasm.

We don't know what another education system can look like. Actually, I would argue later that we don't want another one model fits all system, because that's part of the problem. We can't quite see what it looks like yet. In that in between space of moving away from this competitive, decoupled, mentalized, high stress state into a more active, collaborative community-led, individual autonomy-led learning space, there is a chasm. Exactly what you just said there, me going into a mainstream school and talking about systems thinking, regenerative practice everybody's invited, that's lovely. But a teacher has got to tick a government inspection box to prove that they're doing what the government is asking them to do. Where does that fit? Where does that happen in the system as it is?

There's a lot of work in translation that happens across that bridge. The first thing that I spent a lot of time doing is thinking, okay, if we've got these curriculum ideas, these lessons, these different learning modules that are going to support some of the skills, perspectives, mindsets that young people need for revisiting the future, if it doesn't have a space in the curriculum as it stands, it won't get used. How can I support teachers to fit it into what they've got to do already? Because what they've got to do already is ridiculously large.

We mapped it to some of the national guidelines for learning, so that it's almost giving teachers permission to say, "Okay, we can use it in this lesson. We can use it here. We can use it here, because it's ticking some of those boxes." With the caveat that that's not what we're here for. We're not here to please Oxted and please the inspectorate board. We're here to support the child. That was the first part.

The second part is how can we use language that is not hierarchical, that is not didactic, that welcomes everybody and that is actionable now? We landed with triple wellbeing in that space. For some teachers, the climate emergency is incredibly pressing, and how can we bring that into the classroom? For some teachers is, how can I support the mental health and well-being of my children? For some, it's like, how can we look at systemic racism and the role that that is playing in our education spaces? So many other different issues.

What we come back down to with triple wellbeing is that in order to be well, we need to be well. We need each other to be well and we need the planet to be well. There is no getting around that. Triple wellbeing is not something that you need somebody else to do to you. It's something that you can harness yourself. It can begin in the next five seconds. You don't need anybody else to help you to start doing this. You just need that permission almost to rebel against what isn't letting you do that.

The language is important. The invitation space is important and the empathy. A lot of the work that we're doing within the organization is giving deep compassion to those within an education system, who in their gut know that it's not working. But they also don't want to abandon the community. There's a beautiful phrase that we're now really holding on to at ThoughtBox called the tempered radical. I don't know whether you've come across this. The tempered radical is somebody in any organization, not just education, somebody who is deeply committed and loyal to that organization, and really values the work that they're doing in it, but they know deep within them that it's not working, or that something fundamentally is out of line in that organization. Yet, they don't wish to abandon it because it is part of who they are.

The idea that tempered radical is to strengthen that resolve within that gut of that individual to really listen in to that niggles. Press the bruise is another phrase I quite like to use to actually feel that quiet little voice inside, and start to change the system within themselves. How they are being different within that organization. Recognizing that that is systems change, and that there is a huge power to change the dynamic of an organization from within. There's also that recognition at ThoughtBox that we're supporting systems change from within, literally with an individual in how they are looking after themselves, or how the dynamic is in their classroom, as well as poking government policy to try and change the system from without. There's also that bridge space of where system change is happening.

With this caveat that some educators will be very much recognizing that the entire education system in itself needs to change. Some will just be as a level of thinking, this doesn't feel very right, run a classroom and not be relational to the children. I'm just going to start having five minutes at the beginning where I ask everyone how they're feeling. That very individual notion of something's not right. The celebration that all of that is systems change for a healthier future. Does that make any sense, the bridging?

[0:17:26] RT: It does. It does. It leads me to this question, which is, how are you able to actually get into one of these education systems? I mean, you have some credibility. You've been a teacher for a while. You could be called one of them. You're also bringing some pretty different ideas into the conversation. For people listening, what have you learned about how you actually can figure out a way to enter into the system, so you can start to do this work and gain some traction and have them start to see some improvement and some good stuff happening to give you more space to do more work? What have you learned about just getting in to before you can do this stuff?

[0:18:09] RM: Number one, active patience.

[0:18:14] RT: Okay. Tell everybody, what active patience is.

[0:18:19] RM: I guess, I think we're finally being understood as an organization for what we're trying to do. We've been doing it for quite a long time. It's that notion of being ahead of the curve, but that's okay. When there is a space and a recognition of, "Oh, I think we need to be addressing some of this in school now." We've been saying that for quite a long time. It's fine, because it's great that people are coming into this space. Actually, those eight, nine years of active patience have allowed us to really fine tune how we do that.

I mean, with active patience, it's not necessarily sitting here, twiddling your thumbs, thinking, "Come on. Wake up, everybody." It's actually, process. In that time, we've learned so much about how to do things and how not to do things. Secondly, fail. Fail consistently, because every time you fail, you learn something. When I started, I was naive. That's also a great thing. Be naïve and to apologize for that. I was naive in thinking, "Well, of course. Everybody will want to bring this into school, because look at all the things that are going on in the world? Of course, we want to be talking about it in school."

That blind naivety just continued that resolve. Well, this is necessary. As you mentioned, being a teacher really does help. There is this beautiful, if not a little negative at times, recognition that if you've not done the job, what right have you got to tell those who are doing it how to do it? I completely empathize with that. Four out of five of our core team are teachers, and there is both

deep empathy in that, so that you are speaking from the point of having done it. There's also a recognition of how to speak the language, because you know what, and also, you know what a teacher's life is, and so, you know what this would look like, coming to them from the other side.

I've got two with my team and particularly, they're wonderful at bringing a visionary to the practical. I sometimes dance a little bit too much in the visionary place. They really help to bring this work right back down into the classroom space. Having that experience in the classroom really has helped. Also, I think one of the things that really we're trying to do is to make it as easy as possible to bring this in. One of the reasons that we got known and we're still very tiny, so we wouldn't really know, is that we've made a decision four years ago to create a program for every school-aged child that would be free and be free for life, that was really helping to explore the climate and nature crisis in the classroom. There's a four-part program for every school-aged child, and that got us from working with, I think, 25 schools to 3,000 schools in six months.

Some of the schools, we don't necessarily have a partnership where they're taking the resources, we know that they use them and it was thank you and goodbye. That has also felt important to have consistency. We're consistent in the messaging that we use that this triple wellbeing is sitting at the heart of everything. We're consistent also in the core values that we hold within an organization. We practice what we preach as an organization. We're a triple wellbeing organization. We're consistent with the core skills that sit at the heart of everything. We have critical thinking, systems thinking and empathy and compassion is the three elements. It's thinking, feeling, connecting. That consistency throughout.

We have a consistency with being teacher friendly as possible. Again, making everything that we make, how can it be used in that classroom tomorrow, without anyone's permission? That's important. The permission bit is an important part of this. Because within schools, often, you have to have permission from the government, or from the school system to be doing certain things in classrooms if there isn't permission in the timetable already. How can we give teacher permission to bring this into the classroom space? What does that look like?

[0:22:09] RT: You have a manifesto. I like manifestos personally. I have one. The reason I bring it up isn't so much for that. I think that when I was looking into your work, it struck me that you've done a lot of thought and executed some structures and some process and some philosophies

that represent the organization, so that it's a place that newcomers have a guess into the organization, have some guideposts to figure out who we are and what we do, what we stand for. If I get to those choices and decisions I have to make, I've got back up against that.

Would you talk a little bit about why the manifesto is important to you and what it is and a little bit of delineation of the three elements, so that people understand contextually why this is the work, or why this manifesto slides into the work of ThoughtBox?

[0:23:01] RM: Yeah. I mean, I think it goes back to what I said at the very beginning, that notion of authenticity. If as an individual, you're not practicing what you're preaching, that there is a complete dichotomy between the work you're doing and the work you're living. There was a deep recognition within this that has not come through thought. It's come through living, that if I believe in this, I've got to try it. That notion of actually practicing what you're preaching, and a triple wellbeing foundation that sits at the heart of everything that we do with this notion of simple, deep connection. What does it look LIKE to live your life through a triple wellbeing lens? What does it look like to have self-care as part of your job and make it my job to look after myself?

Actually, that is a value that I put at the heart of all of our work. If each of our team isn't looking after themselves, something's gone wrong. How does it look like to work at both in an organization and in my own life to look after the people around me? Again, we look after each other on the team and I look up to people in my life and they look after me. Having that culture, that mindset of just practicing that as a foundation. What does it look like to care for and connect with the natural world on a daily basis? What does it look like to have that deep relationship and where that's not happening, something has gone wrong.

I think having the values that aren't – It's very easy. I did a school for social entrepreneurs, year-long training. It's very easy as an organization to have values, manifestos, missions on a wall, or in a guide book, that look wonderful, that feel wonderful when you have that team day and come up with them and that sound fantastic, but that don't really do much other than look fantastic, sound fantastic and sit in a beginning of the guidebook.

I guess, the manifesto, a deep autonomy of the organization is that we're a living, learning laboratory. We are constantly living the work that we're doing. When something isn't working, you can feel it. Those edges are the work. That then becomes the space to connect into. I think, having that notion of, what are the values that really this work is being driven by, or having an ecological mindset of seeing the natural world, not as something separate, but as something part of us? How can we bring that into just daily practice? And having that notion of ethics and integrity. Recognizing that we need to be really being – being the change. That's a phrase, again, it's bandied around a lot. But what does it actually mean, to be regenerative as a leader, to be living through this triple wellbeing lens.

Having a deep appreciation for a global perspectives as well as there's something at the heart of this work is that social well-being. That there are so many ways of being human that live in balance with the world around us, that we can learn from and we can share this work. A deep reverence and respect for other ways of being. Filtering it down, even with the manifesto, we still come right back down to the heart of our work to triple wellbeing. What does it mean to care for ourselves? What does it mean to care for each other? What does it mean to care for the rest of the natural world? I think within the organization, I would like to imagine – I won't speak for the rest of the team, but I would like to imagine that everybody has those as a foundation of what we are, how we are and what we do. That is the work that is constantly informing how we run meetings, how we're working with partners, that deep invitation into being human together really sits in that.

[0:26:44] RT: I have a question based on my world, and I'm really interested in how you actually do it. You mentioned that there are moments where there's friction, or the edge is relative to what we espouse, versus what we're doing and we see a gap, or we see a bump. For people out there, I mean, this happens to everybody, this difference between what we espouse when we do. When you see it, or somebody else in your organization sees it, what do you actually do to take advantage of that condition? Because it's either a learning situation, I think, or it gets stacked on other situations that we don't really deal with and we just continue to espouse. Help people understand, when those moments come up, what do you do? I mean, what's the actual moves you make?

[0:27:28] RM: Yeah. Again, one of the things I'm so grateful for in our team is that we have – we practice radical honesty. That's the invitation to not feel concerned, calling something out. All of my team will happily call me out, or say no, or yes, or something that perhaps is not going the way I thought things were going. We talk. We had a wonderful new colleague join us recently. She's also brought this consensus versus consent invitation into the organization, which I really like. Also, was saying, “Gosh, you do talk a lot as an organization, don't you?” I said, “Yes, we do.” I don't apologize for that. Because actually, that is the work.

I think, it sometimes can feel easier to just make decisions and say, that's what we're doing. Whereas actually, that edge bit does sometimes require a little bit of niggly work. Actually, let's listen to what you're saying no, and let's listen to why you're saying yes, and let's step back a little bit. I really welcome natural wisdom into this work as much as possible. I have a invisible hook sitting on my shoulder quite a lot with this invitation to use the hawks within, a zooming out and seeing the bigger picture and looking at the wider landscape and then zooming into the detail.

If there is that stuck moment, are we a little bit too in the detail and not enough in the wide landscape? What happens if we all step back a little bit from that part that we're holding and look at the bigger picture? Having firstly, that capacity to be more hawk in that moment. Secondly, the invitation to discuss it with radical honesty. We're not criticizing the person, we're criticizing the idea, or the issue and separating the ownership of that.

Thirdly, to really welcome this consensus versus consent. I am grateful for that, as a leader of an organization that was just me for a long time. Now, there's five of us in the team and there's five directors. We can't all talk about everything. There is sometimes the need for consensus versus consent. But to recognize that I will always check in to see how people are feeling. If there's a decision that's being made that somebody is not happy with, that still would not happen without conversations with that person to really understand, because there's wisdom, always, in that edge, in that clash mind.

[0:29:45] RT: If you're willing to go and embrace it and explore it.

[0:29:48] RM: Yes. Again, there's a wonderful man and phrase in philosophy from Bayo Akomolafe. I don't know whether you've come across him. He's a very inspiring philosopher and educator and all sorts of other things, systems thinker. He shares this phrase, which comes from an African proverb. He says, "These times are urgent. Let us slow down." Again, as an organization, we hold that quite strongly. It's counterintuitive to what feels should be happening right now, which is the emergencies are getting more and more urgent. That's perhaps quite natural response to do more and say more and do it faster.

Yet, when we slow and step back a little bit, the wisdom comes through. Again, within an organization, I think that when those edges come up, it sometimes feels easy to just brush them aside and carry on, but they'll just come back and haunt you later on. Courage is the wrong word, but having that capacity to just put the brake on for a moment and say, "Okay, something isn't working here. Let's look at that." I have a dear friend, and he's one of the directors who supports me in leadership ideas and systems thinking for the culture of the organization. He has a phrase that says, what gets in the way is the way. I really like that as well, because it's so true. Every time we have this moment, something else comes through that wasn't being allowed before and it's a much wiser space.

[0:31:13] RT: You provoke a kind of, what do you call it? Press the bruise. I wrote this down. Press the bruise. I'm going to use that, by the way.

[0:31:22] RM: It's a good one, because it's not too painful. But it's also, yeah.

[0:31:25] RT: I think a bruise that we have, from my perspective and my work that needs to be pressing the education world is we reward too much for knowing answers and we don't reward very much for asking better questions and being better at diagnosing what's going on before we move. A lot of the issues that we face are so complex, that there's no immunity to a quick fix answer, but our whole system – I'm going to pontificate here for just a second.

[0:31:53] RM: No, please do. Please do.

[0:31:54] RT: The whole system that we live in seems to reward and recognize people knowing answers. Education, grades, jobs, compensation, position, etc. Then if you rise up high enough,

you finally reached this place. If your organization's doing anything meaningful, where, “Oh, wow. There's no answer to this.” I'm prepared skill set-wise to figure out. The quote, I think is a provoking to that moment in time. I just wish that we could help people be better prepared, so their response time between when they realize they're outwitted by this challenge is condensed, so they can actually step back, slow down and figure out what a move is. That's my own pitch into the education world.

[0:32:42] RM: Yeah. There's two things that just popped into my head. One, SO when I was out in Tanzania, I ended up writing a book, which still sits on my computer, and a book was the foundation of ThoughtBox unwittingly. It was called *Enough?!*. It was really this deep dive into the education journey that had taken us from living where learning was lifelong, learning was contextual, learning was constant, learning didn't have an endpoint. It was just constantly inquiry-based, exploratory-based curiosity, into this journey of enough exclamation mark, where it's actually on this trajectory to more, more, more, more, more, better, greater, bigger, and then what? Where's the end of that? The end of that is the crisis that we're in.

Then this full stop of finding peace with being imbalanced. Actually, that notion of who you are in this world of being an enquirer and the journey of learning being something that is in yourself to move through.

The second thing that just popped in my head. I would like to bet, without being too arrogant, that I could guess, for every single person listening to this podcast, what the most spoken word was in their first, probably two years of life. It would be the word why, maybe the first three years of life. The word why is one of the most common words that come out of a child's mouth. We are born innately curious about the world. We want to know why, why. As a parent, it's one of the most annoying words after a while, because every single sentence you ask, the answer is why to every part of it.

Yet, that for me is the joy of all of this work, because that innate curiosity is inherent in all of us. It is absolutely live in children. It just gets quashed, I think, because of the education system as it goes along. It speaks to what all of this is about. We are natural learners. That deep curiosity to learn and connect and to be curious is so refreshing as a child. That notion, as you

mentioned a minute ago of seeing success as having answers is completely counterintuitive to what we're – who we are as human beings. We're not born with answers.

Fortunately, the Internet has been created, so we don't necessarily need to be walking around holding all of that in the same way that we maybe did before. That wisdom that comes with recognizing that life is a question. The more questions you ask, the more deeply you connect to this incredibly, extraordinary world that we're in and that there is no end. There is never, “I know it all. Brilliant. Here we go. I've reached the end. I now know.” That's nonsense. This journey of having authority through knowledge doesn't make any sense if you actually question it, but that's also the paradigm paradox, isn't it? Not questioning that –

[0:35:38] RT: I'm with you. We're hoping our conversation gets a few more people traveling this road, too. All right, so last question on ThoughtBox. What excites you about the short-term future for your organization?

[0:35:50] RM: We've just opened four days ago, something called the ThoughtBox Hub. This is a space, a place, a community to actually bring together those tempered radicals, so that they don't feel like lone wolves. It's a place to actually really learn, share and grow together and recognize that this is a journey, and that we need to give each other permission to rebel. This is the very first time since I started this work that we've belonged somewhere. Yes, it's a platform. It's not a home. Because we work all over the world, we can't have a physical home. We've literally just launched it. We're launching officially to the rest of the world later this week.

It's a place, I'm hoping that can really start to give confidence to some of those teachers who are feeling something and know that something isn't right, but I'm not sure how, or what, or where to go with that. A place that we can be having some of these conversations in a safe environment that we can be listening and learning from each other, that we can really welcome in the global educators that we've got, and such wisdom in some of the schools and the communities that we're part of that doesn't get a platform often, because these are teachers, perhaps from the global south, or teachers from marginalized communities that are giving that autonomy and that diversity.

Just a place that is again, it's a home of triple wellbeing, a place to be constantly practicing, reflecting, learning about how to live life through a triple wellbeing lens. We've got a free membership. We've got a community membership that was 5 pounds a month, and then a school membership. The idea is that let's just come together and let's give each other that permission to do things differently. Because we're not going to get it from a government anytime soon. The titanic or the education system is going to take a long time to turn. Let's start jumping up in our life boats and doing things differently. That is energizing me hugely right now.

[0:37:40] RT: We can put a link to that site on the shownotes. Okay.

[0:37:42] RM: Please do. Yes, yes. Yeah.

[0:37:43] RT: That will be there for people to chase after.

[0:37:46] RM: Absolutely.

[0:37:47] RT: Okay. As you know, this is also a leadership podcast conversation. You are somebody in my world who made a decision to do what you're doing and leave behind what you were trained and educated for. You raised your hand and you said, "I'm going to do this deal." For people who are out there listening, they're also hoping that they can pick up and steal a couple of ideas and experiences. My argument is that we tend to learn more from our leadership failures and we do our successes. They stick with us more. Let's start there. In your endeavor to launch this organization, get it up and running and be where it is today, what are some of the things that didn't work out for you and what have you learned from them about you and about leading?

[0:38:28] RM: Again, I'll reference a little bit early, this naivety that surely everyone gets this and wants this and why wouldn't you, because it makes sense. That arrogance, perhaps that came through that. I think, there's two words that just came to mind when you were asking that question. They are humility and grace. I would say, those two words have been really foundational in me becoming more gentle in my leadership and less didactic. In fact, didacticism is – That was my failure. Don't tell Rachel. Don't tell people what they need to know. Don't tell people how to do things. Just enable and allow. That really has taken a while.

I've failed many times in that notion of like, why are people not doing it? I'm telling them how to do it. Why is it not happening? Of course, I think for me, I had to go through that. Oh, that my own and then journey of what that looks like and what this can be like. Having humility to actually welcome those edge moments and welcome doing things that don't work, having the grace to grow through that and from that.

Doggedness, something about, I'm still saying the same thing that I've been saying for the last eight, nine years. It's not because I'm a broken record. It's because it is the same thing. This has always been, how can we live well together as people in planets? As I said, we've always addressed the root cause as a disconnection. It's basically, how can we connect better with each other? Having consistency, I think, is also important. If you fully believe in what you're doing, you don't ever need to think about what you're saying. Someone was saying to me recently, how can you be in a meeting and not have any notes? Or how can you run a session without notes?

Well, partly, perhaps, I'm lazy. I don't spend enough time writing notes. Partly, it's actually, if you live it and you believe it, you don't need information to remind you what you're saying. I'm perhaps being arrogant that I don't need to be arrogant. That's not what I'm meaning here. There's something about being able to speak on authentically, because you are what you're doing. Your authenticity comes from the fact that this is not just a nice idea. This is an inherent belief. I think, actually, I'll just name a sadness. Jacinda Ardern has just announced her resignation this morning. She, as a leader is somebody I always use with young people as an example of a compassionate leader, who is living by the examples that she is preaching. She shows compassion.

I'm deeply sad about that, because I think the young people in particular on a global landscape, who are those leaders who live authentically in the work that they do? I say, we don't need to look to government. We can look in our parents, we can look in our teachers, we can look in our communities. But you can feel around somebody who's an authentic leader, that it's not leadership with a capital L. It's leadership with a small L and it's perhaps not – I said to someone recently, they were saying that one day, they want to be the head of an organization. I was like, “For goodness sake, please don't.” Don't have that as an ambition. If you don't know what your

purpose is, there's not much pleasure in being the leader of an organization. I have to tell you, the pleasure is living by the purpose of what you believe in. I also feel, if you fully believe in the purpose, the leadership just comes through it. You're just you just living by that, but I would use a small L. I don't know if that makes sense.

[0:41:57] RT: You generate a couple thoughts for me here, a couple of questions, because I saw the news today, too. I thought the same thing, "Oh, man. The world has lost a voice." She's young. I think we'll hear again. I was struck by her comment that, "This job takes a full tank of gas and I don't have it." It reminds me of the possibility, oftentimes, with A, the amount of effort it takes to lead and balance authority of the role with the leading, and how oftentimes, you can still end up lonely at the top and not have the fuel stops that you need to sustain yourself. It is a challenge in that regard.

I just thought, consistent with her whole way of functioning, she's going to step aside and take care of herself. Hopefully, she returns. But I think, we are grateful for the contribution she made and the time she's been there, and hopefully, again. You also raised this other question for me. I'm going to ask this question for you. You may need some explanation. Let me give the go here. How do you keep people, or how do you help people be the authors, rather than the witnesses of the work that's needed in the world?

[0:43:08] RM: What a lovely question, Rick. I really love that. One of the things I think that is so beautiful about this work, and I speak a lot about **[inaudible 0:43:16]**. We haven't come up with this. The work that we're doing, we've found easy words to describe to the well-being. This work of regenerative learning, which is another phrase I use a lot, it's not ours. It's happening in agriculture, it's happening in permaculture, it's happening in food, it's happening – Wherever you look, there's something about recognizing that regeneration is a natural principle and it doesn't need anybody else outside of ourselves to do it. We just need to be enabled and allowed to be well.

That notion of authorship in our own lives, we've fallen into the trap of, and I don't criticize others. I think, I criticize the systems that have been a part of our narrative. In this culture, in this paradigm that I'm in in western civilization, we fall into the trap of thinking, "I can only become if other people let me. I can only do this, if I'm told how to do it." Go back down to that little child in

you, but just, you didn't need people to tell you how to do things. You just did it and then you got told off for doing it, probably as normally happen. Most children's childhoods go.

But we know who we are. We know deep down what's in us. There's a lovely phrase, my old English teacher told me once. He's like, "You are the best friend and the only advocate that you will have with you for your entire life. You're going to spend every single moment of every single day with yourself. If you're not kind to yourself and you don't love yourself and you don't hang out well with yourself, we've got a pretty long, miserable journey of friendship there." I think there's something in that notion of actually, let's listen into who we are and that deep authenticity that we have in is that knows where we want to go and doesn't need permission.

I'm going around about a narrative here, but what I love about the work we're doing at ThoughtBox with regenerative learning is that the two keywords are enabling and allowing. That means, what do you need to be enabled and allowed to do this work? The allowing isn't permission. The allowing is what is getting in the way of you being able to do this? What are the blocks to you being able to be the author of your own destination? How can we help dismantle those and move past them? Then that enabling condition for you to just then journey on. Then look at that enabling, allowing is actually a process of remembering, remembering how to listen into yourself, remember how to listen to your gut feeling, remember how to have that confidence to just step over the edge. The world doesn't fall apart. In fact, it probably gets a little bit more energizing when you do. That's a really rambley answer to a beautiful question. Just some of those nuggets that came up in me there.

[0:45:54] RT: Well, decent questions produce rambley stuff, because we're actually having to think of something new and original, rather than something I've already said a few times. Okay, so if you like that one, let's try this one.

[0:46:04] RM: Okay.

[0:46:05] RT: What gifts do you hold on to that hadn't yet been used in the work that you're doing, that would make a difference? Gifts. Yes.

[0:46:13] RM: Oh, gosh. Oh, I love that question. Joy. Let's go with that one. That one just come into my head. I'm really finding such joy in my life, and such joy in this work. It's sat uncomfortably with me for a while, because I was like, well, I spend a lot of my days reading the IPCC report, and the teacher wellbeing index and deeply distressing, horrific stories of civilization and collapse. Why on earth am I feeling joy? What should I do with that? Let's just keep that quiet.

Actually, I recognize and I read a lot of Rebecca Solnit's work looking at George Orwell's roses. She talks a lot, when George Orwell was fighting fascism, he also had a rose garden and really enjoyed stand-up comedy, I think it was. He found, he had to live by joy to be able to meet the grief of the work that he was doing. I feel there's such energy in actually really celebrating the exquisite beauty of the world that we're in, and living through joy, because we generate joy.

Pleasure is given to us. It's an external. It's almost like candy floss diet and pleasure seeking. It's like a commodity. Whereas, I can generate joy. Living through this joyful space is an invitation to start to see a world that we could move into. A lot of the work we're doing is cleaning up the mess of the rows have gone down that have led us to these planetary crises. I'm hoping that the mindset isn't – that the future of humankind is cleaning up mess. Really, the narrative is let's stop making mess in the first place, so we can actually live in balance and live in harmony and be well and thrive well together.

That invitation into joy, actually, I can be living a joyful life, whilst also looking at and feeling and holding on to the grief. It is that bridge into a new paradigm of being well together. Moving away from this business as usual narrative, which is just stick your fingers in your ears and pretend that the mess isn't growing. Moving beyond what Joanna Macy calls the great unraveling, I use Joanna Macy's work and look at ThoughtBox, and this apocalyptic future of when it's all doomed, into this great turning. I use Charles Eisenstein's phrase here. He talks about the more beautiful world our hearts know as possible.

What does it look like to inhabit life with joy? That maybe is a little – Gift is the wrong word, because it's not a gift to be joyful. It's a quality of being that I think I perhaps, hid under a bush, or put in the world, because I felt like a little bit like, "I can't be joyful when the world is so distressed." Yet, I think it's okay, because I'm not naive about the distress of the world. Actually,

I'm meeting it and placing it and holding it. But I need to be well as well. Actually, I know if I just sit in the IPCC reports, I will burn out. How can I generate joy and that quality of vitality to journey towards this more beautiful world?

[0:49:22] RT: I agree with you. I think that oftentimes, those people who we need, who want to be really good followers, at least as a starting point in their life, in their career, the work can get challenging and hard. When they look up, it's useful to see authentic opportunity, possibility or joy as you're using from the people that they regard. I mean, I think that's what she did in New Zealand, as much as anything. She provided a sense of possibility and joy for her country and people responded, the whole world responded. The whole world. I might be exaggerating there a little bit.

[0:49:58] RM: No, but she – Yeah. That quality as well, just really admired in her. Just being fully human. She said that. She was saying, she ran out of gas, because she's human. If you didn't have enough in the tank, because she's simply human. I think, there's something about embracing our humanity in all of its complexities and beauties and horror and everything else that comes with it. But just not being ashamed of that, and actually just having that as the foundation.

Maybe coming back to the leadership space, where are we invited in a mainstream narrative of leadership, to have humanity at the foundation of that. Yet, that is part of the problem, if we want to put that into inverted commas that we're not being allowed to be human.

[0:50:41] RT: Yeah. I agree. All right, so Rachel, I want to thank you for coming on here. I'm going to give you the last word in a second. I want people to know that in the shownotes to the podcast, there will be a link to your own website, there will be a link to ThoughtBox Leadership, your LinkedIn page. We want to have the link if they want to make a contribution to the cause. I'm going to put you and me on the spot to say, that we'll also provide a list of the books that you've – or the authors that you've referenced there.

[0:51:10] RM: Very happy to. Yeah.

[0:51:12] RT: I think those are important resources for people to have, because we don't get – People who write good books help us get to where we are. They're our partners.

[0:51:20] RM: Absolutely.

[0:51:21] RT: Let's share your thought leadership with them as well, so they can maybe tap into some of the stuff you've tapped into. All right. Therefore, last word for you. Anything that I didn't ask that you wish I'd asked? Anything you want to say that you haven't said, before we close this out?

[0:51:38] RM: Yeah. Just gratitude and appreciation for the questions and of the journey and for that invitation to step back a little bit and to ask questions about the familiar. I think, there's something in the maybe final note. The original tagline for ThoughtBox was teaching – it was inverted commas. Teaching children how to think, not what to think. I didn't like that afterward, because I was like, I don't have the right to teach children how to think. We know how to think. I guess, my final note is the invitation for us all to remember our three-year-old self as much as we possibly can. The joy that we've felt in asking that question, why? Holding on to that deep curiosity, and maybe having that little hawk on your shoulder, so that we can keep zooming out and thinking, “Okay. This this world I'm doing, or the way I'm doing things, have I ever thought about why I do that? Is that a good way? Is that sustaining me?”

Just welcoming the question as the journey. I think on a personal note, living my life through inquiry has allowed me to take this journey and recognize that I didn't know where I'm going next. I have no idea what the future holds, but I move through with that question of why as a partner and that deep invitation to just be human as the other. I guess, I leave that as a endpoint of remembering who we are innately, is that deep curious child that wants to explore the world. And just being kind to ourselves that we have flaws, we are fallible, we're human. That's not something to be apologetic for. It's something to actually welcome into as many spaces as possible.

[0:53:15] RT: All right, so thank you. I want to thank you as a newbie here in the UK to know somebody out there is tweaking the education process for the children in this country in positive directions. It's cool to know the person who's doing that. Thanks for coming on the show.

[0:53:29] RM: Thanks, Rick. Thanks for the conversation.

[0:53:30] RT: You're welcome.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[0:53:34] ANNOUNCER: Thank you for listening to 10,000 Swamp Leaders with Rick Torseth. Please take this moment and hit subscribe to follow more leadership swamp conversations.

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