

**EPISODE 63**

[INTRODUCTION]

**[00:00:06] 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]

**[00:00:20] RT:** Hi, everybody. This is Rick Torseth. And welcome back to 10,000 Swamp Leaders. This is the podcast where we have conversations with people who've made some decisions in their life about how they want to use themselves to lead and do work in the world that's challenging, complex, or what we call here swamp issues.

And, oftentimes, we have people who not only do that work but also help other people build that capacity to do that work. And today is one of those days. Today is a cool day for me. I get to talk with Jill Hufnagel, who is living in Roanoke, Virginia. And Jill has been at this work for a very long time. Jill, I'm going to call you a pro from over here. Put you on the spot.

Jill's got her own consultancy. She has worked at Harvard. She has worked for the Cambridge Leadership Associates. She's worked for Kansas Leadership. And all of that, for listeners who are regular, means that we're probably talking about adaptive leadership today. And, boy, are we – and I'm glad to do it.

Jill Hufnagel, welcome to the swamp. It's great to have you here.

**[00:01:21] JF:** Thanks, Rick. So happy to be here.

**[00:01:23] RT:** All right. Let's get context for people here before we get into the specifics. What is it you want people to know about you that will help them find an orientation point for our conversation?

**[00:01:33] JF:** I think one thing that's probably helpful to know about me is that I really believe in humans. I believe that humans have so much more potential than we know. I find again and again, wherever I am, that there's so much to love about one another. And sometimes that feels kind of muted right now.

I love to change my mind, especially as an adult, about things that really matter. And I'm fairly certain the most important thing I'm ever going to do is raise kids. I've got three kids. I think those are good helpful things to know about me and how I show up in the world.

**[00:02:11] RT:** Okay. Great. You and I crossed paths a while ago. And we crossed paths I think probably in an inevitable way because you are a very skilled practitioner of the work of adaptive leadership out of Harvard. We're going to get into that in here in a second. And that's a big part of my life.

When I was thinking about what I wanted to talk about, certainly, adaptive leadership is going to be a part of our conversation. But what I'm interested in is what drew you to this work to start with? And maybe you didn't begin with adaptive here. But how did you come to get into this work?

**[00:02:44] JF:** I did not start with adaptive leadership. I started as an academic. I taught English and I taught feminist theory. And then I became a licensed therapist and I was working with individuals, with groups, with families. And I began to work for a leadership institute. And there were a whole suite of leadership theories that were embedded in the work of the institute. But when I bumped into adaptive leadership, when I first went to the Kennedy School and experienced in the room, this leveraging of the dynamics that were happening in the moment to illustrate what makes the work of leadership so challenging, it shook me. It changed how I thought about every room I walked into after that. It helped me to see things that before that were pretty invisible to me. And it just felt so ripe and relevant. It really was. It changed so much of my disposition.

And after that exposure, I knew that that was the work I wanted to do with my life. I mean, it really was – you hear people talk about kind of finding their soulmates. Felt a little bit like that for me in adaptive leadership.

**[00:03:54] RT:** Okay. For people who are maybe listening for the first time and maybe they're hearing about this phrase adaptive leadership for the first time, what is it? What is adaptive leadership? And what makes it unique or at least different from the other points of view about leading?

**[00:04:10] JF:** Adaptive leadership at the highest level, it draws on evolutionary biology. And at the heart of that metaphor is the notion that, for any of us, for us as individuals, as families, as communities, as organizations, businesses, for any of us to survive, much less to thrive, we have to adapt.

And adaptation looks like parsing what is essential and core from who we are. Separating that from what's legacy. And when we use the term legacy and adaptive leadership, we mean, "Look, we've done it that way because we've always done it that way." And that's kind of a radical idea. Most of us continue to engage in legacy practices far beyond their utility.

At the heart of adaptive leadership is this notion that we've got to adapt. We have to evolve. Because the contexts that we're working and living in are rapidly shifting and changing. And if we keep doing things as we've always done them, we will not only become irrelevant. But, over time, we don't survive. That's one piece.

Another piece of adaptive leadership that's super compelling is that adaptive leadership is firmly grounded in the notion that the activity of leadership is distinct from positions. A lot of times, you hear this word leader. And if you are an adaptive leadership space, for me the word leader gives me this full-body rash. Because it suggests that the work of leadership is for the anointed few at the top. And adaptive leadership says, "Whoa. Whoa. Whoa. Absolutely not."

There are authority structures. And authority structures are awesome. They provide protection, order, direction when work is technical, when we've got a manual, when it's about leveraging intellectual expertise or experience. But leadership is an activity for anyone anywhere. And I just love that. I love the idea that anyone anywhere can engage in the activity of leadership. That's a key distinction. That is a pretty significant deviation from a lot of leadership theory prior to.

**[00:06:26] RT:** You're getting to another, I think, distinction about adaptive leadership, which is this – I'd like for you to speak to a little bit the nature of the challenges that we're facing. Why do we need authority? Why do we need managing? And why do we need leading? How does what we're contending with help determine which of those uses of ourselves and the organization or the group that we might use?

**[00:06:48] JF:** For me right now, one of the ways of thinking about adaptive leadership, adaptive leadership is outside-in. And what I mean by that is adaptive leadership suggests that when you understand the set of pressures that are at play, the context that you're working in, only then can you make sense of how people show up.

When we talk about adaptive challenges as distinct from technical, those are challenges where there isn't a manual, where they often elicit varied responses and reactions. Including reactions that are more below the neck. Kind of heart, gut, emotional reactions. They typically surface factions. Factions of people with varying beliefs about the nature of that challenge. Whose work it is? What progress would look like?

The first part is making that distinction between technical and adaptive work. The second part is what does "leadership" look like in each of those cases? When work is technical, authority is really useful. Authority is useful for providing clear protection, order, direction. Aligning people about what needs to happen and when. And helping people with the right skills. Use their authority, their roles to get work done.

Adaptive leadership is really trained though on this other kind of work, these adaptive challenges. Where it's the people closest to the challenges who are often best positioned to diagnose those challenges and to make progress on them. And this notion of diagnosis is really key too. You think, all day, every day, the pressure on us is to execute with clarity and speed.

But when the work is adaptive, typically, the vast majority of leadership failures when the work is adaptive, they're diagnostic. We are so attuned to quickly solving that we solve all the wrong challenges maybe with a lot of nuance. But that ability to kind of press pause and say, "Hold up. What is the nature of this challenge? And in turn, what's required given what we're facing here?"

That's really tough. It's tough to stomach that, to weather that, to ask people to slow down particularly given our need for speed in most organizations right now.

**[00:09:16] RT:** What I'm thinking about here is adding this capacity. If I'm a listener and I'm coming into maybe for the first time or revisiting for the second, third time this concept of adaptive leadership. I would like you to speak a little bit about what it takes for the individual to become adaptive themselves before they ask others, and the system, and the organization to begin to adapt? Because these are people who have been highly successful. They're accomplished. They've made success. They've gotten there in part by knowing answers and fixing problems. The systems rewards them. Society rewards them. And, boom. Suddenly, they're in a situation where that's not getting it done.

It strikes me in my way of looking at it. It still begins with me as an individual. I have to come to grips with my own hungers for being right and knowing answers. And living with more ambiguity than what I'm accustomed to. You're in the field helping people do this all the time. What do you see? And what's the challenges with helping individuals themselves evolve before they take on a system to evolve?

**[00:10:22] JF:** Well, Rick, I think you did a really nice job of talking about what it's like to be an individual facing adaptive challenges right now. Both for folks who say, "All right, I want to build my adaptive capacity." But, also, I think for us as a species, as humans right now, there are a few key elements of I think what we're up against. I mean, this context we're working in, all of us that we're living in, this context in all of our communities is deeply fraud.

One piece is trying desperate not to give into fear. As humans, as this species who, to me, is on this evolutionary edge right now, it can be so easy to give into fear. And fear causes us to contract. Right? We are not expansive. The first piece is can I notice my own fear? Can I tolerate it and not give into it?

There's also this question about can I tolerate uncertainty. When, to your point, Rick we are so rewarded for being certain, for avoiding failure, for knowing, for jumping into action. I think the second piece is can I tolerate uncertainty? And then third, can I change my mind? And, I mean, changing our minds about things that matter.

And on the surface, maybe that doesn't feel too challenging. But when you start to change your mind, oftentimes the people closest to you, the people who look to you for guidance, who call you wise and come to you again and again, sometimes when you start changing your mind they'll experience you as disloyal. Both from a leadership perspective, but also as humans, I think those are the three practices that right now are so important. Managing our own fear. Tolerating uncertainty. And changing our minds.

**[00:12:20] RT:** For listeners, before we finish, let's come back and talk, help them understand how they design a practice to deal with those. But we'll add a bit more before we do that. You talked about when you went to Harvard and were studying this and they have a very unique process for teaching. I'm going to let you speak to this. And my question that lives behind it, but please go first here, is how do we carry that learning strategy into the real world as opposed to a classroom at Harvard which has some artificiality to it relative to the structures that we sometimes have to contend with in the real world. Talk a little bit about this thing called case-in-point. Why it's useful? What goes on? And what you saw as benefits and challenges for learning this way?

**[00:13:14] JF:** Case-in-point is a pretty wild methodology for most folks. And at the highest level, case-in-point is using the dynamics. What's happening in the moment? In the room? In the system? That might be the language we used. In a group of people who are convening? Elevating and using those dynamics to illustrate the adaptive leadership concepts. Concepts around provocation, around heat and disturbance, concepts around factions that emerge when heat goes up or uncertainty rises.

And the idea is that, all day, every day, these dynamics are at play. However, typically, we avoid talking about them. These dynamics might be about who gets heard and who doesn't. They might be about our collective overreliance, I would say, on authority. On whoever's at the front of the room to orchestrate things, including conflict.

And so, in polite company, we're aware of all those things happening in systems and rooms. And we have colluded in avoiding, elevating and talking about them. Case-in-point sort of reverses that and says, "Actually, we've got so much fodder for learning. Everything happening

in this room happens outside of this room." There's no firewall between what happens in classrooms, in organizations, in consultation, and in training. There's no firewall between that and what happens out in the world that we're engaging in. What if you could leverage that? What if you could actually speak to those dynamics? Start to surface and interrogate them. And imagine other ways of engaging beyond some of these default patterns that we know are not getting us where we need to get. That's what's at the heart of case-in-point.

And it's pretty disruptive. Because you and me, Rick, from a very young age, we learned that when we show up, let's say in a training environment, we sit down and there's something that happens at the front of the room. There's some wisdom expertise at the front of the room. And that person is going to share their wisdom with us and we're going to soak it up.

This instead says there's actually collective wisdom. And that wisdom is most alive if we can talk about the here and now. Not what's happening outside of here. Not what's happening in the past or the future. But really using the present as the ultimate teaching mechanism to explore all of the concepts at the heart of adaptive leadership.

**[00:15:56] RT:** Let's help people right now. I can imagine people saying, "Great. But I can't make it to Harvard. Either time nor money. They don't necessarily give me that access. But I understand I think what you're saying." What are some ideas, or thoughts, or ways that you can help people nudge themselves along in this process without having it happen in the environment that we're describing already?

**[00:16:24] JF:** A notion that's most of us can kind of metabolize is that, regardless of the situation, kitchen table, boardroom table, something happens and we immediately have an interpretation about whatever has just happened. They often protect us in our people.

And so, those initial interpretations that say far more about us than they do the situation, what if we could begin to entertain multiple interpretations? We've got that first one. And almost with curiosity, can we let that one go? Hold it lightly? I often say can you rent multiple interpretations simultaneously?

A first move might be, "All right, I've got my interpretation. What are two other interpretations?" And it's not because I hold them tightly. I'm going to lay my life on the line on behalf of them. But what might this look like to someone else? What about the context might be informing some of the patterns that are emerging right now?

A first move would be to punch past my first interpretation to hold a few others. Another might be to notice reliance on authority. When things go sideways, again and again, we tend to point a finger up and blame the people at the top. That's a pattern. And it's an intriguing one. It's certainly a pattern we can work. It also, though, implicates the few rather than the many.

And so, I'm always most drawn to interpretations that implicate more people rather than fewer. And I'm drawn to interpretations that implicate me. And here's why. Here's why. Like every other human, I can try to protect myself and I can become defensive.

However, interpretations that implicate me, now I've got agency. If my interpretation only implicates you, Rick, and your people, I don't have power and control over how you show up. But I do. I do have some power, some agency, some control over how I show up. Interpretations that implicate me, those to me are gold even when they're tough to handle.

**[00:18:40] RT:** Yeah. I'm in the room right now thinking about this, a meeting or a group of people that convene every Tuesday at 9:00, et cetera, et cetera. And they've been following the row process. Somebody's after trying to shake that up. It could be different. Get the more interpretations of it. It strikes me that the easiest starting point would be the person who convenes the meeting to recognize what you're talking about and start to facilitate more interpretations coming out so people have that experience. And now we're going somewhere. A good use of authority there because they have the position to do that. But speak a little bit about what it takes and what could happen if it doesn't go well. If I choose to do this on my own because I listen to this podcast with Jill and Rick and we were talking about interpretations, I'm going to give this thing a go. Speak a little bit about what's – I mean, it would cognitively get this. But there's a stirring in the gut. The heart rate might pop up a little bit. What's your counsel for people who are just thinking maybe I do this?



**[00:19:40] JF:** I mean, I think there's a reason that the heart rate goes up when you think about doing that. Because there are a set of expectations that people show up with. And the expectations of the people who are convening the meeting are the highest expectations in the room.

On the one hand, great. If I'm the one convening the meeting, maybe I'm the one who disrupts the patterns. It's just that. Because those expectations on me are so intense, the moment that I start to disappoint them, everyone's heartbeat in the room starts to go up. It's like there's a script. And if I deviate from that script, the amount of disturbance that that causes is pretty profound. It's why authority is both a resource. It's an incredible resource, right? Authority. Because I can get and hold attention more easily than anyone else in the room. We are really deeply calibrated to whoever has authority. When people convene, there's an observation of the pecking order. It's why when you have authority, what you might say, you think it's a whisper. It becomes a scream. Because you've got this megaphone.

Authority is this incredible resource. It's the resource that allows you to convene meetings, to allocate resources, to decide who's invited to those meetings. But it's also a constraint because of how deeply calibrated we are and how tight the script is around what authority should provide.

Sure, Rick, could be that the person who convenes the meeting starts to disrupt those norms. And if they do, if they do, they're going to really need to hold steady when they begin. And it's going to happen very immediately to get feedback from that system about how they're feeling disappointed in that moment.

And so, another way of thinking about this is that we ought to get better at partnering with authority. If you're convening a meeting and you have a hunch that it's not as productive, you aren't hearing from as many people as you might, that you're missing the wisdom of the collective, it might require partnering with a couple of other people in that room. So that if you decide to show up a bit differently, there are others in the room who can calibrate to the disruption that that generates and partner to help hold steady.

**[00:22:02] RT:** Okay.

**[00:22:03] JF:** I was going to say this other piece, which is I think one of the challenges that we're up against right now is that our operating system needs to be updated. Our collective human operating system. Right now, most of our systems are built around authority. And, in turn, hierarchy. And what that looks like is consolidation of power.

Now I'm not saying 100% of the time. But what we learn from a very young age I think is some version of that pattern the moment we show up in school or in our family systems. It's just that that operating system that's built on authority and hierarchy is not well equipped to deal with, let's say, pandemic or AI. Those kinds of challenges actually require the collective. They require crowdsourcing. They require evolving far beyond what those operating systems can provide. And I think it's why it's so fraught when someone with authority, even with the best of intentions, shows up in a way otherwise to the pattern, to the script.

**[00:23:09] RT:** Yeah. You've used the word a couple times here, agency. I want to toss another word in. I think it's kind of a partner with that is choice. And so, part of what you're stirring here I think is leading is a choice in an activity rather than a role in a position. Speak a little bit about, with that distinction, maybe people didn't have that distinction and they're listening to you or they're doing a class on adaptive leadership and that becomes a distinction. What do you know about or what have you learned about what it takes to make that individual choice to decide to raise my hand and lead on something in some particular small or large way? What's it really take there?

**[00:23:49] JF:** A compelling, deep abiding sense of purpose. I mean, every week I show up in rooms. And the way that I show up, it's disconcerting to groups of people who have a set of expectations that I tend to disappoint. And, Rick, like you, I like being liked and belonging. And when I disrupt those expectations, I feel the heat back at me.

The reason that I keep showing up and doing the work that I do in the way that I do is because I do have this absolutely abiding sense of purpose. And it comes out of my sense that so few people are feeling this deep sense of engagement and are working as broadly and with as much impact as they could. I mean, instead what I find is so many folks feel disengaged, disempowered, muffled lost.

I mean, if you look at the majority of organizations, they have a real crisis around a couple of things. One is are our people happy? Do they feel like they're showing up at work and using a whole lot of themselves? No. They really don't. I'm trying. I'm trying desperately to reignite people's sense of themselves and what's possible. And that requires disturbance.

The other thing is there's a real lack of succession planning in most organizations. And I think that has to do with this notion of coming from a place a scarcity. Again, the anointed few have power. And so many folks feel muted, muzzled, lost, and disengaged.

When I show up, I'm so committed to, I'm so connected to this notion of building capacity for people to experiment more broadly, to re-engage with their own sense of purpose that I will disappoint their expectations. And when other people have that sense of purpose and possibility, I begin to see them try things that they haven't tried in quite a long time. Because most of us, we have tried. We have stood up. It's just that we've gotten feedback from the system. Take a seat. And it's really hard to get up again. It's hard to believe again.

**[00:26:10] RT:** Well, I'm going to come back to this. I want to throw another piece in here. You and I live in the United States. Not everybody listening to this podcast lives in the United States. But they had a question going on. What's going on in the United States right now?

We are in the beginning stages of a long run for two people running for president. We now know that much earlier than we normally know in our country. I want to talk about mobilizing people. Let's start with the sort of the generic perspective that adaptive leadership brings to the work of mobilizing people. If you would set a context, why is it important? Why does mobilizing people matter if you're choosing to lead and use this work of adaptive leadership? Why do I need to know how to do that?

**[00:26:52] JF:** Well, there's two definitions at the heart of adaptive leadership. One is leadership with authority. And I think a lot of what we've been talking about so far in this conversation is leadership with authority. Probably, the most famous quote about adaptive leadership is that leadership with authority is disappointing your own people at a rate they can bear in service to making progress on adaptive work. That's that work where there isn't a manual.

Leadership without Authority involves mobilizing people. And this is people across factions. People with different beliefs about the nature of the work and how you ought to go about it. Leadership without authority is mobilizing people across factions to make progress on adaptive challenges.

And right now, as we are in the US in this moment of deep distrust in institutions, I would just say founded, founded deep distrust in institutions, deep distrust in authority, this ability to mobilize people. And I don't think there's a manual for it. That is what leadership looks like. Can I get and hold attention?

You might also think about ours has rapidly become an attention economy. There's so many things pulling at our attention in any given moment. I might add it's mobilizing people around a shared purpose and it's getting and holding attention long enough to make progress. That's really tough work. And it's especially tough because so many folks are pretty ground down and they've lost sense of agency. And I think it's easy to kind of curl up and quit.

**[00:28:38] RT:** I'm interested your view on this. It also strikes me that in the – particularly right now, in this work or this activity of mobilizing, we're witnessing the ability to mobilize people around some pretty crappy stuff. Some pretty unappetizing communal attributes. It strikes me there's a kind of value orientation that also is needed to mobilize people for the common good as opposed to something south of that, which we're facing now.

From your perspective, you can go where you want with this, but when you're trying to get people aligned to do good, what do you got to bring as a person? Because you could go a different direction. People can be susceptible to some of this stuff. What have you learned about this work done well and getting people on board who either resist or sort of live in between? And I could go this way. I could go that way. But they kept – what your counsel and coaching to people about how you build this movement a little bit? And let's put in the context of not enough authority to really exercise that authority so they kind of got to go with it.

**[00:29:49] JF:** Well, in some ways, not having authority may be a resource given our distrust of authority and the historical context depending on the skin that you're in, the faith community you

come from, the area of the world that you grew up in. Authority relationships are so deeply fraught.

First piece is, in some ways, not having authority can be a pretty powerful resource because you aren't dealing with those countervailing forces. I think what you need to have – this is a tough one. Because most people, I find, as they start getting into adaptive work, they begin to believe they have the answer, they have a vision. And it's about persuasion.

Then I find myself disappointing people yet again and saying, actually, you have to be deeply tied to purpose and in some ways agnostic about the how and open to changing your mind. You don't know. I'm always a part of the problem I'm trying to solve. For some folks, that's a bitter pill. Because I'm sure that I know – and, actually, Rick, it's you and your people who have to change your mind.

See? I've got to see that I'm a part of the mess. My own certainty that I know is a part of the problem. Can I show up anchored to purpose and agnostic about the how? Can I be open to learning my way forward to experimentation, to failure? I hear a lot of people saying, "Oh, we're okay with failing." But if you kind of see, for example, organizational metrics, there's very little room for failure.

I've got to be in a recursive cycle of diagnostics. You diagnose. You intervene. You debrief and learn. You diagnose. You intervene. You debrief and learn. I've got to be down for a pretty clunky path. I've got to listen to people that I don't often like to listen to. I've got to work with groups who potentially we've had a sorted and difficult past. And I've got to be open to disappointing some of the people who I've been closest to. And that's a huge ask. So my own certainty and longing for kind of a vision, probably a lot of that I'm going to have to interrogate and let go of.

**[00:32:16] RT:** You've mentioned purpose, your own purpose in the work that you do but also in this conversation about how these people might go. It strikes me that having that deep sense of purpose is a well of energy. It's important to have an understanding of that in order to go into this work because you're probably going to need to pull from that frequently in different ways. What do you say about that purpose?

I mean, I can't tell people what their purpose is. But what have you learned in your work? You've made a decision. You know what your purpose is. You go into it every day. You disappoint people because they expect you to be the expert in the front of the room. You don't do that. You make them work. But what do you know about it? And how do you take care of yourself and your purpose when the world seems to be a little agitated about having to deal with your purpose position?

**[00:33:02] JF:** The root of purpose, it comes – that P-U-R, it sits beside the P-R-E. It's before everything. Getting really clear on what your purpose is. I think if you don't know your purpose, you're likely going to stand in someone else's. If I'm not standing in my purpose, I'm likely standing in someone else's. That's sobering.

And look, one of the equations that we'll often share with people is that resistance is a part of progress. Typically, the moment I start to experience resistance, I'll let off the accelerator. And some of that comes from self-protection. What I find is I've got a robust set of self-protection mechanisms. We all do. And they snap into action so quickly. So, resistance, when we get resistance, it's because what people are afraid they're going to lose is greater than their sense of purpose. There is no doing adaptive work without experiencing loss.

For me, trying to stay connected to purpose, it's an everyday. It's an everyday meditation if you will. And it does require me taking really good care of myself. Because if I'm not taking really good care of myself, if I'm not seeking sanctuary, creating time for reflection, if I don't have confidence for when I screw it up, and I screw it up all the time, it's really hard to figure out how to show up in a way that's disruptive without just blowing things up. It's hard to show up in a way that's disturbing enough for enough people in the room that they learn that it creates curiosity and tolerable agitation. And not just kind of taking them out.

Because we are collectively, as humans right now, pretty fragile, pretty brittle, pretty frail in a lot of ways. We've taken a lot of hits collectively. This attempt to stay connected to purpose, it's a tough one. I think the other part is it requires a lot of grace. I have to give myself grace and give other people grace. Try not to get activated when folks resist.

Resistance is a part of progress. The only way that you know you're making progress, that you're getting attention, am I getting some resistance? Resistance is feedback. If I can read it through that, that helps me stay connected to purpose. Shining a light on progress helps me stay connected to purpose. Taking breaks.

I just said to you, Rick, I take a lot of time to myself to try to make sense of myself. Because it's not like I show up like I'm a clean machine. I get tripped up just like everyone else does. I do think it's the part you've got to be perpetually nurturing and reconnecting to. Because if not, self-protection takes down purpose all day, every day. It's so robust, my own system of self-protection in every organization system of self-protection. And self-protection tends to perpetuate legacy practices. It doesn't generate adaptation. It's like I double down on the way I've always done things. Kind of brings me back instead of forward.

**[00:36:19] RT:** Who you see in the world besides Jill Hufnagel that you say they're connected to purpose? I can see it in how they show up, and how they conduct themselves, and how work gets done. I mean, who are your role models for this?

**[00:36:33] JF:** Well, I want to say I'm not sure. I don't know that I would call myself out. I think I'm as messy as every other human. I just keep getting up and trying every day to notice my own mess.

**[00:36:45] RT:** I get to call you out.

**[00:36:48] JF:** I'm trying to model it and I'm trying to embody it. And I miss the mark all the time. I miss the mark all the time. And I am not harsh with myself. There is that. Yeah, I try to give myself that compassion that we were talking about.

You know who comes to mind? I really love the work of Prentis Hemphill. Prentis has just released their first book, which I have not yet read because it's on pre-release right now. But Prentis Hemphill is doing really cool work and has a podcast that's absolutely worth listening to. And is doing work on how do we heal. How do we reconnect somatically to ourselves and the world around us? And, yeah, I love their work. That's someone who comes to mind for sure.

I've appreciated the way that Jacinda Ardern has shown up in the world and saw on many occasions. This is someone with a lot of authority. Just kind of apprentice maybe. Someone who's engaging in the work of leadership without authority, Jacinda with authority. Leveraging that authority in ways that I hadn't seen before. Providing protection, order, direction. And, also, giving work back to people and asking those in her community to weather their own disruption and not kind of showing up as having the solution all the time. And that's tough.

**[00:38:16] RT:** What are we not talking about? What is it that you know about this work and helping people build this capacity that we haven't covered that you want to make sure you give voice to here?

**[00:38:27] JF:** What I've been thinking about so much, and it became loudest for me during the pandemic, is that we are a species. Us, humans, we're a species. And something about that has been kind of heartening to me. And I think on some level, we are sort of skittish squirrels. We're a bit curled up. And I mean that with a lot of gentleness about who we are and how we are. We do long to be held, and cared for, and nurtured. And I think we are on a frontier. We're on this evolutionary edge. And all the ways that we've been in relationship with each other, they are not going to get us to where we need to go. The combative, the competitive.

I mean, look at the moment that we're in right now. I blow you up. You blow me up. That is not going to get us there. And so, there is a reason. I think that we keep going back to seeking protection. But if as a species – I was working with a tech organization and they'd asked me to come in to observe and consult to them about how they meet.

I was watching one of their meetings and I gave them feedback at the end. Some patterns I noticed. And one of the men in the room said, "Wow. We're so primal. So primitive, aren't we?" And I just would say that about us collectively. Given what we're dealing with, we are quite primitive. And my question that I'm sitting with right now is how do we expedite our own evolution to meet this moment?

And I think that if we could get better – I'm always wondering, what is it exactly that I'm getting paid for? I think I'm trying to help people reconnect to what it is to be human with one another. And to be human right now, it's not easy. I feel like, often, we're trying to avoid blowing things



up. And yet, we know that the status quo is insufficient. The patterns that we are engaging in, they are not getting us there. I'm entertaining this notion that if we could learn repair, the work of repair, that we could tolerate more disturbance.

**[00:40:42] RT:** Okay. As we come to the end of our conversation here, there's two reasons why I started this podcast. One was because I was encountering lots of people like yourself who were doing really good work and making decisions about how they're going to use themselves to do the difficult work of adapting and dealing with really hard problems. And they're fairly modest about it. My aspiration was to have a platform for them to be able to talk about that and share that.

And the second part was the notion – and where I live, in the Seattle area, we have lots of Native American tribes all over the place. And so, there's the long history in my neck of the woods of elders passing on stories and wisdom to the future generations of the tribe. And so, I had this sort of notion that there are people on the road behind us a little bit. And if we could give them some things along that they could use to expedite their development, that would be great. I don't know how well that goes. But that's still an aspiration.

With that metaphor and that perspective in mind, what counsel or what advice do you have for people who listen to this and say, "Okay, I'm going to go do some stuff." What do you know that they should put in their back pocket and you take with them on this journey?

**[00:41:53] JF:** I love, Rick, drawing on this notion of elders, and wisdom, and passing that on, and telling the stories. I think the first part is can I notice myself? Can I notice my own patterns? The places where I'm stuck? Can I be curious about what terrain feels too scary for me to tread?

I mean, the one person we can't see is ourselves. And I think that's so tough as humans. Because when we don't know what to do, typically, we do nothing, which is doing something. The first part I think is can I study myself? Can I notice the places where my fear, my trepidation gets in the way?

And there's been a lot of work on micro habits, atomic habits. Is there a move? Sometimes I think that leadership lives somewhere between fear and fantasy. I notice people, they're either

terrified, "Oh, I couldn't do that. I couldn't say that." That generates this paralysis. Or there's this fantasy. I'm going to storm in. I'm going to do this thing. And then in my wake with my cape fluttering behind me, everyone's going to see and come.

And I actually think that the work of leadership lives somewhere in between there. Can I hold myself to account for incremental change? Knowing change is incremental in time, monumental over time. But, first, I've got to me. And can I see the places I'm stuck? And hold steady in the face of that stuckness in a way that's incremental. I think that might be a first place.

**[00:43:31] RT:** Good counsel. Okay. Last question. What's ahead for Jill Hufnagel?

**[00:43:35] JF:** Ooh. Well, one of the things – this is a project that I have a colleague and dear friend, Jen Brothers. We learned this work together a couple of decades ago now. And one of the things that we talked about was this idea of mother mentors. That one of the things you need as your parenting is you need someone who has kids a generation ahead of yours. Someone who's not in the mess, in the swamp with you right now, right? Because so much gets elicited when the majority of your friends are parenting kids the same age. And our hunch was, "Oh, we needed someone ahead of us to help provide perspective, to help us manage ourselves through all of this."

One of the things we've been talking about is, now that we are empty nesters, what would it look like in our own community to experiment with mother mentors? What would that look like for us to be that and for us to seek that? Because the other thing is – I don't know about you, Rick. But I think we always need parenting. And most of us don't have that, that reckoning with, "I need parenting. Our kids need parenting." Those parents who are behind us. They need to be held. That's a project that's on my mind right now.

**[00:44:52] RT:** Great. Thank you. Okay, for people who are listening, Jill has several resources that she's passed on to me. And we will put links to those resources in the show notes for the episode. And, Jill, if there's anything else you want to pass on to me before we get to that point, do that, and we'll include all that stuff that you think people would be interested in understanding. Thank you for coming into the swamp and having this conversation. I really appreciate it.

**[00:45:18] JF:** Thank you, Rick. Thanks for inviting me. And more than that, thanks for creating a platform for us to have conversations like these that are rich, and varied, and, to me, really aspirational. Appreciate you, Rick.

**[00:45:30] RT:** You're welcome.

[OUTRO]

**[00:45:34] 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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