

SIMON BELL: Hi, I'm Simon Bell I want to welcome you to this series of podcasts celebrating 50 years of applied systems thinking and practise in the School of Engineering and Innovation at the Open University I'm an Emeritus Prof at the OU. I started with Systems in 1996, which seems like an awful long time ago now. I tried my hand at a lot of things, including CEO of a research institute, editor of a journal, writer of novels, and I have a dark, wicked suspicion that I love apocalyptic stuff.

People have their own definitions, but to me, systems is primarily the understanding of the world as relationships, the flows between things. The conversation which follows is supposed to be systemic so that we can follow through on a number of lines which are interrelated and connected. My guest. Now is Wendy Gregory who was a Lecturer in Management and Systems at the University of Hull but has a fascinating background in Venezuela and New Zealand and being a raving environmentalist, or so they say, Wendy. How are you today?

WENDY GREGORY: I'm good today. Thanks, Simon.

SIMON BELL: Your background-- I mean, you've really been all over the place, haven't you? You've been with the Open University but with the University of Hull, City University. And you've got married in Venezuela. What took you to Venezuela?

WENDY GREGORY: What took me to Venezuela was a research project that the department that I was in at Hull University had with the Department of Interpretive System Zoology at the University of Los Andes, I think it was called, In Mérida. And basically, I'd been over there one year, met with some of the people that were there. It was a fascinating visit, because there were riots going on.

I managed to be outside one day while there was a riot going on and walked past people burning tyres and things whilst the police were sort of standing around with their guns ready to take action if things got dreadfully out of kilter and so on and managed to get back to the room where I was supposed to be doing my research with the people that were in that department. And they said, oh, we have to get you away from here and bundled me into a Jeep. And off we went into the countryside, away from where we were in the town centre. So yeah, some very interesting experiences while I was there.

But the second time that I went, which was a year later, I also went with Gerald Midgley, who is a professor, now, of systems thinking. At the time, he was a research assistant at Hull University. And on the flight on the way out there, he proposed to me. So we ended up getting married there while we were there. And I said I would get married to him if we could do it within the time that we were in Venezuela.

[LAUGHS] Luckily, the friends in the systems community there helped us to organise everything.

SIMON BELL: (LAUGHING) That's a lovely story. Wendy, if I ask you-- I mean, these are always questions that are going to push you a little bit on the limits. But if I asked you what does systems-- what's the systems approach mean to you, what's your takeaway if you had to give an elevator pitch or what you mean by a systems approach? What does systems mean to you?

WENDY GREGORY: Systems, to me, means a great variety of things. But the main ones, I think, are that they encapsulate lots of different viewpoints about what they actually are. And if we want to think about systems, we have to kind of be aware of how other people might be perceiving it-- that it's not just down to my perception of what the system is. And that encapsulates the fact that people draw different boundaries. We need to be aware of what boundaries they're drawing when they think about their system. And to give you an example of the sort of thing I mean, recently I've been doing some work with local groups looking at doing litter picking and trying to clean up areas of green spaces. And we've come

across people with very different views about how those green spaces should be used and even to the extent to which they should be cleaned up.

So there are some people who believe that a green space, if you want to help the wildlife in it, then you have to get rid of a lot of the habitat that's there, cut it all down, clean it all out, get rid of all the litter that's there-- which of course, I agree with getting rid of the litter, but not necessarily about cutting down the habitats. And some people think that a green space should be like their own back garden. We're trying to get people to appreciate wildlife and biodiversity is just as important as getting rid of the litter is.

Sometimes people don't see that from their point of view. From their point of view, it doesn't make sense. We have to be aware of that if we want to actually achieve anything in terms of maintaining the good that's within a system but also allowing people to achieve, I suppose, some aspects of what they're trying to achieve with the system.

SIMON BELL: This focus of yours on multiple perspectives, if you like, you don't understand a problem unless you understand the multiple perspectives at which that problem is perceived. It's not just a problem. It's seen differently by different people in different ways. And for some people, it may or may not even be a problem. And if you do not understand those perspectives, you don't really understand the nature of the world you're trying to understand. And that, from my point of view, from what you're saying, sounds like how you're seeing systems or part of the systems approach.

WENDY GREGORY: Yes, absolutely. I think it's really fundamental to what we do. And really, in today's world, with the kinds of issues that we face, either with the pandemics or, if you think about the England football fans, how they responded after the penalty kickoffs, with their racist attitudes and so on, we have to be able to understand what leads somebody to take those viewpoints. How was it that so many people were led to believe that a lot of what was happening around the pandemic were to do with governments and big business conspiring against the little people?

How did they get to have those viewpoints? How did they establish those worldviews? And how can we challenge them? How can we challenge those worldviews if we feel that they're going to be detrimental to the vast majority of us? It's hard, I think, to understand sometimes how people have formulated the viewpoints that they have. But it is actually necessary if we want to change the way things are in the world. And I think we do need to change a lot about what's going on in the world at the moment.

SIMON BELL: If I could-- I mean, it seems to me that's what you're saying-- you can correct me if I'm wrong about this. But it almost seems to me that's what you're saying is that a systems approach helps us to get to the truth of a situation.

WENDY GREGORY: I wouldn't go so far as to say the truth of the situation, [LAUGHS] because sometimes it's not feasible to actually get at some of the viewpoints. If I go back to the issue of people trying to tidy up green spaces, one of the things that happens in towns if you have some small green spaces that have become wooded is that you get a certain minority of the population who find it convenient to carry out nefarious activities in that environment, by which I mean drug dealing, prostitution, even drug using. Some people use it for rough sleeping.

These are all activities that most of the people who are civically minded would not want to be happening in their neighbourhood. But then you have to think about, well, how is the system set up to make those people have those activities in that space? And how can we change it so that they have somewhere else to carry out those activities or so that their activities are actually paid to, stopped in some way? And it

may be beyond the feasibility of the people that are trying to change that system to actually bring about change in all of the things that they're trying to act upon.

SIMON BELL: So that's fascinating, as well. But this idea that some people might think that a systems approach, if it's very involved in multiple perspectives and understanding people, is kind of like a soft touch. But the way you're describing it sounds to me like you can use a systems approach to understand and make some really tough decisions which won't have universal appeal but will be systemically, if you like, orientated in their basis and in their process.

WENDY GREGORY: Yes, that's exactly what I am trying to say. You said it much better than I did.

[LAUGHTER]

SIMON BELL: That surprises me. Do you think that there is a wider application of the systems approach for community?

WENDY GREGORY: I think that there are some people who naturally think systemically. And there are other people who, when introduced to the notion of a systemic viewpoint and that it means that everybody has a partial view of the world, and that we need to have dialogue together in order to begin to understand what other people's view of the world is-- that sort of activity can bring people to make compromises, I suppose, to some extent, to see how their world overlaps with somebody else's world and maybe to become more compassionate, if I can use that word, to actually begin to comprehend the stories that lie behind, the reason that a person behaves in the way that they do.

Rough sleepers, for example-- I live on an avenue where we have a large home for people who have been living on the streets for many years. And there are a lot of the neighbours along here who don't approve of the fact that that building is being used now for people who have been homeless for many years and who have associated behaviours because they have addictions and so on. Any time any minor crime happens, the first thing that people do is they jump to blame the people who live in the house at the end of the avenue.

There's no dialogue going on between those people and the rest of the neighbourhood. And there needs to be, because we all live in the same community. We're all part of the same community, so we need we need some sort of mechanism to bring people around the table to begin to talk about their stories, what brings them there, and to listen to the stories of others about what brings them there, because without hearing the stories of other people, we're very fearful of them. We fear what we don't know, essentially. That's my view, anyway. [LAUGHS]

SIMON BELL: It's just this idea that the systems gives us a different perspective and allows us to appreciate that and not be fearful of other perspectives.

WENDY GREGORY: Yes, especially perspectives that we take as being very alien to our own perspectives. It is very hard to listen to stories that people have about their life, about how they've come to be as they are. I just remembered, I remember years ago watching American History X. And it's the story of a guy who is very right wing, very racist. He kills another young Black man, and ends up in prison. And whilst he's in prison, he becomes the target for a lot of very violent people. And he's befriended by a Black man. And it's a story about how he turns around his life and begins to think about things very differently as a result of that friendship that develops in the prison, a very [LAUGHS] strange friendship given his background and the things that he believed in.

But nevertheless, that happens. And I think that can happen in real life, as well. I don't think it's just a matter for some person making a story that can then be turned into a film.

SIMON BELL: I think we're up for time, but I could sit and listen to you all day. I really could. Thank you ever so much for contributing to these podcasts, and thanks ever so much, Wendy.