

SIMON BELL: Hi. I'm Simon Bell, Emeritus Prof at the Open University. Welcome to the Systems Thinking in Practice pod. Here we have conversations about systems, the great flows of energy between things, energy of all kinds, exploring systems, the systems side of thinking.

I've been doing this for a long time now. In 2020, I studied the use of short stories to help with systemic mindfulness, for example. The resulting book, A New Approach to Mindfulness-- Mindful Stories, is all about a systemic approach to gaining a mindful state of being. You can use systems in literally every way imaginable, in my opinion.

Today, I want to welcome a great systems thinker to the pod, Misha Hebel. Hi, Misha.

MISHA HEBEL: Hi, Simon.

SIMON BELL: I'm going to be interested in asking Misha to tell me about herself, about the way she experiences and uses systems in Practice. So just a few words-- Misha, you sent me what I think of, really, as a rich picture. It's your visual CV. But wow, I mean, amazing background going from drawing and painting through to kite flying, doing your PhD, genealogy, Brunel, Lecturer there, Associate Lecturer at the OU, gardening.

But the thing that stood out to me was a liveryman and a Freeman of the City of London. Tell me about that. What's that?

MISHA HEBEL: I did my PhD at City University right in the heart of the city. And I was introduced to the livery. and they are the old guilds, so they really got really old companies, like the Mercers and the Skinners. But there are a number, quite a lot, of modern companies. There are 110 companies altogether. And so they're professional guilds.

I joined a livery company. Then I became a Freeman of the City of London. Then I became a liveryman. And then I decided to become a clerk, because I liked the livery so much.

SIMON BELL: Well, that's fantastic. Misha, you use systems in all kinds of ways. Do you think of yourself as a systemist? Do you think of yourself as somebody who uses systems as their first port of call when looking at difficult or complex situations?

MISHA HEBEL: Totally. As soon as things get messy, as soon as things get difficult, I tap into my little toolkit. And certainly, seeing other perspectives, looking at alternatives-- yeah, it's almost instinctive now. So a great example is the pandemic. We had to sort of reorganise our business operations and go online and rethink events and rethink what our members need. And our members range from 15 to 95 in age, so it was quite a challenge. And I don't think I could have seen the bigger picture without systems thinking.

SIMON BELL: So you actually applied it within the context of managing under a pandemic?

MISHA HEBEL: Yes. Yeah. So to look at all of the alternatives and what the members' priorities were and also to come up with ideas with my small staff about what we could do, how we could reinvent things. We spent a lot of-- the focus of the organisation is to sort of get together on a regular basis and network and talk and exchange ideas. So we have to keep that going, keep in touch with people, care for people, but do it all online.

SIMON BELL: Fantastic challenge, as well. I love it. I want to ask you a slightly technical question, actually, because in an earlier correspondence, you used this phrase with me, and it's one of my favourite phrases in systems. You said, emergent properties. You're interested in these emergent properties. Tell me about your life with emergent properties.

[LAUGHTER]

MISHA HEBEL: Ah, well, again, we have to go back to the pandemic. Emergent properties have been-- we've reconnected with older members who have embraced coming online, whereas they physically couldn't travel to us. So that was a bonus. The pandemic meant that I could devise a whole bunch of things I had time to do that I wouldn't otherwise have done.

But also, the consequences of sustainability and green issues are quite important, too, and how we integrate those with how the livery works. And the emergent properties there, the stuff that we're living with now because of systems of 50, 100, 150 years ago-- I mean, it's almost a world full of emergent properties. The company I run is science-based, so we're very interested in monitoring and checking and keeping track of things.

And also, every organisation has got these net zero challenges. What can you do? Half my job is about arranging dinners and being at dinners. Where does our food come from? What are we using? What utensils? How are things washed up? What's the life cycle? Where does the waste food go? All sorts of things like that impact on what we do.

SIMON BELL: Well, One of the things that really strikes me in this conversation is that, when we're talking about emergent properties, what we quite often mean are the surprise things which come out when we try to understand something which we think we understand already. But there are surprises and consequences that, if you're not looking for them, if you're not open to seeing things, you don't see them. To me, that's one of the benefits of a systems approach. It helps us to deal with the things that would otherwise be missed. Do you see what I mean?

MISHA HEBEL: Totally. In fact, I did prepare for this by making a few notes. And I have emergent properties/surprises on there. [LAUGHS] Yeah. No, see, I like the surprises. I enjoy that. And if I'm not seeking them, I'm always open to them. So yeah, sometimes they're good. Sometimes they're bad. And of course, bad ones organisations often want to ignore the bad ones.

SIMON BELL: In fact, that can be one of the benefits, can't it, of being a systems consultant or a systems practitioner is, going into an organisation, you can sometimes see the things that-- I mean, they're quite often very evident, but they're being missed because people aren't aware of them, or they're trying to ignore them or suppress them.

MISHA HEBEL: But we like the world to be neat and tidy and the way we want to see it. So all human beings have systems, value systems, going on inside them. And most people don't want to see anything that's unpleasant or challenges their worldview.

SIMON BELL: I suppose that's also important, your word there, the worldview, this idea that we actually have a set of preconceptions about what we're experiencing. And we're often blind to our own preconceptions. It takes somebody else to draw it to our attention.

MISHA HEBEL: It does. Or some of the wonderful techniques that I've learnt through the OU about getting your thoughts out, down onto paper, whether it's a rich picture or a causal link diagram or whatever, something that helps push the stuff out of your head and get a wider view.

SIMON BELL: Mm, mm. [INAUDIBLE] good to ask you, what's your preferred sort of-- when you approach a problem, what sort of systems tools do you use when you're entering a new complex situation?

MISHA HEBEL: Rich pictures, I don't have to say, are usually my first port of call. Yeah, I mean, I've used various versions of soft systems methodologies, working the whole way through. Collaborating with

others, I find rich pictures really useful. So if I've got a small group, and we're trying to come up with ideas, there's something about it that's sort of less judgmental.

It doesn't matter if you can't spell, or English is your second language. You can write things down, and it's quite a good way to [INAUDIBLE] small communities to share their ideas. And it breaks the ice. So it has some multiple uses. I wouldn't usually use the rest of SSM with a community group, but sometimes it might be appropriate.

SIMON BELL: So causal loop diagrams and multiple cause diagrams, you'd also be using those. So once you've established stuff with the rich picture, yeah?

MISHA HEBEL: Yeah. Yeah, but just to track the variables and how they can have a knock-on effect. I've always found that a very powerful tool. And of course, if you're mathematically minded, you can take it even further and simulate a situation from that. But just the discipline of forcing yourself to think, well, what causes this? Or what prompts that? And what's the knock-on effect? And then that goes to your emergent properties again.

SIMON BELL: The other wonderful thing about the rich picture, from my point of view, and I'm very fond of rich pictures, too, is that they can be drawn by the group in real time. So the group-- actually, I mean, everyone feels they've contributed, ideally, everybody feels they've made their contribution to the picture. And therefore, to some extent, the picture is everybody's legacy. Everybody owns it, and everybody has the consequences of it. It's a great tool.

MISHA HEBEL: [INAUDIBLE] just to add to the complexity of the situation, it's thundering here now. So sorry if you've got background noise.

SIMON BELL: [LAUGHS] Don't worry about that. Don't worry. OK, Misha, as our last question today is, where do you see systems going? Do you think systems is as vibrant and as useful today as it was when you first started using it?

MISHA HEBEL: Yes, in fact, more so, and partly because of the environmental challenges and the pandemic, where you can see lots of knock-on effects and lots of different ways of doing it. But I think, because of the environmental issues, people are starting to get a bigger picture of the world and what's in it and what's impacting on things.

And I think it really is a very right time for systems thinking to go to the next stage. Life's changing. Technology's changing. Connected living is increasingly becoming a challenge, as well. And it's the time to rethink.

SIMON BELL: What a great-- that's a great outcome. Thank you so much, Misha. Thank you for waiting for us, and thank you for being on the podcast today. It's been great talking to you, Misha. Thank you.