



Conscious Life presents

TRAUMA SUPER CONFERENCE

Organizational and group trauma work

Guest: Carolyn Sargentson

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[00:00:09] Meagen Gibson

Hello. Welcome to this interview. I'm Meagen Gibson, cohost of the Trauma Super Conference.

Today I'm speaking with Carolyn Sargentson, a coach who is in a lifelong exploration of her own nervous system and those of her treasured clients. As a former academic, yoga teacher, and museum curator, she loves to work between language and objects, mind and body, movement and stillness. She brings curiosity, tenderness, and a light, restorative touch to working with individual and group nervous systems, stories, movement, and breathing patterns, honoring the inner healer in each of her clients. Thank you so much for joining me, Carolyn.

Carolyn Sargentson

Thank you, Meagen. It's great to see you.

Meagen Gibson

So, Carolyn, behind the scenes, you and I have been talking a lot about systems and groups. So I want to focus our time today on group nervous systems because most of us, as much as we do our individual work, find ourselves as part of a whole, whether that be in our family, in our workplace, our sports team, or our place of spiritual practice. So I'd love it if you could tell me what you've noticed about group dynamics from a trauma informed lens.

Carolyn Sargentson

Great question. Thanks. I think the observation that I'd make about how we show up in groups and how those dynamics roll is that a lot of the time a kind of kicking up or an unease, even bad behavior or unhappiness, in a group is coming in because as individuals we show up and we are spending a lot of our energy optimizing our sense of safety. And I notice this in myself, and I notice it in others.

And the way I tend to think about it is that the group has its own nervous system. We come in as individuals, and we form a group. We bring our own individual histories. We bring our own individual patterns and residues of the traumas that we've experienced, of the grief that we may be holding, of all kinds of things, our attachment experience, we know a lot about this now.

[00:02:18]

And then we come into a group, and there can be great uncertainty about how we can be present to others, with each other, and what I think happens a lot, and I've noticed it in myself, and I usually do tend to work from things that I've noticed in myself and worked on for myself. I think I'm probably more useful in doing it that way is that there's a lot of anxiety in a group about where our place is. Where's the safety in this group? What's my place here?

And I was thinking about our conversation a bit earlier, and I was laughing. I spend quite a lot of time laughing at myself. And I was laughing because I was thinking of three different scenarios around my own experience of safety, or lack of, in groups. And I was thinking about a group of loved friends. If you and I and friends that we have in common were sitting together, I would have no anxiety. I would feel loved and safe and I'd be fully present.

Shame wouldn't be running. Trauma and grief wouldn't be running. I mean, grief may show up. It has a habit of showing up. And then I was thinking about another place of safety for me is going into quite big groups, I'm quite comfortable being with 200 or 300 people if I'm asked to be. If I have a role, I feel safe. If I have a role, I feel safe in a group. If I'm authorized by the group to support them, facilitate, any of those kinds of things.

And then the third space that I was laughing at was that, really, for me, if I don't have a role and I'm not in a space of deep love and comfort and safety, my tolerance of being in a group hits its limit at around four people. And I can enumerate that because of zoom, because I look at all the rectangles on the screen, if there's four of us, I feel very safe. I can manage. Once it's up to sort of five, six, and then it starts to grow and goes to new pages, I will disengage, I will withdraw to avoid the discomfort of the anxiety.

So there's a lot, I think, around this question of group dynamics and where trauma might come in. And I just want to say, and then I'll pause, that in my experience of working with groups, which I do more and more of, I would say that people's attachment trauma, people's unresolved traumatic life experience, will show up in a group. It can be negated at home, we can somehow cope as individuals, we can shut the doors, but when we're in a group, boy does it kick up.

And so the group nervous system, if these things are kicking up in the individuals, is likely to be agitated. The words I tend to think of are agitated, unsettled, unable to act, struggling just to be present in form as a group, to be in that formation together. That's true for a shocking amount of workplaces, I'd say. I have been surprised as I've moved more, and I'm shifting a little bit from individual work into more group work and more in person work as things change. And I'm taken aback by how much unsettledness there is and how much work there is to be done.

Meagen Gibson

And especially, I don't know if you would tie it directly, but I have a friend who leads a large team in a management position and the circle of the ecosystem of that team from the beginning, like pre COVID, through COVID and now, in what we would kind of... They are not the after times yet, but where we've all acclimated a bit and adjusted a bit, has been so interesting to watch and hear from her.

The homeostasis they were in before, and then the absolute disruption and everybody's trauma coming up during, and now after some of the accountability and self realization from some of the

people that were the most difficult during those times and that adjustment and the way that they've kind of revealed I didn't believe this about myself, and now I've come to understand that it's true. I didn't think that any of my personal stuff came here. I didn't think I brought any of my personal flaws to this place or to the way I show up here.

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And I think often because in the Venn diagram of who we are as people, we can take on different roles in different systems and in different groups. And I think a lot of people sometimes show up in particular systems of groups because of that. They're like I've come to this group because it is a place where I can be smaller or quieter and I don't need to be so big or I come to this group because I get to be big and loud and boisterous and take up a lot of space.

Have you noticed that kind of surprise from people, I guess? Or is this something that comes to a surprise for people that you're working with in groups that they can show up in different ways and that there is kind of this thing running in the background that they might not be aware of?

Carolyn Sargentson

Yeah, I think there is in the work that I'm doing, and a kind of underlying current here of, something of what you're describing, of people, in order to settle the group's nervous system, we need to show up more fully and do some work in our full humanity, if you like, in order that we can then perhaps ease back and perhaps breathe out into a new layer of clarification between person and role. Doing the whole thing in role, as we might have done before, I don't think really is working anymore.

Where people have got depleted and exhausted, though, I would say it's because they've brought, in a way, too much of themselves. They've been just running on empty and bringing all of themselves into the workplace through the pandemic. And often that overwhelm and that exhaustion and that sort of collapse can be happening when too much of the self is there and the role is not really containing the person in the workplace safely.

So I think that sort of person role thing is definitely a factor. Another pattern that I've seen very, very strongly and I don't know if this would resonate for you, and this is not a reflection on your friend who you describe, is that I'm noticing that with my clients, the combination or the intersection between the pandemic and poor leadership has really left people on their knees. And I'm noticing that, again, I'm a little taken aback by that because it is not just a one off with one client.

This is systematically across the sectors that I'm working with, the teams that are coming to me, and a lot of them have had, let's say, stand in interim leaders or leaders that just aren't leaders, they just haven't been able to do it, very unreconstructed sort of folk in these roles. And that running up to the pandemic, combined with the experience of the pandemic, is holding these teams just at the moment when they need to be moving in a place of complete exhaustion and depletion.

And that's a really tough one because you have to slow way down with them, way, way down with them. And people will often come to a coach like me because they're a new leader. They've just come into an organization and they've got the job, they're thrilled, they're coming in, they've got great ideas. The board that's appointed them has listened to their manifesto. There's alignment.

It's all great. The person comes into the organization and they kind of put the manifesto on the table and in theory, everyone's with them.

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In theory, everyone's relieved that the poor leadership era is over. And then the symptoms of this kind of traumatized system, if you like, are that there can be no movement. There is no movement. So people can sit still with each other and go, great idea, great plan, great strategic plan, great mission, great vision, great aspirations. What's happening at the sort of symptom level, if you like, if you're trying to diagnose or tune into a system and understand it, is that there's a kind of stasis, if you like, rather than a homeostasis, as you said earlier.

There's a sense that this group of people can't act. And one of the things that I think might be working with the teams that I'm working with, and I think a lot of the theory probably won't work anymore, we're having to build new theory and new practice, I would say, at the moment. We're still on some kind of front line. We're dealing with uncertainty more than anything else, still, I would say. We need to find ways for these teams to become present to each other, to form themselves as teams or groups because what they're not yet able to do is to act.

So for me, there's a sense that if we can become present to ourselves in a group first, then we may be able to build levels of safety and agency so that we can start acting. But there's just this lack of ability to do, there's a lack of energy to act in these systems that are overwhelmed, traumatized and, I would say, fairly deep in grief. There's a big intersection between trauma and grief, I'm finding. At times, it's very difficult to sense which is running more in the field, in fact.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. And everything you're saying totally resonates. And also reminds me a lot of another contributor that we have, Britt Frank, who wrote *The Science of Stuck*, which is more for individuals, but around the symptoms of anxiety and trauma and this inability to act, not meaning that you're broken. And maybe this is something you would reflect as well, but whatever you're feeling, stuckness makes sense given the circumstances, the background of the individual.

The stuckness doesn't necessarily mean that it's all in poor leadership. Like you said, there's a great vision, everyone adopts it, there's a wonderful strategy, but no one can actually do the steps that take to get there. So, fascinating to me, symptomology that you've noticed and for anybody who is part of an organization or leads one that's watching this, you're not alone. Your experience in your workplace, it seems to be quite symptomatic in a lot of places.

So how do you begin, I mean, I think you touched on it just a little bit, but how do you begin in this slowing down way that you said, like really slowing down, but how do you begin to work with both the individuals and the group nervous system once you've identified... Do you have to identify what an organization's specific kind of trauma history is? Or is it a general approach, knowing that there's kind of this stuck mentality?

Carolyn Sargentson

Yeah, that's a great question. Not necessarily, I would say, just as, Meagen, we're clear now that with an individual, if somebody is coming into a coaching relationship or a therapeutic relationship with another, we know that we do not need to and, in fact, should not invite that person to recount

their traumatic experience. That is absolutely no help to anybody. That kind of curiosity we might now define as morbid, unhelpful and indeed damaging, because we're just retraumatizing. So that kind of curiosity needs to just be put down.

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And I would say, in a way, the same is true for organizations. Maybe not quite as profoundly true because what I would say with the group dynamic is that we need to surface what is unspoken. So my job is to get alongside people and to be present in their world and to notice what might be unspoken, to surface hidden loyalties and hidden dynamics that might be being brought from other systems that they've been in. The family system is the obvious one because it's the original system.

But by the time I'm working with people, they've been through several systems and participate in several. Family is another good one, their current family. I'm thinking of people, for example, with one of my clients where there's a cohort of people who've been, because of the nature of their security work, they've come through, most of them, the military or the police culture, so they have a strong attachment to those values and principles.

So those don't make sense in the environment they're in now, but they really dominate their way of showing up. That's a very stark example in my experience. So I think one of the things that I have to do to slow down is to get very present to the energy in the field, if you like, and to be sort of noticing between my nervous system, all of those individual ones, and what's going on in the container of the group, and mostly, I would say, the challenge for someone working like that with others is to do much less than they think they should do.

So stop coaching, stop advising, stop having the answers. So you have to deal with your own fears and your own nervous system attunement to be able to slow down to the degree that others will slow down with you. And in a sense, it's like climbing into a well. I think that's how I experience that. I climb down and sit on the ground with people and we're all at rock bottom. That's where I join them. I don't join them at the strategic planning level or the great mission and vision level. I join them at rock bottom.

Meagen Gibson

I'm having a visual of you shouting down from the top of the well just like, looks dark down there!

Carolyn Sargentson

Yeah. Where's the ladder? I'm coming down. I'm going to come and sit with you. Yeah. So a client that I'm working with at the moment, I have the visceral... Well, actually, the story was interesting because the story, as it was described to me, the narrative was, we used to be family and now we've gone feral, rather as you were talking about a little bit with those pandemic changes and how the teams are feeling about themselves, and we want to be a family again.

So the aspiration was there, but doing that was just not available to them. And I just realized I had to go and sit down. It was the well of grief. And we went and sat down there together and they named it and we just kept going round the table without the leader until these beautiful souls had shared all that had been hard about the last five years of toughness, not just the pandemic, but tough stuff before then, including people being lost in various ways to the system.

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And there was a lot of grief that surfaced and it took hours for that process. We did no work to go anywhere or do anything. There was no team building, there was none of all that old stuff that people used to do as consultants and coaches and there was no rallying, there was nothing of that. It was just like, we need to sit down here until we can all feel that reality of what has happened here. And if you sit long enough, the system will begin to move itself.

So the theory would be that the system is innately searching for balance and that that will bring a kind of level of healing in the system that will settle it, recalibrate it. And my job is to attune to that. And it's often a matter of timing. I don't so much now, but my training of myself is to slow myself down and not get uncomfortable and try to push on. And it's extraordinary how powerful it is just to sit and wait. So you're kind of holding space.

You have a role, you're there, you're strong, and you just trust that what wants to come through will come through, and it always does. And the capacity we have as coaches and helpers to cut that off too early is insane. I don't know whether it's a lot of damage, but we can get in the way of the sort of systemic rebalancing and healing that's available in the field if we know how to look for it and how to wait for it, and then to begin to name it as it begins to show up.

Meagen Gibson

As you're talking, I'm reminded of the first thing you said, which I actually wrote down really quickly, which was about the energy it takes to optimize a sense of safety and how part of gaining that energy back, I imagine, is grieving, that how much energy you reclaim as an individual and a group when you can name your grief and grieve together.

Carolyn Sargentson

Yes, absolutely. The reclaiming is a really important word here, Meagen. Really important. I'm glad you brought that in. There is a tremendous amount of energy to be reclaimed as we acknowledge our own trauma in our own therapeutic environments. There's something to be reclaimed in mother to child relationships. You and I often talk about that. Yeah, I was talking, actually, with a colleague recently about how, for me, I could see that when my mother died, part of me died with her, but also that when my son was born, something died from me as well, in me as well.

And I'm at a point where I'm ready to reclaim that. And so that kind of dynamic of, for me, death and reclamation, that might not fit for everybody, is really important. It's a really important relational piece. And, yes, absolutely, that is true for groups. And I would say here that one of the very powerful things here is witnessing. And again, that's quiet work. This isn't charging around making maps or charts or changing things or moving things. There's a time for that.

But it's just the quiet witnessing of others. That true seeing of someone else. That's deeply healing work, I would say. I know it because I receive it and I feel it when I'm able to make that available to my clients. And that's just as true of group work as anything else. And for a new leader to come in, as I've been working in this way recently quite a bit, as a new leader comes in, that person needs to spend time witnessing what has been in the group, witnessing all that they've been through in the pandemic, all that they went through before, because that person is the newest into the system.

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And there's an order of precedence here that says that the newest in must acknowledge those that came before them. And it's an order of precedence, not an order of preference. It's simply to acknowledge everybody's place and to honor that and respect it. So one of the things that I will do with pretty much all groups that I work with is to ask everybody to line up in order of arrival in the system. You can do this, actually, with family constellation work as well. This is all coming from constellation therapy practices and theories.

And the latest person acknowledges every single person all the way back. And it goes back person by person. Everyone acknowledges everyone before them because they made it possible for them to come in. They built the platform for them to stand on. So you acknowledge backwards. And then at the back of the line, the oldest or the earliest into the system, the longest standing person, the one with the institutional memory, if you like, or the family memory, then releases everybody forward, one by one, all the way through the system to say, and now you're free to do your role.

Now you're free to do the work, to lead us forward, to take us onward. And until we do that kind of fairly basic systems retuning, often an organization or a team with a new leader can't do anything. And it gets confusing. People get very confused, well, why can't we do this? Why do we keep coming back to obstacles and stuckness?

I just want to make one more comment, if I may, about stuckness, because I think that conversation can take place in different ways. I see stuckness as highly generative as I think you do. That being stuck, it's like, yes, we're all going to sit down here and see what wants to happen. It's a call to sit, I think.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. And as we've been talking about energy, and stuckness is, to me, nothing more than a message that you're not listening to. The paralysis is you haven't been paying attention. I've been trying to tell you something. So now I'm going to completely shut you down and force you to listen. And until you do, this is just going to feel really hard.

Carolyn Sargentson

Yeah.

Meagen Gibson

And sometimes it's not some big, revelatory, earth shattering thing. Sometimes it's just you've been working too hard and you're not spending enough time actually feeling the sensations of your body. That happens to me all the time where I get super stuck and literally, I feel like a bag of sand that cannot move. And I realize, oh, it's because I've been holding my belly, my stomach has been like this, all day. In fact, I did it before I came on with you. And it's only 09:41 A.M. where I am.

But I sat down, actually before five minutes before, but five minutes before we were going to come on, I sat here and I literally did three minutes of letting my belly just soften. And so how many times do we do that? How many times do we listen to stuckness as a message of what's not being heard or acknowledged or noticed?

[00:27:37] Carolyn Sargentson

Yeah, that's beautiful. That's a great example. It is. It's a call to notice and to name, what is this sensation? I had my version of that, over Christmas, I took a good break, two week break, and I think it was Boxing Day. And I sat there and thought, what is this feeling that I've got? There's a feeling, there's a sensation that's present. It's uncomfortable. I don't like it. And sure, I could go off for a hike or call a friend. Let me just sit down with this. So I was sort of quietly meditating on this question of, what was it? And I just started laughing because I was bored with myself. I had completely bored myself to death.

Meagen Gibson

You had extended your own company. You're just like I'm done with you.

Carolyn Sargentson

Yeah. I was so bored, so I started laughing. And because I was able to go there, then I was able to, having sat with that for a bit, then felt impatience with myself, well, that was a bit of sort of inbreath energy coming in. It was a bit of activation. Okay, what do you want to do? So I then was able to kind of shift from being present to myself to being in the energy of doing in the outside world, which I also think is something that these teams are needing to do.

They need to get present to the form of the team and the experience of the team before they can act. There's work to be done before action is available, the energy of action is available. So I laughed at myself. Had I not really connected with that, I think I would have missed out something really important.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. And I think so much of our energy and attention can be fueled by what needs to get done instead of asking ourselves, what do I need? It's an outer informed, kind of panic ridden motivation instead of an intrinsically motivated question of action, if you will.

Carolyn Sargentson

Yeah. And there's all that stuff in there about slowing down to speed up. If you really slow down and rest there or stay there and find the stillness and just dig in. For me, it's always sort of digging into or dropping into the sacral. There's always, for me, a kind of down, an exhale and a dropping down into the sacral space. Okay, what's down there that I need to be with? And then I can be quite quick, when I come out of that, it's all a bit lighter.

And I can be in the action without it feeling like a heavy, dutiful state of play to get something done. I can dance a little lighter. And it's countercultural to do that, to slow down, or to be inert, or to sit with stillness, especially in an organization. So I love the in person work because I tend to travel to organizations and spend a week with them and then I'll work a little remotely and coach remotely and then go back and do a bit more in person work.

And it's great because it's in the in person time that we can really feel the slowness come in and just drop right to that. I've always found rock bottom a very reassuring place to be, which may not

work for all of your listeners and all of our viewers, but there's something for me very like, okay, this is it, there's no further to fall here. At my darkest moments, I thought, okay, I can breathe here. I don't like it, to put it mildly, it's painful, but I know where I am. And then we breathe and move and release into.

[00:31:46] Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. This might make me sound like a bit of a masochist, but having been through several rock bottoms of sorts in my lifetime, now when I am able to be with and witness somebody at rock bottom, there's a tiny excitement that I get because now they're going to know how strong they are. And I don't wish rock bottom on anyone, at all, but that's how resilience is built. It's not by being given a rock bottom, but by surviving it and being supported in that survival and in coming back from it. Rock bottom with support, that's the ingredients of resilience.

Carolyn Sargentson

Yeah, it's the bottom line, right? Yeah, it's the place we spring from.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah.

Carolyn Sargentson

If you think about someone who's done a certain amount of yoga and teaches and goes back to yoga frequently, Vanda Scaravelli is the tradition I'm trained in, and she would always say as you release down into gravity, something springs back up again. And there's a moment in practice where you suddenly feel that and you go, that's what those words meant.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. Especially when it comes to breathwork, which I know we're actually going to get to in one minute, we're going to do a little bit of breathwork, just so everybody knows, but I have one more thing that I wanted to come back to, that I wrote down that you talked about earlier, which was you were talking about family constellations therapy and that exercise which I thought was so beautiful.

And the thing that you didn't name explicitly, but I'm wondering if you can touch on just a little bit, is how releasing of toxic and hierarchical power structures that is and where, we can't dismiss all hierarchy in organizations or they don't work, like hierarchy is not inherently evil, but especially when you're talking about an owner or a founder or someone who carries the legacy of the organization and the release and agency, but the release of unspoken wizard of Oz-ness and power culture that happens through that exercise of the person carrying the legacy, saying to the newest person, like, okay, all of you are kind of released. You have the legacy now. Here's your agency. Go be powerful in the world.

Carolyn Sargentson

Yeah. And you can't do that piece of releasing forward until that founder has been fully, fully acknowledged, not necessarily given power. Our system, our culture would take us to, oh,

therefore they're in charge. That's not at all how systems theory works, that kind of thing works, as you know, but it's just to really honor the work that was done, the labor, the intellectual contribution, the business design, all that was done by the founder.

[00:34:54]

Once everybody is able to do that, then the founder can offer the baton, symbolically, to those that follow when they are ready to step back. That's such, as you know, such a significant threshold and one that is painful for everyone. It's not easy. That has to be given time and attention, and a process. So, thanks for naming that.

Meagen Gibson

I just imagine that there's both a lot of grief and relief, maybe unexpectedly, from the founder when they get to do that.

Carolyn Sargentson

Yes, absolutely. Yes. There's loss, grief around loss, grief around what might never be, thinking of the work of Francis Weller here, and the grieving for who we never became. As we step back, we're not going to be the next version of that leader. We're stepping back. So we're grieving at many different levels, at the levels of identity especially. And if we step out of that community, we're stepping out of something that we created and that sustains us.

There's a lot of grief, I think, for founders who move on and also for the community, or whoever is remaining in the system to take the organization forward. There's an enormous call to maturity. There's a real kind of stepping into taking the baton, really kind of assuming the mantle, if you like. And that isn't easy for people who've been in the shadow of a founder.

So there's a lot of sort of attuning and rebalancing and acknowledging that needs to happen to rearrange those kinds of dynamics. And it's actually, when it's done well, it's very beautiful and healing work. And creative work. And yet you can see lots of situations where the work has not been done in that way. And so people get very stuck, back to stuck. They just can't move beyond these ties, these kinds of chords that tie people. There has to be symbolic, ritualized cutting of those chords.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. And the weight of the risk involved and how protected from risk everyone but the founder can be for so long. That part of that, what you were just saying about the fear when being handed the baton, is the newfound realization of risk responsibility toward yourself, toward the organization, toward the people that are employed there and work there, and all of the things that you had not felt or acknowledged or had taken for granted before, I assume.

Carolyn Sargentson

Yeah, absolutely. And some kind of transitional space really helps where people practice being grown up. People practice being less present as founder leaders, more present as the inheritors of the mantle. Running experiments live in real time can be a great way, really, to settle a nervous

system, you have to be very present to real time experience. You have to try things on, try things out, feel your way in. It's somatic work, very much so.

[00:38:29] Meagen Gibson

Well, everyone is very lucky to have you guiding them through that because it's tough work.

Carolyn Sargentson

You'll know this to be true, I learn so much from every encounter, I just learn so much and feel so much. And I've always said, actually, I may even have said it last year when we talked in this context, that for every bit of healing that my clients find in themselves, for themselves, I receive a bit of that too. And I find that quite precious and wonderful. And that was very unexpected. It's consistently turned out to be true that when healing is in the field, I'm not a healer, I'm an academic doctor, not a doctor doctor, my father was a doctor doctor, but yes, I'm not a healer.

And I work not to be a wounded healer either. Like most people working in the therapeutic space with the wounded healer archetype running strong, I try to clean that up. But healing shows up in the field when you've invited and it becomes available to everybody, I would say.

Meagen Gibson

I think a lot of people at home watching can relate to that as well. Anybody who's on a healing journey knows that it starts with you, but it extends out whether you intend to or not, in good ways. Well, one of the things that I know is a huge part of your toolbox is this creating space, allowing space, and breathwork, as part of that. And I've enjoyed practicing that with you before.

So if you'd be willing to, I would love it if you could lead us through a short breathwork session. Probably about ten minutes it looks like we have time for.

Carolyn Sargentson

Yeah, good.

Meagen Gibson

That would be great.

Carolyn Sargentson

Yeah, let's do that. Let's do that. Let's invite our viewers, then, to just come up with a visualization of a system or a group that they're part of where there's low levels of discomfort, where we're aware that we're optimizing our sense of safety when we're present in that group. We're a little anxious, a little activated.

So what I'm suggesting here is we're not going into a full blown difficult situation as we visualize. It's not going to be appropriate for this kind of setting, but just to do a little experiment between how we stay with self and other at the same time. I think it was Prentis Hemphill who said, how did they put it, boundaries are there so that I can love myself and you simultaneously. I haven't got that quite right. But the spirit of it is what I'd like to kind of call into this practice.

[00:41:25]

How can I love myself and you simultaneously, equally? So in that setting, we need to be able to breathe for ourselves. We need to come home. We want to be able to be here first and then secondarily with others. And often we exist the other way around when group pressure comes in.

So I'm just going to suggest that we begin by, people can close their eyes or not, if you're not closing your eyes, I suggest you go a little out of focus, just so you're with a peripheral vision, so that you're not looking at or focusing on the screen particularly, and just find yourselves in your chairs. Or wherever you're standing, lying or sitting. Maybe press the feet down a little bit and rumble the feet against the ground a little bit, just so that the skin on the soles of the feet can find the ground and remind you of the base of your feet.

Perhaps you're sitting on a chair and you can feel where the skin and your flesh and your bones are dropping their weight into the chair. And take two or three longer, slower breaths than you usually would take and just let yourself enjoy that. You can stretch a little. Yeah, yawn, Meagen, go for it. Yawning is lovely. Yawning and sighing. So here's the invitation. You can yawn some more breath in. You could sigh on the way out. The great beauty of watching is you can make noise. Beautiful.

And let's just bring our attention as we sit and breathe with a little bit more awareness of the rising and falling of the breath. Just some of our attention going there. Bring our focus to the length of the body, the vertical alignment within which we sit. This is your kind of sovereign alignment. This is where you're probably likely to find yourself. It may work for you to breathe in through your feet, to visualize that and let the breath come up to the crown of the head or above it.

And then as you breathe out, to visualize yourself letting the breath all the way downwards and back through the body and through the feet to the ground. So imagine the breath coming up and down as you sit in your sense of length. I'm going to draw on some beautiful teachings from the Strozzi folk. Just be with your own dignity here, continuing to breathe, finding, let's call it, the dignity line in your vertical alignment.

And you may want to adjust a little, be a little more alert, feel a little more of that dignity, adjust your position a bit, maybe sit a little taller, I don't know, and begin to really know this place, all the way along the inbreath and the outbreath, know this place as your sovereign space and your innate line of dignity.

And if you can practice with whatever is valuable to you in this invitation regularly enough to be able to invoke this knowing when you're next in a group situation, the one that I asked you to just hold in mind, one where you feel a little activated, just imagine for yourself the feeling of activation as you anticipate being in that environment and then bring yourself back to this dignity line, this vertical alignment, with some awareness of your breath.

For some of you, you may want to drop your chins a tiny bit and feel a little more length in the back of the neck. For some you may want to just release a little in the pelvic floor muscles, the belly, the lower rib cage may be a little contracted when it thinks about this group. There'll be experiences and sensations in the body that come in when you think about this group. So if you let yourself anticipate being with the group, notice the sensations, breathe back to your dignity line.

[00:46:48]

Be there until you can anticipate being back in the group. Visualize that. Notice anything. Could be the same contractions, could be a little different, keeping on coming back to your dignity line and to your vertical alignment and your breath awareness every time you feel that beginning of the activation feeling.

For some of you, you may find it's helpful to enter a group like this, particularly if it's on Zoom, but it would also be true of sitting in person, you may want to lean back against your chair, which you can do now. Feel the back of the body and take your stance back so that you're just a little bit less available to others in your visualization and you're more available to yourself. So I'm leaning back to my chair, and I can feel the chair back supporting me. I'm now more aware of my front and my back.

And one last possible tool, if you like, might be that if you're feeling this strongly and you need to define your own sovereign space as more than this line, you may, if you would like to, turn the palms of both hands outwards and just create, and I'm doing it on the screen if you want to take a look, create your own breathing space. Just taking your hands, coming out from the body, in front to the sides, just until you can feel how much space you need to have your own sovereign breathing space when you come in with others.

And again feel this, it won't help just to do it once. You have to do it maybe every day, maybe several times a day. Whatever bits of this practice you find interesting or helpful, just experiment with it by doing it when you're quiet, not activated, so that you can recruit that, bring it in, when you're sitting at the next Christmas family dinner or the next meeting that might be challenging. Or you're sitting with somebody who's really kicking off in a group. Not your problem. Come back to yourself.

And I'll leave it there, Meagen, for now. There's lots of things like that that can be lovely to do.

Meagen Gibson

I love that. And especially the way that you brought it all together at the end with the literal, physical, here is my breathing space. And you bring up such a good point. So many of the things that you said during that session overlapped with another contributor, Dr Darryl Tonemah, who talks about sovereignty a lot and dignity and creating your own space of agency and power. I appreciated a lot of the ways that you contextually framed that.

And also the reason that I brought him up was that he always says you don't practice for a fire drill during a fire. So we practice these tools and we do the breathwork that you've just laid out and the visualization not when we're in the situation. That's not the first time we should practice. We should practice it several times so that we have that embodied experience of, like, here's what it feels like to stay in my space and to define what my problems are and aren't. And where I can breathe and where I can loosen and where I can get quiet.

Carolyn Sargentson

Yeah. And what's mine to do, what's mine to own, what's mine to do, what's on this side of the boundary, and what's out there. And just maintaining clarity on that can be tremendously settling and calming.

[00:51:01] Meagen Gibson

Isn't that amazing? I remember, because what people don't understand, I think, is the discomfort that comes when that happens. I can viscerally remember the day in 2019, I think it was, when I was sitting in a meeting and a problem was presented and I had to, with every fiber of my being, not solve that problem.

Carolyn Sargentson

Yes.

Meagen Gibson

Because I knew I didn't have the capacity to take it on. And I knew that it wasn't my job to solve it, but every fiber of my being wanted to solve that problem. But it took a ton of just like, you underestimate how much work it's going to take to withhold, to sit back and be like, actually, this isn't my problem to solve. This isn't my issue. I'm going to relax in this moment. It sounds very serene, but really what was happening was a complete and total battle within me.

Carolyn Sargentson

Oh, yeah. Yes. I completely resonate with that. I've had very similar experiences. And it's true. When you're coaching, do nothing. What is the minimum that you could do here? As my trainer says, only speak if you can improve on silence.

Meagen Gibson

Which I think is also a Quaker principle. I am not a Quaker. So if there are any Quakers, the listening audience, that would like to correct me, please write me an email. I'd be delighted to be more informed, but yeah, I think I've heard that as well.

Carolyn Sargentson

Wonderful.

Meagen Gibson

Carolyn Sargentson, thank you so much for being with us and for everything that you do. How can people find out more about you and your work?

Carolyn Sargentson

Yeah. Come and find me at carolynsargentsonconsulting.com. I think somewhere on the bios you'll find the link. And I'm open to working with all kinds of individual and group situations. Love my work. You're very welcome. Come find me. Yeah. And thank you for watching. I hope there's been something for people here. It's been a pleasure to see you, Meagen, as always.

Meagen Gibson

Wonderful to see you as well.