ADVENTURES IN BEHAVIOUR CHANGE - PETER LEFORT
(Katie Elliott & Peter Lefort)

In his work as Community Network Manager for the Eden Project, Peter Lefort helps people improve their wellbeing and resilience through connecting with others where they live. He has a particular interest in supporting community activists in taking good care of themselves and runs regular workshops on the subject of burnout.

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Good afternoon, Peter Lefort. Thanks for joining me!

Afternoon Katie. Thanks for having me.

Do tell us a little bit about what you're up to at the Eden Project.

Yeah, great. So I work for Eden Project Communities, which is the community outreach arm of Eden Project the charity. And the purpose of the charity is to connect people to each other through the living world. And what we do in the communities arm is about bringing people together in their community and around the idea of communities . So I basically support a network of individuals who are doing something where they live or want to and creating and holding spaces for these people to come together share ideas, share challenges, successes, those kind of things and be a part of a community in and of themselves.

So what is it about community that is important to you?

Good question. Community, I think, feels like it's at the heart of pretty much everything I have done, one way or another. It's one of those things that's always there, whether or not you're aware of it. You're never really on your own whatever it is that you are doing, whether you are actively running community projects, speaking to your neighbours or not, you are impacted by the people around you. And I feel, and what I seek day-to-day in my work is, the more that we are aware of the communities we are a part of, and the more that we put into those communities and take out, the better we are able to do whatever it is we want to do.

Mmm. Because there's been a lot of research that's come out recently about the problems caused by isolation. And the fact that loneliness is increasingly something that we're facing in society. How does what you're doing fit in with that?

Yeah, loneliness - it's amazing how much we are talking about that now as a society compared to even five years ago, I think. And isolation is a really

interesting term because isolation can be split up into solitude and loneliness - and solitude is the joy of being alone whereas loneliness is the pain of being alone, and I think often there can be a bit of confusion between the two. Sometimes you don't want to be with other people and you want to be on your own, but the more we can identify loneliness - it doesn't even have to be on your own you can be lonely and have hundreds of friends, you can be lonely and have a huge family - loneliness is just a mismatch between the relationships that we have and the relationships that we want. It doesn't mean anything about who you are as a person - and I think the more aware we are of communities and how we are a part of them whether we know it or not, whether we feel welcomed into them or not, the more chance we have of doing something about loneliness which, you know, can and will affect all of us.

Mmm. So the thing that interests me about being part of a community is that it can be a great resource in times of need. It can be a great place to go and seek help of whatever kind. But something I think is often underestimated is the importance, in terms of having good mental health, the importance of actually being able to contribute and make a meaningful contribution to others. So, how does your work invite people to both give and receive?

Yeah, it's a really good question and it's I think that's at the core of what we do. And a lot of it is around removing these ideas of give and take as a transactional idea. You know you don't have to give in order to take or vice versa - being part of a community kind of takes that away and it's much more about collaboration and reciprocity than it is about transaction. And the kind of work that we do, the events that we run, the online spaces that we hold, are about creating these spaces where people can just be themselves and understand the expertise that we all have. You know, we're all an expert in our own experience and a big part of contributing is finding the right time and the right person and the right place for you to share your experience and your expertise and there's going to be times when that's not appropriate. There's going to be times when we feel like we've got nothing to offer and even the people we would consider to be experts in, you know, really obvious things, there'll be times when their experience is completely irrelevant and not interesting to anyone at all. And the great thing about a community is you connect as a human being, not as a job title or anything else, and you connect on that kind of heart-to-heart level as much as the head-to-head level. And it can be hard to create those spaces. I think a really interesting thing that's happening at the moment in terms of trends towards cars and streets being places where you come out your house you get in your car and you drive away and that is our relationship with our street, so it's very hard to develop connections with our neighbours because we don't feel like we have that sense of shared space and that

thing in common that helps us find permission to actually reach out and have a conversation with someone.

Yeah, and what kind of things do you notice happening when people come together and start getting more actively involved in their communities?

I mean, happiness. It feels like a trite word and it's an overused word, but it's incredible to see. And I think sustainability is a word that's really bandied around and overused and can really kind of turn people off, but the sustainability that we see in the work that we do comes when people are connecting as human beings around shared values. The connections - if the conditions are right - can become friendships and that's the beautiful thing and that's the thing which is really sustainable. You can talk about financial sustainability until the cows come home, but actually developing a personal connection with another person - a friendship - in theory, that could be a sustainable connection for the rest of your life.And it's those little moments that are often invisible unless you know how to spot them or unless someone tells you about them. That impact, it's so big you can't even measure it but it's also so small, you can't really see it.

So, you and I met at an event and you ran a wonderful workshop on the subject to burnout and what I loved about it was that you created a really safe space for people to talk about what can be quite a difficult subject because we touched on all sorts of different things. So tell me a bit about burnout and what you've what you've learned from your work on that subject.

Yeah, so burnout is an issue that's very close to my heart. I've burnt out in my professional work and my personal projects and things like that. And burnout is something that's not really talked about that much. I think there's taboos about it, but there's also a general lack of of understanding or awareness and there isn't really one definition of it. The closest I've come is a sort of a feeling of emotional, physical and mental exhaustion. And it can be really cyclical - you can develop these patterns where you feel like you have to prove yourself. And when you're doing anything around social change, community work, anything where there is a value-based aspect to what you are doing and what you're putting your energy into, you're going to be susceptible to burnout because it effectively boils down to putting more emphasis on the external things you are doing than the internal things - so the ways that you are looking after yourself. And I have been privileged enough to be able to get support for being through burnout and learning how to look after myself a bit better. And since then I've been, any opportunity I get, trying to run workshops, talk with people, hold these spaces like you say that are safe and that are accessible, to share what I've learned but also learn from other people. And I think, what I know and what I've found to be useful is really growing

year-on-year as I learn from others about their experiences of burnout and how they got through.

Mmm. The thing I remember most clearly about the session that we did together was when you talked about ‘drivers’ - so the kind of underlying beliefs that tell us that we have to do things a certain way or that we are a certain type of person and how that we may not even realise they're there, but they're determining our behaviour and having a significant impact on our health and our ability to cope. Can you tell us a bit more about drivers and how they work?

Yes, absolutely. Beliefs, I think, is a really good word for that and I would add the word 'irrational' to that. I think it's a really important thing to remember. So the drivers can be split down into five categories. You've got ‘be pleasing’. So this is the idea that everything you do has to please people. ‘Try hard’. Whatever you do, you have to give a hundred percent all the time. ‘Be perfect’ is the third one. So it's this idea that you can't get anything wrong, everything you do has to be a hundred percent right. ‘Hurry up’ is the fourth and this is that everything you do, you've got to do really quickly, you can't waste any time. And ‘be strong’ is the fifth one. ‘Be strong’ is you can't show any weakness, you have to be on it, you have to be capable the whole time. And I think a lot of those will resonate with a lot of people and you might think, "Oh, yeah, that one definitely feels big for me and that one doesn't ". And the key thing is, all of those things in moderation can be positive beliefs. They can be beliefs that could drive us to positive things. But what makes them drivers, and what makes them irrational, is when they become bottomless pits of energy. When no matter how much energy you put into trying hard or you put into pleasing other people or you put into being perfect, that voice at the back of your head will never go away. That becomes the driving force for what you're trying to do. And I think helping people to think about, "Ok, well which drivers are stronger for me and which are less strong for me?", is a really useful way of starting to create space to ask ourselves these questions. I think it's an excellent collaborative thing to do, it's really useful in teams, knowing what the drivers of other people are so that you know how not to trigger those drivers and make people feel really bad. And also being able to communicate your own drivers so that other people are aware of your own triggers. And it's a real process of starting to understand, where are these irrational beliefs coming from and how do I go about challenging them? Because until you're actually aware of it, there's very little we can do about it.

Yeah, definitely. The thing that amused me when we were sitting in that group and you told us about drivers and got us to think about which were the drivers that had the strongest hold on each one of us individually, was that when I looked at mine, I thought, well, everyone must be driven by those things, because they're clearly really important. And we went around the circle of people and everyone thought

that their's were really important and they were all different. Everyone had a slightly different combination of drivers running them and if we all believe that they're terribly important and essential and we all disagree about what they are then it kind of calls them into question a bit doesn't it?

It does, absolutely. It's fascinating. And like so many illogical things, the moment you shine a light on them, you see them for what they are. You know, arbitrary, meaningless things. And sharing them and hearing other people have got different views to you is a really great way of doing that. And also thinking about, "Ok, well these drivers are important to me, but which of them do I project onto other people?" And it's interesting to think - for me, for example, 'be pleasing' is really important to me, but I would never expect anyone else to be held to the same standard that I would hold myself and it's only when I kind of visualise that for myself or talk about it with other people that I can see how absurd that is, and if that someone else disappoints me, I won't hold it against them. But for some reason there's a part of my brain that thinks that it will happen the other way around if I disappoint someone else. And this is the whole thing about having a community and having connection with other people is you can share these things and it challenges that behaviour. Whereas there might be times when, for me, 'hurry up' can be quite important. You know, being on time is really important to me and sometimes I project that onto other people and if they don't get something to me on time, or if they turn up late to something, I might notice a lot of anxiety around that. But actually if I can talk about it, I can notice it that, well, actually I have an arbitrary standard that I'm imposing on somebody else and they might not have that. And I can say to them, "Actually this is really important to me", and maybe they'll adapt their behaviour for my benefit or maybe I'll just realise, "You know what, it's okay if other people don't have the same standards, that's okay". But the more we have these in our own head, the more they just cycle around and get stronger and stronger and stronger until we shine a light on them and see them for the ludicrous things that they are.

They seem like great tools to have available to work with because ever since we did that session I've had that sort of new awareness of them. I hadn't come across them described in that way before but they felt instantly recognisable and familiar to me when you talked to us about them. And I did notice just earlier on today, in fact, I noticed a situation where I was putting myself under huge pressure to do something perfectly - to the extent that I was thinking, "I'm not sure I want to do it at all because I don't think it will be perfect". And then I remembered about the 'be perfect' driver and I thought, "Hmm, I wonder if that that need for perfection is actually a real thing or whether that's just coming from me, because maybe doing it a bit imperfectly would be fine". But without that sort of external voice to

question it, it’s all too easy just to believe everything that goes on inside your head.

Absolutely, and I think the magic about these drivers - and you can call them whatever you want and if they don't work for you then make up other terms, you know, whatever works - is you don't have to understand anything about psychology. It doesn't have to be about knowing these buzzwords or key things. It's just about, as you say, being aware of it, taking a moment to think, "Ok, where is that voice coming from? And is that a voice I want to listen to or is it actually something that's quite difficult and isn't actually going to get me anywhere because it's never going to go away, even if I pour a lot of energy into it, that voice is still going to be there”. And it's not a quick fix, but yeah, talking about it with other people and creating space for yourself can make a huge difference I think.

Yeah. One of the things I've really learned strongly over the last few years is that I always used to be very involved in community work and I thought I could just be giving out but not really paying attention to my own well-being. And it always seemed a bit self-indulgent, actually, to become more aware of what was going on in my own head. I felt that that was not really a very good thing to be doing, you know, thinking about yourself. It doesn't sound like something one really wants to spend a lot of time doing and obviously if you do it, you know, to an extreme and it isn't necessarily healthy or much fun. But I have noticed that the more I've learned about things like these drivers you're talking about, the more I have to offer to my community. Because I'm I'm better resourced myself. Able to do more without burning out. But also much more compassionate towards what's going on for other people because I can see that as part of the human condition rather than just imagining that somebody's being a bit difficult to work with. Does that make sense?

Absolutely, and that's really nice to hear. And I think some of those words like 'compassion', I think, that's what it really boils down to. I totally get what you're saying about feeling self-indulgent and I've been through that and I hear that so much. And again, it feels like one of those things of, you know, you saying that to me, I can hear how strange that sounds and, to me, irrational, but I know that I feel the same thing as well. And hearing you say that helps me identify, actually, yeah, you know, I struggle to do that and to find that time. One of the other things I often talk about in my workshop is this idea of resilience. And sometimes when I talk about resilience with people, people can think that, yeah, it's self-indulgent or it's about doing less and cutting down and becoming a hermit or something like that, which is absolutely not what it is. Resilience is, it's just about being able to respond to shocks and not about necessarily doing less than you're currently doing, it's just about doing it in a way that gives you energy. And I think there's a real challenge for us in society in terms of the language that we use, not just

around burnout and resilience, but things like looking after ourselves, that can feel self-indulgent. And one of the biggest offenders, in my experience, is this idea of 'doing nothing'. The myth of doing nothing, because when we when we're thinking about looking after ourselves, often that is couched in the language of doing nothing, whether it's going for a walk, watching TV, having a bath, having a nice meal, the way we talk about it, the language we use is around doing nothing. And what we mean when we say doing nothing is we mean doing nothing of consequence. Because we're so used to defining the impact of what we do through an external consequence, you know, work, family, how does it impact other people, how does it impact the world? And as soon as we start thinking about doing something that has internal consequence, that makes us happier, that makes us calmer, it's very hard to justify that consequence because it's so easy to dismiss and nobody else sees it and so nobody else can report back on it. Whereas if you do a bit of work, you know, chances are someone else is going to notice it and acknowledge it, for better or for worse. But if you have a bath or if you go for a walk or hang out with your dog or whatever it is that you need to do to look after yourself, there generally isn't anyone else who can validate the consequence of what you have done. So we have to get better as a society at accepting that, understanding better what it is that gives us resilience and, more importantly, what the impact of that resilience is. It's not just good enough thinking, "Oh, if I do this thing, it'll make me resilient." We also have to think about what does that actually mean? What is the consequence of being more resilient? What will that enable me to do? Whether that's feeling happier, feeling calmer, a lot of people talk about the idea of being more productive which is an interesting one, but possibly dangerous because it starts to get into this idea of success and potentially into the driver zone. But this idea that we have the ability to effectively retrain our brains by accepting that it is important to look after ourselves and there is an actual consequence that comes as a result of that and we can share that with other people as well - I think that helps us take a bit of ownership over looking after ourselves and stepping away from guilt and self-indulgence and all of these things that we're so conditioned to do.

Yeah, I'm just noticing in what you're saying that part of the doing nothing idea for me feels as if it's tied up with with money. Actually when we say we're doing nothing, very often that means we're not working. We're not earning money. We're not doing something that has a financial consequence. And a lot of the things that we do when we say we're doing nothing like the ones you talked about, having a bath, you know, hanging out with your dog, making a nice meal, whatever it might be - they don't necessarily cost money either. They're sort of outside of that whole transactional world, and maybe we maybe we need to remember to value those things that are not based in a in a money-orientated framework.

Absolutely. But it's hard, we're fighting against so much counter-narrative in that respect. You know, the number of adverts we see everyday, it's no surprise that part of our brain is hardwired to think that economic activity is meaningful and other stuff is not. But again, it's one of those things, as soon as you shine a light on it it disappears because it's ludicrous and we all know that there are these kind of intrinsic human things that are actually fundamental and money and all of this stuff is incredibly important, but it's a means to an end and nothing else. And I think it's how we start challenging that, because unless we actually take responsibility and talk about it with other people, those ideas aren't going to get challenged and yeah, like you say, we will automatically slip back into patterns of things that have this external value, whether it's money or anything else, feel like they should take priority because that's what we're told.

Which brings us back beautifully, actually, to the subject of community. We talked about how difficult it is to quantify the benefits of being in community of giving and receiving as part of a group of people, and a lot of those community activities cost absolutely nothing, but they bring huge benefits, as you know better than anyone I'm sure. So before we finish, Peter, I'd like to ask you what would your *Little Challenge* be?

My *Little Challenge* would be to say thank you to somebody. So this is something that I think ties into all of these ideas around communication, community. We're so unused to reaching out to people and offering gratitude because it feels like quite a scary thing to do and often we feel like we need to hide behind things and have permission, but we have the permission to do that all the time. So my *Little Challenge* is literally just find someone and say thank you to them for something that they have done and how it has impacted you. It can be a big thing, it can be a small thing, it could be somebody you know already, it could be someone you've never met before - but just starting to express the impact that something they have done has had on you really starts to challenge these ideas. And again it's celebrating something that probably doesn't have anything to do with money. It's practising this kind of language of, "Actually, this has had a really positive impact on me". And it's an incredibly lovely thing to do. It will make the other person feel amazing. It'll probably make you feel pretty good. And it takes five seconds of your time.

I love that. So a daily thank you to somebody could be life-changing. Peter, thank you so much for joining me. Where can people find out more about the work that you're doing and about you in general?

Well I'm on Twitter @peterlefort and you can find loads of information at edenprojectcommunities.com. You can get involved, come to events, there's little how-to guides and stories about things that other people are doing in their

communities. If you need a dose of inspiration and celebration in your life, spend five minutes there and I guarantee you'll find it.

That sounds fantastic. I've so enjoyed talking with you. So my thank you for the day is to you - thank you, Peter!

Thank you, that really means a lot and thank you so much for having me. It's a real pleasure.