

LOVE IN A F\*CKED UP WORLD PODCAST  
EP10 KELLY HAYES

Dean: I'm Dean Spade. Welcome to Love in a F\*cked Up World the podcast, where we talk about how to build and sustain strong connections with each other because our movements are made of our relationships and are only as strong as they are.

Thank you to everyone who's been supporting this podcast. I just got back from a UK book tour where I got to meet listeners in cities like Manchester, Glasgow, Edinburgh, and London.

It was really fun. It was amazing to be able to connect around these issues and topics with people who are thinking a lot about relationships and community building. If you haven't already, I hope you'll join our Patreon, where we're having a lot of very juicy conversations with each other about these themes and topics.

We love making this podcast and we really appreciate the support that's coming in through Patreon to help us keep it going. This episode features an interview with someone I knew I wanted to have on the podcast since the very beginning: Kelly Hayes. I have so much admiration for Kelly's writing, podcasting, organizing, and the way Kelly shows up as a [00:01:00] friend.

Kelly has been an organizer and journalist based in Chicago working on really important things for decades, and she's also, of course, the co-author with Mariame Kaba of the book Let This Radicalize You. And Kelly has a new book out, which is an edited collection called Read This When Things Fall Apart that I cannot recommend highly enough.

It just so happens that we ended up having this interview at a time that's very intense right now in Chicago as people resist ICE and this sort of federal invasion of fascism there. And so we wanted to rush this episode out. You'll hear more about Kelly's work in the course of the interview, and I hope you'll check out the links to her many amazing projects in the show notes.

Kelly, thank you so much for being on the podcast. You are one of our, like for our whole team, you're like one of our role models for what it is to make a useful podcast for our people in these times. So it's very special to get to interview you. Thank you for being part of it.

Kelly: Oh, thank you for having me, Dean, and that, that's so beautiful to hear.

Dean: I [00:02:00] remember walking with you in the woods right after the last presidential election, and I was just beginning to do some recording for this podcast. Just so many of the themes we were talking about together at that time, and in the longer course of knowing each

other, make me feel very eager to interview you for this specific podcast about our movements through a relationship lens. And yeah, I'm glad we got here. And the place I really wanna start is just, I think people who read your work and listen to your podcast and learn from you, see that your work for resistance is very fierce and generous and like very consistent over a long time. And I think a lot of people these days are struggling to show up, you know, struggling for how to plug in, how to continue even when there's like a lot of setbacks and conflicts in the work, and there's a lot of really justified like fear.

And I was wondering if you would talk about what drives you? Like what do you think fuels your persistence over the [00:03:00] long haul and with the many kinds of work you do? Like what is keeping you going?

Kelly: Thank you for that question. I can tell you in the context of what's happening right now in my city, that resistance is the one thing that makes me feel hopeful and enlivened amid all the terrible shit that's happening.

Chicago has been invaded by federal agents who are snatching our neighbors, kidnapping beloved members of our communities while they work, while they drop their children off at school, while they sleep in their beds. Our city is being terrorized by men with guns who commit violence recreationally and to create content for their fascist Instagram reels.

People are living in fear of being disappeared into this country's deportation machine, and people who are acting against that violence have been brutalized, tear gassed, shot with so-called less lethal munitions, and two people have been [00:04:00] shot with live ammunition. Silverio Villegas Gonzalez was a father just trying to go about his day and ICE killed him.

This is a terrible time and what drives me right now is that getting out there protesting, doing ICE patrols, participating in rapid response, that's where hope resides. It's where hope is made. It's what actually makes me feel better amid all of this ugliness. Of course I wanna live my values and to move from a moral place and defend my neighbors, but I'm not just moved by a sense of obligation in this moment.

I am also moved to act because simply sitting and stewing in my awareness of what's happening is toxic for my soul. I need to be around people who are trying to create safety and freedom for one another. I need to be with people who remind me that there is more to life than the evil that is unfolding around me.

Recently [00:05:00] in my community, in the Rogers Park neighborhood of Chicago, there was a day when ICE was hitting the neighborhood hard

and there were actually hundreds of us in the streets responding. With every alert I responded to I would arrive at a location and find people already there, or people arriving right behind me. Sometimes people I had known for years, but also a lot of people I had never met. Each and every one of those people gave me hope, and I needed that hope. However, we can engage with each other in this moment the work of trying is going to feel better than sitting alone together in the glow of our screens reacting.

I think that kind of connectivity and isolation is killing us, honestly.

Dean: Yeah, and when, when you say that, I think about two things. One, that sometimes when people are having a hard time, they're like, oh, I should retreat. Like the story of like kind of mainstream self-care is like I should retreat, do therapy or do meditation [00:06:00] or go do...you know, when a lot of what we're suffering from is isolation. So that actually moving towards others, which can feel counterintuitive in like an antisocial society where we also feel afraid of other people sometimes or like afraid of social interactions, but actually feeling like we're part of something.

And then this, the other piece of it is like having initiative, feeling like we're not just, we don't have to just wait and hope it gets better, but that we can be part of caring for each other. It's not always like relaxing, like it's probably hard being on your feet all day and it's cold out or all the things that do come with doing things in our communities, but there's actually a great relief in being initiating with others. And also not being alone in it, as you're saying. I really appreciate that.

When we were together, I think in the fall, early fall of 2024 at the Portal Project Conference, I heard you speak very powerfully about something that I have repeated so many times and thought about so many times since I heard you say it, about how our movements need spaces where people can share more about their emotional states and how they're doing [00:07:00] and what is sacred to them.

And you talked about this Understory Project that you're part of. And like how hard it is when we're all going to meetings that have like these packed agendas and there's not actually like a time to be human or relational in those meetings 'cause we're like behind, we've gotta get out the next meal or newsletter or you know, action.

And I loved what you shared about what you were observing and I wondered if you would talk about that here. I think it's, there's no one who I've heard say it in the way that you are. And the Understory gathering seems like really unique and also replicable. So I'm curious if you would talk more about it.

Kelly: Absolutely. I can tell you what I experienced this past Sunday when I was out on ICE Patrol because ICE was hitting our area again. And I am, as you said, the co-facilitator of Understory, a spiritual and emotional support group for activists. I co-organized that with Tanuja Jagernauth, and Tanuja was gonna cover for me that day because I was on the ground responding to alerts and just felt like there was too much happening for me to make it to the group that day.

I had been out there for [00:08:00] hours and I wanted to stay focused on what I was doing. Then something happened about an hour before the group met. Someone close to me said something that pissed me off, and suddenly I found that I did not have the words or the ability to respond to it in a way that was going to end well.

All I had to offer in that moment was escalation, because that's all my body and mind wanted to do. Why did I have nothing else to offer? Possibly because I was overflowing with hurt and rage because my neighbors were being taken, because my fellow volunteers were being threatened and having guns pointed at them. Because most of the time when we arrive at a scene where ICE has been present, the most we can do is document the abduction, or comfort whoever was harassed or witnessed violence. I had so much hurt and outrage coursing through me, and bitching out the people who made me feel that way was not an immediate option.

So here I had in front of me this person [00:09:00] I care about who I was legitimately and reasonably upset with, but who I could not have a reasonable conversation with. So I decided that I needed to go ahead and get my ass to Understory. Uh, not because Tanuja couldn't hold it down without me, but because I needed to be there for my own sake to re-regulate, to ground myself.

And I am really glad I did. It was a beautiful session and I came out of it in a completely different place emotionally. And I was able to have a tough conversation with the person who had upset me and work through it in a way that was reasonable and made sense. I think a lot of people need that kind of space for adjustment and reflection, and for the most part, I don't think our movements are making that space.

And I think we've all lived the consequences of that in meetings where trauma responses are ricocheting around the room. We need space to be human together and to expand our humanity together, as Mariame Kaba recently said.

Dean: Will you [00:10:00] say a little bit about how the facilitation works in Understory? And if you want to, like anything about what being in the space did to shift things for you when you were in that heightened state.

Kelly: So we begin each session if we have new people, we're a little

more thorough about going over our community agreements. If we don't have anyone new, we just run some highlights for people, reminders of how we approach each other in this space, starting with compassion and such. Then we do a drop-in activity.

Tanuja, who has a background as a healer, usually leads that. We do some breathing together, maybe a stretch, something to help ease us in. And then we do a check-in. And the check-in question is usually just some variation of, how are you doing? And I've heard from so many people who participated in this space that this is the only time they get asked this question in a given week where someone actually wants an honest answer.

We create space for people to air whatever it is that they need to air. If there's something that's hurting [00:11:00] them, that they're grieving, if something that's frustrating them, something that they're proud of or joyful about, we just air it all out and people have the option of doing that out loud or in the chat.

And after we've taken some time to do that, we approach a reading together. It's usually just a short excerpt 'cause we don't wanna give people homework. This past week, it was a couple of paragraphs from a piece I had written about the exhaustion of this moment in Chicago and about what I was thinking and feeling as a person who is trying to keep up with doing some good in this time and place.

And we read that out loud and we drop it in the chat. Then we give people a couple of minutes to sit with it and think about it and think what it brings up for them or where it can help us go. And we discuss. And that goes on for a while. And then we, our final section is on hope, grief, and intention. We take a couple of minutes to contemplate what hope, grief, or intention we're [00:12:00] carrying with us into the new week.

And folks are invited after a moment of reflection to either share that out loud, write it in the chat, or simply take the time to journal and keep reflecting on this idea. And we wrap with announcements and usually a one word checkout. And most of the time I find that I and other people leave the space feeling a lot better than when we entered it because we really needed that space to share and to decompress and to re-regulate.

Dean: I'm just thinking about how when I've been in like grief support groups or 12-step meetings or like any kind of group, just having other people be vulnerable and expressive can sometimes help me feel what I'm feeling that I've maybe been suppressing. And sometimes I can feel some of their feelings and get more access to myself or regulate because the group is all paying attention at the same time. Like I really love learning about the Understory because there's not a ton of groups that [00:13:00] are for that, that are in our movement. That

are, you know, so yeah, you could go to a 12-step meeting or you could go to a group therapy or something. But like it can be so helpful to be around other people who are politicized and coping with the realities that we are all acknowledging that a lot of people might, you know, not be acknowledging or have the same vulnerability to, or investment in.

It just, it's beautiful. I have one more kind of detailed question. Is there a timer for like when the initial check-ins, like is there a certain amount of time people are supposed to check in? Like I'm just trying to get the vibe of the meeting in case anyone wants to try to create their own?

Kelly: No, we don't do timers.

Sometimes people have a lot to say and we go with it. You know, I think that we have shared values in the space and the space is based in relationships. Folks have occasionally asked me, you know, messaged me 'cause they've heard me talk about it at some event or something, and they're like, can I join? And we've kept all of the invitations really relationship based.

It's like if you have a connection to someone in the group, you can be invited into the group. Which has kept us relatively small, because you know, we're not trying to create like a megachurch of [00:14:00] social justice. We want something grounded in relationships and I think that keeps it easier to set expectations in the room that make sense to people and make room for people when maybe they need a little more time or there's something going on.

What we're very open to though, Tanuja and I, is to talking to people who want to create their own version of this. I've done that several times. I'm always happy to share with people like what our process looks like and what we've learned. And to really talk with folks about the fact that, yes, it would be great if there were already a thing and we could all just access that thing, but we don't all need the same cookie cutter things.

You know, it's like these folks, we share abolitionist politics. Many of us come from the same lineages of organizing. Many of us have had shared experiences in the streets. And so our needs may not be the same as the needs of another community. And you know, what's sacred to us, 'cause that's really what we're getting at the heart of here, might be different. It might be named or identified differently.

The concept [00:15:00] of the Understory, what it describes is the space beneath the tree canopy in a forest, this unseen space of life and decomposition and renewal where like life is constantly happening, but much of it is unseen. So we think of Understory as being a place for people who are that to the movement, who are not people holding

the big banner in the street necessarily, but people who are constantly living life and learning lessons and breaking in different ways and having to heal and reform themselves.

Those people coming together to do some of that work of healing and survival and processing together. Even in a forest, those ecosystems are gonna vary so wildly across the terrain. So it's about figuring out what does that support system look like for the people in your corner of the Understory.

Dean: It's interesting that when I heard the term Understory, I also thought of it as like each of us has like the front facing [00:16:00] stuff we are bringing to the agenda in the meeting, or we're bringing you know, that you're bringing on your podcast or in your writing. Or like all the things we're all bringing that might be the headline. And then there's the Understory of how we reproduce ourselves to get there. And like, you know, also I'm caring for a loved one, or also I'm dealing with pain or also I'm, you know, all the things.

Or also I was really activated at the event because of this part of my history, you know? And like a place to like, it's so powerful to me that that stuff is going to come out sideways if we don't give it airtime. And I love the idea of people doing their own. And also it's making me think of you and Miriam writing in your wonderful book *Let This Radicalize You* about pedestal-ing and about how when I think about choosing to create groups like this through relationships, it also might help it not be like, "Ooh, I'm going to like this group, the Kelly Hayes Group, and I've listened to Kelly's podcast and now I get there and I'm disappointed by something. How can it be imperfect?!" And I have to tear Kelly down.

Like the ways in which making things more intimate and generated through relationships can sometimes keep us on a more like realistic level, and not go into the pedestalizing and then the [00:17:00] disappointment cycle that can come when something like, that thing preexists me and I've got an expectation on it, you know.

So, yeah. I like love the idea of you all encouraging people to do their own and, and to feed it with whatever's true for them and their friends and connections. Yeah. Beautiful.

Kelly: Yeah, thank you for that. I really appreciate that read on it.

Dean: Yeah. I, your work documents so carefully and actively in ways that are so helpful to us, like what these attacks on our communities are like. And in my opinion, you're like, you've also been very prescient about what is coming. Like you're a pattern noticer who's helped me anticipate things I wouldn't have anticipated without your guidance. And so anyway, you're very aware of these ongoing attacks in our communities from your day-to-day work in the streets, and also

your long study of domination and resistance.

And I'm curious if you would speak to like how. We hold our relationships together in the face of these ongoing attacks in our [00:18:00] communities that are, you know, very persistent. And I'm thinking about what people are experiencing in Chicago right now, or more broadly, like how do we stick together?

Kelly: I really appreciate this question.

You know, there's such a spectrum of experience in terms of what people are up against right now, in terms of people facing the threat of abduction or being on the front lines of protest or doing the exhausting work of rapid response or being in one of the most heavily targeted neighborhoods, which I wanna acknowledge, I am not. There are no safe zones in Chicago right now, but our friends in areas like Pilsen and Little Village are being battered so much harder than folks in my area. Some folks are also dealing with the fear and the stress of facing charges for taking moral actions during this time. So amid all of that complexity, I don't wanna be too prescriptive, but I do want to name some things.

The first is that it's easy for me to neglect the people I care about most in times like these, that I have to be [00:19:00] very intentional about doing otherwise. When I'm with people listening to them talk about their ideas or their problems, sometimes my mind is somewhere else, whether I'm deconstructing my last mistake or imagining what I would do differently next time, or rethinking some logistical issue or worrying about which text thread is making my phone buzz in my pocket.

Maybe I'm feeling guilty because I feel like I should be doing something else right now. It can be hard to give people our full attention, and it's easy to forget to ask the most obvious questions about how someone's doing or to validate people in the ways they need to be validated in that moment. For me, I think it's important to be honest with people when I see myself falling short in those ways. To apologize for what I'm getting wrong. And when I can, to double down on what I ought to be giving people in those moments, whether it's affirmation or just really [00:20:00] listening to what they're saying and being there for them. I try to be honest about my capacity and not make plans I'm going to have to cancel, or over promise. But these were unpredictable times, so extending each other some grace is also important right now.

I appreciate my friends who have been understanding about the fact that I am not fully myself right now, because how can any of us function as we normally would right now? A lot of my friends are dealing with that too. So I think keeping those lines of communication open, starting with compassion, and not shying away from naming that

we are not showing up in the ways that we want to, I think those things are really important.

I also wanna name that some of the worst moments I've seen good organizers have when relationships and even organizations have cracked and turned to dust, have happened because people didn't know when to step away and take care of themselves. Everything feels like an [00:21:00] emergency. Maybe everything is an emergency. So they just keep pushing themselves until they're running on stubbornness and stress hormones and nothing else. And you can do that for a while and maybe get lucky and not break anything. But the longer you stay at the wheel in that condition, the more likely a crash becomes.

Someone says the wrong thing or a neutral thing that hits you the wrong way. Something doesn't go as planned, and suddenly you find yourself responding to a complex human interaction with fight or flight reflexes. You don't have access neurologically to long-term strategic thinking, or maybe even to your values. You just react, and if something hurts, you swing back. Things get broken.

So when we get to that point, when we feel nothing but empty and aching, and every perceived slight and disappointment feels like a major gut punch, the responsible thing to do isn't to keep going until something [00:22:00] breaks. The responsible thing to do for me and in my experience, is to step away. Get some rest and get some healing.

Whether that means visiting a drop in space, going to a support group, spending time with friends, connecting with nature, sleeping, whatever it is, it may feel like there's no time or space for that. But trust me, there is going to be no time or space for what needs to be done when we have shattered our relationships or blown up our group over conflicts and situations that we just weren't emotionally equipped to confront.

Dean: Yeah, I mean I think people are hesitant to talk about it in our culture 'cause we valorize overwork so much. But like work addiction is a real thing. And you don't have to use an addiction model, but having an imbalanced relationship to work is a very normal thing in a society that does valorize work too much.

And maybe when we see it in people who are working for profit-y things it seems so obviously dysfunctional and wow, that person's, you know, working from their [00:23:00] hospital bed after they just had heart surgery. It's kind of the like classic image. But I think what it looks like in organizers is really complicated because we have the best justification ever, which is that yeah, the unmet needs are outrageous.

And it can cause us to not listen to feedback from our loved ones. And I've done this, 'cause you've got the best justification ever. You're

like, "are you kidding me? My doing this is why you like me anyway. This is who I am. This is vital to the world. This is what we most believe in. How could you judge me for doing too much of it?"

And then I think the pattern I've seen (I've done a lot to try to address this pattern in myself), I've seen it go unaddressed in beloved, brilliant people who've become more and more isolated. And so now they have almost no personal relationships that are really places of care and feedback, and it gets to be, they just have organizing relationships where they're like bossing people around or you know, like in limited roles, in terms of vulnerability. And it can be kind of a loop where you feel worse and worse. You act worse maybe in your intimate relationships. You feel ashamed, you back off, you feel judged when [00:24:00] people give feedback. I guess there's a whole thing there that I, you know, I, I have used the 12-step program Workaholics Anonymous (for all of its limitations – it doesn't have an analysis of capitalism or anything), but I just wanna put that out there for people listening. Like if you're feeling like your relationship to the work is imbalanced. And of course there's no sense that there'd be some easy balance 'cause this is an impossible situation. But like it can be useful to try to actually ask, "how do I feel when I'm doing this work?" You know, like "where is vulnerability right now? Where is rest?"

Like for me, there's always a question, is self hatred fueling this? I have to do more 'cause I don't deserve to exist. Is that somewhere in the background? You know, like what are the motivations when I'm doing this work right now? Is it coming out of joy, compassion, love for other people and the planet? Or is it coming at some point out of a tighter place that's not loving myself?

I think these questions, they can be really hard. It's hard to even notice our motivations when we're in a panicky place, but I just wanna echo, like the thing you're describing. I think a lot of the conflict in our movement groups [00:25:00] often comes out of people getting to those states and not being able to be responsive to themselves and others. It's hard.

Kelly: Absolutely.

Dean: So hard. Speaking of that, everywhere I go, people tell me so many stories about the intractable conflicts happening in their communities, in their community groups. And you've been at this a long time. I'm curious if you would share some of your observations about common patterns of conflict that you're seeing in movement spaces.

We've talked about this some together before and I just, I think you've seen a lot and you've supported a lot of people who are in the midst of conflicts in groups. And I'm just curious if you would share patterns you're seeing and what you're noticing helps.

Kelly: I think one of the biggest problems I see recurringly is that people don't plan for conflict. Because when you don't have a plan or agreements around how to resolve conflict in a group, you know, what kicks in when someone says or does something that hurts or disappoints us? The same reflexes and responses that have been [00:26:00] ingrained in us around conflict in this society, and those are all bad. We want to punish people or to just not have to deal with them anymore.

We focus on establishing innocence or guilt, and we don't want to embrace any semblance of our accountability for what might have been our part in the conflict, because many of us come from environments where admissions of responsibility were only met with punishment. When we don't establish our own norms that are based in our values, the ugliness of our individualist carceral society fills the void.

That's why when I put together a worksheet called 'Mapping Community Defense, and Care in Our Neighborhoods' to help people and groups prepare for the federal invasion of our city, I included a section on knowing how your group will address conflict during this crisis. I almost didn't include that, but my friend Tanuja reminded me of how many groups we had seen blow up over not having a plan for conflict. And [00:27:00] I said, you're right.

So it's in there because we're not going to do anything effectively together unless we plan together around how we are going to address moments when people experience harm or disappoint each other. Because we are all human, and those moments will happen. We are so socially de-skilled.

We don't know how to talk to each other. We don't know how to be together. A lot of what we're seeing is just the product of that, of just how horribly isolated we all are. And feeling our way past that is gonna be real messy. It's gonna be continuously messy. There are a lot of great tools out there, like the 'In It Together Toolkit', and like your recent book, that can help us think through what it means to be in right relationship, what values we actually share, and how we can move through conflicts in ways that actually reflect those values.

I think one of the first things I think about when assessing the health of a group with respect to conflict (and this is [00:28:00] something I learned from the 'In It Together Toolkit' and the folks who made it), was when you get upset with someone, do you go to them? Or do you go talk to someone else about them? And, and if we are in a situation where we're constantly kind of running for the teacher, or running to gossip or to vent, and cannot approach each other and say in a good way, like, "Hey, that didn't feel right, can we talk about that?" If we don't have a practice around how we talk to each other, around how we address when things go wrong, we're going to just create

these massive drama scenarios again and again, and they're gonna get ugly. And a lot of things don't have to get ugly.

You know, sometimes people mess up in ways that like, "this is going to be a big deal". But a lot of things get inflated to that degree that don't have to function that way if we can just learn to relate to each other better. And if we can have a sort of go-to set of ways that we handle things, and we [00:29:00] all know that this is how we handle things when problems come up.

Dean: I've been talking to a lot of groups about having a litany that you say at the beginning of your meeting and at the end that's just like "we believe in direct feedback and we know that we're all learning in public together, and it's okay to make mistakes and we believe in repair." And even though those are just words, that's so countercultural that I do think it could help. And then I can like, then maybe we can ride it a little bit. Like, "oh, you know how we say that thing in our meeting, Kelly? Well, I guess I wanted to try, uh, when you're late, it felt like..." You know? Like just giving each other some little roads, even if it's awkward to do the new thing. And I see the exact same thing you're describing that most people talk to everybody but the person that they feel this way about.

The other thing I see a lot is that when I come in and I'm venting at you about how frustrated I am about the meeting and about somebody else, then you don't keep that confidential, right? Like the other thing we're bad at our, in our movement. So when someone's venting to you, just assume it's confidential. Unless they tell you to go tell someone else, don't. 'cause just then there's a whole ripple in the, in the [00:30:00] group: are Kelly and Dean mad at each other? And you know, it's like, you know what I mean?

And I can also be like, "Hey, have you told them? I think they might be, it might be worth telling them", you know? Just we can just remind each other to try direct feedback. We may or may not do it. The person may or may not take it well, but like the more we can have the most basic agreement to try to be direct and to try not to talk about each other behind our backs, unless it's a real 'vent' and it's confidential and it's just to like help me clear my mind and get my thoughts together about my next action. You know, I think that those are such big things, and I love this idea about preparing.

You know, I love when people who are in love are talking about how they wanna treat each other when they break up. Like talk about it now while you're in love. Or roommates talking at the beginning of your roommate-ship about how you're gonna deal with conflict as things come up in the house. Hope and Ciro and I and I have a meeting next week to talk about like, how do we wanna deal with it if we have disagreements in the podcast? Like how do we wanna be with each other?

Right now we're in love, we love making this new podcast, but like we're in a group together. We might later disagree, or somebody might not be able to work on the podcast anymore, and it's just like that [00:31:00] move is, it's not a downer. It's like actually such a connector, such a loving move of being like, yeah, we might later get into conflict because that's a hundred percent of the time what happens when you do things you care about with others, which is a great thing to be doing, you know?

Kelly: Absolutely. And I just also wanna encourage folks, you know, it's okay if you need to go to someone to say, "is my reaction to what this situation is disproportionate? Am I being reasonable?" Like having touchstones isn't the same as just gossiping or talking shit about people.

But if you do that, I think be open to a reframe, you know? And if you're someone somebody goes to for that, be open to reframing and don't feel like you just have to mirror their emotions, or be like, "oh yeah, fuck that person. Obviously they're the worst person for having upset you."

You know, I can think of a time not too long ago when I went to a dear friend of mine who's one of my touchstones, and I was like, "isn't this other person like being so fucking ridiculous, and how dare they?" [00:32:00] And they were like, "you know what? When you said the thing that you're interpreting as having, like you drew a line that was then crossed, you could have come across as joking". And like just completely reframed to me the conversation, and how like it might have seemed like I was engaging with a back and forth and being playful, whereas I perceived myself as being serious. And I was like, oh yeah, and, and maybe I was trying to soften what I was saying a bit in a way that might've come across as, you know, me just being funny.

And so it's on me to go back to this person and say like, "you know what? I had a legitimate feeling about that thing, and maybe I didn't fully express that, but I really did have a legitimate feeling about that and I wanna talk about it". And we worked through it in no time. It was just I needed somebody outside of it to tell me that my reaction might not be the most balanced one. Sometimes we need that.

So, you know, be open to hearing that, and be open to telling people who trust you that. They trust you. You know, like part of how we earn people's trust and deserve people's trust is by telling them the [00:33:00] truth.

Dean: Yeah. And sometimes I think there can be a thing, like if I'm really upset from an interaction I have, and I'm not ready to talk to that person, and I come and talk to you and you hear all my upset, and I get to kind of have the wave of emotion with a trusted person, that person's like, "that sounds hard." I can, you know, they're with me in

the pain a bit. And then maybe I can come down to a little bit of what's the kind of rightsized action? What would I like to say to the person who I was upset with? Because I'm getting some support from a friend. And so I think we can help people towards rightsized action by also like when we're listening, like, "am I really activated? Am I about to kind of join into a revenge narrative with them?" Or "am I about to minimize their experience?" Like when I'm the listener, what's happening for me and how can I remember my intention to help the person feel heard and find a values-aligned action that's rightsized.

And so being honest, like you're saying, like being honest and trustworthy in that way. Noticing my, if I'm getting into a reactivity, 'cause you know, sometimes when someone's upset in front of us, we get upset too. We're just animals, you know? And I [00:34:00] think sometimes in our communities that can turn into a, like, let's join a campaign of revenge together against someone else we love.

So one of the things I constantly refer to is your set of episodes about AI, your podcast episodes. I've given, I've sent them links to those, to so many people.

And it was really those "Movement Memos" podcasts where I first started trying to learn about what AI is, which now seems like an eternity ago because AI is moving so quickly. And how to understand its role in this moment, who's behind it and what we should anticipate. And lately you've been covering more about the relationships people are having with Chat GPT. And I've recently directed a friend to your work because my friend was distressed, having seen an advertising for the "Friend" wearable AI product.

And I wonder if you would wanna talk a bit about kind of the emotional and relational context in which these products and these relationships with AI are appearing, and what you've observed, and what you want us all to be thinking about as these technologies roll out.

Kelly: Thank you for this question. This technology is so dangerous, [00:35:00] not for any of the reasons that tech billionaires have described, like talking about it taking over the world or turning us all into paperclips or whatever, but because it furthers dehumanization during extremely dehumanizing fascistic times. It alienates us from each other, and our alienation is already killing us. People don't know how to turn to each other. People get angry with me and Mariame all the time for telling them that to make change, they have to build relationships with other people, because the expectation that they should have to build social bonds is so unthinkable to them.

I have heard over and over from people that people have disappointed them and a person in their position shouldn't be expected to engage

with people or trust people. More and more young people don't have friends. This is all so dangerous. And I wanna name that I understand how people have arrived at these states of alienation, [00:36:00] and that I am not blaming people for feeling wronged, isolated or alone, or for being afraid to engage with or trust other human beings.

I have been there. I know what that feels like. I also know that we are social creatures who were never meant to survive alone, and who don't have the capacity to survive alone, and certainly do not have the capacity to get free or defeat fascism from a place of isolation. We have to take risks. And human relationships are the first-line risk that we all have to take in order to have any hope of changing our collective conditions.

We have to pool our capacities and have shared commitments. This is fundamental stuff. But so many of our people have been isolated and socially de-skilled by the norms of internet culture, by the constraints of their schedules under capitalism, and by the abusive or inaccessible conditions they've [00:37:00] experienced.

We also haven't had a sufficient focus on base building over the last decade and a half. So we haven't really done the skill building people need to counter these trends. And amid all of this, we have the rise of these products that give us an artificial shoulder to cry on, an artificial sounding board, an artificial "friend" who will listen to us talk about the problems we're sure no one else wants to hear about. I have heard from a number of disabled people that they talk to Chat GPT all the time about their symptoms, their medications, and their supplements, because they feel like, they don't feel like anyone in their life really wants to hear about these things to the extent that they need to talk about them.

And that just gives you a sense of the vulnerabilities that have been created in this society, and how the people who aren't getting the support they need are poised to fall into greater isolation, because the needs that might compel us to reach for each other now have [00:38:00] these digital substitutions. And we have already seen how horribly wrong this can go with these chat bots, counseling people to kill themselves, encouraging delusions, and developing patterns of interaction that become a form of addiction, sometimes ruining people's real world relationships, and even getting people killed.

We're talking about the intentional cultivation of a dependency. I think this is the end game of capitalist alienation. AI is also simultaneously tearing at the fabric of our shared reality by automating the production of misinformation at an unthinkable scale. We're talking about a fire hose of bullshit on every corner running 24/7. And the goal isn't to create some coherent alternative narrative that replaces the truth, but to contaminate the flow of information so much that the truth becomes indistinguishable from right wing

[00:39:00] hoaxes, myths and lies. A lot of people already default to what they believe when confronted with facts that don't match that narrative.

We are talking about a campaign being waged by fascists to make facts irrelevant and unrecognizable. They don't want you to be able to pick the truth out of a lineup. And so we also have to recognize that the truth is a front of struggle, and one that we cannot afford to lose. And on that front AI is a weapon of mass destruction.

Dean: God, your clarity about it is so helpful to me, as much as I like feel scared hearing this, of course.

A lot of your recent coverage that I also refer to frequently and point people to, directs us to the need for community defense and underground action, like what you've been describing in terms of defending our communities against ICE abductions.

I wonder if you could talk a bit about what kinds of relationships we need in our lives to like do this kind of risky work? What kinds of relational [00:40:00] skills? And what kinds of relationships to ourselves we need to do bold rule breaking work together?

Kelly: I think that we need to be clear about the different modes of work that are needed right now. There's some work that has to happen out in the open and that needs to happen very quickly, that honestly cannot move at the speed of trust. I was recently at a big meeting with a lot of organizers from around the city, and I remember sort of folks acknowledging in the room that a lot of folks here have beefs with each other and have unresolved conflicts. And that given the conversation that we needed to have that night, this was probably a good sign, because if everyone in the room was on the same page, we wouldn't have enough people in the room to do what we need to do next.

So there are spaces in which we're not gonna know everybody, or we're maybe gonna know people and have reservations about them, and we need to just move in the same direction anyway. [00:41:00] You know, there are moments when you have to put your quarrels aside and your qualms aside and move fast.

Then there is another mode of work that has to happen painstakingly and with a lot of trust, and maybe with some layers of access in terms of how much information people carry based on how long or how deeply they've been involved. And to be clear, I am not just talking about criminalized work here because I think we need this level of care with some things that aren't criminalized yet, but could be in a short time. Or simply could lead to people being targeted for extreme repression or violence whether that thing is ever technically illegal or not. It's hard to talk about a thing without actually talking about a thing, and we obviously need to take care in terms of what we say in

public right now. But I will say when it comes to sensitive work, especially where sensitive information gets handled, building trust is deeply important. Vetting is important. We have to [00:42:00] remember that trust is also a safety practice.

I remember years ago when I was working with a team on a direct action that we were going to deploy, where some of us were definitely going to get arrested. A team member came to me a few days beforehand and told me she was experiencing a mental health crisis. She was worried about what it would be like being arrested and being in jail in that condition. I was so grateful that she knew she could come to me, and was able to talk and feel seen. And I was able to go back to the group and explain that some things had changed and we needed to regroup and make some adjustments without revealing anything that person didn't want revealed in the larger space. And we made our adjustments and we adapted and it worked out. That person took a different meaningful role in the action, and they were supported in the ways that they needed to be.

Now, what if this person hadn't felt safe coming to me? What if someone had a substance use issue [00:43:00] that could affect the work or make them vulnerable and they didn't feel safe telling anyone? The more risk we're taking on, the more we need to be able to trust each other. There's an intimacy involved in taking continuous risks together. We have to know how to support each other, and we have to know how to keep each other alive.

Justice work takes a toll. And higher stakes work takes a higher toll. So I would encourage people to think about how they are building trust in addition to all of the other important considerations about digital security or not doing certain things digitally at all, think about the fact that you are human beings and that your vulnerabilities become shared vulnerabilities. So you're going to need to build trust and mutual support.

Dean: Yeah, there's something so hard about acknowledging that we each have lifelong work to do to become more and more trustworthy. And so it involves things like, asking for help makes us more [00:44:00] trustworthy. Being able to know, oh, I need to say when I'm not sure if I can do something, or when I'm struggling, or like knowing what our struggle points are around honesty with ourselves and others. Like just like doing this kind of self inquiry.

I think there can be a move in our culture like I wanna be already done. I wanna show everybody that I'm already good. I've got it all worked out. But it's actually more trustworthy to be curious. Where do I not have it worked out? Where am I a little sketchy? Like when I get tired in this way, I do this thing. Ooh, yikes. It sometimes turns out not that great for people who love me or not that great for people who are relying on me. Just like being able to, to engage with each other

a little more honestly, and know that every single person is imperfect and working on stuff. And starting from that baseline can make it more possible to do more bold and secure work together.

'Cause we've, we're being more transparent with the people we're taking a risk with potentially, or sharing important information with potentially. But it's really countercultural [00:45:00] to recognize that we are all working to become more trustworthy instead of just, I've already got it, you know.

Kelly: You know, it was groundbreaking for me when I came to understand that patience was a practice and not a feeling.

This capitalist, individualist society really dupes us into believing that we either are or aren't something. And so instead of trying to practice that quality that we wanna have, we're in these defensive modes where we're trying to depict ourselves as "No, no. I, I am trustworthy. I am brave. I am good." Instead of thinking about what does it mean to do good in concert with other people? How can I do good instead of fixating on whether or not I am brave? It's like, well, where do I find courage? Where can I practice courage? Oh, it turns out it's easier to practice courage in concert with other people. Maybe I'll do that then, you know. What does it mean to be trustworthy? What does this person need from me? [00:46:00] Revisiting these things all the time, absolutely. Because we are all flawed people and none of this is as innate as we're told to expect it to be. You know, we're constantly remaking ourselves in the act of doing, in the act of being.

Dean: So I would love it if you'd be willing to talk about your new book Read This When Things Fall Apart. What inspired the book? What was it like to put it together, and what are you hoping this book will do for our communities?

Kelly: Well, this book was inspired by an awareness of our political trajectory and how desperate things have become for so many people here in the US and around the world.

My book with Mariame Kaba, Let This Radicalize You, was written for people who were newly entering the fray of organizing. And we're honored that longtime organizers also found it useful. But what we had set out to do with that book was to write a book we wished had existed when we were new to movement work.

With Read This When Things Fall Apart, [00:47:00] I had this idea that it might be helpful to create a sort of bundle of letters for people who were deep in the mess and the fight. People who were encountering things that inevitably go wrong in movement spaces, or that we know are going to keep happening because of the nature of this political moment.

In the beginning I thought it might be a zine. So I reached out to some friends and asked first, is this a good idea? And when people said that it was, I asked, who wants to do this with me? And this is how most of my projects begin. And in a very short time, as participation blossomed, it became clear this wasn't a zine, this was a book.

It was a strange book. And it feels much more like a project I organized than an anthology I edited. But it is both of those things. And because so many hands made this thing, I think I feel more comfortable praising it in a way that I wouldn't if this were just my [00:48:00] book and something I made. It doesn't feel egotistical to say that I think this book is beautiful and necessary and that I think everyone who is trying to make change in this moment should have it because that isn't a statement about me and my work. It's a statement about what can happen when some of the wonderful, brilliant people I have struggled with and thought alongside over the years, including some of my best friends, get together to make a care package for other people who are trying to make a difference and really going through it. If you've ever gotten together with a group of friends and made care kits of some kind for people, that's what making this book felt like to me.

So of course it's beautiful and of course it's necessary. And of course I'm proud of it because I'm so proud of the brilliant, beautiful people in my life and of what we can do when we work in collectivity. No one person could have written this book. It took all of our perspectives and experiences to create a table of [00:49:00] contents that reads like a crisis directory and points people towards letters that might help them navigate some really difficult moments.

And I think that says something about the nature of survival and the nature of liberation work. These are collective projects.

Dean: Yeah, it was so helpful to read and I think it really defeats isolation and the, the epistolary form is so loving and embracing and creates just a, I think there's just a vulnerability in the text that I felt as a reader. It's the kind of thing that I know I'll teach to my students and use in workshops, different letters and parts of letters over and over again. 'Cause it's like that kind of text where a small, even a small amount is very evocative. But also the whole thing is like a support system. You know? Like it's got a lot in it. It's such a beautiful gift. And I do know that anthology projects are really like herding cats, and they can be really a lot of work. And so I'm really, really, really grateful to you for that. It's just a certain kind of movement work to do, an [00:50:00] anthology project of any kind. I hope everyone will read it.

I'm wondering if you would also be willing to reflect a bit on being a

journalist at this time. This is actually a, a question I got from somebody else. I was like, I'm interviewing Kelly Hayes. What should I ask? And someone asked this question, I think it's so good. You obviously have done many things and do many things in our movements, but one of them is journalism and I'm wondering like how you see that role right now. That field has changed so much. What does it mean to be a journalist right now with your values and practices?

Kelly: I think it's been a long time since many of us trusted the mainstream press, if we ever did. But right now, the corporate press has, for the most part, capitulated to fascism. There are important flickers of resistance here and there, but an industry that had largely been stripped for parts and set on fire by corporate looters was not well positioned to put up a fight in this moment.

That makes independent journalism more important than ever. It's [00:51:00] frustrating for me because I don't think enough people recognize the truth as a front of struggle. But our opponents are bent on tearing apart the fabric of our shared reality to make the truth indistinguishable from lies. And as I've said, AI is very much a part of that. We are being hit with a fire hose of bullshit day in and day out.

So we have to support people who are still out here weaving facts into narratives we can make sense of, and giving us an actionable understanding of the conditions we're experiencing and the threats we're facing. The truth is a front of struggle and nothing else will hold if that front is lost completely.

More and more we are algorithmically splintered into having completely different experiences and understandings of the world and what the hell is going on. We need storytelling that not only tells the truth, but asks important questions and encourages people to be curious. And maybe even invites them on a journey that [00:52:00] leads away from what they thought they knew about the world and what's happening.

We need movement journalism because without a recognition that things need to change, what can you possibly be acknowledging about reality that is of any use to anyone? We need journalism that informs, enlivens, compels and invites us. Stories that drive us to not simply understand a situation, but to imagine our own role in shifting that story, to see ourselves within an arc of change so that we might help shape it.

Words have that power. They still have that power even now with the fire hose of bullshit running 24/7. This is a time of monsters and one of the ways we are fighting those monsters is by making journalism that matters under monstrous [00:53:00] conditions.

I don't think we should shrink from that, and I am proud of \_Truthout\_

for creating the Truthout Center for Grassroots Journalism because we don't just need to shore up our own publications right now, we need an ecosystem of independent journalism dedicated to keeping the truth alive.

Dean: I'm so moved by it. I mean, I, there's so much craft in what you do, so much of a certain kind of writing that brings in so many people, that so many different kind of readers can read. And a kind of like voracious research that you are just always doing that I observe in what you make. And then also in talking to you and I'm just really aware of the skillset of journalists that's very different from other kinds of writers like me, that's so important, right? It's more responsive. It's faster and more responsive to the current conditions, and it directs people to find out what's underlying in a way that is so needed.

Anyway, I'm so grateful for all of your work. I would encourage everyone listening to receive your newsletter, which is one of the few things I read every time it enters my email box. It's [00:54:00] so helpful. And to listen to "Movement Memos" podcast, and to generally look at the work of Truthout. There's just so much there, it's one of the places I do rely on when I need to like figure out what's actually going on inside the fire hose of bullshit that we're all, as you say, experiencing. And I'm just so grateful for your long dedication, role modeling, humility, care, and you know, just intrepid, relentless desire for liberation for us all.

It just comes through in everything you do. And I'm so happy to have been alive at the same time as you, though these are very hard times to be alive and to be dedicated to liberation. I feel more possibility because of what you do. Thank you so much for being part of this podcast as well.

Kelly: Thank you for having me as a guest on your podcast, Dean. Your work is so important to me, as it is to so many people, and I'm just really grateful that I get to be your friend.

Dean: Thank you so much to Kelly Hayes for joining us for this episode. Kelly has so much [00:55:00] wisdom to support us in these intense times and the things we need to do together right now.

Thank you for joining me for the latest episode of Love in a F\*cked Up World, the podcast. This podcast is based on my book of the same name, which is out now from Algonquin Press. I hope you'll pick it up from an independent bookstore near you and not from Amazon or Audible.

Love in a F\*cked Up World is hosted by me, Dean Spade. It's produced and edited by Hope Dector. Thank you to Ciro, Eugene, Derekh, Kelsey, Lindsay, Jessica, Raindrop, Nicole, and everyone else who helped with this podcast. Our theme music is "I've Been Wondering" by The Ballet.

If you found the show useful or if you have ideas of things you'd like to hear about, we'd love to hear from you. Please check out our new Patreon where you can join the conversation with other listeners. We have so many exciting episodes planned, and we're grateful to be able to rely on our community for the support to make them happen.

We need each other now more than ever, and I hope this podcast offers tools and ideas that can help us build and sustain the strong relationships we need to build strong movements to resist. I hope you'll keep listening, subscribe and share this episode with [00:56:00] people in your life.