Meghan: Hello, Meghan here. We're taking a break this month from the usual programming to bring you an episode from our sibling podcast Undercurrents, produced by MCC Ontario and hosted by the very wonderful Ken Ogasawara. We'll be back next month.

In this episode, Ken speaks with best-selling author, public speaker and podcaster Malcolm Gladwell, who also recently spoke at an MCC Ontario fundraising event...

They cover a lot of ground - from pacifism, to soccer, climate change, and more. This episode has been edited for length. You can listen to the full conversation on Undercurrents wherever you listen to podcasts.

Ken: Welcome to Undercurrents.

Malcolm: Thank you, my pleasure.

Ken: So the theme of this fundraiser that you spoke at was "The power of partnership." And you used some brilliant stories. You use examples of philanthropy and higher education. And among other things, how to improve a soccer team, to make a point about sort of strong link, what you called strong link versus weak link approaches to improving the world, essentially. Could you give a brief summary of that point, because some of the questions I want to ask later on sort of pivot on these points of weak links, strong link things.

Malcolm: Yeah, a strong link system is a system that is improved by improving its strongest links, its highest quality. So if you think of, if you're running a software company, there is a very small number of software programmers who are, an order of magnitude better than everybody else. You want better code, you find an all-star software programmer and plug that person into your company. That's a strong link system. A weak link system is a system that's only as good as its weakest link. And there's tons of examples of that. You know, I was talking about a lot of modern medicine is very weak link, you have 20 people working together in a complex operation. If even one of them is deficient, the efforts of everyone else can be sabotaged. A soccer team is a weak link system. Soccer teams are only as good as their poorest player. So if you want to make that system better you look to the bottom and make the person or thing at the bottom perform a little better—you've service that end of the...so my question was, is the world we live in today a weak link or a strong link world? And I think it used to be a strong link world. The 19th century is and the early 20th century, are strong link, those are strong systems. You know, why does the West perform so well in that era, because their best schools are the best. Their best are the best. Their best entrepreneurs are the best. Their, you know, their best violinists are the best I could go on their best doctors are the best. That's the way you made yourself good in that era. Today, I would argue that we're going in the opposite direction, where we look more and more like a soccer team and that the way to improve society in our present climate is to attend to our weak links. And so that was I, you know, my argument in the talk I gave at MCC was that an organization like MCC, which is weak link oriented—MCC is not trying to make Harvard a stronger school is it? It's not, it's not trying to make, you know, Rosedale in Toronto an even better place for rich people to spend their time. It's looking to lift up the most marginal and disadvantaged aspects of any society. And my argument was, that is a very 21st century mission. That idea has never been more important than it is now. And that the world we're moving towards is one in which servicing weak links is the surest path to improving outcomes.

Ken: Right. And so I want to I want to pivot from there to, you know, MCC, Mennonites, generally, and the Anabaptist denomination as a whole. As you know, one of the key tenants of that particular faith is the peace part. And so if there's one thing that peace, churches have, have a deep concern about it's war, right? And conflict. And your latest book, “The bomber mafia,” you explore war, and in particular, sort of all the characters involved in the fire bombing campaign of Tokyo at the end of World War II. It was, you know, horrible event. And I should disclose here as well, this, this topic is personal to me, and that my father lived through that bombing of Tokyo. And he has very vivid memories of surviving that and the trauma that that gave him and the subsequent healing as well. And he's written about that eloquently, but as I was listening through the podcast part of it, which you've made that into an amazing audio book as well. But I was definitely conflicted as I listen through this, you know, because it's, this is kind of going behind the scenes of folks who caused my father and his people a great deal of pain. But well, one of the characters that caught my attention was this relatively minor character. And his name was Antonin Raymond. Could you describe who he was? And? And I'll jump a question off of that.

Malcolm: Yeah. So Raymond is an architect, a very, very brilliant American architect who moves to Japan in the 1930s and becomes the most important American architect in Japan. And one of the more successful architects in Japan, but he's an American who immerses himself in Japanese culture. And then, when hostilities break out between the US and Japan, he moves back home. And he's recruited by the US Army, when war breaks out to help the air corps, which turns into the Air Force, understand what they were going to be bombing when they bombed Japan. In other words, what are the structures like, you know, because each—if you're, if you're trying to obliterate a city, a city made out of bricks, or behaves differently than one made out of stone behaves differently, the one made out of wood. So they had him actually go to a remote corner of the Utah desert and build a replica Japanese city based on his intimate knowledge of Japanese building techniques. And then they would proceed to bomb it and learn what worked best. And so you know, you're right, he's a minor character. But he's an extraordinarily kind of poignant one, because he was a man who had devoted his life to Japan, and who was in love with Japanese culture. And then he's called home and is enlisted in a campaign to better to help the US Air Force better understand how to destroy Japanese culture. And I just can't, I've never understood how he managed to kind of survive psychologically survive what he was asked to do. In his autobiography I point out it's a paragraph and then he moves on. But surely, it's a paragraph that masks an extraordinary amount of pain.

Ken: Yeah, and that's, that's kind of exactly what grabbed me about it. And you ask a good question, like, how did he survive that? How did he grapple with it? And my question is, this sort of is in the larger sense, a question of this idea of like, duty to your nation, right? Which has such power, especially in times of war, and especially in times of the world wars, when nations were rallied in such intense ways as a people. But it does make me think about national, you know, to expand further, nationalism and that sense of duty to your nation, despite it being perhaps against your own wishes and your own values. And I guess, one question is like, how does nationalism, or that sense of duty to nation, how can that hinder peace or weak-link work?

Malcolm: Oh, I see.

Ken: I took a little left turn at the end there.

Malcolm: Yes. Yes, I see what you I see where you're going with that. Well, the I think, on one level the answer is pretty straightforward. Which is that the problem, I mean, there are some good things that

come from love of country and service to country. But the problem, the overwhelming problem with it, is that it's a set of obligations and that impose themselves on or trump other obligations. So, you know, it supersedes, once you have decided that the single most important obligation you have as a human being is to serve your country, then that tends to sweep aside everything else that might take precedence over everything else that might conceivably be of importance in your life, love of God, service to fellow man, charity, devotion to peace. All those kinds of things, which normally, you know, most people have, not just people who are pacifistic in nature, most people have under most circumstances, a devotion to all those things. Right? They do want to be nice to their fellow human beings, they do believe in peace as an ultimate end, they do believe in serving others. It's just that when it comes to wartime they the priorities of nationalism trump every one of those other considerations. The pacifist is someone who refuses to let that, those concerns of nationalism take precedence. So I think that to answer your question about weak links, that our devotion to serving, the weakest links in society is really only truly meaningful if we don't let other considerations take precedence over it. Right? The so there's no way to be someone who was in the game, who was serving these particular interests, or who would decided to be a pacifist, and not be an absolutist. The minute you compromise you, you can't be a pacifist and someone who's also willing to compromise your belief system, right? I mean, then if you're willing, someone who's willing to compromise and you're not a pacifist anymore, right? That's not all. Not all belief systems depend on that degree of absolute commitment. Right? There are many belief systems that work quite well with compromise. I can be a fiscal conservative, and very happily, and fruitfully compromise all the time. I can say, well, actually, I am. But you know, if we're in the middle of a depression, the government really should spend a lot of money that can be told I can still be, I can still be someone committed to small and frugal government, who will concede that there are moments in time, when we have to do something very different. That doesn't mean that I'm not a fiscal conservative. It just means I'm a thoughtful person who understands that these, these ideological commitments are not absolute. But if you're a pacifist, can't play that game.

Ken: When it comes to war.

Malcolm: You can't say I'm a pacifist until my country is at stake, in which case, I'll give all those beliefs up and happily go to war, the past if, you know, it is a commitment to behaving under a certain way, under extreme conditions. That's the nature of the belief system.

Ken: And as you may know, early Anabaptists stuck to their guns and paid for it with their lives.

Malcolm: Not just early Anabaptists, pacifist in the First World War were imprisoned and some of them died in prison in the United States on behalf of their belief. So it's, you know...it's something that's happened in in modern times as well.

Ken: Yeah, it really, as a Mennonite myself, that really puts the question hard to me, you know, what would I be willing to, to die for those convictions and for that stance, that peace theology. And well speaking of convictions, there is in some way and duty to the nation there was and is a way for pacifists to serve their nation without fighting and that was the conscientious objector designation, where Mennonites could, for example, serve the nation not by fighting, but by serving the country in other ways. Like, you know, volunteering, volunteer work essentially, like whether it's manual labor, for infrastructure work, or serving in hospitals. And one of these very people you highlight quite eloquently, Lester Glick in revisionist history, who turns out was a Mennonite and a conscientious objector and who served his nation to great sacrifice to himself personally. So this is someone, for the context here, you

know, so this, you did a series in this last episode, last season of revisionist history about the now infamous Minnesota starvation experiment where people not only starve themselves to further scientific understanding, and to ultimately, you know, help feed the hungry in more effective ways. But they did so willingly. And this is a spoiler alert, but this was not only something they subjected themselves to, but was in fact, their idea, which was something they willingly volunteered for. Contrast this group with another group of people in an episode that that's called "outliers revisited," where you had a group of seniors at the University of Pennsylvania, you revealed to them a certain privilege that had that contributed to them being at this elite institution. And you then pitched an idea of how university admissions could be far more equitable. But much to your surprise, they resisted, they resisted quite strongly against making that process more fair.

What is the difference between these two sets of people? And how do we get on this scale of maybe extremes? How do we get from moving the needle from those of us who are holding tightly to our privilege? To toward more toward those who sacrifice for the greater good?

Malcolm: Yeah. Well, that's a big a big question, which I could talk about for many, many, we could all talk about very many hours. But I guess I would say a couple of things. One is that on the side of the, to begin with the starvation experiment, that all these conscientious objectors participate in during the Second World War. That is hard to understand. It could never happen today. And not because what was done by the men, who were all men, to themselves, was particularly egregious, although they did suffer a great deal. The reasoning, the fundamental reason why it couldn't happen today is that we don't have the same kind of richly developed sense of what sacrifice is in today's world. So the idea that somebody would willingly take on a burden, or suffer for some cause that they believe to be larger than themselves, is an idea that's largely alien from the way that we talk today about suffering. So we tend to think of suffering as being a bad thing under almost all circumstances. And part of that is a good thing, we have a heightened sensitivity to cruelty and to mindless suffering. But at the same time, we seem to have become indifferent to what I would call mindful suffering, which is the kind of suffering that somebody willingly takes on, after a great deal of thought and reflection, because they believe some larger good will come of that. We really struggle with that. I mean, if you just look at, I talked about this in the episode, but you know, it was very hard, for example, for people to, for us to accept the idea that some people might willingly volunteer for a COVID vaccine trial. In other words, come forward and say, “Go ahead, infect me to see whether a candidate vaccine works. Because I know that if, if a bunch of us do that we can shrink the time it takes to develop a vaccine by six months.” And as a result 10s of, if not hundreds of thousands of people, might live who might otherwise die. Virtually impossible for an experiment like that to get authorized today. Even though we all know the risk of somebody dying in a challenge trial is relatively small, and the benefits were enormous. We just don't, we can't wrap our mind around the fact that somebody would want to take that kind of risk on behalf of others. So our our kind of public conversation about doing things, giving up something for the greater good, has become very impoverished. And I would say that it's become impoverished, in large part because of the decline of, this is one aspect of the decline of religiosity in our society. That we’ve sort of forgotten that there were very clear social consequences to the central role that religious life and practice paid in Western societies. And one was to make it easier to understand the idea of what true sacrifice was, because the New Testament story is a story about sacrifice. That's what it is, right? So if you are raised on the centrality of that story, it's much easier for you to understand, oh, giving up some portion of myself, for someone else is one of the greatest things I can do as a human being. Right? That's what, that is what

were put on earth to do, to engage in that kind of thoughtful sacrifice. And so, when religiosity is the center of your culture, that's almost second nature, we don't, we don't question that, we don't, we would never, we would never roll our eyes or laugh or be skeptical or critical of someone who wanted to engage in that kind of sacrifice. We get it right? When religiosity goes away *(coughs)* excuse me, it becomes really, really hard for people to understand sacrifice.

So what's going on in the parallel case that you talked about, of these students at Penn, who are all enormously privileged? And as you say, I go there, and I won't go into the specifics of the episode, but I go there, and I demonstrate to them that, hey, you know what, you guys were the beneficiaries of an enormous unearned advantage. And here's a way to level the playing field, are you interested in leveling the playing field for and they're totally not interested in leveling, in any way giving up their privilege. And that's because they have no model of sacrifice. It's gone. Right? That's what it means to live in a secularized world. And, you know, I think that's kind of a shame. There's, there's just who, where, if you're an upper middle class, highly intelligent, you know, privileged kid in Ivy League school, what role model is there anywhere in your life of sacrifice? Doesn't exist, right? You don't learn about it. You don't have to....You have some vague historical examples, but not a real kind of living example from your own faith. And you don't know people. I mean, how few, like, what are the two religious denominations in the in North America that make a habit out of service? The Mormons and the Mennonites, right? So, what are what are the odds that one of these students at Penn is either a Mormon or a Mennonite or is very close to a moment or a Mennonite? Really small. So they don't even know anyone who does any kind of service to others, right? On a limited, they don't people who kind of like, maybe volunteer once a week, that's probably as far as it goes, but give up a year or two years of their life? No, they don't know that. So I came to them and said, are you willing to make a sacrifice of the privilege of your class on behalf of the greater good? And, of course, they said, no, it's like, it's I was like, I was speaking foreign language to them.

Ken: That's really interesting. And to me, it also feels like and this may be simplistic, but it seems to me a matter of degree, as well as of sacrifice where, I mean, again, this goes back to the New Testament, there's a story there of the wealthy man who threw in a ton of money at the offering and the woman, the very poor woman who gave her last few pennies. And Jesus is saying this woman gave more than these rich guys who gave out of abundance. And...

Malcolm: By the way, this, this is a really crucial point, I've often wanted to do an entire podcast episode on this. You know, we make the same mistake today, over and over and over. The billionaire gives $100 million to Harvard University. And it's staggered over 10 years or 20 years, and he's getting a tax write off on... And when you, when you finally run down and do all the math, you discover that that person is actually, you know, substantially less generous than the typical person who's giving money in their church offering or giving money to their local homeless group. You know, in fact you can look at aggregate data that middle and lower middleclass people give a higher percentage of their income to charity than do the wealthy. So it's like, I mean, this is like, this is one of those kind of you would these biblical lessons, which is probably more apt today than it was in the in biblical times.

Ken: Yeah, exactly. And seeing you get fired up about this, and I know that you have in recent years, really taken it to you know, for example, the higher education, how things work in the States, at least and as well, you gave an eloquent tirade against private golf courses. I think that was in LA.

Malcolm: Yeah, yeah.

Ken: And so my question is, you know, as you as you sort of plant your flag on some of these issues, do you, would you consider yourself an advocate in some of these things? I mean, venturing from writing for interest sake to sort of like wanting to affect change in an intentional way?

Malcolm: Well, not really because I don't think that writers such as myself are really, I mean, we can sometimes we may think, we may flatter ourselves and to think that we're advocates. But we're not really. We start conversations and advocates take those conversations and do something with them. I don't, you know, advocacy implies to my mind at least a much more direct connection between conversation and action. I'm not doing any of the action, I'm just doing the conversation.

Ken: Right. John Stuart, once said, he's like, advocacy is manual labor. The viral video that he could produce part of his show on Comedy Central, which puts shines a bright spotlight for 10 minutes. But that issue doesn't go away because of that bright spotlight there for 10 minutes. It's as you say, it's taking that conversation piece, and the action that needs to happen, the manual labor that has happen for months, years, decades, sometimes. You know, one major advocacy campaign that MCC itself is starting out on is the climate crisis.

Malcolm: Yeah

Ken: And that being kind of like, talk about the biggest context existential kind of campaign that you can think of, and how, one I went to a church a couple Sundays ago, and kind of got them to sort of share about what their concerns were. And just to sort of again, start that conversation, as you say, for them to kind of get their wheels moving again. And this is the church, I was very committed to it. But a lot of the notes that came up on these little sticky notes, was the challenge of feeling overwhelmed or feeling a sense of despair, around something that they've cared about for a long time, but have seen relatively little, well, it's been going back or like it's been getting worse. And another piece of that is sort of the recognition that it's not enough to say, like, I'm going to start composting, I'm going to plant my little pollinator garden. These changes have to happen at a very high level on a massive scale. And for that, you need political engagement. But when you talk to every single politician, I mean, we just had a municipal election here in Waterloo Region, and every single one of these people on their platform, there's this housing, like affordable housing is a major thing. And we needed to kind of tackle this. And when we talk about the federal election, everybody's talking about climate change, and that's a crisis. And so, I guess part of it is like the seeming deadlock or—not to be cynical or despairing about it, but you know, how do we move past the rhetoric of everyone saying, yes we all agree this is the problem. And then nothing changing because of politics, and of, you know, toeing the party line and all that kind of stuff. Doesn't I don't know if you can find a question in there. But it's just...

Malcolm: Well, I mean, it goes to the question of expectation. You know, this was never going to be something that you were going to win in a generation. Now. Some people say, well the problem is we are running out of time. That that's kind of a separate reality, that the truth is to turn around a society in something as fundamental as this is going to is, you're just not going to do it in 10 years. And you if you don't do it in 10 years, you can't get you can't get disappointed and disheartened. It was never gonna happen that quickly. And you sort of have to accept that fact. Like, you know, you're making the big ship turnaround. And so once you realize it's not going to happen in a generation, then you have to have goals that fit that timeline. So, you know, the, and you have to, you know, I don't think, that's not about giving up. That's just about being a little more realistic, and helping people understand that we're doing something now, really so that your kids and grandchildren can live in a different world. And you're we're

laying the groundwork now the grassroots groundwork for change that is going to happen sometime off in the future. But you should feel that you have productively contributed to this change. If you are, if you're involved in laying the foundation. You're not going to be around for the house. It's fine.

Ken: Right? Yeah. And exactly. And well, and this brings us right back to the idea of weak link work. The soccer team, right? The soccer team. Advocacy is a soccer sport. And you mentioned in your talk, the Tottenham Hotspur 48 Pass goal sequence, the soccer team that passed the ball 48 times before scoring. And I actually looked that video up. And it's, first of all, it's incredible how long it takes. And secondly, the thing that I noticed was, in soccer, if you watch a soccer game, it's not like we're all charging forward at all times. You know, there's a lot of passing back. You make some inroads into your offensive zone, and then you got to pass it back, you run up against it, you got to pass it, and sometimes it goes all the way back to your own goalie. And it struck me that in some ways, the folks trying to, to advocate for change, to create real change, it can feel like that.

Malcolm: Oh, that's interesting. Yeah, there's a lot of, it's not yeah, it's not this kind of linear process. You take one step, two steps, you know, one step back for every, for every two steps you take forward. So it is confusing, and about halfway through that 48-goal sequence, you begin to wonder whether anything is ever gonna happen. Right, which is another useful, you know, another kind of useful lesson, that sometimes we're unaware of how successful or being you know... You know, I was having a conversation with someone who I would describe as a climate change skeptic, but what's interesting is if you listen to his arguments, the skeptics arguments today are different than the skeptics arguments of a generation ago. So it's no longer you know, nothing is happening. Now, it's something is happening, but I think it might have happened before, or something is happening, I don't think we can do anything about it. It's very different argument. Right? That's, that's actually progress. That's kind of pass number 24 in the 48-pass sequence. When you move somewhat away from nothing's happening, that's a big, big win. And it's really, really hard now, to hold the position that nothing's happening. Right? And so that, you know, so I tend not to be as gloomy as others in terms of our... I also think that, that, that are that technological answers to climate change problems are probably underrated. And that technological, we have to remember, technology's always a lot more dynamic than we imagined, there's going to be a lot of technical fixes we just can't imagine yet. So with that in the back pocket, and with the idea that that the ground is shifting in terms of what skepticism sounds like, makes me more optimistic, perhaps than others.

Ken: Just a few more questions. This is a question that I saw, you were in an interview a couple years ago with Channel Four News. You were asked, what drives you? And you said you love discovering things, and in particular, discovering ways in which your own understandings have been wrong or incomplete. And the act of learning and relearning. And first of all that's inspiring to me. Because I think it's not something that a lot of people intuitively think to do. We like to find things that reinforce what we already believe and take some courage to get out of that. But my question is sort of a general one. What are some things that you've had to relearn over your years of writing? In some ways you are vulnerable in the sense that you put things in writing you put it in print, it's on the page, here's what I here's what I've thought and here's what I you know, over the years and then maybe look back on things and think well, maybe that was...

Malcolm: Yeah. Well, I mean, I mean, there's numerous examples, some of my few look at the way I've written about crime over the years and on my books, it's...I've taken positions in more recent books that

contradict positions I took in some of my earlier books. That's one example. I think I've, you know, I was talking to someone about this. I once years ago wrote a piece about a woman named Susan Love, who was a kind of dissenter on the orthodoxy about hormone replacement therapy for women. And I was kind of dismissive of her dissent. And then she turned out to be right and so I've thought a lot about why I made that error. And so I, you know, one of the things I've tried to be is, is never be dismissive. I mean, you can have a honest quarrel with someone. But there's a big difference between an honest quarrel and being dismissive. So there is a way to, every time you disagree with someone, you need to leave the door open to the possibility that you're wrong and the person you're disagreeing with is right. And so leaving the door open has been something that I've tried harder to do. And yeah, that would be one big difference.

Ken: I love being dismissive *(laughs)*. It's just so much easier, isn't it?

Malcolm: We all do.

Ken: Thank you, Malcolm. I appreciate your time with us. Really, again, thank you for your generosity and just what you've contributed for MCC and. And pleasure to meet you and chat.

Malcolm: That was fun.

Ken: Okay. Thank you, Malcolm.

Well, there it is, an interesting conversation with a very interesting person.

I'd like to thank Malcolm Gladwell again for generously giving of his time to engage with MCC and for encouraging all of us in our weak link work. Thanks to Kindred credit union for sponsoring not only undercurrents but the power of partnership event as well. Undercurrents is produced with help from Christen Kong, composer Brian MacMillan, sound mixer Francois Goudreault and graphic artist Jesse Bergen. Finally, thank YOU for listening. If you're new to Undercurrents, have a listen around to some other episodes for stories of miracles, reconciliation, radical acceptance, and more! Please share and subscribe wherever you listen. My name is Ken Ogasawara, thanks for listening, have a great rest of your day.

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