Disrupt Yourself Podcast

EPISODE 260: AMANDA RIPLEY

Welcome back to the Disrupt Yourself podcast, where we provide strategies and advice on how to climb the S Curve of learning in your professional and personal life, disrupting who you are now to slingshot into who you want to be. I'm your host, Whitney Johnson. Today's episode is about a universal topic everyone can relate to, conflict. It's part of life. It's part of business. It's part of all interpersonal relationships. And our guest this week explains why conflict is good. It leads to innovation, compromise, and inclusion. But author and investigative journalist Amanda Ripley has also been studying what she calls high conflict. This is where disagreements get so entrenched that it becomes an identity and a cycle of blame. People form their tribes. It's us versus them. This is politics. This is the online comment section. This is actual war, as we've sadly seen play out in recent weeks. Sometimes it feels like our differences are intractable. But as Amanda has observed, after covering disasters, war zones, and even local politics, there are specific signs that signal when healthy conflict is heading into the spiral of high conflict. And while high conflict is difficult to escape, Amanda says there are tactics that can break the cycle of tribalism. These can apply to all of us at any scale marriages, coworkers, neighborhoods, government, and even a geopolitical crisis. This conversation with Amanda is really extraordinary, and I know you'll find it valuable.

Whitney Johnson: So, Amanda, will you start by sharing with us a formative experience in your life?

Amanda Ripley: You know, I think for me, the one that is top of mind is like a lot of people. I grew up around a fair amount of conflict. My parents didn't get along that great and I would monitor their arguments from the top of the stairs. And I think this is something other kids can relate to and other adults. I would sort of listen in. And I think at the time, it seemed like this would be a good way to gather intel like I was the CIA of the family. And it was a way to kind of keep track of it, like, was it getting better? Was it getting worse? You know, in retrospect, probably not the best strategy, you know, whereas my older brother would go off into the woods and play with his Star Wars figures, I

would sort of monitor the conflict. So, you know, I think that was early on my way of dealing with conflict was to be on the outside looking in and kind of keep keeping my eye on it under the illusion that that would help protect me from it. And something that only recently have I have I realized, you know, I've made a career out of doing it in some ways.

Whitney Johnson: Did your parents know you were listening?

Amanda Ripley: You know, that's a good question. I think they did. My mom has passed away, but I did show her my book. I did show my dad the draft of my book, High Conflict. That includes that detail. And he didn't. He didn't seem surprised. I think he, you know, experiences a lot of regret and guilt about the amount that they argued.

Whitney Johnson: I loved how you said you were the CIA of the family with all the listening devices which happened to be you sitting at the top of the stairs. So, you've written a book now called High Conflict. As you said, you've made a career out of studying conflict. But one quote that you share that I thought was really powerful and poignant and I think is a nice lead into my asking you the question of what is high conflict as you said this. My mom struggled with bouts of depression and anxiety, and she reverted to anger and blame when she felt threatened, which was often. And it sounds like you're. I hope it's not too much of a leap to say that those are seeds of high conflict. Any quick thoughts on that before you introduce the topic?

Amanda Ripley: Yeah. You know, I think one of the things that I had not realized so anger is a really interesting one that we can talk more about later. But anger can be really healthy, and it's necessary for good conflict, for healthy conflict, and it can be catalyzing and energizing and all these good things. Blame is usually a mask for fear, and probably if someone had pulled me aside and told me that when I was five, I wouldn't have understood it. But it would have been great if I had known that. Not just for understanding my parents, but also understanding myself and the world because I sort of went on to cover a lot of conflict for 20 years. As a journalist, you know, I covered crime and courts and disasters and terrorism. And so, I think I was always kind of witnessing and sometimes contributing to. To be honest, a lot of blame and understanding it better and understanding the way it masks deeper issues would have been, would have, would have been helpful.

Whitney Johnson: So, you're saying when we see someone blaming or perhaps more importantly when we find ourselves blaming the experience that we're having is fear.

Amanda Ripley: Yeah. And that doesn't mean that you're not right to try to hold someone accountable. That's sort of a separate thing, but the emotion of blame. Generally, suggests that there's fear underneath, there's some kind of vulnerability, and it's useful to at least inquire right in yourself, especially, yes, but in others as well. Like where you know, what is threatened here? And it can be, it can lead to interesting. You know, it's not always super deep sometimes it's, you know. But it's, it's better than just staying at the blame level.

Whitney Johnson: I think it's really valuable as a person who has blamed a time or two to have that insight of, Oh, I'm actually afraid of something right now, and it might not even be in this situation. I'm just afraid of something and finding a way to blame to sort of pull the focus off of yourself and the experience you are having.

Amanda Ripley: Right, right, right. It makes it, it makes me curious again at least. It's like, wait, what am I? And again, it doesn't mean that there isn't a real problem. It doesn't mean that you're not going to hold someone accountable and stand up for yourself and all those good things, but you can do it with a little bit- a little bit more clear-eyed and open heart than you can if you're just kind of stuck in blame.

Whitney Johnson: Let's talk about high conflict. This is so interesting to me. Did you coin the term high conflict?

Amanda Ripley: No. So, it actually comes from the family-law arena. So, in the eighties, lawyers started noticing that there were these families that were stuck in conflict in really ugly, hostile divorces, and they called them high conflict cases, high conflict people, high conflict families, high conflict divorces. And so, the idea is at a certain point, let's take the divorce example because it's something we can all kind of imagine. About a quarter of American divorces can be termed high conflict, and that basically means that the couple gets stuck in perpetual cycles of hostile emotions. And that means filings and counter filings, lots of lawyer bills. And it can go on for years and years and

actually is a huge drain on the system and of course, on everyone involved. And usually, it's, you know, the kids who suffer the most. So, a lot of the research on high conflict divorces can apply to high conflict politics to high conflict, you know, workplaces to high conflict people. So, I found that connection to be really helpful to me, right, in making sense of what was going on politically and in other places.

Whitney Johnson: So, what is high conflict exactly and the difference between high conflict and what you describe as good conflict?

Amanda Ripley: Yeah, so the kind of conflict, it turns out, really matters. And this is again something I hadn't realized despite covering a lot of conflict. But I started about five years ago. I started hanging out with people who know conflict intimately, but differently than journalists. So, negotiators, gang violence interrupters, divorce mediators, diplomats, all kinds of psychologists, rabbis, ministers, all kinds of people who really work every day. Bus drivers, by the way, city bus drivers, experts in conflict, especially if they're good at their job. So, people who know conflict and also people who study it, particularly who study intractable conflict, really difficult conflict. And it helped me understand that the kind of conflict you're in really matters. So, the goal is not to have no conflict. We need conflict to get better, to get stronger as individuals, as communities, as countries. The goal is to keep conflict in that zone where it is useful, right, where we can push each other and be pushed and be challenged. It's kind of like exercise, right? Like you need stress to get stronger. But there's a point at which it becomes self-destructive. And so, the same with conflict. There's a point where there's this tipping point where conflict begins to take on a life of its own and it becomes its own reality, so to speak.

Amanda Ripley: And you can see it in the data, and you can hear it in people's stories where it usually becomes like an us versus them conflict. Or at least it's seen that way. Usually, there are sort of grandiose language of war, even if there isn't yet a war. Usually, there are people suffering on all sides, but to different degrees. It's actually not hard to tell the difference. Once you kind of know what to look for and, and the important thing to realize is that high conflict is really hard to get out of. Once it gets going, it becomes like a perpetual motion machine. And so, any intuitive thing you do to get out of high conflict will probably make the conflict worse. So therefore, you have to get really clever, and you have to do unintuitive things, which requires some, you know, some thought and some insight and training and practice because it just it isn't going to happen if you just keep doing the same thing over and over, right?

Whitney Johnson: How do you get into high conflict? So, you said there's this tipping point, and the obvious thing that's coming to mind for me is Ukraine in Russia is there is that high conflict. How do you get into that? Any thoughts on dissecting that for us?

Amanda Ripley: Yeah, that's a great example. So that is definitely a high conflict. And it's also a good example of how it can be asymmetrical like you can have one person or one side that is much more in high conflict than the other. In this case, you know, the aggressor is obviously Russia and in particular, Putin, right? And so, remember when he gave that speech in February and he said he showed more emotion than he usually shows, and that for me, was a really important cue as to the kind of conflict he was in in his own mind. And when you have someone who has that kind of power it's very dangerous, obviously.

Whitney Johnson: To state the obvious.

Amanda Ripley: And so, what you could sense just below the surface was a sense of grievance and humiliation. So, humiliation is one of the key fire starters, one of sort of four triggers that tend to lead to high conflict, and it's a really underappreciated force in my experience. It's behind every high conflict I've ever looked at, you know, whether it's domestic violence or civil war in Colombia. I mean, there's humiliation lurking underneath. Evelyn Lindner is a psychologist who studies conflict. She calls humiliation the nuclear bomb of the emotions. And I think that's about right. So, you could see with Putin that there's narratives in his head. I'm not an expert on Putin, but you could tell that he has a narrative that Ukrainians are ungrateful, right? For all that Russia has done, and the Soviet Union had done and, and bigger than that, a sense of deep grievance about the way history has been written when it comes to the Soviet Union's collapse.

Amanda Ripley: When you have someone who is clearly damaged like that, who has a lot of power and also a lot of propaganda tools at his disposal for his own population and for his military, it's very dangerous. And it's, you know, it's like you can see this is not a happy person, right? Like you can, it doesn't take a genius to listen to Putin talk and to observe. What's happening is very isolated has been, from what I understand, especially isolated during the pandemic, as have many people. And so, there are these narratives in his head about good versus evil and his rightful place and Russia's rightful place. And any time people feel like they were up on high, and they've been brought low is when you can get into really toxic kinds of conflict. And that's true, you know, for gang violence, that's true for racial violence. You see it just all over the place. So, so it's really important to look for signs that people feel humiliated, whether they should or not. There's a great Nelson Mandela quote. "There's no one more dangerous than one who's been humiliated, even if you humiliate him, rightly." Which I love that little add on. So, it's important to at least be aware that if you humiliate your enemy, even if you didn't mean to. And even if you shouldn't, he shouldn't feel humiliated. And we could talk more about the subjective nature of humiliation. But if you do that, you probably will supersize the conflict, rightly or wrongly.

Whitney Johnson: You talked about there are four factors that can be in play that start to be signals to you. That high conflict could be just around the corner. And one of them, you said, was humiliation. And you talked about with Putin this sense of his feeling humiliated. What are some of the other factors that can lead to or signals that we might be moving into high conflict?

Amanda Ripley: Yeah. So, the other three, I call them fire starters, but they're accelerants of conflict that tend to make it dysfunctional are powerful, binary group identities. So, this and that right Republicans and Democrats, black and white, men versus women. These kinds of distillations of people into smaller categories or boxes, right, tends to make it so that all of our kind of worst instincts, tribal instincts in conflict are heightened and there are good evolutionary reasons for that, it is just not helpful in the modern world where we are interacting with a lot of different kinds of people. And even if we're not doing that in person, we're doing it by proxy. We're inundated with information that's very vivid about supposed threats or real threats from other groups of people all around the world all the time. And so, we know from decades of research that humans don't behave well in conflict when, when there are two groups, right, particularly when they perceive their group to be superior, whatever that group is.

Whitney Johnson: So, going back to Russia, Ukraine, so this would be something else that's in play for Putin of like us versus them, Russia versus Ukraine.

Amanda Ripley: Yeah. And, also, even maybe more salient is Russia versus the West, versus NATO, versus particularly the United States. This is a very deep wound, right where again, humiliation is present. So, we have yeah, you're right. Group identities and humiliation and also corruption. So that's another important tripwire for high conflict. So, when people cannot trust the institutions around them, whether they're the courts or the schools or the police or the news media. They are very vulnerable to the fourth trigger for high conflict, which is conflict entrepreneurs. So, these are people or companies that exploit conflict for their own ends, and they are always present in high conflict. And Putin is obviously a conflict entrepreneur. So, conflict entrepreneurs are really interesting, and it is important to note that some people who are conflict entrepreneurs won't be in 10 or 20 years, right? Like some of the people I followed in the book, I followed a former gang leader in Chicago named Curtis Toler, who was a conflict entrepreneur, engaged in a really violent vendetta with a rival gang for many years. And now is just an incredible force for good in Chicago, interrupting gang violence and helping explain to people how it works and connect with young men who no one else is willing to connect with.

Amanda Ripley: So, there is movement and also, we all can be conflict entrepreneurs, especially in a time of high conflict when we've designed a bunch of our institutions, from Twitter to politics to the news media to reward conflict entrepreneurs, right? So, I don't mean to set up another us versus them dynamic right between us, the good guys, and then the conflict entrepreneurs, which is tempting, believe me. But, but yeah, so that's, so humiliation, group identities, corruption, and conflict entrepreneurs are the things to watch out for and try to distance yourself from if you can, try not to amplify. Right. This is something I often talk to my journalist colleagues about. I do trainings for reporters about how can we cover the news without making people feel humiliated or without amplifying the voices of conflict entrepreneurs, right? Which we keep doing. So, these are hard problems, but those are things to be kind of on the lookout for.

Whitney Johnson: It is interesting what you just said and you, you mentioned this or alluded to this early on, is that you wondered if at certain points in your career, unknowingly, unwittingly, you had been a conflict entrepreneur and the power that journalists have to, to not be a fire starter to not to be a non-conflict entrepreneur, that there is a great deal of power in your voice. And are you finding that there are some journalists that are wielding that sword well?

Amanda Ripley: Definitely. I mean, they're going up against a huge amount of, you know, cultural forces moving in the other direction. But I know politicians like this. I know journalists like this. I know, you know, ministers like this, they're, they're fighting against the pull. Like, there's this really strong magnetism of high conflict and it's very hard to resist. So particularly since the book came out, a lot of people have reached out to me who are in the trenches trying to fight differently, you know, and it's incredible what they're doing. So, the only thing I know how to do is to try to connect them to each other, right? So that's one of the things I've been doing and also trying to be helpful to them as a sounding board for strategy because, you know, it is really hard to be a journalist or anyone who is trying to create good conflict in high conflict. It's a very lonely experience.

Whitney Johnson: I want to double click on this that high conflict is magnetic and that when conflict escalates past a certain point, the conflict itself takes charge. And you actually use the metaphor of the La Brea Tar Pits. Do you want to just share that really quickly?

Amanda Ripley: Yeah. The La Brea Tar Pits are a place in Los Angeles, just off Wilshire Boulevard, down the street from an International House of Pancakes, where it turns out it looks like just kind of a small dark lake doesn't look that exciting. I don't know if you've ever seen it, have you Whitney?

Whitney Johnson: I haven't.

Amanda Ripley: Okay. Yeah, it's not super exciting. But in fact, underneath is an incredible story. So scientists think that going back to the last Ice Age, what happened was this is a natural asphalt. Spring still is and was then. So what would happen is a large mammal would kind of stumble across this thinking its water and wade in. And it only took a couple of inches to essentially paralyze stop in its tracks like a bison, a huge animal because it's sticky, it's asphalt, right? And then the animal would start braying and distress, naturally, which would raise an alarm and attract more animals, particularly predators, like a pack of wolves. Let's say, who then would get stuck and then on and on this would go, and after a couple of months, each animal would either be killed or starved. It would starve to death and then slowly sink into the murky depths of this pit. So, there are thousands and thousands of wolves. Trapped bodies, skeletons of wolves in this pit. Incredible animals, predators, strong animals and are all stuck in the same pit. So, it's, it's, it's really a perfect metaphor for high conflict, you know, it pulls you in for very evolutionary, understandable, natural reasons. And then once you're in, it's really hard to get out. And the more you call for help, the more the worse it gets. So, you flail about trying to get out and then you get more stuck. So that's, that's a lot like high conflict.

Whitney Johnson: Hmm. It's such a great metaphor. And, and just a quick observation you might want to, to chime in on this. I'm thinking about the S Curve of learning that we use in our work and how that maps growth. And whenever you start something new, it's really hard to start because the growth is slow when you're making predictions and they're inaccurate and you're mapping new territory and you've got this huge identity shift. But once you do start, the momentum takes over. And so, I'm thinking about conflict, similarly, is that initially there may not be a lot there, and I think you use the metaphor of fire as well. But once that fire takes off, it's almost impossible to start. And so. So, let's now talk to we've identified what it is. How do we get out? So, we're at the launch point of that curve and we don't want to go up that curve. We want to get as far away from that curve, from starting a fire as possible. How do we get out of high conflict? Or yeah, let's assume that we're out of it and then maybe talk about how to just make sure it doesn't even start when you see the signs.

Amanda Ripley: Yeah. Well, I'd love to answer that by telling a quick story. So, one of the people I followed in the book is Gary Friedman, who is one of the world's renowned experts on conflict. He has helped literally thousands of people through really difficult conflicts, from divorces to labor disputes, you name it. He's written books about it. He taught negotiation at Harvard and Stanford. And so, a few years ago, some of his neighbors asked him if he would run for office in their little town in California, which made so much sense, right? Because even in their little town, politics was starting to get kind of ugly. The meetings were really unpleasant. There were a lot of fights about

what seemed to be kind of small stuff, and they figured, who better to heal the town and politics than Gary? And this made a certain kind of sense to him. He was looking to travel less. He's getting older, wanted to see his grandkids, so he decided sure, he would run for office. And he did, and he won in a landslide. And as he puts it, it took about an eighth of a second before he got sucked into high conflict in politics because that's how it's designed, right? And he was not applying all the things that he did in his professional world to politics. He was allowing the normal rules of the games game to operate. Ok, so fast forward, he loses two years of his peace of mind to this high conflict, he becomes someone who is unrecognizable to his family and friends.

Amanda Ripley: This is very common for people in high conflict, as they will at some point your family and loved ones will say to you that they don't recognize you. Hopefully, hopefully, you still have loved ones who can say that to you. And he wasn't sleeping well, he was, you know, he just was spinning all the time about the injustices and how he'd been mistreated by his opponents. And so then, after about two years, he hit a sort of saturation point. And this is how he began to get out. So, this is finally answering your question, which is usually there's some kind of shock that happens. It could be small. It could be a gang violence in Chicago, it can be a snowstorm. So, a week goes by, nobody gets shot, and people have a moment to step back from the conflict. And they start to realize that the losses far, far outweigh the gains at this point, and they start to question some of the things that they have been sort of assuming that have been operating on automatic. So that's what happened with Gary. His he wasn't up for reelection yet, but his allies on the board were and they all lost, and he realized that he had no power left on the board, even though he had two more years to serve.

Amanda Ripley: And it kind of created this opening where he could reflect on what had happened, and he realized that he had to change what he was doing to excavate himself out of the tar pits, right? So, the first thing he did, if you think about those four things we talked about that tend to lead to high conflict. He had to unwind those exact things, right? So, when it, when we talk about conflict entrepreneurs. In his case, he had been relying as a political advisor on a neighbor and friend who came out of, she's a political organizer nationally. So, she was very understandably using the rules of national politics and the adversarial culture we're in and applying them to a very small political race. So, she would use words like war and kill and, you know, exaggerated grandiose language, which is always a sign of high conflict. And so, he started relying on his wife instead as his political adviser because she was beloved in the community, knew everyone really well, and was less quick to assume the worst about people. So, the other thing he did was to try to dial down the power of the binary identities. So, he had started thinking of everyone as being in two camps. The new guard, which was him, right? The change agents, the upstarts, and then the old guard, which were his opponents who had been in office much longer.

Amanda Ripley: And this was in some ways there was a grain of truth to it. There often is right with some of these powerful group identities. But in fact, even in his little town, it was hard to sort everyone into two buckets, right? Because people are complicated and some people don't quite fit, and some people just wanted to serve their community, and some people like getting together and having snacks, you know, I mean, there's all different incentives for people to show up to these meetings. And the same is true, obviously at a national level, but much more obvious, right? I mean, you cannot put seventy-four million people you've never met into one box like its madness, but it feels very right and normal when you're in conflict.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah.

Amanda Ripley: So, he had to stop even in his own head, thinking of people that way and sort of re-humanize them to think of them as more than one thing. So, he would talk to his neighbors about their dogs because he had a dog and talk to them about gardening because he has a garden. And you know, it sounds silly, but it was genuine, which is really important, and it was a way to start to see them as whole people, and also for them importantly, to see him as a whole person who is flawed.

Whitney Johnson: He reframed the "us".

Amanda Ripley: Yeah, right, to make it bigger.

Whitney Johnson: He changed his definition of "us".

Amanda Ripley: Yeah, that's what you want to do is expand "us" in whatever creative ways you can.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah. And where does the corruption piece come in in that story?

Amanda Ripley: Yeah. I mean, I think it's less obvious than it is with, you know, Chicago gang violence or Colombia's Civil War or other things in the book. But what's, what's important is the perception of corruption, right? That is just as important as the actual level of corruption. And I think in this particular town, there was a sense that there is a sense that things were unfair like the system was rigged in favor of the rich, and that was not untrue. Right. So, there was again, a grain of truth to it, but that kind of sense of inequality between the people who, who had a, just a huge amount of wealth and the people who didn't. That is the kind of thing where it makes it easy for conflict entrepreneurs to step into the void and offer a scapegoat or an explanation that is simplified but satisfying. Humiliation, in Gary's case, he had to own that himself. I mean, he wasn't the only one, but he had to realize that he had gone into this, claiming he was doing this act of service for his little town. But in fact, he was trying to prove out his whole career and see if he could fix politics in the United States. So, there was this real sense of ego. Involved, which he fully admits to his great credit, right, if only every politician could be so humble and reflective. And he had to admit to himself, first of all, that he was bringing a lot of baggage to this job that he wasn't really being open about, even to himself. So, when people were dismissing him or belittling him or not running the meetings the way, he wanted to run them, it felt much worse, right. Then it would have otherwise, because he was up on high in this special category of expert coming in to save the day hero, really, right?

Amanda Ripley: And how dare they? You know, how dare they question him? So, he had a lot at stake, and that was important for him to just start to realize and try to loosen some of his grip. Because ironically, he was going to fail, like he was going to upend his whole model of conflict mediation by bringing that to the table and so releasing his grip on that to some extent meant, you know, lots of things he had to do, but first of all, had to be aware of it, and then try to avoid humiliating everyone else. So, there was this one time he called me very excited. He would give me these updates, which is great. And you know, he realized that some of his, his opponents tried not to think of them that way anymore. But some of his opponents on the board were doing something that he felt was in violation of the regulations. And his first instinct was to hold a public meeting sort of a gotcha encounter and which he would have been within his rights to do. But again, remember that your first instinct in conflict is never helpful. So his second instinct was to take a beat and still hold them accountable and address this problem without publicly embarrassing them, because that was only going to make them dig in, you know? So, he found small ways to remove the sense of embarrassment or shame or humiliation.

Whitney Johnson: Was he successful?

Amanda Ripley: Yes, that's the great news. Thank you for asking. soon as I bury the lead on that, but yeah, he. So, two years, so two years were lost. Essentially, things got worse in the town. No progress was made. Things they really needed to work on, like the water rate needed to be raised, the infrastructure. They had a lot of concerns about, you know, weather, and climate change. Those were like real problems they needed to address, and they weren't addressing them. So, I don't know if this sounds familiar to anyone in America, but this is Congress, so in a very micro diorama size. So then, after excavating himself out of high conflict and into good conflict, which was a slow, painstaking process. A lot got done. They fixed the road, they managed to deal with each other in ways that didn't keep them up at night. He once called me to share a voicemail he'd gotten from one of the fellow board members who, who was just thanking him for the way he managed a conflict within the meeting and what he said was great, he said. The neighbor said I felt like I could listen to them both and not have to choose sides, and it felt really good. So that was really nice. And so, he found these small ways to interrupt the feedback loops that you get into in high conflict. And, and you know, the truth is, no one else was happy, either. So other people made changes as well, but because they wanted a better kind of conflict. And so it is in the end, you know, a happy story that this is possible. This can be done. You know, obviously, it's easier in a tiny town in Northern California, but the behavior isn't that different, honestly.

Whitney Johnson: And there are lots of tiny towns all over the globe. So, lots of tiny towns aggregated make lots of big towns. It's a remarkable story. I had this reflection, Amanda, as I was reading your book and I wondered, and I love your thoughts on this when you grow up in a religious context, which I did and I'm deeply devout in my faith and there's this clear sense of right and wrong. Do you find that individuals in that situation, it ends up being very

much an anchor? It is. But I wondered, are we sometimes more prone to high conflict because of that idea of right and wrong? Any thoughts on that?

Amanda Ripley: Yeah, it's so interesting, right? I just was talking with a man who gave a sermon at his church. He's a congregant, but he would occasionally give sermons and, he said one thing that led to literally two years of conflict, like people turning on each other, and eventually, he and his wife stopped going to the church they've been going to for years and years. It's very painful and I won't get into all the details, but I've got a lot of people reaching out like this, a lot of pastors. And, you know, I mean, there's a lot of conflict in all kinds of institutions right now, but definitely, churches and synagogues and mosques are part of a part of this. So, it is. There's a paradox. There are a bunch of paradoxes that you find when you study high conflict, and one of them is that groups, and I would include spiritual groups, especially. Can they have the power to create good conflict, to enforce norms of decency and humility that keep us from collapsing into dehumanization, right? And groups have the power to enforce conformism and purity of ideology and a sense that "we are better than," and as Curtis, the gang leader, the former gang leader, I mentioned is he likes to put it any time there's a "better than" and a "less than", there's always room for war. So, I think it's that combination. It's not like having strong sort of values and a sense of right and wrong. But do you feel like your group is better than right than others? Or that there's no redemption? There's no way to make a mistake and come back from it, right? That's where we get into trouble as humans. I don't know. What do you think of that?

Whitney Johnson: I really like what you said, and I'm actually going to potentially ask you to repeat it, but this idea of, of how we talked about it, it can be very much a stabilizing force. But there's there is a paradox there, of it does create the sense of anchoring and it does help with the community. In fact, when you set it, I felt very moved by it of this sense of right and wrong and doing good and being kind in your community. But it also can create conformism. It's very much a both-and, and so I think.

Amanda Ripley: Yeah.

Whitney Johnson: I think what's powerful for me, is that, especially as a child where you're trying to say, you know, this is, this is right, this is wrong and you're trying to identify for people that works as a young child. But if you never graduate to, you are all, we are all, equal as human beings in our humanity. If we don't graduate to that, then we move to that place of high conflict. And, and I think as I as I read your book and thought about this, none of us is immune. I think we all can move to this place of high conflict. And I think that that's actually where I'd like to go next is. What are one or two things that I can do to know when I might be going to that place? And you may have already answered this, but from an individual level, I'd love it if you'd summarize. And then also one or two things that I can do to stay in this place of good conflict.

Amanda Ripley: Some of the things in a way, it's easier to do individually. Right? Then than to fix the systems and institutions we are in. Both need to happen. Just to be clear, right, both need to happen. We need changes up high and down low and inside and outside all those things. But one thing I tell people is, look, we can't control what other people do, unfortunately. What we can at least control is try not to get in high conflict in our own heads because I'll tell you what it is hard on you physically, emotionally, spiritually. You will pay a price and so will your loved ones. So even if the other side is not being fair, not fighting fair. Maybe even a threat to you like a real physical threat. Those are big problems. And you know what? You want to keep your head. You want to keep your wits about you in that kind of conflict. So, the more I've worked on this, the more I've started to appreciate the power of recognizing high conflict in Yourself first right and then other things have to happen. So, I'm not saying that that's enough, right? But it's more than we maybe think because we make a lot of mistakes.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah.

Amanda Ripley: When we're in thrall to high conflict, right?

Whitney Johnson: Right. Well, as I'm listening to you, I'm thinking about what you said about Putin at the beginning, this sense of humiliation. And if I look at it from an individual standpoint, I mean, I'd love to hear your thoughts on that on a group context is if I can monitor for moments where I might be feeling humiliated in some way, I know that that could be a spark. I know that if I'm going to this place of all or nothing, the binaries, that's a

risk. If I have this sense of things aren't safe, things aren't fair. I can't trust what's going on around me. And if I find myself spending time around people who are stoking that sense of there, you know, this isn't right. You shouldn't, you know, on Twitter or whatever. I'm following that and I'm allowing myself to be like, Yeah, yeah, I get the, you know, get the bad guys. Those are all signals to me that I'm going into that place of high conflict and so I can. Once I'm aware of that, I can talk myself down. And as you said a moment ago, yes, it's a group. But if you think one person, if Putin could have walked himself back from this place and it sounds like he's in a place of pain, and so if we're trying to not objectify anybody, we need to recognize he's in a place of pain. What he is doing is wrong, absolutely a hundred percent. But if he could have walked himself back, we would be in a very different place right now.

Amanda Ripley: Right, right. And it's hard once the war gets going right, its hard once violence starts. And so that I agree one person does matter and I want to just really, you know, kind of drill down on that point very briefly and we can go back to things you can do. So, we right now in the United States are at the lowest point of political tensions we will have for quite some time. I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but the research on this is really clear because we're midway between presidential elections, right?

Whitney Johnson: That is very bad news, Amanda.

Amanda Ripley: I know, I know, I know you can edit this out. That's fine. But, but we know we've studied a lot of conflict all over the world. And so, we know this, and we know that violence, political violence goes up right before and after elections for lots of reasons, particularly in a context where you have high levels of corruption, conflict entrepreneurs, group identities, and humiliation, which we have. So, and we also have a well-armed population, right? So, so that we can predict. So, then what? Where does that leave us other than being scared and upset? Well, it turns out there is really good research on the power of regular people to normalize violence, so there isn't a lot of good research on anything, conclusively. But here's one that I can tell you, right? We know that if regular people go on Twitter or Facebook or just in talking to their friends or whatever. They say violence is never OK. It's never OK, not for my side, not for your side. It's never OK, and it won't be OK. This is not how we do things here that it actually has an effect in the research when people are exposed to those messages and it doesn't have to be messages from highly influential people, although that's nice, right? It can be regular people in your network. Then people themselves express less support for political violence. So, part of what we need to do is to denormalize the kinds of antisocial, really toxic behaviors that we have seen and will unfortunately see more of. So that's something we can all do right now, right? And also, to give

Whitney Johnson: Wait, wait, no, no pause two seconds, this is really, this is a big deal. So, one of the things I want to ask you to do is share with us two or three tweets or posts on LinkedIn that you have shared that we can put in the show notes. And then as part of your podcast, we will amplify this because I think this is, this is so powerful to me because oftentimes we say, well, what can I do?

Amanda Ripley: Right.

Whitney Johnson: And you're saying to every single one of us, if you will post or say to someone, violence is not OK, that "mean" that's in your head starts to have this contagion effect. Yes, that is powerful. And so, I want to make sure that we really emphasize that if we take nothing else away from this conversation.

Amanda Ripley: I'm glad that you see that because I say this, I've said this to other people, and it kind of goes in one ear and out the other. So, but I feel like guys, I mean, look, you know, we're all worried about democracy, Republican, and Democrat. I mean, it's like 80 percent of Americans are worried about the health of our democracy. And lots of things matter when it comes to democracy, right? You need, you need more trust in our institutions, more trust in our journalism. You need better voting protection laws. You need less corrupt political systems. But guess what? Violence matters more than anything else. So, once you get into violence, then you get into these feedback loops of high conflict because then there's a fear, right? And then there's revenge. And then what happens very quickly is the public becomes much more supportive of electing a strongman dictator and giving up some of their freedoms.

Whitney Johnson: Because they're afraid. Because they're afraid,

Amanda Ripley: Because we're afraid. Right. And I you know what? I'd rather have security or the perception of security than chaos and lawlessness, right? So that's very normal. So, one of the things, if you're worried about the future of democracy, one of the things we must do is denormalize violence and build relationships. Because once violence happens, if you don't have relationships or at least rapport with people across political or racial, or religious divides, right? Then it's very hard to stop that autopilot thing that happens where things get worse and worse and worse.

Whitney Johnson: So important. Really, really wonderful. You said something that I in your book about holding fast to the understory. What do you mean by that?

Amanda Ripley: Oh, I'm glad you asked, because it's one of the other things people can do to avoid getting sucked into high conflict, even in their own heads, is to investigate the understory. So, try to figure out what am I really upset about here? Right? There's a story in the book about a couple that just goes to war over who is going to get the Legos in their divorce settlement. Right? So, what was that really about? Well, it was really about they felt like their child's affection was going to go wherever the Legos went, right? But often people don't even know what the understory is of the conflict they're in. This is something that Curtis does in Chicago, with young men and women who are at risk of getting shot or shooting someone else. Is to try to figure out what is the root cause of this conflict, and often it is a sense of humiliation or fear or fear of not belonging. So that's, that's usually in there, and you want to try to ask questions of yourself and others to figure out what, what are the Legos really about? And just to take a quick personal example, I noticed when my own parenting. Parenting really, you know, I think in my experience, it's very humbling and it reveals all of your weaknesses, right?

Whitney Johnson: So, ditto. I'm right there with you, Amanda.

Amanda Ripley: Yeah

Whitney Johnson: Continue.

Amanda Ripley: And so, yes, so I noticed over the years that when I'm sort of, at my worst self. One of my worst selves, let's say as a parent, is when I feel like we are being rude to someone like a service person, right? By being late for an Uber or, you know, doing something that might be annoying to a waiter or something like that. And I was trying to figure it out because it's not like, I'm a super nice person all the time, right? So, I'm like, what is the deal with this? And I realized that, and I hate to be someone who's always blaming their mother for everything, but she had her own demons. Trust me, that she was conquering, but my mom used to have this way of sometimes being really entitled and impolite in my view with service like a waiter, right? She'd asked for a better table. Or there was this real. She brought a lot of meaning to like really small interactions that shouldn't matter that much. And so as a kid, this was just, oh, so cringy, right? Like, I just was like, oh, this is killing me to have to have those awkward moments and feel bad and embarrassed. And I think that's what it's about because in these cases, I'm describing now as an adult. It really wasn't that egregious, right? Like, it's not great. I mean, it doesn't mean that I'm wrong. Like, I am right. Like, you shouldn't keep a taxi driver waiting, right? Like they're making money by the minute. But the way I was reacting, I could tell, was just a little bit disproportionate. You know, internally, if nothing else like I was just, you know, my heart was me and my heart rate was accelerating. I was finding myself just really fixating on it, getting very agitated beyond what was, you know, kind of reasonable. So. So noticing what is the understory of this, you know, it's right. And then that's, that's very helpful.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah, noticing the understory and also you said, you said just now, and I think you said earlier this idea when something starts to feel Texas big like just this is just so big.

Amanda Ripley: I'm going to steal that. That's great.

Whitney Johnson: And it's not that big. That is a signal to you that you've been triggered and you're about to enter the zone of high conflict. And, and I think that's really, really helpful. And I want to go back to this thing that you talked about your mom because I think this is really important. And then we'll, we'll wrap up, is that this idea of struggling with bouts of depression and anxiety, which I think right now mental health becomes even more

important. When we're struggling with that, we can revert to anger and blame, and when we feel threatened, which is often. And so those, so this comes back to the importance of tending to our mental health because that will help abate much of this as well. So, this is kind of a prior, prior, prior, but I think that's important.

Amanda Ripley: It's funny that I hadn't made that connection until you just said it, but like half the country's acting like my mom. And it's because they're afraid and they're upset and they're frustrated, you know, and because we've had like a miserable two years and there's a real sense of, you know, nobody knows what, nobody's driving this train. You know, like and I have no control of my life.

Whitney Johnson: Right.

Amanda Ripley: And that's not how humans are wired.

Whitney Johnson: Right. right.

Amanda Ripley: But that's interesting. Yeah.

Whitney Johnson: So, I was going to ask you what connections you'd made as we were having our conversation. Is that your connection or is there something else?

Amanda Ripley: I think that's my connection. Yeah, like, oh, wow, I'm actually this is familiar to me. And in some ways, maybe I should try to make that connection more explicit because I think. You know, I think there is a sense like, oh my God. Everybody is just behaving terribly at school board meetings and in grocery stores and. And that is true. Right. There's a lot of bad behavior, but like again, we have to understand where it's coming from, or we have no shot at dealing with it. I mean, I think sometimes I feel like there should be like a national holiday of just recovery from this pandemic. Like, I mean, it's just like, I mean, we have a mental health crisis, a lot of loss and grieving that hasn't been done. I don't know what the solution is, but we need to talk about it because it's coming out sideways, right? I see it again and again. People are just taking things out on each other.

Whitney Johnson: Right.

Amanda Ripley: All over the world.

Whitney Johnson: Well, you even said at the beginning, Putin was too isolated. I mean, all the way back there. So, I like the idea, one day of just, everybody taking a break. That would be lovely. How can people engage with you if they want to connect with you? Obviously, they can buy your book, but if it sounds like you're getting a lot of emails, a lot of interaction, what's the best way for people to reach out?

Amanda Ripley: One kind of fun way that is different than all the usual ways is that you can if you have a problem that you're having in conflict or whatever, and you want to talk about it with people who understand, you can reach out. I host a podcast, a Slate podcast, called *How to!* It's, *How To!* And we that's all we do is we take listener concerns, problems they're having. Sometimes it's about conflict. Sometimes it's not. And then we find the perfect person to talk to them. Sometimes it's an official expert, right. But sometimes it's an unofficial expert who just lived a lot of life and knows what it's like to be in their shoes. And then the three of us workshop the problem together on the show. So that's, that's one thing, and then.

Whitney Johnson: I love that, by the way. That's fantastic.

Amanda Ripley: Oh good! Yeah, it's been a lot of fun, too.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah, that's fantastic.

Amanda Ripley: To kind of, you know, hand the reins over and let, let listeners bring us their problems.

Whitney Johnson: As you sit at the top of the stairs and watch them.

Amanda Ripley: Yeah, right, exactly. Exactly. This time I have some backup, you know, I bring in someone else.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah, you do.

Amanda Ripley: But you can write to us at *How to!* at Slate.com and you can also leave us a voicemail, which you can find, at the slate website. But then I'm also on Twitter @AmandaRipley straightforward. And the book is called *High Conflict*, and that's available everywhere.

Whitney Johnson: Any final thoughts?

Amanda Ripley: No, I really enjoyed this conversation, you made me think and maybe reflect on some things that I hope I'll be able to carry with me and share with others. And you know, I think these are, these are difficult times, and you know, it's, it's important that we have hard conversations that go deeper. So, I appreciate your willingness to do that on the show. So, thank you.

Whitney Johnson: Thank you!

Three key takeaways from my conversation with Amanda. Number one, your first instinct in conflict is never helpful. Our evolutionary brains are wired to protect our own, to take sides, to raise the alarm when we are threatened. It's great for survival, but not for modern society. It takes work to step back and think carefully about our response to conflict so that it can remain productive and not spin out of control. Amanda's key advice. Address the problem without public embarrassment. Never make an example of your opponent, as humiliation is a key ingredient of high conflict. Dial down the binary rhetoric. It's not about us versus them, but about all of us. This isn't a cure-all for conflict, but it is a safeguard against dangerous escalation.

Number two. High conflict in our own heads is a bad place. I think we're all guilty of this. It's hard not to look at the world sometimes and say, what are these people thinking? Even if you're not in open conflict with others, you're still getting binary in your own mind. You're taking sides and grouping up with like-minded people, possibly on social media. Amanda says you'll pay a price and so will your loved ones. If you can, stop carrying the burden of high conflict.

Number three. Big solutions can start with us. The world's conflicts are overwhelming, and it's easy to feel powerless when reading the news. But I felt inspired when Amanda touted the power of regular people to denormalize violence. Just saying publicly that violence is never OK really does have an effect. Maybe it will reach seven people. Maybe it will be seven thousand people, but we all want this. We all need to hear it. And the firm reminder from a loved one or a colleague might be all it takes to push this message forward. I plan to do it, and I hope you will, too.

For more, on being hopeful in the face of overwhelming conflict. Listen to Jacqueline Novogratz, episode 233. A great discussion on weighing risks can be heard with General Stanley McChrystal, episode 245. And for more on moving out of a high conflict situation, listen to Coss Marte, episode 5. He was formerly incarcerated and now has a highly successful business. Thank you again to Amanda Ripley for being our guest. Thank you for listening. Thank you to our producer, Matt Silverman; audio engineer and editor, Whitney Jobe; and production assistant Stephanie Brummel.

I'm Whitney Johnson

And this is Disrupt Yourself.