

Rippel—Unsung Stewards Podcast Transcript

Season 5|Episode 1|Dr. Arvind Singhal

The Stories and Legacies We Live By

[00:00:00] **Becky:** Welcome to Unsung Stewards, a podcast series presented by the Rippel Foundation. I'm Becky Payne, President and CEO of Rippel, which is dedicated to fostering equitable health and well-being. Our podcast spotlights and celebrates individual stewards, people working with others to create the conditions that everyone needs to thrive.

[00:00:21] At Rippel, we are dedicated to a future where everyone thrives with no exceptions. Rippel and our partners have committed ourselves to building that future, which starts with building the will among others to join a growing movement to thrive together. This season on Unsung Stewards, we are talking to stewards within that movement. They are all advancing equity and thriving in their communities and bringing others into this work.

[00:00:46] I began this season speaking with Dr. Arvind Singhal, a professor of communications and Director of the Social Justice Initiative at the University of Texas at El Paso. Dr. Singhal has been a teacher, advocate, and organizer for many years. We consider him to be a kindred spirit within the Movement to Thrive Together, and his work on the Positive Deviance approach, a way of developing community-driven solutions by honoring successful outliers and out-of-the-box thinking is a strong example of shared stewardship in practice.

[00:01:19] Today's podcast episode is a little different than our typical format. When I sat down to speak with Arvind, it quickly became clear that he thinks of himself and his world in terms of stories and that each one has many valuable lessons for stewards everywhere. So instead of a live conversation, I offer you a set of stories in Arvind's voice.

[00:01:40] You'll hear me occasionally set up each story, and I invite you to listen deeply to each one.

[00:01:46] Arvind's first story is about his childhood and the journey that helped shape who he is now. He emphasized to me how the legacy he inherited from his family has influenced him and how he thinks about the legacy he wants to

leave behind for his children. Importantly, he reflects on the impact of older generations saying yes to the ideas and dreams of younger generations.

[00:02:09] In stewardship terms, this is akin to building an abundance mindset, as opposed to a scarcity view of what's possible. His intergenerational upbringing weaves together the influence our inherited legacies have on our lives.

[00:02:23] **Arvind:** I'm a product of parents who produced three boys. I'm the youngest. Education was very highly valued, in our modest home. Both my paternal and maternal grandfathers were professors. My paternal grandfather was a professor of mathematics. My maternal grandfather was a professor of physics and then later began to teach glass and ceramics engineering and my paternal grandfather passed away when I was 10. My maternal grandfather passed away when I was 20. And this notion of, inter-generationality, if there's a word like that, or inter-generativity, between these generations was always present in my home. I owe a lot to a four-year experience that I had when my paternal grandparents came to live with us. When my paternal grandfather retired he built a home in Delhi, but for six months of his life he would, he and my grandma, would come stay with us. And he was a teacher at heart and he had three grandsons six, seven, and nine at that time, I was six, and he would give us the equivalent of maybe a quarter if each of his grandkids wrote one page of Hindi in cursive, one page of English in cursive, and I don't think my brothers or I ever missed our opportunity to get a quarter at the end of the day. And so if I have a love for stories, if I have a love for my mind going to places that it goes, if I have a sort of analytical mind, because I did study mechanical engineering and so on I owe a lot to that experience.

[00:04:36] It's a sort of a formative story which you can only make sense of in reverse. Because uh, you know, so he passed away when I was 10. So this education was day in and day out for six months in a year for four years. And and, 7 years after he passed away, I found myself while I was a student of engineering auditioning at All India Radio, which was the Indian national network channel. Father by this time was in a senior management position. So we were in New Delhi and I could audition very easily for Hindi language programming. Including being a host for literary works in Hindi, not just covering events. And also I was a very popular, Becky this may surprise you, a very popular Western music host.

[00:05:31] And and, I hosted quiz programs and talks and I used to do that, at school and in college. So I, in connecting the dots in trying to understand me in terms of where I am, I do owe it to my ancestors in terms of where I am today. I

think the shift from engineering to getting a master's degree in radio television and film production, MA, was a very natural one for me, even though it probably was completely non-normative off the script.

[00:06:16] And my parents were like, "Yeah, of course, we see him work on his engineering problems, but not so much, but he spends all night writing his radio scripts and so let him go." And this comes from the progressive ancestral environment that I came in that the answer, no matter what the question, was always yes. It was always yes. And that's something which I think I've passed on to my children.

[00:06:48] **Becky:** In this next clip, Arvind describes stories that live within him as lines of code that describe how he operates in the world. Now, it is not often that we have a guest who so clearly reflects the stewardship practices. He shared several stories that highlight stewardship practices such as valuing unheard voices and building trust, changing the story to cultivate stories of hope, shared humanity, and mutual strength, what it means to create opportunities to come together across seemingly disparate perspectives, and what it looks like when we choose not to fight with each other, but rather to reimagine a path forward together, based in love instead of repeating old patterns that no longer serve us.

[00:07:32] **Arvind:** My first story is a Lincoln story and it's an important story to me. So Lincoln on a battlefield was once in front of a Union soldier, he came across many Union soldiers, as we know, this one saluted him, thrust his hand out, and shook the Commander in Chief, the President's hand, suddenly to realize that this was a tall man.

[00:07:54] And so he said, "Oh, Mr. President, you're tall. How tall are you?" And Lincoln's response, and this is one of my lines of code, without adding an, without batting an eyelid was, "Son, like you, I'm tall enough that my feet reach the ground." Now it's a simple story, but this story speaks to me at multiple levels.

[00:08:23] Talk about stewardship. Here's a Commander in Chief, and his response is not, I'm six-four and a half, which is the expert response. And we are so good at that, no? That's the reason why we argue about data all the time. "No, it's this. No, it's that. No, this is what it means." Lincoln cuts through that, forget about the fact that I'm Commander in Chief.

[00:08:46] Forget about the fact that I'm President. Forget about the fact that I'm six-four and a half. He's saying, son, that's the relational. Like you, the familial, tall enough, the humility. And in essence, to me, he's saying wisdom lies not

just with a tall man, President, Commander in Chief. It's distributed. And that's central to my work in Positive Deviance.

[00:09:12] The answer is there. The wisdom's there, provided you have the humility to suspend your expertise, even if it's temporarily. We are who we are. Becky is who she is. But can Becky in a certain moment, whether it's a battlefield in Gettysburg or wherever suspend that expertise and create the enabling conditions for the other to feel that they stand? Okay. Second story. Simple one. Mother Teresa. I had a correspondence relationship with her.

"Mother, will you march with us against the Vietnam war?" When she was on a private visit to D.C. During Watergate, and she says, "My child, if you're going to have a march in Washington against the Vietnam War, I am so sorry, my child, but if you were to choose, if you were to choose to have a march in Washington for peace, I will be the first to lead." Now this is an important part. It's a reminder to me each and every day we are against so many things, right? And what's wrong with it? We are against war, we are against sexual discrimination, we are against racism, we are against, X, Y, and Z. And that's fine, but you know that line of you grow in the direction of the questions you ask.

[00:10:37] And what Mother Teresa is really saying is, if you ask what you are for, you're going to be at a different place, because now you're not looking at, what you're against, what's the problem, what are the deficits, what are the gaps. Of course, you want to overcome that problem, but you begin at a different place by asking, what are you for?

[00:10:58] And, what are the assets, what's working? I want to share with you, Becky, if you would allow me, a story that I truly understood in some depth when I was in India four weeks ago. When I'm in Delhi, almost pretty much the first thing I do is I go to the house where Gandhi lived for the hundred, the last 144 days of his life, when, you know, where at his prayer meeting, he was assassinated.

[00:11:26] Now, this time I was in Calcutta and I went to a few Gandhi sites, but I went to a place called Hyderi Manzil, which is just the name of a big house now beautifully refurbished. It's a museum. But this is the house where Mahatma Gandhi slept when India awoke to freedom. He didn't want to be in Delhi because he was, it was a sad day for him that here we are giving birth to a nation, but not one, but two.

[00:11:59] And Gandhi was at this big house located in a Muslim neighborhood. Now he's a Hindu man and, Calcutta had the worst riots. Muslim and Hindu who had usually lived in peace, but now, you're being pulled away with partition and there was tremendous violence. Gandhi decides to stay in this house in a Muslim neighborhood and a few days into his arrival and living here, when the riots really speeded up, Gandhi goes on a fast.

[00:12:33] Basically he says, "If this violence doesn't stop, there's no point in me living. Nope." The fast goes on for about 80-plus hours. And he's dying, right? And each day, of course, the Hindu and Muslim leaders are coming together. And and, the violence is ebbing because, the holy man, the Mahatma, is dying because people are being violent.

[00:12:57] And on the third day, Gandhi asks, they are, like, pleading with him, "Please, Bapu, please break your fast." And he says, "Has the violence stopped?" They say, "Oh, no, we had three incidents." And he said, "Okay, my fast continues." And he was very obstinate. Pandit Nehru, our prime minister, makes a plea.

[00:13:15] He flies from Delhi too. And he says, "You people, Bapu is dying. And it's all because of this madness. Will it ever stop?" And the next morning the door suddenly opens and there's a Hindu man with a machete and he throws the machete at the foot of Gandhi's bed and says, "You live. Eat! You live! I'm going to hell anyway. There's no redemption for me." And so Gandhi calls him, and Gandhi says "Why are you saying that you're going to go to hell?" And he said, "Oh, I, I just killed a little baby." And Gandhi said, "Why did you kill the baby?" and he said, "Because they killed mine." So here's a Hindu man saying he killed a Muslim baby because Muslims had killed his baby.

[00:14:06] "You live, you eat. Here's my machete." And Gandhi calls him. And he says "There may be a way out. I'd like you to find a baby, as, as big as, yours, the one that you lost and the one that you killed. And make sure it's an orphan. And I would also like you to see if you can find a baby who's a Muslim baby."

[00:14:30] "And there's a way out for you. Try to see if you can raise him like a Muslim, as a Hindu man." And so this is a quintessential story for me. And because it tells me where am I in the picture. What am I going to do? And through this mirroring of where am I in the picture, and what's my way out? I perhaps can go to a place where I have not been, and thereby create the conditions for somebody else to go to a place where they've not been.

[00:15:06] Now, we don't know whether this man actually adopted a child or not, but that's not important. What is important is there's always a way out. Becky, translating this to my own life, my dear and beautiful wife of 31 years, Anuja, in 2017 decided that she was going to move back to India. Now, this was a very difficult time for me, 31 years, two beautiful children.

[00:15:34] And there were reasons why it was very apparent why she was just done with householding because our younger son took to alcohol and went through 11 rehabs. And by the time the ninth came along, after three and a half years of his affliction. Um, she was like, this is I can't, I just can't. And for my own mental peace, I just, I just need to survive, I need to. And so she moved back to India. And for me, this was, obviously there's like a mayhem around me. Rejection. What? 31 years. And then, of course, she had the grace of telling me genuinely that "I knew I could say this to you and you will understand." And I really didn't, but I did.

[00:16:26] Because together we had faced some of these kinds of things before. And yeah, it was jarring. Yes, we filed our papers after being together for seven months. We lived in the same house. We rewrote the story of what a divorce should be.

[00:16:40] We circulated the divorce decree to our boys, to her brothers, to, my friends and her friends so that they could all have input. And, talk about a community watching over a divorce. And and then, a public announcement by both of us that we have chosen to for reasons of our own to part ways and while we no longer will be partners we will be parents to our children and we'll be friends to you because nothing changes unless language changes.

[00:17:15] I'm thinking, you know, until the story changes. And when my son, came to live with me after his mother had returned to India and he was an alcoholic many things happened, you know, the first week I found bottles in the trash. And then the question is, what do I do? This sort of that Gandhi moment, no machetes, but I've got bottles.

[00:17:35] And there's the instinctive part of me, which is like, who the heck are you? Yeah. To abuse me by abusing alcohol and coming to, and that's, that's the part of me, but you'd tame it down a little. So I bring the bottles inside. I wash them over a period of a day. I dry them. I perfume them.

[00:17:58] And now what the heck do I do? This is, there's no grand plan, but that's my way of processing it, right? And then I take them to his room. Okay.

One instinct goes, dump them on his bed. And then you say, okay why don't I arrange them beautifully on a table and, oh, let me make an altar. Oh, and here's a sculpture of Hanuman, a mythological God of strength and vigor.

[00:18:24] And our son was a preemie baby. So he always had Hanuman by his bedside when he was growing up. And I just leave it there. You know? An altar of his bottles. And my work was done. And he comes home and, goes to his room. He obviously sees what he sees. He comes down and now he's standing behind me and he's, he's got his head down and is like "Dad, what are you going to do with me?" And what is Dad going to do? Dad has already done what he needed to do. And I call his name and I opened my arms and, there he is bawling for 30 minutes. And uh, a year later, I see a Facebook post which says one year sober, and now he's six and a half years sober.

[00:19:10] Why am I telling you these stories? It is inside-out work. But you need a certain software, I think, for me, whereby which you make sense of what's happening. And the question that I ask myself is, how do I create the conditions? So that I realize a better version of me, the conditions for my son to realize a better version of him, but never forgetting that we are connected.

[00:19:42] And that's the love part, right? The interconnectedness of our beings and Gandhi's response is very much in that line. Always. Realizing that we are connected, but yet at the same time, what do I have the power to do?

[00:20:00] **Becky:** Before we go into the next clip, I want to invite you to think about the power of his reminder that nothing changes unless language changes. Now let's listen to Arvind, bring it all together, and share his thoughts on how we can build collective will and create the conditions for people to come together by being intentional about cultivating trust and focusing on the quality of our relationships, which enable the change we are seeking. The stewardship practices of earning trust, weaving our vested interests and learning and adapting together.

[00:20:32] **Arvind:** So the question is, what do we do, right? Again, I can only talk of me. I've talked about the importance of changing the story from the inside out. And one of the little things you learn, the only thing you learn is that it all comes down to the quality of the interactions. Mother Teresa would always say, when somebody would walk up to her and say, "Oh, Mother, I'm here."

[00:20:54] "I'm here to learn. And, I need to learn how to serve." And she'd say, "My child, there's really nothing to learn. Yeah, begin here, begin now, and begin with whoever is in front of you." And then she would remind you when people would tell her that, "Oh, Mother, you're so great," and she would say, "My child, remember, none of us can be great, but all of us in the here in the now can do small things with great love."

[00:21:23] So getting practical. What does it mean for me or for Becky or for Rippel or for any community? And this is a universal... things are going to tip, we know if there's trust if there's understanding, if there's listening, if there is suspension of judgment. It's always going to be there. And how we create the conditions for people to come together, absolutely critical. We are so blind, Becky, to this. This is the software that we don't learn. For most of us, the software of sharing and convening is standing up and delivering. But I would say a singular purpose for me, if you're bringing 50, 60, 70 people is to make sure that each person gets to connect with every other person, inviting people into a conversation: you matter, you belong.

[00:22:28] And that is really actually a skill. It's very teachable. I think that's where the magic is really. So it's not what do we need to do specifically? I think we just need to get better. We need to ask better questions when we convene because convening is nothing but an opportunity to take the same resources, the same people who are there, and transform through invitation inclusion the group outcomes right away. And most of the transformation happens in relationships. And then you say, ah, the science of complexity and complex adaptive systems.

[00:23:14] **Becky:** I'll let that be the final word, Arvind. Thank you so much. You've given me and us and hopefully our listeners so much to reflect on and think about. And while it is complex, it also feels so stunningly simple to return to the basics of human interaction, curiosity, remembering that there was a time when we didn't know what was impossible, but we were struck by how much seemed possible.

[00:23:51] And to return to that sort of innate human drive to connect with other people. We may have trained ourselves out of it through years of living, but I think what I'm taking away from you is that there is so much for movements and groups who are trying to do better by society to return to in age-old lessons and stories and what we are born into the world wanting to do, which is cling and connect and learn and grow with other humans. So thank you for this time.

[00:24:26] **Arvind:** Thank you, Becky. I so appreciate you.

[00:24:28] **Becky:** Thank you for listening to this episode of Unsung Stewards. We hope you took inspiration that will help you grow in your own stewardship of a thriving future for all. I want to thank today's guests for joining us and for their work to improve the communities they serve. I'd also like to thank the team that makes this podcast possible: Molly Belsky, Laila Hussain, and Amanda McIntosh. If you liked this episode and want to hear others, you can rate and review this podcast or follow us on your favorite podcast app so you never miss an episode. I'm your host, Becky Payne, President and CEO of the Rippel Foundation. To learn more about our guests and their work, please visit our website at www.rippel.org. We all hold deep gratitude for those who have been willing to share their stories with us.