‘Something Wicked This Way Comes’

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‘By the pricking of my thumbs, something wicked this way comes’, is a quotation from William Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, spoken by the Second Witch in Act 4, Scene 1, to signify Macbeth’s approach. In Shakespeare’s play, the line uses folklore, where a tingling in the thumbs signals evil, to foreshadow Macbeth’s arrival and highlight his transformation into a monstrous figure. As a society, we have had a tingling in our thumbs for decades and, like many mild symptoms that can signify deeper problems, we have been resolute in ignoring it, thinking that it will just go away of its own accord. But that tingling hasn’t gone away. It has only become worse over time to the point of criticality. As a society we feel this pain in many different ways, including in many aspects of our daily lives, most of which are universal: the impacts of climate change; social injustice; crime; conflict; food insecurity; environmental harm; and health and wellbeing. We can add to that list the global rise in authoritarian and anti-democratic movements. To make matters worse, and drawing on the influence of Systems Thinking, all of these complex and so-called ‘wicked problems’ are deeply entangled, making them even harder to resolve without risking further and deeper problems occurring elsewhere. The growth of authoritarian and anti-democratic

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Figure 1: A neat and uncomplicated representation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Source: https://sdgs.un.org/goals.

movements, for example, can impact the way people think about and react to some of those other problems, such as climate change.

Responding to Marte Spangen's timely and thoughtful contribution, based in particular around that global rise in anti-democratic movements and archaeologists' potential role as social and political mediators in democratic discourse, I use this opportunity of a response to provide further context to her arguments, offering a wider political framing of the Indigenous perspectives that are the focus of her contribution. In framing Spangen's arguments, I highlight the urgency with which archaeologists must address such wicked problems, and the creativity required to succeed. I also consider what success might look like when the problems are, by definition, irresolvable.

In my recent book *Wicked Problems for Archaeologists: Heritage as Transformative Practice* (Schofield 2024) I outlined the history of wicked problems research, which draws on psychology, planning and policy studies, as well as economics and environmental history, amongst others. I described the way the term 'wicked problems' has been used as well as defining some alternative but related concepts. For example, I explored Systems Thinking and entanglement as ways to understand the complexity of these

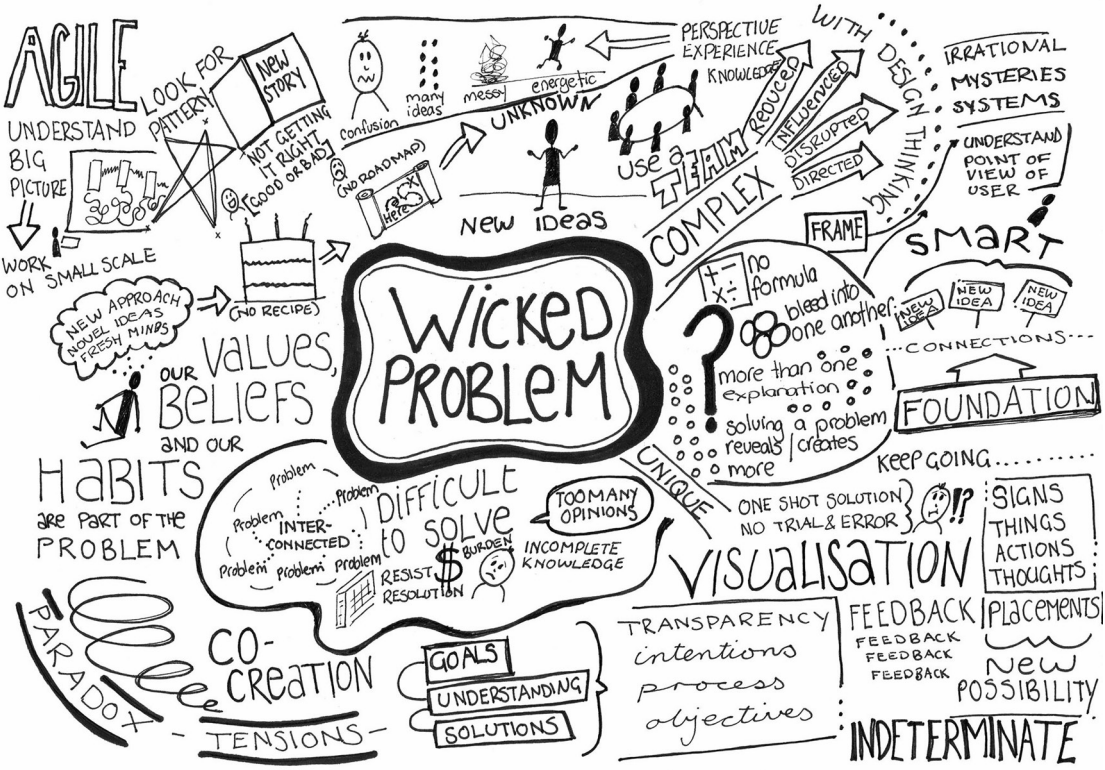

Figure 2: A messy depiction of Wicked Problems. Image source: LoraCBR CC BY 2.0. Source: https://archive.discoversociety.org/2018/07/03/why-i-am-staying-optimistic-about-the-world-and-its-wicked-problems/

wicked problems, the key to which is their definition; that such problems are, as Spangen states, 'complex, intractable, open-ended, and unpredictable'. I also highlighted 'super-wicked problems' where additional factors further complicate matters, such as the urgency of resolution, and the lack of any central authority to help create it.

In teaching this subject I use two graphical illustrations, which I include here (Figures 1 and 2). The first is a well-known and widely used illustration that shows in a neat and ordered form the seventeen United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals, adopted in 2015 as part of the UN's 2030 Agenda (Figure 1). This is an instantly recognisable and commendably straightforward depiction of those most urgent of problems felt universally and for which resolution is urgently sought. The second illustration was selected from a search-engine 'image' search on 'Wicked Problems' (Figure 2). The image is complex, entangled, and confusing. One doesn't know where to begin, or to end. How does one 'read' such an illustration? Does it even make sense? My point in showing both of these illustrations

together is twofold. First, terminology. Some scholars and policy makers use terms like 'goals' and 'challenges' (e.g. 'global challenges'). This is misleading and unhelpful in this context. Goals and challenges are aspirational; they are things we would like to achieve, like winning a trophy or climbing a mountain. With wicked problems, where there is an existential and, in some cases, an urgent threat to human and planetary health, there is no choice but to act, and fast. We should not be afraid, also, to recognise when problems are likely to be irresolvable and, in those situations, to not lure people into thinking that there is some easy fix. Second, the well-known and widely used UN illustration presents the seventeen 'goals' as if they are compartmentalised, with each being separate from and independent of the others. The 'wicked problems' graphic, on the other hand, implies the opposite: mess, entanglement, and chaos. This is the reality with wicked problems. It is not tidy, and there are no simple solutions. Presenting them in this neatly compartmentalised way to global audiences is also misleading and unhelpful.

As Spangen states in her essay, wicked problems present a conundrum: they are complex to the point of being irresolvable, yet they are also urgently in need of resolution. But as I describe in my book, and as Spangen states in her essay, there is hope. What scholars, policy makers and citizens can do, to good effect, is to design small wins that gradually erode the problem's impact on a local scale, thus nudging towards larger-scale resolution. As psychologist Karl Weick (1984:40) states, small wins are 'concrete outcomes of moderate importance that still create traction and can accumulate to transformative change'. Being a psychologist, Weick recognised benefits in this approach both in terms of eroding the problem, but also giving participants a sense of achievement, increasing the likelihood that they'd want to do more. As Greta Thunberg has famously stated (e.g. 2019): 'no-one is too small to make a difference.'

Spangen's essay, and the propositions that it contains, for example around balancing democratic discourse with the need for inclusive, democratic and multivocal debate on heritage, identity and belonging, is essential not least for its urgency. By drawing on experiences from Indigenous and particularly Saami archaeology, Spangen describes how participatory archaeology in Scandinavia can become more self-reflexive and purposeful. Archaeology, alongside the cognate field of heritage studies, provides topics and arenas for democratic discourse, building social cohesion by discussing and tolerating diverse perspectives. Such outcomes would comprise significant small wins in challenging 'anti-democratic discourse'. As stated in the essay: 'The aim of heritage discussions cannot always be to reach consensus or compromise but perhaps rather to encourage the active listening and dialogue that is the foundation and strength of a democratic

public discourse that is currently challenged by multiple aggressors'. In this proposition lies a compelling and persuasive argument that promoting 'open and democratic debate about the past, identity and belonging in the face of an increasingly anti-democratic discourse' provides an essential foundation for resisting those wishing to undermine democracies.

The key point of Spangen's argument is vital not least in defining the true purpose of heritage in society: heritage concerns the recognition, discussion, and celebration of difference. There is not, and never has been, a 'unified heritage identity'. As Spangen states, by celebrating diversity in all of its forms and manifestations, we can 'enhance belonging and community cohesion across variations, as well as training our tolerance for discussion and diversity'. Success would take the form of small wins that address what, in my book, I refer to as the wicked problem of social injustice. However, given the deep entanglement of wicked problems, these small wins would also and inevitably be felt elsewhere, in relation to climate action for example, food insecurity, and conflict. Learning how to successfully hold conversations around difference and diversity may be amongst the most pressing of needs across contemporary society. And as archaeologists and heritage professionals it is an area in which we have both experience and the data to help support such conversations, not least around, Indigeneity, human origins, and human capacity to accommodate change over millennia. Spangen doesn't go quite this far in her essay, but I have argued elsewhere that, as archaeologists and heritage practitioners, we have a duty of care to create such small wins, given the privileged insight and the expertise that we hold.

I agree with Donna Mertens (2017), who suggests that researchers are at an important point in history – they can be frozen in their tracks, continuing to do research *on* people, collecting, analysing and reporting and moving on; or they can work in a way that stands a better chance of solving some of the world's wicked problems and help achieve economic and social justice *for* people. It is this proposition, that we prioritise working *for* people, that appears central to the argument presented in Spangen's essay.

As Spangen says, successful small wins such as facilitating 'contradictory conversations', can build the 'heritage preparedness' we need in the face of essentialist heritage narratives and anti-democratic, totalitarian approaches to the past. Perhaps we still have capacity to ensure that 'a pricking of the thumbs' is as bad as it gets; that we recognise the symptoms and act upon them with urgency. This keynote essay offers a novel and vital perspective on how to achieve that outcome.

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