

Before We Got Together, I Identified as Gay

[00:00:00] **Jesse (Producer):** None of the voices in the series are ongoing patients of Esther Perel, each episode of Where Should We Begin is a one-time counseling session. For the purposes of maintaining confidentiality, names, and some identifiable characteristics have been removed, but their voices and their stories are real.

[00:00:27] **Esther Perel:** They're a young couple, in terms of their experience together. And they're a young couple in terms of where they each are at, in their lives. Their studies, defining themselves, finding their path and dealing with the legacies of their family that is still so present for them individually, and also as a couple. So they're defining themselves and they're defining their relationship.

[00:01:02] **Him:** I think one of the unique facets of our relationship is us working through what it means to be queer and me to be straight.

[00:01:11] **Them:** Until we got together, I identified as gay. It's been really difficult for me and my identity to figure out what this means for me personally,

[00:01:23] **Esther Perel:** They seek clarity with each other, but they don't always have the clarity with themselves

[00:01:29] **Them:** I floated the idea of some sort of non-monogamy and he's really, really not down for that.

[00:01:37] **Him:** I come to a stopping point in conversations about polyamory because it feels uncomfortable to me.

[00:01:45] **Them:** I want to feel more comfortable committing and being able to freely be myself. And I just feel confused about the whole thing.

[00:01:58] **Esther Perel:** So much of what we're going to do is define the terms, but also step outside of the terms that have become too stale and too hermetic and open up conversations, as is often important to do in a relationship and especially a relationship in transition. They are at the verge of moving into a new phase, having moved in together, potentially moving and living close to his family. And so the compromises of the present will have implications for the future. And all of that is coming to a head right now in this session.

So what are the pronouns?

[00:02:44] **Him:** They/them, and I use he/him.

[00:02:46] **Them:** They/them.

[00:02:47] **Esther Perel:** Okay. Just tell me a little bit, the story of your relationship.

[00:02:54] **Them:** So we met when we were both working at the same preschool, I was working at the desk and doing after school stuff and he was a teacher in the room right next to the desk. I was extremely hung over

every single day. I was in the bottom of my addiction. And like at the school, he was like the golden child teacher, like everyone defers to him, you know, what do we do? Like we're having a hard situation in this. Oh, let's bring this kid to this one, to this guy. It's true. It's true, right?

[00:03:29] **Him:** Sometimes they would.

[00:03:30] **Them:** Sometimes. (Laughs)

[00:03:32] **Him:** That's a lot of credit, but thank you.

[00:03:37] **Them:** You undersell yourself. Yeah. And then there was an end of the year staff party.

[00:03:42] **Esther Perel:** But so do you.

[00:03:45] **Them:** I don't have things that I can... he's like this totally golden person. And I've got this like rap sheet of, "this is when I was hospitalized the first time, this is when my parents, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah." You know?

[00:04:05] **Esther Perel:** But you have a story between the two of you, right? I asked you about the relationship story, and basically you started with this theme of he's the golden child, and I am the troubled one. And that was it for so long. This seemed to have been the primary features of my self presentation.

[00:04:28] **Them:** And the way that I defined myself and still define myself at that time is just through that lens of...

[00:04:34] **Esther Perel:** Which was? What was the definition?

[00:04:37] **Them:** It was just the routine of how much I drank, how horrible I would feel, and then shaming myself for continuing that cycle, not knowing how to get out of it. So continuing it, I didn't have a lot of social life. I started drugs when I was 13. And then when I was in high school, it just got really intense. And then in college, ironically I didn't have as much access to drugs in college as I did in high school. So I relied a lot more on drinking and then I just couldn't get out of it.

And I would do these things with myself, where I would say, if I can go this long without drinking, Or if I can go this many nights drinking only this amount, then I've succeeded. And like, I don't have a problem with it. And then if I could do that, which I rarely could, I would congratulate myself by letting myself just go with no limits at all. And then perpetuate the cycle. Alcoholism and addiction runs in my family on both sides.

[00:05:47] **Esther Perel:** Who worried about you? Who watched over you?

[00:05:53] **Them:** I mean, I did, like I had to, I was the one who decided I needed to go to rehab because it was either that, or I was going to die and I felt like I was dying every day and I felt resigned to that fact. My brother was drinking a lot. My step-mom was drinking a lot and those were the people in my life. My dad died when I was... I had been in college for a week and I, and he died. And he was the most stable parental figure. And then my mom has always been very like... unpredictable.

[00:06:30] **Esther Perel:** You just searched for a nice word?

[00:06:35] **Them:** Yeah, maybe. I don't want to be hyperbolic, but I also think that she has traits like a narcissistic personality disorder and along with substance abuse herself. So she would pass out every night on the couch. And that was just part of us growing up. My parents were divorced and she would kind of lure us into spending time with her by giving us alcohol too. Yeah. So after my dad died, that was like the anchor person was gone. So I had to watch out for myself, but I didn't know how the hell to do that. And I was not very good at it. Until I made myself ask for help.

[00:07:20] **Esther Perel:** The act itself of knowing I need help. And I need other help than what is available around me here is a real sign of strength. I hope you've been told that.

[00:07:37] **Them:** Yeah, I had to work hard on becoming proud of myself.

[00:07:45] **Esther Perel:** When I said it's not so simple that if you were able to find treatment, if you were able to seek out help, that too is a strength. I hear that they didn't really absorb it. There is something about them, after years of being in treatments and in detox centers and in rehabs that has strengthened their identity as a patient. And part of what I'm trying to do is help them see that they're not just a patient, they're also a person with lots of resources. It is a more hopeful and more generative view of themselves. And I wish I had been able to do a little more of that, and I had been able to really show my empathy and my compassion for the challenge, but also my challenge for the acceptance of the perennial role as the patient. And when I listened to my conversation with them, I felt that I had missed that.

How many years are you together?

[00:09:02] **Them:** Two and a half.

[00:09:04] **Esther Perel:** And may I ask, how old you are?

[00:09:06] **Him:** I'm 29.

[00:09:08] **Them:** I'm 24.

[00:09:11] **Esther Perel:** Alcoholism, is just in your family or that's that thing you share?

[00:09:15] **Him:** It's definitely a shared thing. I've had alcoholism on both sides of my family and my father is an alcoholic. He was a kind of a yelly person.

[00:09:28] **Esther Perel:** Yelly? Yelly? That's such a nice euphemism. Say it as it is.

[00:09:38] **Him:** There's a smoothie incident that stands out as kind of a good example, where one of the morning rituals for a while in my household was my dad would make us smoothies. And at one point as children do a fight ensued with my brother and I about who would get the first smoothie or something. And my dad's response was to take the smoothie and throw it, which we kind of laughed at at the time.

[00:10:04] **Esther Perel:** Laughter, as a counter to fear.

[00:10:09] **Him:** Yeah. No, and I think a lot of the way that we dealt with things was either the approach of like leaving the house and sneaking beneath the windows so that he couldn't see that we were going somewhere, just this fear response and like treading very carefully and giving a wide berth so that nothing blew the dynamite.

[00:10:29] **Esther Perel:** And then mom packed up the kids and just.

[00:10:32] **Him:** I mean first, my mom was very upfront with my dad and had sat down and had a conversation of, this is what I'm seeing. Like I'm noticing this tendency to get aggressive, to get manic, to get really loud and unforgiving of your children. That conversation was met with a lot of like pushback and denial and "No, that's not me." and so, after that, we began to feel more afraid. And so we left while he was on a work trip. So yeah, my, my relationship with alcoholism is mostly adult children of alcoholics, and they have a bucket list of things that an adult child of an alcoholic might be characterized by and I was going down that list and like, "Oh, wow, this is me." I feel the need to be careful with my performance and hold things together and be kind of the, both the curator of things and also like the, the manager in a way.

[00:11:34] **Esther Perel:** Because?

[00:11:35] **Him:** In part, I'm an oldest sibling. For me that meant like, I need to model for my siblings how to deal with some of the hard things that we're seeing as children and...

[00:11:47] **Esther Perel:** I have to keep it together.

[00:11:49] **Him:** Yeah.

[00:11:50] **Them:** Yeah, but then he's the one who has never smoked weed, like DARE worked on you.

[00:11:57] **Him:** Yeah. Meaning that I...

[00:12:00] **Them:** Don't do drugs that have never done drugs, have never done taken risks like that.

[00:12:04] **Esther Perel:** You see, he became one alternative.

[00:12:08] **Them:** Yeah.

[00:12:09] **Esther Perel:** To those similar circumstances. And you became another alternative and you are two shadow sides of the same circumstances. You get mad. He doesn't know where to put his anger. (Cars honking, siren sounds)

This episode is sound designed with the help of the sounds of New York City. Subways, motorcycles, shaking buildings, sirens. Welcome to my office.

You lose the sense of boundaries. He constraints himself with boundaries. You are the choices he never made. That doesn't mean he's not intrigued by them.

[00:13:10] **Him:** In some ways, I think that's accurate, but from my vantage, that looks like a dichotomizing of like productive choices versus harmful choices or something like that. Or, or like that, like, I dunno, I feel like I definitely made choices that were harmful in their own ways, or like, I don't want to seem like your choices were bad.

[00:13:32] **Them:** No, but like listening to that description, I didn't think of your description as good. Like I'm going to constrain myself, I'm going to like push these things together and hold it together, like make sure all the rules are there and you internalize that as like that's the good one.

[00:13:49] **Him:** Yeah.

[00:13:50] **Esther Perel:** The dichotomy comes from you. Sorry to say.

[00:13:55] **Them:** Yeah she didn't say either or.

[00:13:58] **Esther Perel:** These are often extreme versions of the kinds of choices people make when they're faced with that kind of chaos. Chaos, neglect, need to step up, parent your own parents, be parentified children, all those things. But I don't have a higher and lower order here. I mean, it's true. I watch it as a contrast not as an either or, but that's two common choices to this kind of situation. Each one comes with their consequences, you know.

[00:14:38] **Them:** And it's harder when we have things together or we're making big decisions, which is happening a lot.

[00:14:46] **Esther Perel:** They understood my use of the word choice, but what I was really aiming for was the notion of adaptation. They each had adapted to the circumstances of their childhood, the neglect, the sense of being left to their own devices, the rampant alcoholism around them and each had adapted differently. And that difference between the in control and out of control between the one who became very responsible and the one who checked their responsibilities. There was a complementarity and in a way, what he was saying is it looks all right, but I am hurting inside no less than them. And I want you to know that even though it looks well put together, it has internal turmoil that may not be that different from theirs. So there is complementarity in the coping strategies and there is similarity. In the deep wounding that each of these two people experienced growing up.

So what are the big decisions?

[00:16:03] **Them:** We're thinking of moving near his family. And there's just, there's so many options and there are so many unknowns about how that's going to work.

How are the logistics going to work? Even if we were to stay where we are, how would the logistics work? It feels insurmountable because then there's, we know we have to do this thing and then...

[00:16:29] **Him:** And like broader spectrum too, for me, like we're emerging or hopefully emerging from a pandemic. And I felt so disconnected from other community. And I know, like community's important to me and I know being around people like you is also important for you like you, but yeah.

[00:16:54] **Them:** Yeah. I mean, and then for me, I ruminate on the fact that we're making such big decisions on our own, or not on our own, together. We're making these big decisions together and what that means about our relationship as a whole.

And, we keep making these huge decisions as a couple, does this mean we're going to have to get married? Like, that's my fear and I don't want to end this relationship.

[00:17:19] **Esther Perel:** Where are we going? Geographically, relationally. What else?

[00:17:29] **Them:** Monetarily, family-wise, children-wise, job-wise, structure of family, structure of house, like geographically at the end.

[00:17:42] **Him:** And relationships structure wise, too.

[00:17:45] **Esther Perel:** Meaning?

[00:17:46] **Them:** I mean, one big thing that we haven't talked about, or we have talked about that doesn't have a solution that we can find. So we don't talk about it very often is my uncertainty and drive for newness and for connection to the queer parts of myself this is the first straight person I've ever been with. And it's weird and I didn't think it was going to go anywhere. I thought I was going to go on a date with a nice guy because you're, you're nice. And I like you. And I liked you, but I was like, I didn't know what way I liked you, and I didn't know in what way you liked me. And I was gay.

[00:18:38] **Him:** Present.

[00:18:39] **Them:** I mean, yeah, like is I dunno, like, I don't know, like, I still, it feels disingenuous to call myself gay when I'm with a cis guy, cis straight guy. And I feel really connected to that community still, and all my friends are gay. And like, I do not want to end our relationship and I don't want to move away from our relationship. And I fear that I won't be able to connect with that side of my life anymore, or again. So we've talked about, are there ways in which we can structure our relationship differently? This is also the most monogamous relationship I've been in. And so we talked about non monogamy. That's just been sort of a recurring conversation that comes up every few months and we have a lot of emotions about it. And then we put it down.

[00:19:33] **Esther Perel:** Both carry a lot of trauma of the early years around neglect and unpredictability and sense of aloneness that they each felt and the lack of structure in their life. One of the ways to look at the complementarity is that, through them, he can loosen the grip a little bit. This grip that became his survival strategy, but that he has longed to be able to loosen a little and through him, they can become more anchored, more grounded without having to live in an unraveled situation of addiction and access that constantly tries to reign itself in, but doesn't know. And in that sense, they can give each other so much to help each of them transcend the legacies of their family.

The emotions are?

[00:20:43] **Them:** For me, a lot of it, it comes from a time when I'm feeling particularly trapped, I think. And it doesn't have to be trapped in the relationship, although it does mean that, but it means trapped in other ways

in my life too, like I'm feeling particularly isolated or depressed, or haven't seen my friends in a long time, don't feel like I have community don't feel understood or whatever it may be, but I'm feeling disconnected.

[00:21:13] **Esther Perel:** You're talking about the queer part.

[00:21:14] **Them:** Yeah.

[00:21:15] **Esther Perel:** You're mixing two things.

[00:21:16] **Them:** Yes.

[00:21:18] **Esther Perel:** You're mixing two things. It's one thing to say when I feel disconnected, lonely, cut off from my friends, trapped, depressed, I think non-monogamy. That's one conversation. I can be monogamous and exclusive and it can be not. Yeah, that part can be poly and it can be mono. So these are two different things. And the one thing I noticed is that when you start a conversation, you link it to everything. One conversation is about how do I integrate my queerness into this relationship? Does it have a place? What would it look like? The other conversation is I noticed that I bring up monogamy, polyamory, not exclusivity. When I experienced things that actually have nothing to do with the monogamy, but it becomes the, you know, this is the place where, suddenly I can put all my trapped feelings, and that was a very insightful comment. It actually has not much to do with our relationship when I bring this up. That doesn't mean the conversation isn't in itself important as well. So part of what makes these conversations difficult between the two of you is that you don't stick to something.

[00:22:31] **Them:** Well we don't want to try anything.

[00:22:34] **Esther Perel:** That too, could be, but I, what I just showed here is so much is put into one breath that you don't know what you're talking about in the end. So we want to talk about monogamy. We want to talk about queer woman with cis straight guy. We want to talk about the fears of long-term relationships. We want to talk about what is the move that we want to make.

Which piece, if we have all of them in one, we can't have any.

[00:23:10] **Them:** What do you think?

[00:23:11] **Him:** The conversation for me, the conversation about polyamory is one that brings up at least three things. One is a reminder of how important your identity is to you as a person who is queer and as a person always growing in your understanding of relationships. That's one part. On my emotionality side, it's extreme fear and reticence. And also like a similar catastrophic feeling of not only like engaging in polyamory or like initiating a polyamorous relationship, but also the conversation itself is rupturous. My mind always takes me to inadequacy and like, we can talk about how those things are not connected, like my adequateness as a partner does not have to do with your...

[00:24:11] **Esther Perel:** That's the feeling.

[00:24:13] **Him:** But like, that's where my heart goes. And like, it's really hard.

[00:24:21] **Them:** And I know this

[00:24:22] **Him:** Yeah, we've talked about it a lot and like, It's more, it's not even a question of like, how do, how do we talk about polyamory? It's like, how do we talk about talking about polyamory? And I've also never seen a long lived relationship with a polyamorous couple. I've never seen a model and my models for it are also media, like House of Cards is, is one model. Like it's a terrible model. There's other examples, but I haven't seen it work.

[00:24:57] **Esther Perel:** In your circle.

[00:24:58] **Him:** In my, in my circle.

[00:25:00] **Esther Perel:** In your young circle.

[00:25:01] **Him:** Yeah.

[00:25:01] **Them:** In his young straight circle. I know so many people who it works for in my young queer community. I feel like with the straightness comes a lot of other stuff where it's like, this is how things are. There's not as much questioning of how things are. And that's kind of how I've lived my entire life.

[00:25:24] **Esther Perel:** People in straight relationships have a much longer historical legacy of how things should be done. Less creativity, more continuity, less creativity.

[00:25:37] **Them:** And sexually too.

[00:25:39] **Him:** Or also less disclosure about how, how things work in a relationship like that. At least the way I've seen things play out. Like there's plenty of monogamous relationships that really don't work.

[00:25:51] **Esther Perel:** I asked you, what gets you worked up? You said there's something about the conversation itself. that gets me intensely worked up.

[00:25:59] **Him:** Yeah. It's it's adequacy. It's feeling like, if I am not the way society tells me to be as a romantic partner, you have to be this, this, this, this, this you have to, as a romantic partner, you have to be so multifaceted. And if you, if you aren't a lover, counselor, family, pick your role to your partner, you're not functioning right. And when I think about polyamory, it's as though, if we don't function, right, it's just going to dissemble. If somebody else comes into this, like your interest in them is going to like pass your interest in me.

[00:26:51] **Esther Perel:** I tried so hard to do everything the best I can, that if you think of others, it will mean that the best wasn't so good.

[00:27:06] **Him:** Yeah. And it's not true, like, I know that like intellectually, I know that, but emotionally I can't get past that. And it's like, and then not being able to talk about it with you. It's great and terrible. Like, I want to talk about it with you, but I don't wanna feel how inadequate it feels.

[00:27:43] **Them:** I wish you would talk to me about it. And I know you don't want to feel that. I just want to find more peace around it. And I don't know what that looks like. I don't want to force you to do anything. I bring it up because I want to talk about our relationship and what feels good. And what doesn't feel good. And it's not even really about our relationship. It's not about you, it's not about you. And then I feel stupid for bringing it up because I don't like making you upset and because I love you and I don't want to lose you. And I don't want you to think that you're not enough. So then I drop it for the next few months until all these other things push it up.

[00:28:44] **Him:** And we've done this cycle before. Like we've said all of this.

[00:28:52] **Esther Perel:** Their associations to the word polyamory are vastly different. For him, it's a conversation on an emotional level about rejection, about inadequacy, about not being enough. And he knows that there is another conversation to be had about polyamory. But he can't access it. For them, the conversation about polyamory is about community. It's about queerness as connected to creativity, exploration, curiosity, non normativity. And that conversation becomes difficult because they realize that every time the subject comes up, they may hurt him and they may lose him. And so they are tight around the impossibility of talking about what they think is a conversation about polyamory, but the entrance may have to be first of all, a conversation about community, about newness, about non normativity, about what queerness has meant for them and about what being the chosen one in the family has meant for him, which is now coming with him into this relationship. And this identity as the chosen one who was going to save the family, when his mother took the children and left the alcoholic father has become a burden, but also an identity. We're trying to understand why is this conversation so painful? Because the poly challenges the concept of chosen, even if the chosenness is something he wants to free himself from, he doesn't know how he would ever feel whole without it.

The piece that I hear that you share is that you're saying, how can I be authentic to myself? How can I be authentic and even consider this conversation? What does, what will it say about me if I change? But you're saying the same thing. I'm gay, and if I stay with this cis straight guy, what does it say about me? Like in order to be together, it feels to each of us that there's a part of us that can't come with us.

[00:32:11] **Them:** Yeah.

[00:32:15] **Esther Perel:** And is this so, or is this the way we've created the story? This is not a conversation about polyamory. It's a conversation about the way that you've structured your life and your whole psyche. This I've got it and I'm the center of it all. And everybody turns to me and I solve all the problems. I'm the steward. You know, it's true with my mother, with my siblings and it's true. And so the very thought of polyamory doesn't have anything to do with polyamory. It just instantly becomes, I am not the person that I thought I was. So it becomes a very loaded, scary conversation. And polyamory for you is the door to the queer part of you.

[00:33:17] **Them:** Yeah, it feels like our identities are clashing and I'm the one right now whose sublimating all of that and the idea of not doing that, of saying goodbye to those parts of myself forever is what comes up for me. And that's really scary.

[00:33:45] **Him:** When we both get catastrophizing, we both catastrophize what, I don't know, the future of our relationship is in any regard. The terminus is close. To me, it doesn't feel like we're at a breaking point, and I

think we both said that. You've kind of acknowledged yourself as the more willing to change of the two of us, and that's true. But,

[00:34:11] **Them:** I mean, in a lot of ways, it's not but I think that I'm more acclimated to just like fast shifts. When I think of them as part of a larger structure or a larger narrative, that's when it scares me. We've moved in together. We have a dog, these are huge things.

[00:34:28] **Esther Perel:** What you just said is very important.

[00:34:31] **Them:** When I think of the decisions that we make together as part of a larger narrative, that's when it scares me.

[00:34:40] **Esther Perel:** Like I can make quick adaptations as long as I don't think they are forever.

[00:34:46] **Them:** Yeah.

[00:34:51] **Esther Perel:** When I listen to him describe their triggers as catastrophizing. I tried to look for a metaphor and alternative narrative that could be helpful to them to see from a different point of view, what it means to have parts of your identity in a relationship and maybe other parts of your identity in other relationships. But without triggering the fears that come to the word monogamy or polyamory. And so I just wanted to try this out and see if it would bring some fresh air into a conversation that had become so charged and scary, just to add other images, other associations and try it on for size.

Can I suggest something? I don't know if the metaphor is going to work. I want to try one because I'm a foreigner. I spend a lot of time with foreigners, immigrants of all sorts. We all have parts of us that our closest people sometimes have never known, and they all know that we have other parts to us, but we live with certain parts of us in that relationship. And we live with other parts of us with other relationships, that I could call that polyamory.

[00:36:33] **Them:** Right.

[00:36:34] **Esther Perel:** We bring those other parts with others who speak our languages and we go back or we travel home and sometimes we travel alone so that we don't have to live in translation. But you can be in the relationship with certain parts of you and know that. That doesn't mean that it's a truncated self. It's a flexible self. It's a self that made choices about certain parts of itself and was willing to live with the loss, to live with the compromise, to live it alone. And somebody else would say one should never do that. But many people do make commitments with people outside of their culture, nationality, language, continent. Does that metaphor add something?

[00:37:31] **Him:** It does.

[00:37:34] **Them:** I feel like that explains how I feel. It's always hard to verbalize it, cause it centers it around like, in our relationship, blah, blah, blah, but it's really in other relationships, I can flesh that part of myself out. I can bring that part.

[00:37:50] **Esther Perel:** And do you maintain a connection to that community?

[00:37:54] **Them:** All of my friends are part of that community.

[00:37:57] **Esther Perel:** Okay. And do the two of you spend time in that world too?

[00:38:02] **Them:** We don't overlap friends, like at all.

[00:38:06] **Esther Perel:** In general.

[00:38:07] **Them:** Yeah. Not as a rule, it just hasn't happened.

[00:38:11] **Esther Perel:** Right. So that may be something that needs to change. If you are to be with him and you want to maintain a connection to that world, he needs to visit that world with you. Visit is a nice word. He needs to spend time there, live there, and speak that language. Look at the norms, be at ease, you know? And be the foreigner on occasion, if foreigner is the right image, you know.

[00:38:43] **Them:** It's just, yeah. I don't know. The people that, like the people that I know who have examples of really successful like polyamorous relationships, I don't know are people that you'd be friends with on your own.

[00:39:01] **Esther Perel:** No, but on his own is not the criteria. The criteria is not that those are people you would have met by yourself. Those are people you each bring to each other. And if that component is missing, that's a piece that can be developed because that will become a step in between. That's a bridge. Part of why you can't imagine what that life would look like is because it's based on, on a very tiny sample. Some of which is not even real people. You have to visit and it's wanting to know and to say, I know there's a whole other person here, but you don't live with it. It's like, when you go with your partner and the partner is actually speaking another language with a bunch of their locals. And for once you're the foreigner and that's a dance that foreigners, mixed couples, US non- US, to localize it here, experience daily. So it's an active part, even though that person isn't living in that country, that person brings parts of that country into the relationship, that country, that religion, that culture.

[00:40:27] **Him:** That's super helpful for me.

[00:40:31] **Esther Perel:** And that is a part that you need to bring in, in a more active way so that it doesn't become I'm with you, and I lose it. Or I go to that and I lose you. Anything that becomes this kind of either or where both options feel intolerable will make you not have the conversation.

[00:40:56] **Them:** It seems like that's a theme, black and white thinking, yeah.

[00:41:02] **Esther Perel:** I can't even think about the conversation itself because all I'm thinking is, you know, my inadequacy. There's no place to move in that. You will choke, you will cry, you will both look at each other, it will feel impossible, it will feel like you don't want the relationship to end. And then you will bury the conversation. And then you will be what I like to call in bliss but stuck. Everything is fine, everything is fine, but we avoid this big issue, we avoid this big issue. And then when we talk about the big issue or when we even think about having to talk about the big issue, we will become so completely panicked at the thought of what this may mean to the dissolution of our relationship, which we don't want. So we don't talk about it, then we get down, then we'd forget about it. And then we go back and we are in bliss, but stuck. Meanwhile, life

takes us forward and now we have moved in and now we have a dog. And now we're thinking about moving closer to his family. And I'm wondering, does that mean I'm going to have to get married too, and then you start to feel like life is happening to you. The purpose of today is to put the subject on the table and to make them feel less tense, impossible, choking to the point where they have to be constantly suppressed. If we managed to give you a little more of that flexibility or to open this up, this is the open of today is to open up the conversation, not what you're going to do with your whole life. We're not going to do that in one session. But if you can open the conversation so that you don't every time feel when it comes up that it feels so choking and scary, then you will have left with something important.

The goal is not to create an analogy between immigration and polyamory. It is not my role to decide with them about monogamy or polyamory at this moment in their relationship. My goal is to open up the conversation no matter which way they go before they can talk about opening up the relationship, if that's what they ever choose to do, they both would need to feel that they can open up the conversation.

So how does all of this fit with sex?

[00:43:49] **Them:** It was an adjustment for me.

[00:43:52] **Esther Perel:** To have sober sex or to have sex with a cis-gender straight guy?

[00:43:57] **Them:** Both. And I think having it be sober sex made it a lot better and a lot easier for me to feel connected, physically connected, like in my body, that's not something that I was used to. And it was just really hard. It was hard to shift in that way. And there were things that I wanted to try or wanted to do that he wasn't comfortable with, isn't comfortable with and that's okay. I don't want, I'm not gonna make you try things. But that's another aspect of, I guess I'm a person who wants to like try everything once and, and we get into this thing of how do you know that you don't like this thing? Or how do you even know that you wouldn't like it if you tried it. He's like, I don't need to know, and that doesn't compute with me. I'm like, I need to know. I need to know if I like it or not. I need to know by trying it and doing it and getting all of these experiences so I can have like an index.

[00:45:10] **Esther Perel:** I like to try in order to know, I need to know before I try.

[00:45:15] **Him:** Yeah, good framing.

[00:45:23] **Esther Perel:** But that trying and not trying is not necessarily queer, straight related. It can be, but it exists among two people, period.

[00:45:42] **Them:** Yeah. I don't think that it's inherently queer. And I do think that for me, it's part of my queerness is that sort of experimenting with relationships and experimenting with sex and like different ways of living and different. Like different ways of being with another person or, or other people.

[00:46:01] **Esther Perel:** So queerness, became a part of you in a space where playfulness, exploration was much more prevalent than in the straight part of the world.

[00:46:20] **Them:** And that's coming from an outside view because I didn't have a straight relationship.

[00:46:25] **Esther Perel:** It's what you imagined a straight relationship to be. It does it the same way all the time, because that's how they, in this case, he has done it all the time. But it's an interesting thing. You, you thrive in uncertainty, and yet you find yourself with this person. And this person, one thing that they would bring to your life is your ability to tolerate more uncertainty. And not as a negative experience. And exploration and curiosity and playfulness and mystery, are all active engagements with the unknown. And the unknown in your life has been a source of great stress and anxiety and sadness, but there's a part of you somewhere that would like to explore this with positive anticipation and that's where they come in. And if you say no in advance, because why should I, because I already know, cause I don't want to, when you don't know. But that's the system that's been put in place to make sure that you could carry all this responsibility that was put on you from such an early age, over all the people in your family, you couldn't explore much.

[00:47:59] **Him:** It's the positive anticipation thing that really struck a chord with me because it's like, there's definitely anticipation, but it's hard for me to frame it like that.

[00:48:08] **Esther Perel:** That's correct. It's usually seen as you know, and this is where they come in. This is one of the gifts they will give in your life, sexually speaking as well. You can start with the sex because it's a playful arena to be in the sandbox together. And we don't always know why we picked someone, but there's always a reason and it's not always an obvious one, you know? They focus on their self destructive side, but they could also focus on their more exploratory side. Talking about the self destructive side is beginning to be old.. It's also a part of you, you know where and you've talked to every shrink about.

[00:49:04] **Them:** So I know how to talk about it.

[00:49:05] **Esther Perel:** Yes. But one feels that you've done that many times, one knows that this is a rehearsed story. It doesn't mean it's not an important one. But it's a familiar one versus...

[00:49:16] **Them:** Say it without feeling it.

[00:49:17] **Esther Perel:** Right versus the exploratory one. The one that is more nimble, the one that can make these quick adaptations is the very thing that you couldn't conceive of it for the life of you. What they will do with you are things that you cannot even imagine doing with them. Sometimes there's only one person who can do it. They have that nimbleness, they have that adaptability, including the queer person living in the straight world or in a straight relationship. But you don't have to be a straight relationship, you can become your own relationship. That's multilingual.

[00:50:14] **Jesse (Producer):** Esther Perel is the author of *Mating in Captivity* and *The State of Affairs*, and also the host of the podcast and How's Work?

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