

THE REAL QUESTION

BAD CHAPLAINCY

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VANESSA: Hello everybody! Welcome to a special episode of The Real Question, which we are calling the Bad Chaplaincy episode. We asked you all to send in questions asking for our advice and so that is what we are gonna be doing today. We're gonna be responding to your questions and be doing our very best. We're calling it Bad Chaplaincy because [laughs] chaplaincy is based on conversation and being together, and this obviously cannot be that, but we're really excited and we're so grateful to all of you who sent in questions.

[theme music begins]

CASPER: I'm Casper ter Kuile.

V: And I'm Vanessa Zoltan.

C: And this is The Real Question, with your questions, not ours.

[theme music continues, fades, ends]

C: So, this week we have a incredible collection of questions and I genuinely wanna say how beautiful these questions are. We're only gonna get through a few of them today, but hopefully we'll have another chance to look through more of them in the future because your questions are honest and vulnerable and complicated and frankly useful in my life, so I just wanna listen to the questions you're all asking cuz I know they're gonna be helpful for us, too. So, the way that we're gonna do this is choose a question that had a theme that was very resonant among many questions. So, you might hear a couple around boundaries or health, for example, cuz those came up a number of times. And then we're gonna talk about it as if it was one of our questions. So, we'll try and think about a text that we're reminded of that might help us find new insight into it, and obviously we'll offer what we can from our experience, it's definitely not advice that we give in any sort of legal or medical way, but nonetheless, I hope it'll be useful for you to hear the question reflected on by two friends in the podcast sphere. [both laugh]

V: Exactly. We're calling it Bad Chaplaincy not because that is our intention, but because we just wanna acknowledge this is a chaplaincy-based podcast where Casper and I try to act as friends with a chaplaincy orientation towards each other in the context of this show, and as you all know from listening, like, that is conversation-based, and we sadly cannot have conversations with these question-askers. But our advice is gonna be very genuine. This is not an attempt at a bad advice show. You can listen to excellent bad advice shows elsewhere. [Casper laughs] We are going to maybe give bad advice, but we're gonna try our very very best. [laughs]

C: Well, let's jump in. Our first question is from Instagram, so we'll leave this one anonymous. And this is the question, Vanessa: "I have gone through numerous heartaches. So many people are married and have figured it out. How do I stay confident when it feels like I will never find a partner?" Ooh!

V: There is just immediately something I wanna say here. [both laugh] But then, can I say, come out strong and then we have a conversation?

C: Okay, great! Yeah.

V: So, I felt this way, I was like thirty-one and I you know, was like, "I think I'm gonna die alone." And my favorite cousin Nitzan [?] and I were talking and after we hung up the phone she sent me an email and it was a three-line email. She's about ten years older than I am. And she is happily married and she said, "You know Vanessa I remember this exact feeling. And I know you don't believe this, but I want you to believe in me. I promise you, you will find someone. And so, what I want you to do is have fun in the meantime." She was like, "You just have to believe me, but have a good time! Like, you're gonna spend most of your life with this person when you find them, and so please enjoy your singledom." And what I did was book a trip to Rome [Vanessa laughs, Casper gasps] with my friend Julia. Right? I was like, yes! And that just like, really did get me through and so that is my like, gut advice. Is like, you might not have faith in the world, but have faith in me. I promise you will find someone. And just like, try to believe that and have fun in the meantime. But I also, we need to spend some time like acknowledging the heartache of this, and all of that.

C: I love that have fun in the meantime, though.

V: Yeah!

C: My colleague Sue always says, "And it is a mean time!" [laughs] Isn't that good?

V: I love that! We're in the middle of the mean time!

C: Exactly! Like, these are mean times.

V: I mean right, it's John Lennon. Right? Life is what happens while you're busy making other plans. To bring in a text of like, this is your life! Your life doesn't get real-er when you're in a relationship.

C: Mhmm.

V: And so I think the joy while you're single is so important.

C: Which song is that in?

V: It's Beautiful Boy. It's for his son Sean, and we can get into how problematic he was as a father. He apparently was like a decent father to Sean but a horrible father to Julian, and all sorts of bad vibes. But I do love that, you know, it's just a beautiful song about um, his love for his child, and he's giving some advice, right? Have no fear, the monster is gone. But I think that the most famous line is: "Before you cross the street, take my hand. Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans."

C: Ooh. That is beautiful.

V: Mhmm. And so I really do want this person to have complete faith that they'll find their person, but I also want them to love this moment. Life is happening. And life doesn't start happening more real when you're in a relationship.

C: Well, that's where my mind went, which is like, the You've Got Mail moment where like, you know, at the beginning of the movie, both Meg Ryan's character and Tom Hanks' character are in other

relationships. And like, they're fine. You know? They're going to fundraisers for I think Romanian, like, authors, or they're enjoying like, a third typewriter that's been bought. I mean, they're basically like, living their life but actually haven't found this deeper love with a partner in a way. And so like, I think what I'm reminded of in this question is like, that sense of cosmic loneliness that I think all of us experience sometimes. Whether you're in a committed relationship with a partner or not. And yeah, maybe to bring in another singer, Jens Lekman has this great song, this Swedish kind of pop singer, he's like, "Whether you marry or not, either way you wish you hadn't." [laughs]

V: Yeah.

C: I just love that so much because it's like, "Listen, life is gonna be hard. And you're always gonna look at what you don't have and want." At the same time, I don't wanna undo the genuine longing in this question, which I think is really beautiful and so, yeah. I guess it's just one of those situations where it's like, yes, every situation has its own flavor of challenge, but as you said, like, try and enjoy what is real in this moment, and you know, chances are that you living a life that you're enjoying will also mean that you're meeting more people or that you're sending out kind of good vibes into the world that people are attracted to and wanna be around. I think that's really wise.

V: I also think like there is a problem with society that we think that marriage or long-term committed romantic relationships are the only way to create –

C: I agree.

V: -- a family. Cuz like, I just want to admit, right like, I feel much more secure now that I'm in a relationship with Peter. Financially, right, like, health-wise, like I just have someone whose like, moral obligation is to have my back. And that does, it makes the world less scary. But I just don't think that that should be about romantic partnership. Friendships can be genuine partnerships, and often the people who make me feel cosmically not alone are friends. Right? Like, Peter is my home, but he's like really really not my everything.

C: Totally.

V: And I just – I wish that society acknowledged that. I wish like, you can marry a friend so that legally you have all of those rights, but like that's not a socially acceptable thing. I really hope that in the future, as so many identities become more fluid, that relationships also become more fluid.

C: I'm so interested in this idea, because we have a very limited set of legal categories that recognize very meaningful relationships. Like, one of the things I love learning about, when I was writing my newsletter last year, was in 1391, Sir William Neville and Sir John Clanvowe were buried together under a shared tombstone, and they lie facing each other as a married couple were. And they were, as the category was known at the time, sworn brothers. Where people, two men in this case, swore their true love and brotherhood for each other in public. And it was like, this kind of knightly commitment to one another, and it was recognized. Right? It had implications like, you could be buried together in this very public way. And like, we don't have an equivalent today, where you get visitation rights, right? If you're someone's best friend, or if you're someone's like, long-term roommate or if you're, you know, even like cousins who are really close don't get the same treatment as siblings. Like, we just have this very limited understanding of where committed relationships can happen, and I think we're all poorer for it. And I even feel this as a married couple, like, this is the ultimate legal standing, but there's nothing beyond

that, right? Like, what would it look like to live in a shared house with two other couples? Like, could that be some sort of family unit under the law? There are so many bigger, like, real questions open in this question, cuz it's really about like, the pathways of relationship are limited in our culture. And it means that everyone loses. Like, why can't we have a much more expansive understanding of what it means to love and commit to one another? I think we'd all be better for it.

V: Yeah. There were a couple of years when I was living in New York and I was single and I worked with two women who became two of my best friends, Dana and Jen, and all three of us were single, and I can't tell you how not lonely we were. [laughs] Like –

C: Yeah. Right!

V: -- None of us dated, really, like, we had crushes kind of, but like, we would work together all week and then Friday night we would go out for margaritas and a movie.

C: I love it. [laughs]

V: And Jen would fall asleep in the movie. Right? Like [Casper laughs] and it was just like, we were just together all the time. And they were. They were my primary partners. My mom would come to visit and the four of us would go out. Right? Like, my mom had to see my two partners. And like, and we celebrated Valentine's together. And I mean, it was just such a beautiful special moment, and those relationships have lasted, but now we've just like, all gone off to our romantic partnerships, [laughs] and it's so much more boring! [both laugh] But also like, I just really do wanna acknowledge, like, romantic relationships in the best form, like, can be different, right? Like this loneliness is real. Part of it is this like, bullshit Cinderella, you know –

C: Yes.

V: Just like, raised to Disney-fy that a happy ending means romantic love, and you know, like, part of it is that. Obviously, I wanna complicate that narrative because I love romance novels, god, we could just talk about this for freakin' ever. [Casper laughs] But like, also this yearning to have like, a real partner who you go to bed with every night and have a romantic element with, and right? Like –

C: Yeah.

V: -- That is a real yearning.

C: Yeah, and there is nothing better than snuggles when you wake up in the morning. Like, I mean, that's very real.

V: Yeah. So, I think, to try to sum up our answer to this Instagram question, have faith that you will find someone if that's something that matters to you. Have fun in the meantime. Finding someone isn't the end-all be-all, in fact we believe that other kinds of relationships are just as important and should probably have a legal framework. And like, we feel your pain and I hope you find someone.

C: Yeah. And I feel like, just to expand a little bit on that third piece, it's like, those are friendships and relationships that you can have now, right? So if I was thinking of your cousin's email, it's like, you know, have faith that something will happen. Enjoy yourself in the meantime. And like, find ways to love and

commit with people as friends, as family members, as neighbors. And you know, have that as part of the enjoyment, I think.

V: Yeah, I went to Rome with Julia to visit Stephanie.

C: Right!

V: Two people who happen to still be in my life. [both laugh] A little bit. Right? Like, it's not like I was like, "Burning that, now that I'm in a relationship." Like, these are two, still of my absolute life partners, Julia and Stephanie.

[short music interlude]

V: Okay, Casper, should we move on to our second question?

C: Okay, so our second question comes from Nikita Harvey, who asks: "Is it okay to be late and to ask for extensions?" And they comment that there was an amazing discussion on punctuality in the Discord server, which by the way, if you join our Patreon you can join our Discord, where there are wonderful conversations between listeners and exactly this kind of thing. So go to [Patreon.com/therealquestion](https://patreon.com/therealquestion) [Vanessa laughs] and check out that little perk. So they say, "There was an amazing discussion on punctuality on the Discord server, and I'd love to see that expanded on the podcast." Huh. So, Vanessa, is it okay to be late, or to ask for extensions?

V: So, I went through and read this Discord conversation because I read Nikita's message and I was like, "No it's never okay to be late, and it's never okay to not turn things in on time." [both laugh] And like, let's judge ourselves by our second reactions, not our first.

C: Uh-huh. [laughs]

V: And so, that was my first reaction and obviously I was like, "Oh, that is super problematic." Right? But can I tell you more about my first reaction?

C: Yeah!

V: Before I tell you about my second one? So, my experience of lateness is that other people feel as though their time is more valuable than mine.

C: Right.

V: Like, why do you think it's okay for me to be standing here? I had just as many sacrifices to make to be here on time. And then, also, like, you don't know what I was counting on, right? Like, I was counting on you arriving on time or getting me that document in time, because I only have one hour to do this before I have to start making dinner for the kids. Right?

C: Yeah.

V: So that is my initial reaction, and I wanna tell you about my second reaction cuz confessing to my first reaction makes me feel so bad. But I wanna hear your first reaction first. [Casper laughs] I can be patient.

C: I mean, my initial response is, it's like, just a flurry of thoughts that are incoherent, honestly. Because like, on the one hand, like, it doesn't feel great to be the person who's late or to ask for an extension, and I have been there many times. I remember a mentor, really the first like significant adult mentor in my

life, when I was in my early twenties, who just said to me, "Casper, I'm noticing that every time we have a meeting you're either rushed to get there just in time, or you're frequently late. What's going on there?" And like, it was the first time I was like, "Oh. I guess my system of like, oh, I'll just do this and that and I'm also just gonna run into that person and then I'll just stop by here and I'll get there just in time and it'll be fine." It was the first time consciously that I was like, "Oh, that has an impact on other people."

V: Mhmm.

C: That in my little ego-centered way I hadn't really been conscious of. So, I think I learned the hard way that my being late had an impact on other people, so I guess that's sitting front of mind. But I'm curious what your second layer is, because I think there's a much bigger conversation in this that we should dig into around culture.

V: Right.

C: And identity, and like health and ability, I think, as well. Right?

V: Absolutely. Like obviously I want room for humanity to exist. And I think that what's actually at stake here is like, capitalism, right? Where like, every minute that someone else is late is literally costing us money. Right? In childcare, in "I could be working," like, other people's tardiness feels high stakes. And it shouldn't be high stakes. Right? Like, we should be like, what a great opportunity to sit and look at a tree! And to be honest, you know, the way that other people's lateness isn't high stakes for me is that I often have a book with me. And now with cell phones it all feel so much easier, like if someone texted me, I'm ten minutes late, I'll just sit on a bench and start reading. Whereas twenty years ago when someone was late, and I was just like, waiting for them on a street corner, it like really annoyed me. And so yeah, I think that you know, people get their periods at the last minute, and they didn't think they would, and like that takes however many extra minutes. Or—

C: Right.

V: Right? Like, I know for me when I was sick, I was late and canceling all the time, because I thought I was gonna be able to leave and I was stuck physically unable to move. Or you know, you're ready to hand off the baby to the babysitter or at daycare and they have an explosive diaper. Right? Like --

C: [laughing] Yeah.

V: Like, just things happen. Your kids don't wanna put their shoes on. And I guess what I think is that we should all be trying our best to be on time for one another, as a sign of respect. And also, we should all just always be so compassionate to one another because life happens and it's actually capitalism that has made our lives so hard. [laughs] Right? Like, I do love a plan for between three and four. But like, that can only happen on a Saturday where I'm like, comfortably home and it really doesn't matter to me if you arrive, you know, at three or four.

C: I have a friend who will say that, and I know what they mean is 4:30.

V: [laughs] Oh my god, that would drive me up the wall.

C: Honestly, it does drive me a little up the wall, because like, I have to do the labor of the interpretation.

V: Yes!

C: And I'm like, just know yourself and tell me what you actually mean.

V: Tell me 4:30! Right!

C: Yeah! Because that's fine! Like, you know, so that's my like, little [laughs] inner train conductor who's being like, [in German? Accent] "No! I need to know exactly what time!" [Vanessa laughs] My train conductor is German, by the way.

V: All train conductors are German.

C: But the bigger question that I think is interesting is like, what does late mean? What does on time mean? Cuz I even notice a difference for myself when I'm meeting someone in person and when I'm waiting for someone to show up to a Zoom call, for example. So, if you haven't shown up after four minutes for a Zoom call, I'm starting to draft the email of like, "Hey, I'm in the Zoom room."

V: Yeah.

C: "Here's the link again." Right? Like, I'm like, okay, this person's meeting ran over or something. Something is going on that means that they're later. Let me help facilitate them getting in here as soon as possible. Maybe they've lost the Zoom room. Whatever. But if it's in person—

V: Right.

C: You know, that is like, seven-eight minutes, before I start to think, "Huh, maybe this person doesn't know where to find me, or maybe something's happened." So taking that like, small example, you know, when you zoom out to a cultural level, I mean, this was one of the things I really enjoyed learning about last year as well, was like, how time, like, our current culture of time just like you said, wound up with capitalism, how it was created down to the second, or down to the millisecond if you go to like, trading of stocks and shares now.

V: And Olympic events.

C: And Olympic events! Right? Like that was a creation.

V: Right.

C: There are so many ways to cut up time, right? Why is it in hours and days? There are other ways to tear up time. Whether it's seasonal, whether it's how long it takes to travel by foot from one place to another. Like, there are different ways of engaging time, and so late and on-time are also totally culturally defined. And it's not necessarily that we have the best system here. Right? Like, I've also really learned that my approach to managing time is by scheduling a lot. [laughs] Like, days, weeks, months in advance. Like, I will likely know what I'm doing exactly in three months' time already right now. And that is – it works for me, but I'm not sure –

V: It stresses me out.

C: -- it works for everyone around me. Yeah exactly! [laughs]

V: Oh, no! You doing it doesn't stress me out. But I tried at some point to block every hour of my day, and be like, "Okay, this is the time that I'm gonna write my On Eyre opening essay." And like, looking at my

full calendar just stresses me out. And I'm like, "Nope." So, I love having open chunks on my calendar and then a to-do list on the side, and then looking at which of these things, like, do I feel inspired to be able to conquer well in this moment? Right? Like, what's urgent? Right? Like, I have to pay people. I have to do certain things. And then what is my brain capable of [laughs] right now? And maybe I'm actually in an email frame of mind, and like, it's better for me to do that. But you know, I'm thinking of books in my life like *Hamnet* or *Jane Eyre* where time was just on a different level. Right? So, in *Hamnet*, Shakespeare is an unnamed character, but a main character in it. He's just a playwright who lives in Stratford-on-Avon and goes to London. [Casper laughs] And he tells his wife, right, like "I'll be back in four to six months." And like, that's just okay. Whereas when I leave on a business trip I tell Peter, "Please pick me up at the airport at 4:30 on Thursday." Right? Like –

C: Yeah, yeah.

V: And in *Jane Eyre*, right, she leaves her job where she's an aunt who's dying and she tells her boss, "I gotta go." And he says, "Promise me you'll be back in a week," and she says, "I can't. Like, it might be a month or two." And there was just this totally different relationship to time, and part of me is like, "Thank god," you know? [laughs] You can now communicate, like, "This is how my aunt is doing, hopefully I'll be back in three days." But time was just so different. But actually, now that I've given those two examples, I think the thing that matters to me is the communication. Right?

C: Hmm.

V: Like, I'd be fine if somebody was like, "Two to four weeks," if I had faith that it really was two to four weeks. Right? And it's the same with your friend [Casper laughs] of like, can we just say 4:30? Right, like, honesty is really the thing that helps me. I feel like I can cope with anything if I actually know what it is. Like, I don't care how late you are, if you tell me you're running late. Because then I can start drafting the email. Then I can start reading. Then-- right? Like, it is the communication aspect for me. And right? Like if my husband William Shakespeare was like, "I'll be gone four to six months," what would annoy me is if I got a letter six months and a day, being like, "It'll actually be another three months." Like, manage my expectations so I can plan.

C: Yeah, what would annoy me is if he came back after two and a half months and I'm still having a good time with the baker boy.

V: Right!

C: You know? It's like, "You said four to six!"

V: Totally! [both laugh] It really is clear communication. And Jane is so fastidious in that, right? Jane is like, "I can't promise I'll be back in a week." And that's something I'm bad at, cuz I don't like to disappoint people.

C: Right.

V: So I can imagine Rochester saying to me, "Be back in a week," and I'd be like, "Okay I'll do my best." And then send a letter being like, "Psych!" But like, I love the person who will look very clearly at you and be like, "I cannot promise that."

C: Yeah. Yeah. Well thanks for this question, Nikita, and do check out the Discord conversation which I'm sure was much more nuanced and uh, clever than what we were able [laughing] to share here. But we

really love seeing listeners learn together and share perspectives and – and texts they’re interested in to think about big questions. One of my favorite things, Vanessa, is hearing people starting to do these kind of conversations with their friends—

V: Yeah.

C: --- and being like, “I brought, you know, the movie *Under the Tuscan Sun*, and I wanna talk about X.” I just love that.

V: Yeah.

[short music interlude]

V: Casper, should we move on to our next question? Which is from Instagram.

C: Yes. What is it?

V: So, it is a version of a question that we got a lot, which is about boundaries. So, “How can I tell the difference between setting boundaries and being selfish?”

C: Ooh. So, the first reaction I’m having is like, what’s wrong with being selfish? Like, I guess if being selfish means like, taking care of yourself, if selfish means not taking into account other people’s needs and feelings, obviously then it’s a little bit more complicated, but that’s my like, first instinctual reaction, is like, well why are we creating this dichotomy between boundaries and being selfish? Because setting boundaries is about self-protection, to some extent, and I don’t think that’s a bad thing. Especially for people who are used to having an impulse of like, making space for someone else at their own cost.

V: Self-sacrifice. Right.

C: Yeah. Yeah, how about you? What’s your first kind of instinct on that one?

V: I mean, this is dovetailing too well off of our last question, so it makes me wonder if this is just what’s on my mind, but part of it is clear communication, and then I’m like, “But no, sometimes you actually can’t communicate clearly your boundaries, right?” Like, for real strategic reasons, for safety reasons, for all sorts of reasons. And then there’s like, the obvious metaphor to reach for, which is like, you put on your own oxygen mask before you help someone else.

C: Mhmm. Okay, so here’s a text we could turn to with this question, and one that we have talked about a lot, namely, Harry Potter.

V: I’ve heard of it.

C: I’ve heard of it! So, I’m thinking about Dumbledore, right? Like we’ve been super critical of him for [laughs] a lot of the books, and you know, maybe you love him now. Who knows? [both laugh] But like, he is very boundaried in what he communicates and what he doesn’t. And it’s partly strategic, but I think it’s also partly, like, his stunted emotional capacity, or something. But like, where is the line with him, between being selfish and being boundaried? Because he is doing what he’s doing in trying to defeat Voldemort. Yes, I’m sure there’s some ego wrapped up in there, but he’s also very conscious that no one else can take this monster down, and only he can. And so he has to take that responsibility really seriously.

V: Yeah, and I mean, one of the moments that I love Dumbledore for is this moment where he turns to Harry, I think it's at the end of book five, and says, "Look, I should have told you everything sooner, but I loved you and I like, didn't want to tell you." Which I think speaks to how complicated boundaries are. Right? Like, even a great tactician like Dumbledore is like, "I'm supposed to tell you this, and I have this rule within myself, but you were only eleven, you were only twelve, you were only thirteen. I like, couldn't do it."

C: So in that context, would you say it's a bit of both, in the sense that there's some selfishness that comes from love?

V: Mhmm.

C: But he's also setting this boundary. I guess maybe Dumbledore needs the same question this person is asking, is like, how do I tell the difference?

V: Right.

C: Like, how can you recognize when it is selfishness or self-interest, versus actually a responsibility of keeping a boundary. How do you know?

V: Well, here's the thing, boundaries are often selfish. Right? There are times where boundaries are not selfish, right? You don't wanna tell your children certain things because they're too young and they don't need to know. And like, that is a boundary that is entirely about taking care of the other person. But boundaries are about safety, often. Right? And about appropriateness. And so I agree with you, I think that the problem is the word "selfish," here. I think maybe the way I would re-frame this is, when am I setting a productive boundary—

C: Ohh, nice.

V: --that is protecting me but still allows for the other person's humanity, and still allows them to be whole, and when am I shutting someone down entirely? Right? Like it's about when are boundaries helpful, and when are they too firm. Right? Is that the question? Cuz aren't boundaries usually about protecting ourselves?

C: Yeah! And boundaries often disappoint people. And, I mean, I had this recently, like, I have a friend who is an expert at something, I needed input on something they had expertise on, and I asked them about it. And they said, "I'm really sorry, I'm actually not saying yes to anything in addition to my normal job this whole month." And you know, they were very very apologetic about it, and I wrote back and I was like, "Thank you. Good for you, there are other ways I can get this information, like, I really respect you doing this." Cuz I was like, I wanna affirm that boundary.

V: Yeah.

C: Yes, it's an inconvenience to me, but they don't owe it to me, right? Like, good for you for modeling good boundaries! Like, snaps! [finger snaps] Snaps for you!

V: Yeah.

C: And so in that case, like, that is not selfish at all. Like, that was good boundaries, they were communicated clearly and lovingly.

V: Can I tell you a messier version of that?

C: Yeah.

V: So somebody recently texted me-- Tuesdays are my quote-unquote "bad" workday. I work thirteen hours on Tuesdays.

C: Ohmygosh.

V: And it's nonstop. Right? Like it's just straight meetings. I get maybe a half-hour break in the middle. It's really a thirteen-hour day, 9am til 10pm, nonstop meetings, which means I get up at 6 in order to do all the things I need to do before, right, it's just a nonstop day. And somebody texted me asking me a question that was entirely googleable.

C: Yeah.

V: It was just straight up a googleable question. And asking for a couple minutes of my time to hop on the phone. And it was easier for me to hop on the phone for five minutes than to respond being like, "Hey, actually, I don't have any time, this is something that you can look up."

C: Yeah. [laughs]

V: Right? And like, I was investing in not offending this person for months, right? And I think maybe that is part of this question. Right? Is like, when is it easier to just let someone cross your boundary?

C: Yeah. [laughs]

V: Be like, "Yep. I zoom facilitate something, I put people in small groups for five minutes, I can call you for three of those five minutes. Even though that is usually when I pee. [both laugh] I can not pee." And like, I think that that was the right strategic decision for me. Right? Like, it was easier. It was just easier.

C: I'm laughing so much because yesterday I wrote an entire email like, there were two or three paragraphs, like, explaining why I was not gonna do this thing. And then, just before pressing send, I was like, "Oh what the hell," and I deleted the whole thing and I just said, "Yes, fine," like [laughs]

V: And I will say, like, I'm glad I did that cuz I think it was better, but there's a really bad rabbit hole with this, where we start disrespecting ourselves, right? Like, the logical conclusion to this is like, "I'm just gonna have sex with this person even though I don't want to cuz it's easier." Right? Like it's easier than yelling no and -- right? Like, this can become really degrading.

C: Yeah. It's a dangerous road to go down, and so the stakes for this question of how do I tell the difference, and like, when do I know which one to choose? Right? Even if I'm able to tell the difference, I might still make a decision like, I'm just gonna give this person a call because it's gonna be easier. I'm trying to think, how would I know?

V: I mean, I'm not gonna lie, some people can just do this, right? I just rewatched Fleabag season two, literally, it's always a good decision. And a moment that really struck me this time is -- so Fleabag's sister is named Claire. And Claire asks her husband, she says to her husband, "Leave me." And her husband is like, "I'm absolutely not gonna leave you." And they start fighting. And Fleabag is in the room, and the husband says, completely reasonably, to Fleabag, "Can you please leave us alone?" And she goes, "Nope." And the sister is like, "No, she can stay right there." And I just, like, I love her so much in that

moment. Right? If the sister then asked her to leave, she would leave. But she was just like, “Nope, that’s a boundary. It’s not your decision. I’m gonna stay here with the sister.” And just the confidence of that, being in the presence of the confidence of that moment, of like, “You’ve asked for a boundary and no, I have my own boundary. My own boundary is, I’m for my sister not for you. Bye!” I just – I love it so much. [Casper laughs] And that moment, I think importantly, comes after a brief conversation between the sisters where Fleabag says to her sister, “You’re in love with this other man, go chase him through the airport.” And Claire says to her, “No, you’re the only person I run through the airport for.” And right, so like, between the two of them, there has been sort of a boundary conversation. And so it’s not selfish when she tells the guy “Nope, I’m staying.” So I feel like maybe the answer is like, you have to know what you’re for. Right?

C: Oh, I love that.

V: And Fleabag has just articulated with her sister, “I’m for her. Like, I – nothing else matters. My boundary is, is it good for Claire? If it’s good for Claire, the answer is yes. And if it’s bad for Claire” – right? Like, and so, I feel like this question is about like, identity and what we stand for, cuz that was a boundary that was totally selfless. Right? She’s drinking champagne and enjoying watching her brother-in-law in pain. [Casper laughs] But like, it wasn’t just about that, it was about being for her sister.

C: I mean, Fleabag season 2 is so beautiful because that show is so much about boundaries.

V: Oh my god, yes.

C: Right? Fleabag’s relationship with Hot Priest, and Hot Priest has obviously made vows as a priest, they love one another. That’s very clear by the end. And yet, Hot Priest ultimately chooses his vocation rather than the love he feels for this wonderful woman who’s entered into his life. And I think it’s precisely what you explain, which is that he has another experience, or I don’t wanna say re-conversion, but there’s a moment of clarity for him about what he’s for. And in his language as a Catholic priest, like, he is for this relationship with God that allows him to be a loving presence in the world as a priest to his congregants and the wider community. And he says this beautiful line at the – oh I kind of don’t wanna say it, just in case anyone hasn’t watched it! You have to watch season 2 of Fleabag! But essentially that sense of like, you’ll get over it. You know, that boundary breaking impulse of this romantic love that he repels with great kindness.

V: I wanna add one more thing into the mix here, which is that I just rewatched one of my favorite movies, *Avalon*, which is part of Barry Levinson’s Baltimore series, and I’m showing them to Peter cuz um, it’s about like the American kids who are the children of Jewish immigrants in America. And so I’m like, “Do you want to understand me and my family? Let’s watch these films together.” [laughs] And we just watched *Avalon*, and the beginning of the movie has these loud annoying frustrating scenes where they’re having Thanksgiving together, and it’s the same conversation every year. “We never make a turkey, and we only make a turkey because it’s what they do in America, and why do we do it?” And they have to put a big board on top of the table to fit everyone, and this one uncle is late, and the kids are hungry, and should we cut the turkey without him, and no we have to wait for him. [Casper laughs] And at the end of the movie they just like, finally set a boundary, this one uncle is always late, and the kids are hungry. And they put up a boundary of like, “We’re cutting the turkey without him, this is rude.” And he gets so offended that it essentially leads to the destruction of the family. Like, they stop doing Thanksgiving together and one of the shots at the end of the movie is a family of four doing Thanksgiving in front of the TV, just alone. To me, it articulated that who I’m for is like, putting up with other people’s

weird idiosyncrasies and letting go of some of my boundaries to have the annoying loud Thanksgiving meal. Right? Like, telling the kids, "Have a cracker. Like, it really matters to this uncle that we wait for him to cut the turkey." And like, he's crossing my boundary by being late, he could leave earlier, right? Like, but like, I don't care cuz my bigger goal is to make sure we always gather. And like, that is a ton of compromises. And, if that uncle wasn't late but was like, mean to one of my children, right?

C: That would be different.

V: Then I'd be like, "Get out." Right?

C: Yeah.

V: And so I think that this question of who am I for, what am I for, I do think might be at the heart with Fleabag, right, like with all of it.

C: Oh, that one feels really resonant, in part because, what I'm expecting is true in that context is that for the rest of the year there is a relationship with this uncle that is meaningful enough. I recently had to navigate a relationship that just hasn't been as rich as it used to be, and kind of finding an ending to a shared celebration, you know, that we would do every year. Because that fabric of relationship just hasn't been as strong, and no doubt, you know, multiple reasons for that, and part of that is me, and part of that is the other person. But like --

V: Nope, you're perfect.

C: [laughs] Well I know that's not true, but, in this case, I feel relatively [laughs] okay about it, I think? But just in that sense of like, even with this uncle, like, as you said, if there were other things that were violated, right, which was the lovingness of this family or the commitment to each other, then I'm not gonna extend that grace to you. Right? So like there's a reciprocity in these boundaries I guess is what I'm trying to point to, and like, you know, break that once, okay. Break it twice, now I'm getting pissed. Like, break it three times, I really have to navigate what the boundary is, and I think maybe that's one of the lessons I'm learning is that I can set a boundary that makes sense now, but it might change. And I think I've ben, I've held on too much to this sense of, like, "Oh, I've finally figured it out, now this is the rule." And it's like, "Haha, surprise, like, life changes!" And the rules are probably gonna have to change. Otherwise you're maintaining this boundary that doesn't make sense anymore.

V: Yeah. I mean, the live question for this, for me, is one that I talk about on the podcast [laughs] a lot, because it's an example that I'm comfortable sharing, but is, right, I've put up a boundary with my aunt. I no longer talk to my aunt. And there is a scene in *Jane Eyre* that I struggle with so much, because Jane gets kicked out of the house by her aunt and she's eight, and she says, "I will never call you aunt again. Like, we are done." When she leaves, and then her aunt beckons for her when her Aunt Reed is on her deathbed, and Jane goes, and is like, "Yes Aunt Reed." And, Jane talks about like, "I was ten years older. And like, I learned," [laughs] right? And like I love that wisdom. But the aunt is cruel to her still!

C: Yes!

V: And I'm like, "No! Hold your boundary!" Right? Like, go to someone on their deathbed but like, you don't have to be nice about – like, that scene is always just so hard for me to read, cuz I'm like, "No! Hold your boundary!"

C: Do you think Jane would go if the aunt wasn't on her deathbed?

V: I don't know. Maybe. I just – I get very anxious about picturing myself in that situation, of my aunt reaching out to me, being like, "I'm sick, and I—" Not even like I'm sick, just, my aunt formally beckoning me. One of the reasons that my aunt and I never speak is because she, like, the onus was always on me. And the target was always moving, right? It was like, "I can't believe you didn't call me two weeks before you came home, so that I could plan. I can't believe you didn't call me eight weeks," – right? Like, it was just impossible no matter what I did, I was profoundly disappointing her and had to deal with her wrath. But the onus was always on me, so like she has never reached out. And so, I wonder if she reached out, death bed or not, and was like, "I need to talk to you." Like I think I would go, but I would be majorly on my guard, I would not go in and be like, "Yes, Aunt, please love me, I forgive you." Right? And so, yeah, I don't know. These questions are really live questions. And even just thinking about her reaching out to me makes me anxious. I'm like, because exactly to your point, I have this very firm boundary. And the idea of life changing in a way that I would have to renegotiate that boundary, I'm like, "Oh! No!" Right? Like sometimes those firm boundaries are sanity.

C: Right. Right. So, it feels like with this question of how can I tell the difference between selfishness and boundaries, I really love what you said about, know what you're for, right? What's the most important thing? And then set a boundary, but also know that it can change, and not to let it blow in the wind like laundry, but at the same time know that it can move, you know. Like, pegs on the laundry line with intention.

V: Whoa!

C: Look at that!

V: That was [both laugh] I want you to end there but I need to amend one thing, which, it doesn't have to be that you know what you're for, it's: reflect on what you're for.

C: Hmm. That's good.

V: Right? Cuz like you can't always know, right? But take a moment, right? "Oh, my brother's late again. It really matters that we don't cut the turkey without him." Right? Cuz you can't always know ahead of time.

C: That's fair. That's fair.

V: Well everyone, thank you so much for sending in these beautiful questions.

C: We have so many more questions to get through, so we might do another one. I feel very stimulated in my own life by these questions, so I really appreciate your thoughtfulness and generosity in sharing them. We have many more, so apologies if we didn't get to yours today. We will do another one of these, and explore a few more questions together.

V: And also, feel free to email us if new questions have come to mind. You can always email us at realquestion@notsorryproductions.com

[theme music begins]

C: You've been listening to The Real Question. We can only make this show thanks to your support, so if you have the means to help us out, please check out our Patreon at patreon.com/realquestionpod. We'll be answering one more question in a little bonus for our Patreon subscribers, so check that out if you are already a member of our Patreon. If you love the show, you can review us on iTunes and you can always follow us on Instagram and Facebook @realquestionpod and on Twitter @therealqpod. We are a Not Sorry Production and our executive producer is Ariana Nedelman. Our editor this week is Molly Baxter. Our music is by Nick Boll and we're distributed by Acast.

V: We'd like to thank everyone who sent in a question. We've just loved answering them and there are so many wonderful ones we didn't get to. We also wanna thank Julia Argy, Nicki Zoltan, Stephanie Paulsell, and all of our Patrons.

C: Thank you everyone!

[theme music continues, ends]