

THE REAL QUESTION

MIDDLE AGE

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VANESSA: Hi everyone! Before we start today's episode, we wanted to share a bit of news with you. So one thing is staying the same. If you are a Patron of The Real Question, you are never going to hear an ad on The Real Question. However, there's going to be a small change which is that if you are not a Patron of The Real Question, every once in a while you might start to hear an occasional ad. Our model for selling ads has changed, so instead of hearing specific ads for specific shows you'll be hearing the same ads across Harry Potter and the Sacred Text, The Real Question, and Hot and Bothered. And if you support us on Patreon, even just for a dollar a month, you'll still never hear an ad.

VOICEMAIL #1: Hi Vanessa and Casper, it's Allison. I think that you turn middle aged when you're forty-two. Maybe forty-three.

VOICEMAIL #2: Hi Vanessa and Casper, my name is Kristin and I think age is very arbitrary, but perhaps middle age is around forty.

VOICEMAIL #3: Hi Vanessa and Casper, my name is Scott and gay male culture would have us believe that we may as well be dead when we turn thirty. But I actually think that we hit middle age somewhere between forty and forty-five.

[Theme song begins]

CASPER: I'm Casper ter Kuile.

VANESSA: And I'm Vanessa Zoltan.

C: And this is The Real Question.

[theme music continues]

C: A big thanks to those of you who recently signed up for Patreon. [theme music fades and ends] Freya W, Chloe C, Annie B, Allie C, and Amy. And I should say, thank you to everyone on Patreon because I recently hosted my building meet-your-neighbors event, and I wouldn't have done it without all of your lovely encouragement and this conversation that Vanessa and I had. It was super fun! We had posters everywhere, my neighbor Caroline baked a beautiful chocolate cake. It then started to rain horribly but we said "That's no problem! We'll just go downstairs." And the party continued inside. And I really felt so much more at home in the building that I live. So, thanks to Patrons for supporting this show and also for helping me meet my neighbors. And I hope you can do something like that too! It's really fun.

V: That's awesome! I'm so glad that went well.

C: Well today's conversation, Vanessa, is another one I'm hoping you can help me with because I'm really trying to figure out: when does middle age start? Um, we heard in the voicemails a couple of estimates of the age when this beautiful stage of life comes. I'm turning thirty-five this year and it felt like a moment of like okay, I'm stepping into a new part of life. And that really came home to me when I

recently attended a Zoom retirement celebration for two of our old professors, Dudley Rose and Emily Click at Harvard Divinity School. Both those people had been really encouraging and practically helpful for me, both as a student and afterwards. And you know when you see someone who's really shaped your life in some way? Kind of laid down the tools of their trade, right? Like they've completed their teaching careers, they have inspired so many people, and now they're ending that time of work. And it's beautiful and it's often a little sad, but the feeling that I felt was this sudden weight of responsibility. I was like "Oh god, I can never repay to them what they gave to me, I can only pass it on." It was just such a moment of like Oh god, I'm not the young promising y'know like flitty exciting new person on the block like, no! This is it! Like, [laughing] this is who the world has now. Like, we don't have Dudley and Emily teaching anymore. Oh god! Y'know, now it's up to me, and the people who I was in school with. Now, I'm not a professor, I'm not a teacher, so it's a little easier for me, but nonetheless that feeling of something being passed on and it now being in my hands felt really real to me. And so I'm sitting with this question of like, what is this new stage of life about? And so that's what I wanna figure out in our conversation today.

V: Casper, it's so interesting that you're equating middle age with this idea of like "Now it's my job to have something to offer people. Now I'm the expert." And I'm wondering if you think that that should be true for everyone, or do you feel like you now have things to offer [laughing] younger people?

C: I mean I definitely feel the responsibility that I should have something –

V: Sure

C: --to offer.

V: Okay, yeah.

C: I—[laughing]

V: Yeah!

C: You know, and I think back to my own experience, like when I was twenty-four, twenty-five, I had an incredible mentor -- um, whose name was Charlotte Miller, and I still love her very much, and she was the age I am now when she sat me down one day and she was like "Casper, I'm gonna be your mentor cuz you're never gonna ask for help." And it was just like such an incredible gift to me as this like arrogant and at the same time very insecure [laughing] twenty-four/twenty-five year old. And like she really both put me in line in a couple of ways, like I was always a little bit late for things, and she was like "So, what's that about?" And I was like "Uh, I don't know?" And I was never late again. And she was also extremely generous and like sharing resources and tools and like introducing me to meditation and she really opened the way for me in terms of my career, and my self-development, in a significant way. And so I think about that and I'm like "Oh wow, like, here was someone who was the same age I am now, and who had such a big impact on me, like, am I doing that for someone?" I don't think so. Like, I've a couple of people I'm a conscious mentor for, but it's more responsive, like I'm not inserting myself in their life. And I think that really became clear in this Zoom retirement party I was like "Wow, y'know, those relationships across generations are so beautiful and so formative." And I'd been so lucky to receive them. I have a responsibility to pass it on. And so I think that this stage of like moving from young person to middle-age, I guess I'm looking for a specific age of when it starts so I know like when am I on the hook for like, doing this? [laughing] Like, is it now? Cuz I'm turning thirty-five? Or is it when I'm forty-two, cuz I would like a plan.

V: So [laughing] I'm curious how much you're really attached to this idea of it being a general age, or the right age for you? Right? Because

C: Mmm.

V: I would imagine that you have a sense that like some people for whatever reason step in to like real authority and skill young. Like, in their late twenties, right? And we see that with like Naomi Osaka.

C: Right.

V: There are now tennis players who are three years younger than she is and she's like "I will take you under my wing, and like do this press conference with me. Here's how to talk about mental health."

C: Mmm.

V: And then there are other people you know my friend Genevieve is my age, she's thirty-nine and she's just finishing her surgical residency. And like of course –

C: Wow, yeah.

V: --she has things to teach younger people, but she did two residencies and is y'know a specialized trauma surgeon, and like only when she turns forty will she be a certified surgeon who can start doing that.

C: Hmm.

V: So I'm wondering how attached you are to this idea that it's one age for everyone, forty "come on everyone we're middle aged! [Caspar laughing] We should be saving for retirement, we should be mentoring young people, you should've done X, Y, and Z." Even if it's nontraditional things, right? I don't think you're saying you need to be married and have two point five children and own a home, right? But like that there's some things that by forty everyone has to have done.

C: Yeah. I mean, ugh, this is one of those things, right, where you realize something about yourself and you're like "I don't like it." But like I remember when I got married, being like "Yes! Got in there just before I was thirty." Like, I married when I was twenty-nine. And like, I'm not proud of that, but like I did feel it, like I was like "I'm on track!" And I'm track in like a bunch of things, I'd say in my work life. We don't own a home, we're a long way from a down payment, like, that is definitely not happening on that kind of track that somehow culturally is like expected of us. So I do feel that, is what I'm trying to say. Like, it does feel like there are actual numbers associated to these moments that somehow my brain expects me to hit. But I know rationally that that makes very little sense. Right? Our bodies are aging at different levels, I mean you mentioned a professional athlete, right, their athletics career at least as a competitor is probably gonna finish in your thirties somewhere, unless you're Roger Federer or Serena Williams and Venus, right, like these kind of legends and heroes of the sport.

V: And they're thinking about retiring like at forty-one.

C: Right! Yeah, it's not like they're trying to figure out how to play until they're seventy-two. Although listen, they haven't stopped yet, so we may speak too soon. So yes. The numbers do feel present even if I know logically that they shouldn't be the driver.

V: I will just tell you that there's something really freeing about watching those milestones that culture wants to oppress us with fly by and be like "Nope!" I bought my first car at thirty-three—

C: Yeah.

V: I was like “No I still don’t own a car! I don’t need a car!”

C: Yeah!

V: It was great!

C: I still can’t drive! [both laughing] Right!

V: Like and there are other things, right? Like I started supporting myself financially at eighteen which is younger than a lot of other people do, right? Like, there are some ways that I’ve been really ahead, and other ways that I’ve been behind, and I just find such freedom in watching those things blow by. So—

C: Yeah.

V: I just wanna offer that to you. Does that sound exciting to you? To be like, “D’you know what, no, I might be seventy and never own a home, and like who cares?”

C: Yeah, d’you know what, that is actually really helpful, because one of the things that feels wrapped up in this question is: even if I’m getting clearer about, okay, these are the expectations of this age, it also then allows me to be more intentional about being like “But I don’t want that,” rather than swimming through like a mossy gloopy liquidy situation. Be like “Okay, these are the options, I take that, I reject that. I want this one, I don’t want that one.” And like, maybe I wanna go cycling through Europe for three months, and like no that doesn’t make sense, but like it does make sense, you know what I mean? And so to have that—to have that clarity about choosing rather than just falling in to “Oh well this is next, this is next, this is next.” That feels really wrapped up in this question for me. And some of those choices that I wanna make are about responsibility, right? Like, it’s not that I just want – I wanna have the best life for me, it’s like no I’ve been given things, and so it’s my duty and also a pleasure to pass those things on. It’s about being intentional and choice-ful about what this next half-decade from thirty-five to forty looks like.

V: Yeah. Something that I’ve been thinking about a lot since I’ve turned thirty-nine, is two of my favorite writers are Charlotte Brontë and Toni Morrison—

C: Mmm.

V: --and Charlotte Brontë died at thirty-eight, and Toni Morrison published her first novel at thirty-nine.

C: Wow.

V: Charlotte Brontë by thirty-eight had written Jane Eyre and Villette and The Professor and god only knows what she would have been able to do if she had lived longer, but that can make me feel really bad about myself to some extent. And then I look at Toni Morrison and obviously I’m gonna be the next Toni Morrison, so, look out world! Right? But like –

C: Yeah.

V: --two of my all-time favorite women, like, they had such different relationships with their ages. And so I love that you’re using this idea of what does society want me to do, and therefore like what do I want my relationship with that to be?

C: Well that's a really good entry into the first text. I've brought you a little quote from David Sedaris, who is just one of my all-time favorite human beings. He is an American humorist and author. He started out as this kind of like abstract artist performer. He took a lot of drugs, he did a lot of weird jobs in between, and he always kept a diary. And he writes diaries and essays and memoir with such hilarity, first of all, but also real tenderness. And you might know his story about being an elf at Macy's around Christmas time, it's a wonderful wonderful place to start with Sedaris' writing. And in this book Calypso, he has a little quote which I wanted to pull out where he says "There are few real joys to middle age. The only perk I can see is that with luck, you'll acquire a guestroom." And so I chose this quote because, well first of all David Sedaris is gay. Um, and he's been with his partner Hugh for a very very long time. And he writes hilariously about family and children, so I'm sure he enjoys them plenty, but he doesn't have kids. And at this point in my life, you know, definitely still an open question to some extent, but kids are not looking likely or on the horizon. And so I think one of the challenges with this idea of looking at the kind of dominant expectations from society is that, yes with middle age certainly after marriage, the next obvious step is like, house and children. Or at least a dog! And like none of those things are happening, and I look at this sentence and I see okay for someone who isn't fitting into that traditional category, like what are the joys of middle age? And Sedaris is pretty, I mean he's being funny but like he's not seeing a lot of joy in it, right? Like, the only joys that with luck maybe you'll acquire a guest room. It kind of looks like a bleak invitation, and I think maybe that's a little bit what I'm worried about in this question as well, is like with youth you have promise and potential and like new experiences and new opportunities to learn and grow and like I'm a bit worried that maybe this is like a time of stasis? And you know if I'm honest, like, friends who we were very close to you know as they're having children, of course their center of gravity in their family life changes, and so like essentially, are the next twenty years gonna be a bleak time where like, [laughing] all my friends have kids and I'm just like "Okay, well, we got a guest room, so, I'm just gonna go and like write hilarious books." I mean, maybe that is what it's about.

V: Well, first of all, I think that this guest room obviously is a metaphor [laughing] for financial stability, right?

C: Yeah

V: Which I would say might be the big perk for lucky people, right, as he says "with luck."

C: Yeah.

V: Lucky people middle age in theory is a time of more financial stability.

C: Yeah.

V: But what I'm hearing you say is like regardless of whether or not it's middle age, I'm thirty-five and a lot of my friends have little kids. I don't wanna spend the next twenty years of my life hanging out at other people's kids' birthday parties. [Casper laughs] Or like I'm happy to do that some of the time but not all of the time. And so like where do I find this niche for joy in my life.

C: Yeah, I would say it's adjacent to that. It's like this is happening for other people and that's wonderful. I don't want my life to just look like an absence of that. Like, I want something full, and it's not gonna be the same as kids, and I really honor and recognize that there is a precious joy and suffering that comes from parenting that I will just never experience. But like, I want this next phase of my life to have a fullness rather than just an emptiness in comparison. Do you know what I mean?

V: Yes! Totally, and I feel you as a stepmom, right?

C: Yeah.

V: I'm like a one-eyed monster [Casper laughing] I'm like half-parent.

C: You're the best stepmom though [Vanessa laughs] Like, legit prize-winning.

V: No—I'm in this with you, right? Like I really feel you. I mean the question is like what do you wanna be? Right? Like,

C: Yeah.

V: Do you want a guest room? Like, you potentially have this thing that other people don't have which is twenty years god willing and a stable career and two incomes no kids, right? Dual income no kids "DINKS" they're the most financially secure people, so like what does that look like for your next twenty years? And what does that look like as far as you giving back, you being Dudley and Emily for someone else? If you're not gonna have kids but you wanna be a mentor like, what does that look like?

C: Yeah, that's definitely something I've been thinking about, and I [laughing] like I often get asked and I think you do too, about like "Hey I'm interested in going to Divinity School, like, can you talk to me about it?" And having had you know maybe twenty to forty of those conversations over the last couple of years, I created a google doc which I'm sure we can put in the show notes or something where I was like "Here are all the things that I say in that conversation, like, this is what I learned, this is what I would recommend, this is how I did it. Obviously your experience will be your own but here is what I have to share on that question." And I think one of the things that I felt in that Zoom retirement celebration was like Okay, there's the factual sharing of information which a google doc can do really well. But actually what these two professors did for people, I mean this was literally what people said over and over again as they honored these two retirees was that it was the quality of the attention that they gave to every person who sat down in their office. Now, one of them was like head of the Masters of Divinity program, so that's his job, right? The other one was the head of the field education experience where you find a placement where you get to practice ministry in one way or another, so again paying attention to students being with them as they figured out what they wanted to do as part of their job. It's not part of mine, right? I don't work in a university context, I don't work with students directly. So I don't wanna like open every hour of the day to talking to anyone who wants to think about divinity school. But it did make me think about a little bit more intentionally okay what are the conversations that I do wanna make space for with people where I give them that quality of attention, or maybe who are the young people already in my life where I can be more present and engaged? And a couple years ago I did kind of make a commitment for myself of two younger people that I would intentionally check in with and just listen to and be excited for them about what was happening in their life. And I think I want more of that but it's not – it's not the fullness of what I wanna make this next twenty-year theme about. I think it's more than mentorship is I guess what I'm saying.

V: So it sounds to me like you're like I'm turning thirty-five, I wanna have this conversation with myself. Like, I wanna figure out –

C: Mmm.

V: --what I want the next twenty years to be, and I don't think that you and I are gonna figure that out in this episode, like, everything [Casper laughing] that you want the next phase in your life to be. But you have this ambivalence about it, right? You brought this question of like, "Am I now the age where I need to be thinking about this?" And so I'm wondering what your mixed feelings are.

C: It's so interesting cuz actually, the way you just asked that question like a lightbulb went off in my brain. Which is it's not about like what do I wanna do, but it's more like how do I want to be? Like, for the last twenty years you know, whatever, I've been like the young person in the room often, or I'm like organizing youth climate actions or I'm the fresh voice as we're talking about the future of religion. And like frankly I love that role! Right? Like you get to be a little cheeky, you get to be inspiring, you don't have to have all the answers, but you get to ask the questions. And I feel like with this moment of turning thirty-five, like that era or that approach or attitude is no longer really describing who I am or who I wanna be in this next phase. And so, it's not exactly like what am I doing but it's like how am I doing it? And I think that's what I saw in that retirement celebration was like, their way of being made space for other people. Like, it was – it was generous, it was thoughtful, it was present. And I wanna [laughing] I wanna be more like them when I grow up, you know? It's like that kind of feeling. And I haven't even thought that out loud for myself so that's really helpful to realize that it's like okay. What's the – yeah what's the tone, right? Like what's the vibe that I'm being in this new stage? Yeah.

V: I mean I love that and what I really love about what you're saying is that you're acknowledging that you have a new sort of power. And—

C: Mmm.

V: --I think it is one of the great psychological violences that people with power can do, is pretend like they don't have any or not notice that they have any.

C: Yeah.

V: Right? If you're like "Oh I don't know how to fix that," and it's like "Well you're the one who can fix it." Right? And so if people who have power don't see themselves as having power, the world gets worse under their watch, right?

C: Hmm.

V: There's that expression right like "All we need for evil to exist is for good people to stand by and do nothing." And I think that not acknowledging your power is doing nothing!

C: Hmm.

V: Right? Whereas what it sounds like you're trying to do is step in and be like "No! I'm the one with the energy, I'm the one with the expertise, I'm the one with the organizing power. Okay!" Like, but, the other thing I hear you saying is "But am I that person?" [both laughing] "I don't have that job and I'm not sure that the infrastructure is there" and it sounds like you have some of the power that you want to acknowledge and step in to—

C: Yeah.

V: --and some of the things that you humbly are like "but I don't have the answers! [Casper laughing] That's not my job!"

C: Yeah, or like would I be good enough in that role? And I – I guess I recognize this feeling like other people have talked about that, of like when you become a teacher or the principal or you become the manager or the you know the CEO, whatever. Um, that you're suddenly in a role where there's expectations of you to have answers or to at least know how to set direction and you're like "Oh, it's me?"

V: Yeah.

C: “In charge? Oh boy!” [laughing] Um, and like I can do the best I can but like it still might not be good enough, and I guess that’s the uncertainty around this moment is – and maybe that’s the uncertainty actually about this stage, is that when you’re moving from one to another, of course you have that uncertainty. And maybe when you’re sixty-five or whenever we transition from like middle age into older age, that there’s all that uncertainty all over again, um about kind of taking on this new role. Yeah. That feels – that feels like a really good description. [pause] [singing tune of Defying Gravity from Wicked] “Something has changed within me.” And like how am I gonna be with that change? And what I don’t wanna do is ignore it, in exactly the way that you’re saying. Because I’ve seen people do that and I completely agree with you that it – it’s irresponsible and it can actually hurt people and so, yes, starting with that acknowledgement and then figuring out okay how am I gonna be with this new access, with this new influence, with this new stability?

V: And it’s such a tightrope to walk right? Because you also don’t wanna be like “Here! I’ll mentor you! [Casper laughs] I have things to teach you!” And the younger person being like “Actually I don’t – I don’t wanna meditate, and no thank you? [Casper laughing] Right? Like, Charlotte, it really saw – there was a discernment –

C: Yeah.

V: --for her, which was part of the brilliance –

C: Absolutely.

V: -- of what she did, right? And so I can just imagine a like bad version of this, of you walking around and being like “Here I am! I’ve noticed this about you!” [both laughing] “And it’s bad!”

C: “You’ve been waiting for me even though you didn’t know it!”

V: “You’re welcome, I’m here!” Right? So there’s like [Casper still laughing] part of acknowledging your power is actually knowing what your power is, which is really confusing and like constantly changes—

C: Yeah.

V: And people can think that you have power that you really know that you don’t.

C: Mhmm.

V: And vice versa, right? Like people can see power in you that you don’t realize you have. It sounds to some extent like we’ve answered your question, middle age is a different age for everyone and for you Casper it’s thirty-five [laughing] because it’s causing this crisis of [Casper laughing] Phase in my life. Right? And maybe this is the right moment to turn to the next text, cuz regardless of what it is for everybody else, it’s thirty-five for you, and you wanna be different and what does that mean? On this like tightrope?

C: So you’re telling me I – nailed it, and I reached middle age before anyone else? Why thank you! [both laughing]

[Musical interlude]

C: So the second text that I’m bringing, for two episodes running, it’s Shakespeare! He’s back! Old Billy boy. And I’m bringing you, from the play As You Like It, a speech by a character called Jack, called the

seven ages of man. And this piece of text is very close to my heart because when I was eleven, I recited this from memory at my prep school, and I felt like very self-involved and incredible. I felt very mature. So as I was thinking about this question, this text came to my mind because what Shakespeare does is I think complicate this idea of middle age. I found it really helpful. So I'm gonna read you the first few lines, it goes on much longer than this, but this will give you a sense of what the speech is. "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players. They have their exits and their entrances, and one man in his time plays many parts, his acts being seven ages. At first, the infant. Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms, and then the Whining Schoolboy, with his satchel and shining morning face, creeping like snail unwillingly to school" So those are the first two stages, and he goes on to describe these five others of being a lover, a soldier, a justice, an older man, and then someone extremely aged who is kind of like a child again. And Shakespeare is not inventing these seven categories by himself, the concept of seven ages was a kind of medieval philosophical idea which really echoed this number seven which is often present in the bible, think about the seven deadly sins for example. But other people split life into different categories. Aristotle had three or four I think, and so you see basically people in this tradition exploring how to chop up life into these different stages and I feel like it's helpful for me to look at this speech because it doesn't fall into like childhood, teenager, young adult, middle-aged, old person or like retiree. It feels more alive and it feels more complicated. And at the same time I'm not exactly sure where I fall, so I- I just thought it was a stimulating text because I probably sit somewhere between the soldier which he describes as someone full of strange oaths and bearded like the pard – like a leopard, and you know I have a little facial hair now and then, mostly it's a comical mustache, that's kind of one place where I sit. And then the justice is probably too old, but the justice he describes as someone who is in round belly, with good cap and lined. So someone who is maybe you know enjoying the stability of a little bit more financial security. So in all of these stages, I mean they're fun to look at. I'm honestly less interested in these particular stages and more interested in the idea that – what if we were to create our own stages? Like, how would I want to describe what this stage is for me so I know I'm leaving behind this kind of youthful questioning enthusiastic – I mean maybe I still wanna be enthusiastic, but like there's a youthfulness that I feel like I have completed that phase. So like what is this next stage and how do I wanna describe it? Like, that's what I love in this Shakespeare quote, is like it gives us different language or an invitation to think with different language, rather than just being like "Oh, it's middle age," which is so meh.

V: Right, and so like the word he uses is "Soldier," which I would imagine is not a word that you wanna use [Casper laughs] in your life... I dunno.

C: Right.

V: No?

C: Right, yeah, no I – it doesn't – it doesn't feel very descriptive for me, no.

V: So like what is the word that you wanna use?

C: Hmm.

V: Or like, I—sorry, so I—to interrupt myself, I ask myself that same question I was like "oh no! Many words!" [Casper laughing] Right? So I'm also wondering like how that question made you feel?

C: Yeah, I guess this is why I kept going back to that Zoom retirement [pause] thing, because that's where I really felt this, and I think one of the words was "Responsible." Like, that really is a part of it. Like I have responsibilities now, not just for myself and the people I love but like, for people who look to me for

something, not that I have the answers but I can offer my attention and my interest, again not to everyone, but at least to some people. So that feels like one important word of responsibility. I guess another one is some confidence in knowing some things. Again, I'm not a teacher or a professor but like I do know some things. And I can sit with that more comfortably, and share that in a way that doesn't have to be meek. It also doesn't have to be overconfident, but there is a solidity to knowing something that feels really real. And I guess another piece of the energy for me is about so much of my – certainly career has been like – I've ended up cofounding some organizations, creating projects like Harry Potter and the Sacred Text and The Real Question. But I also have an energy of like something more solid rather than exploratory. I'm still figuring out what that really means, and maybe that's what connects with the David Sedaris text as well, of like the spare bedroom. Like there's some solidity to that and that could be in terms of financial security, but I think for me it's more about like there's something in that word like "Foundations" "solid" "enduring" rather than like "exploratory" and "questioning." Yeah. That all sounds quite vague, but that's my first offer.

V: No! Oh I don't think that sounds vague at all. I think that that sounds beautiful, right? Like I mean what it sounds like, and this goes back to what you were saying with the David Sedaris one, of the question is like "What does the spare bedroom mean, and what – are you the soldier?" Right? You were saying that its' not what you wanna do but it's how you wanna be.

C: Yeah, yeah.

V: And it almost sounds like what you want -- and you can tell me if I'm projecting incorrectly -- but like when somebody asks you something and you don't quite know, like, a mantra to recite to yourself of like "I'm in a phase—

C: Mhmm.

V: -- where I wanna be responsible and where I wanna be present." Right? Or whatever it is. And like let that decide your next move. Cuz I think part –

C: Yeah.

V: --of what you're saying here is that in youth you did youth well.

C: Mmm.

V: And I don't think that everybody does do youth well. Right? But you –

C: Mmm.

V: --are naturally a questioner, and an extrovert who will like go out and try things and there's the expression of like youth is wasted on the young, and like –

C: [laugh] Yeah.

V: --it was not wasted on you. Right? Like—

C: Hmm.

V: -- you went out in the world and tried and did and failed and succeeded, right?

V: Mmm. Mhmm.

V: And so it sounds like there's just some pressure of like "I wanna do middle age well and it isn't gonna come as naturally to me as youth did."

C: Yeah.

V: And so who do I wanna be?

C: Yeah!

V: And so yeah I wonder if like that's what it is, is like coming up with some sort of just like three word mantra of – these are my three things.

C: Mmm.

V: These are the things I'm concentrating on.

C: Mmm. Yeah, it's making me think about friends who at the beginning of the year will choose like a theme for the year, and that's their kind of guiding orientation of like "I'm gonna try to say yes to adventure or to creativity" or you know something like that, so like when you're given a choice you can be like "Well which one's more adventurous? That's the direction we're going in." Oh I like that a lot. [Pause] Responsibility sounds less fun. [both laughing]

V: Yeah. I mean it's what you're --

C: [still laughing] Yeah.

V: -- responsible to.

C: Yes. That's true. Cuz I do – I – I think that's wrapped up in this for me as well is like, the solidity and the – and the knowing something and the kind of taking responsibility also allows you know if we take a nature image, like, a tree can grow deeper and taller because it has those things, right? It's not moving around all the time, or it's not trying lots of different things. There's more stability to be able to grow deeper roots and taller branches. That's an image that might be helpful for me. To be like those giants from my divinity school experience, they stayed in the same place for a really long time in terms of their work.

V: Yeah.

C: You know the team they had together didn't have any staff turnover for more than a decade, which --

V: Yeah.

C: -- is frankly unheard of. Because they were all so stable and it worked really well for them it was a really functional, loving environment. And y'know Vanessa the thing that really stayed with me from those conversations was the other staff members who worked with them, said yes you were excellent professors, yes you were excellent administrators, right like deans in the school. But the thing that you were always first was ministers. Because you helped us know that the thing that was most important was our daughter's dance recital. Was the health of our partner. You helped us be human and loving together and that's -- you know people won't remember what you said but they'll remember how you made them feel. That's that piece in here that I want to grow into is like the way I shape teams or the way I shape projects the way how I am. That's like – that's the biggest impact you'll actually ever have on people, on the world. And I wanna take that seriously rather than maybe you know learning something new or meeting some people, or. There's a I guess a centeredness, maybe that's a word I can sit with. Yeah, just

this loving presence that does maybe not come naturally [laughing] to me, but I really – I really respect and appreciate in the people who I feel it from.

V: I just wanna say how much I love and respect you because I feel like –I feel like you're asking such a beautiful opening question. You could've asked this question about like "I'm not young anymore" and instead it's this like "Who do I wanna be?"

C: Mmm.

V: Which I just think is such a beautiful way of framing [pause] framing this transition.

C: Hmm.

V: Yeah, I just wanna say that to you. I'm really moved by the core of your question and the struggles that you have with it. And I have no doubt, right like and you know this, right. It doesn't matter which words you choose, it matters, you know, what your commitment is to them. There are so many different wonderful ways to be.

C: Hmm.

V: There are so many different wonderful ways to be, right? Dudley and Emily were wonderful in a particular way, but you know--

C: Hmm

V: We know – we know wonderful people who do that a million different ways.

C: Hmm.

V: But you know I – I really look up to Terry Tempest Williams who's traveling all the time, and is, right? Like and can often be inaccessible because she's off meeting with like tribal leaders about the best ways to address climate change in Utah. So yeah I can't get her on the phone [both laughing] but like you know, but when I'm with her I'm the only person in front of her.

C: Yeah. That's helpful.

V: Emily and Dudley and all of their brilliance right like, I would just invite you to expand your scope as you're thinking about --

C: Mmm.

V: -- who you wanna be and how you wanna be, like there are other people you respect who are in the world differently than them.

C: Hundred percent, yeah, that feels – that feels liberating honestly because I think sometimes I can feel like if I'm emulating you know -- we've named Dudley and Emily but there are so many others that I'll just be falling short because I'm not – I'm not as wise or I'm not as loving and gentle and so it is really figuring out okay what does this stage look like for me? And how do those themes of responsibility and confidence and stability show up in my expression? Which may have echoes of others but are also gonna be different.

V: Well Casper I'm so excited to see who you're gonna be in this next phase! I hope that you're similar in many many ways to previous Casper. But there are also some things that could use improvement, so. [Casper laughs] Just kidding.

C: [still laughing] Oh boy.

V: I hope it's not a total change because I love this you. But I'm really excited to know this next phase of you.

C: Thank you, love.

V: I'm gonna know you for the rest of your life. I'm gonna know you through so many phases.

C: Isn't that so fun?

V: It is really fun.

C: Yeah. I'm super pumped about that.

V: Like we're still at the beginning of our friendship.

C: I know! You're gonna live to ninety-two, I'm gonna live to eighty-six so we've got a long way to go.

V: We're gonna die at the same time, about. I'm four years older than you.

C: Oh!

V: We're gonna die about the same time.

C: Yeah. I get to go first.

V: Ugh.

C: Yeah.

V: I hate that for us.

C: Well I'll send you the information about my funeral cuz I've written it all down.

V: Okay great. Yeah.

C: It's in the will.

V: Yeah I can take care of that.

C: Okay.

V: Okay.

C: [laughing] Well thank you very much Vanessa and thank you David Sedaris and William Shakespeare.

V: Bill.

C: Yeah. This was really helpful.

V: Good old Bill.

C: Yeah. Billy Boy.

V: And we wanna thank Hannah Osterwick who sent in this: "Snuggle while you still can," which is found in a bathroom stall in her college.

C: Oh I love that. In a couple of weeks, I'm gonna be doing an episode on the question: "Should I go back to school?" And so we'd love to hear voicemails from you if you have a story about going back um into education a little bit later in life, and what your experience was. Good, bad, wonderful, depressing, all the things. And you can send those voicemails to realquestion@notsorryproductions.com

[theme music begins]

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V: We are a Not Sorry Production and our executive producer is Arianna Nettleman, our music is by Nick Boll and we are distributed by ACast. We'd like to thank Allison, Kristin, and Scott for their voicemails, Julia Argy, Nickie Zoltan, Mollie Baxter, Stephanie Paulcell, Laura Glass, Emma Smith and all of our Patrons. Thank you everyone and we'll talk to you next week!

C: Bye!

[theme music continues, fades, ends]