

The Real Question

NON-BINARY

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Casper [00:00:00] One of the things that's really hit me in the last few years, whenever I'm at my parents' house and looking through old photo albums of us as a family, I wore so many dresses. So much jewelry. I remember one time my mom got so mad because I put all of her necklaces on at the same time and they turned into one giant necklace that literally could not be untangled and the whole thing had to be cut apart and we had to sew them all back together. It was a nightmare. But [laughs] I think about that now, and I'm comfortable as a man, like I'm pretty solid in that. But like, if I were truly free, I would wear the fabulouset, like, big skirts, big jewelry, chunky situation, like on a summer's day and want to like frolic around a park and read Shakespeare.

Vanessa [00:00:49] And I--right like, I love being a woman. And I remember at my sixth grade graduation from elementary school, girls had to wear skirts, and I wore pants. And my mom was like, are you ready to deal with this? And I was like, what are they going to do, not let me graduate? It's just so interesting, looking back about the ways that as kids, we feel more free.

Casper [00:01:14] Yeah. We're going to talk a lot about gender in this episode and the way it can constrain, the way it can liberate. And I'm really excited to see if there's something I can learn from this that will help me embrace maybe more of that freedom that I feel like I had when I look at those photographs of me as a young kid.

[intro music plays]

Casper I'm Casper ter Kuile.

Vanessa [00:01:36] And I'm Vanessa Zoltan.

Casper [00:01:38] And this is the real question. Today, we're joined by guests who are going to be calling Ruth. And Ruth is an actor whose day job is in childcare. Originally from Australia, they spent some time in the U.S. and currently live in London, my hometown. Ruth identifies as an ex-vangelical and loves playing D&D...and I'm guessing is chaotic good. But I may be wrong. [Vanessa and Casper laugh] Ruth, thank you so much for joining us.

Ruth [00:02:19] My pleasure.

Vanessa [00:02:20] I got a much more ordered good vibe.

Ruth [00:02:23] Yeah, I think I'm a rule follower in many ways. I think I'm lawful. Maybe not even lawful good, maybe just lawful neutral.

Vanessa [00:02:32] Ruth I actually think that that leads into our question so well that you have this idea of yourself as lawful. So do you mind telling us a little bit about yourself and where we're coming from before we get to the question?

Ruth [00:02:46] Yeah. So the story that kind of kicked this question off for me was an experience that I had when I was on the train one random day last year and I was on my way home from the theater. It was like 10:30, 11:00 at night, and there was someone who

came on the train and asked for money. And I gave them money and they looked at me and they said, Thank you, sir.

Casper Hmm.

Ruth And I had this disproportionate reaction to being gendered differently. I suddenly felt like so relieved, and excited, and, and I felt like I could see into a whole different world just based on someone calling me something that was different to all of the roles that I had ever followed. And so my question is, do I want to identify as non-binary?

Casper Hmm.

Vanessa [00:03:45] What do you think that feeling was about? That feeling of relief?

Ruth [00:03:51] I mean, I know my experience as a woman, and I'm sure that similar things can be said for men. But the idea that...you have to constantly be performing your gender well. And for me that a lot of my thoughts were instantly about the way that I look. I've always felt like I was never quite succeeding at looking the way I'm supposed to look. You know, I'm too tall, or my face is a weird shape, or I'm too fat or my hair is too thin, or, all those things. And so that relief came from, Oh, wouldn't it be nice to not have that?

Vanessa [00:04:34] And so if you were to start saying, I'm non-binary, what would that do for how you feel and think about how you look?

Ruth [00:04:43] I think it would give me more of a sense of freedom because there's a blank slate to nonbinary. Of going, this is the way I look, and it doesn't matter how similar or not I look to other people or to other ideals of what I should look like.

Vanessa Mm hmm.

Ruth Having said that, I know there are some ideals that are beginning to form about the way non-binary people should look. And it's often like, you know, slim, white, androgynous. Yeah.

Vanessa [00:05:20] So what exactly is the question that you are bringing to us today?

Ruth [00:05:27] I think it's, should I identify as non-binary?

Vanessa [00:05:31] So the question *should* write implies that there is a right and a wrong, right. I should exercise today, but I don't want to, right. What is the right answer?

Ruth [00:05:47] I think the right answer is the one where...the words on the outside of me match up to the feeling on the inside of me. But because I can't feel anyone else's experience, I don't know if they're using the same words the same way that I am or not.

Casper Hmm.

Ruth So I don't know that there's a right answer. I guess I'm just hoping to get a little bit closer to it.

Vanessa [00:06:13] Why wouldn't you just be like, yeah I'm non-binary.

Ruth [00:06:19] It's quite a lot of effort to go against culture in that way. And so--

Vanessa Totally.

Ruth --I want to make sure that it's something I really care about and feels really right before I put that effort in. There's also something about, you know-- gender nonconforming people have been paving the way for many of us for a long time and have been targeted for it and that kind of thing. And there's a, there's a fear of appropriating words that aren't mine or disrespecting the elders? If I don't do it right.

Casper Hmm.

Vanessa [00:06:56] That's so interesting because your first concern--doesn't that mitigate the second? Because you're saying it would be hard for me too. And so wouldn't you then be one of the elders, one of the people who is doing the hard work of living authentically in your body, even when it's not within the like, cultural framework of gender binary understandings?

Ruth [00:07:23] I hadn't thought about it that way, and that is bringing tears to my eyes. I love that. [laughs a little] I love the idea that I could be someone's elder. That's really cool.

Casper [00:07:35] Ruth, I have this image that you're like walking, you know, those walking bridges between two very tall cliffs, and it's like a huge drop below. And like, on your left side is how you're thinking about the challenge of dominant culture, the kind of previously existing gender paradigm, which so many people don't fit into, and it sounds like you feel the same way. But then on the other hand, and maybe this is even more of the way you're describing it is even more of a drop down to the kind of frightening depths below, is not wanting to invalidate other people's experience or to claim language which doesn't feel completely right. And what I'm hearing and what you're saying is that actually that, that might be even more scary than breaking the gender binary, is like offending other people who also don't fit the gender binary, who have specifically kind of narrated their experience in a certain way, and you kind of don't fit into that. Is that right?

Ruth [00:08:32] Yeah. Yeah, I think—so, I realized maybe five-ish years ago that I'm bisexual.

Casper Hmm.

Ruth And, like, the curse and the gift of bisexuality is the invisibility.

Casper Mm hmm.

Ruth So I have learned to navigate already a queer identity that I can be open about it and put on a show when I feel comfortable? And I can just hide in the fact that I have a male partner for the rest of the time, you know? So, there's some of that exploration of identity that I feel like I've done a little bit of before.

Casper [00:09:13] How was that?

Ruth [00:09:16] It was like a question that kept popping into my head. I mean, essentially since I was 12, just like periodically the question would pop into my head and I would bat it away and bat it away. And then sort of, you know, about five years ago was when I went,

oh no, it's it's becoming important to me to actually answer this question seriously. And that felt really freeing. That felt like, standing in my truth and being honest with people, and that felt really good.

Casper Hmm.

Vanessa [00:09:45] Are you glad you waited until five years ago? Until you had that confidence of oh no, this is really important. Or do you look back and go, oh, man, I wish the first time I had that thought, I shared it.

Ruth [00:10:01] Yeah. I think it wouldn't necessarily have been safe for me. I mean, you know, I came out to my mum as an adult and still got, like negative pushback. So I think if I had done that when I was 12, I would not have felt safe.

Casper [00:10:15] Yeah.

Ruth [00:10:16] So, yeah, I'm, I'm glad that I waited, and I'm glad for those years of feeling a bit hidden..

Vanessa Mm.

Casper [00:10:25] Yeah. Ruth, you mentioned in your bio the, the magic word ex-vangelical. And I feel that is such an important piece of this story. And I wonder if you can give us just a sense of what that moved from presumably growing up evangelical and moving away from that. How does that tie in to all of this around sexuality and gender identity and, and this word freedom that you've mentioned twice? Now that feels like a really important counterpoint maybe.

Ruth [00:10:54] Yeah, I think because I had to hide from myself so many aspects of my sexuality.

Casper Mhm.

Ruth Including just that I am a sexual being. [laughs a little] I had to hide that from myself for a long time because I was very invested in purity culture and virginity and all that kind of stuff. So that comes a sense of I don't know what I don't know because I got really good at hiding stuff from myself. So I don't know what is still hiding...yeah. And when I first left the church, it, it felt like a divorce or it felt like a really serious breakup. And I felt the way freedom kind of manifested then was it it was scary initially, and it felt ungrounded and terrifying and like I was free falling through space. But then as I claimed it more, it felt more like freedom and it felt like relief.

Casper Hmm.

Vanessa [00:11:58] So, you know that you're someone who is willing to do the brave, hard thing. That doesn't mean that you want to do it, right.

Ruth Mhmm.

Vanessa You also know how *hard* hard is.

Ruth Mm hmm.

Vanessa So can you describe a little bit about that anxiety, about like, it just sounds hard.

Ruth [00:12:17] I think, because I've done some hard things already, I'm tired.

Vanessa Yeah.

Ruth And I feel bruised from some of the experiences that I have. Which I think, maybe we collect those experiences as get older anyway, like we all collect our own scars and bruises.

Vanessa [00:12:36] But there's a difference between scars and bruises, right?

Ruth [00:12:40] Yes, there is.

Vanessa [00:12:42] And you said bruises, right? Bruises are things that are still healing., scars are things that have healed.

Ruth [00:12:48] Yeah. Yeah. So maybe some of the hard things that I have done are recent enough that they're still bruises.

Vanessa [00:12:59] Yeah. Ruth, before we turn to the texts, is there anything else, any other factor in your head that you want us to keep in mind as we move into this? Any family reality, social realities? You said you're in a partnership. I just want to make sure that you feel like we have all the information.

Ruth [00:13:17] Yeah, I think. In terms of kind of, safety. There would be some corners of my life that feel safer than others to come out in. So in my childcare job, I don't know how welcome that would be there. And that's not an assumption that it wouldn't be. It's just a genuine not knowing. There's no one else gender non-conforming in my workplace.

Vanessa Mm hmm.

Ruth I think my, my partner is quite supportive of me having this conversation. Certain members of my family would not be. And then in terms of myself as an actor. That whole question about my brand and my type is a factor. So, do I still want to go up for women roles? Do I just want to continue to be a woman in the acting industry?

Casper Mm hmm.

Vanessa Right.

Ruth So those are all questions that are part of it, too. Yeah.

Vanessa [00:14:22] Yeah. God. I want to lay down and take a nap. [Ruth laughs] I don't know how you're...

Ruth [00:14:26] I keep swinging between excitement and--

Casper Yeah.

Ruth --tiredness and fear.

Vanessa [00:14:31] Yeah. I mean, the stakes are so high, right.

Ruth Yeah.

Vanessa Some social implications. Your ability to make a living.

Ruth [00:14:40] Mm hmm.

Vanessa [00:14:41] And your feeling of being your authentic self. I mean, like, this is, this is big and hard.

Ruth [00:14:48] Yeah.

Vanessa [00:14:49] And we'll solve it in the next 27 minutes. [Casper laughs]

Ruth [00:14:51] Amazing. Thank you so much.

Vanessa Yeah. [Ruth laughs]

Casper [00:14:56] Well, luckily, we don't have to solve it alone. [laughing a little] Ruth, will you tell us about the first text that you're sharing with us to help us think through this question?

Ruth [00:15:03] So the first text that I have brought is from Shakespeare.

Casper Woop woop.

Ruth Who writes so much stuff about gender and people pretending to be other genders and people discovering all kinds of layered genders. So the text that I've chosen is *Twelfth Night*. Act two scene four. And the characters are Viola, who is currently pretending to be a boy, and her boss, Duke Orsino.

Vanessa [00:15:30] Should we act it out? You be Viola and Casper be Orsino.

Casper [00:15:35] You're talking to a middle school Malvolio here. So, like, I am so into *Twelfth Night*. [laughs]

Ruth [00:15:40] Amazing. My father had a daughter loved a man / As it might be, perhaps, were I a woman / I should your Lordship.

Casper [00:15:49] And what's her history?

Ruth [00:15:52] A blank, my lord. She never told her love, / But let concealment, like a worm i' th' bud, / Feed on her damask cheek. She pined in thought, / And with a green and yellow melancholy / She sat like Patience on a monument, / Smiling at grief. Was not this love indeed?

Casper [00:16:16] Ohhh! [laughs a lot but in a crying way maybe] Will you give us the context a little bit? Because, as you said, Vioa's pretending to be Cesario, but she is secretly in love with Orsino. Like, give us the picture of what's happening here.

Ruth [00:16:26] Yeah, so she is pretending to be this page boy, Cesario, because she's found herself in like a strange land, and she thinks she'll be safer if she's dressed as a boy or a man. And so she's working for Duke Orsino, and she's fallen in love with him. But part of her job is delivering his love letters to someone else. And this is a moment where she, it's the closest she gets to just kind of, tearing off her hat and letting her hair fall down and saying, but I love you. [laughing a little]

Casper [00:16:55] Yes. [laughing a little]

Vanessa [00:16:57] And can you break down how you make meaning of this Viola speech that A blank, my lord?

Ruth [00:17:03] Totally. So she's kind of hinting at this hypothetical, like *if* I were a woman and *if* I loved you. So, you know, I've got a "sister" who loved someone, and then Duke Orsino says, Well, tell me about this sister. What's her history? And she says, Well, it's a blank because she never told anyone. She just hid it. Which is what Viola feels like she's having to do. And all those words about like green and yellow, melancholy and smiling at grief, that's the situation that she feels herself to be in, that she's finding it's so hard, to just be a blank and not talk about how she feels and who she is.

Vanessa [00:17:49] But the other thing she says at the end there is, was not this love indeed, right, that.

Ruth [00:17:56] I know! And I hate that.

Vanessa It's brutal. Yeah.

Ruth That that's what we think love has to be?

Vanessa Yeah.

Ruth So that's really gendered too, right? Like the image of the constant wife, or the constant lover? Like Penelope in the *Odyssey* who has to just like sit and long for someone and just be okay with never getting what they want. Obviously men and male characters experience this too, but I think there's a particular image of the faithful woman who waits. Yeah.

Casper [00:18:27] Well and it's also so oppositional to the kind of classic queer pride theme of right, like living out loud, coming out of the closet, like being vocal about it. And here is Viola saying, like, No, love is quiet, love is hidden. Like, is this not also a type of love? Can you tell us, like how it feels to live as Viola in that way of, like, something feeling true, but not saying it?

Ruth [00:18:53] Yeah, she's definitely, she's not lying to herself.

Casper Right.

Ruth Like she knows for sure how she feels and who she is. And she's refusing to tell him for really good reasons. So I think...primarily that feeling of how unpleasant the longing is, is the overwhelming feeling. Of how much she wants to be able to tell the truth. She calls it noble and she calls it love, but I think she'd rather not have to feel melancholy and feel grief.

Casper Yeah.

Vanessa [00:19:28] I mean she also calls it a worm.

Ruth [00:19:29] Yeah. [laughs] Yeah. She's not enjoying it.

Vanessa [00:19:33] Right. A worm in the bud of a rose, right?

Ruth Mm hmm.

Vanessa It's going to eat the thing alive.

Ruth Mm hmm.

Vanessa Does that ring true for you? That if you held back this truth, about identifying as non-binary, it would be a worm in like the beautiful rose of you?

Ruth [00:19:56] A little bit. Since I had that experience on the train, I'm now hyperaware of, the word woman and women. And even when it's not referring to me, there is a sense of going, oh, that's not, that's not quite right. That doesn't, that doesn't fit. And that rankles a little bit.

Vanessa [00:20:22] What do you mean, even when it isn't about you? Can you say more about that?

Ruth [00:20:27] Yeah. Um...I feel more happy to celebrate other people's womanhood when I don't feel like I have to be the same as them.

Vanessa Mm-hmm.

Casper Hmm.

Ruth So if I am, looking at a list of female actors who are up for Oscars or whatever. If I don't feel like I have to be that, then I can be more like. They're women. That's great. Good for them. And not, oh no, they're women and that's bad news for me because that's what I'm supposed to be.

Vanessa Hmm.

Casper [00:21:03] Mmm. I do want to lift up that point again Ruth, which is that in our conversation, I think is rightly focusing on what you want to do and what you should do. But like the context also sucks. Like Viola is very clear about what she's saying here and Orsino is not paying attention, right? Like, the world is not as it should be. And like this shouldn't have to be hard and complicated. And may we all live in a world where these questions, A) don't have to be questions, they can just be truth, [laughs] you know what I mean? And so I kind of want to like shit on Orsino for a moment, it's like, pay attention, dude. Like, he's so self-obsessed in his own story and his own expectations about who Cesario is—right Viola is Cesario—so, I just want to blame him for a minute. [laughs] And through him, right, the way in which the Oscars categories are best actress and best actor. Like, that's dumb! Why? This is stupid. So, yeah, I just. I just want to say that. [laughs]

Ruth [00:22:04] Yeah, he is so self-obsessed. And his, his question afterwards is, but died thy sister of her love my boy? Like, I think his motivation for saying that is, will I die? Will I die from love sickness? Like he doesn't, I don't think he cares about this hypothetical sister. I think he only cares about himself.

Casper [00:22:23] Ruth, what do you make of the ending? Because turns out Viola has a twin brother, Sebastian, who, who kind of takes her role as the page boy and she can be herself. And like, I'm curious, first of all, is there a Sebastian in your life? Is there someone with whom you've been able to kind of be really open about all of these questions in this journey or that, that helps you maybe take off the disguise, if that's a fair word?

Ruth [00:22:51] Yeah, there is. I do have a few friends like that. And I opened up to this friend of mine about my experience on the train. And she was like, Cool, how can I help you? And I said, Could you experiment with using they/them pronouns for me and see how that fits? And she found so many excuses to talk about me in the third person in front of me. [Casper laughs] So many excuses. She was trying to set me up with someone at a party who clearly didn't like me, and [laughs] but she was like, you know, this is Ruth. *They* blah, blah, blah. And then she would look at me to see how I responded [Casper laughs] and she would feed back to me what she saw. And she would go, Every time I say "they" you smile, I just need you to know that you look really happy when I do that.

Casper Hmm.

Ruth Yeah. So I do feel like I have some people that I can be really, really open with and help me explore.

Casper Hmm.

Vanessa [00:23:51] Sounds like this friend is wonderful and has a lack of subtlety skills. [Casper laughs]

Ruth [00:23:55] Totally. Yeah.

Vanessa Yeah. [Casper and Ruth laugh] Loyalty is not a subtle feeling.

Ruth [00:24:02] Yeah, no.

Vanessa It's great.

Casper [00:24:04] Ruth, can I ask you a question? Just how all of these questions situate themselves within the profession that you've chosen? Because obviously acting is roleplaying, right? You're pretending to be someone else. And like, does it feel like you act in your everyday experience? Does it feel like you are you but other people don't see you in the way that you want to be seen? Like, do they feel like completely different landscapes, or do they feel very interrelated?

Ruth [00:24:28] I don't think I feel like I'm acting. Do I feel like that? I think maybe. Maybe I do a little bit.

Casper Hmm.

Ruth But then I wonder, doesn't everyone feel like this? Like, doesn't everyone feel like, the gendered expectations that are put upon them are not quite right?

Casper Mmm.

Vanessa [00:24:54] Let's say everyone does. How would that change what's right for you?

Ruth [00:24:59] Well, there's a mean voice in my head that says, you're not special. You don't get a different word, just because you don't like your gender. Most of us don't.

Casper [00:25:11] Whose voice is it?

Ruth [00:25:14] Oh my gosh. I think it's a Twitter troll.

Casper Mmm.

Vanessa Mmm.

Ruth There is a non-binary actor I follow on Twitter who has recently kind of blown up in the London and UK theater scene. Their name is Rob Madge and they posted a message that someone sent them, that was like basically saying, you're not, you're not special. Stop trying to pretend that you're special. So I think it's that kind of voice.

Casper Mm hmm.

Ruth I do have a real fear of being a millennial snowflake [Casper laughs a little], and of inventing issues that aren't issues. But also, it's my mom's voice that says that, the like, you know, the same person that I couldn't come out to about my sexuality. There would have been a lot of kind of. No, you're not, you're not like that.

Casper Yeah.

Vanessa [00:26:19] So certain women, right, who were sexually harassed in their jobs in the 1950s and sixties, look at the MeToo movement and think, Oh my God, thank God, finally. And other women think, I had to put up with it, why should they not have to put up with it? And we can value that both of those reactions are fair, right, because of what they went through. But my opinion, one of those reactions cares about the future, and is more right than the other one. And I'm wondering if that feels true for you about this also. Right, that like the reaction of "you're not special" is like a fair thought, but that doesn't mean it's the right thought, or the thought that gets us to a better world.

Casper Mm.

Ruth [00:27:07] Yeah, you're right. It's not the most loving response. And you know, and I think about if any of the children who I work with wanted to share something with me about their gender identity, my response would not be, you're not special. In fact, my response would probably be, you are special. Like. [Vanessa and Ruth laughing a little]

Vanessa [00:27:26] Yeah, look at you. How cool are you?

Ruth [00:27:28] Yeah, totally. Right. And like specifically about this performer who got trolled by people, I think they are special. I think they're really special.

Vanessa Totally.

Ruth Like, yeah.

Casper [00:27:43] Ruth, I'm really struck by the two names that you gave to the voice of who is saying that you're not special, right? One is a Twitter troll, which is like, fuck you Twitter troll. Like, we have to deal with them to some extent, but mostly we want to ignore them and just move past them. But the other voice you said is your mom. And like, that's very, very different. And I'm wondering, can you tell us a little bit more about like, I guess, what would you want to hear, from her?

Ruth [00:28:13] I think in the same way that I would respond to a child saying that to me, I would want to hear her say, yeah, you are special, like... That who you are, is worth seeing, and is worth valuing. Kind of regardless of how similar or not you are to other people.

Casper [00:28:34] Yeah. I hope she'll get to say that to you.

Vanessa [00:28:39] Yeah. Ruth, as we move on to the next text, I'm wondering if you can just tell us what from this kind of unwieldy conversation you want to take with us to the next text. What were you like, ah yes, that felt helpful.

Ruth [00:28:57] I think it's the narrowing down some of the reasons to, and some of the reasons not to. So the reasons to is like a sense of freedom and relief, and the possibility of being a model for other people, although that might be an optional extra.

Casper Mm-hmm. [Ruth and Casper laughing a little]

Ruth Um. But the reasons not to might be that it's not the right time or it's not safe right now, or that it's not quite right.

Vanessa [00:29:29] Is that last one still an option, that it's not quite right?

Ruth [00:29:35] I don't know. [laughing] I feel like you asking me that question is making me go like, oh, I seem very dedicated to defending the idea that it's not quite right, when really lots of people around me are telling me that it might be quite right.

Vanessa [00:29:47] What is the voice in you that's like, maybe it's not quite right. It's this, I'm not nonbinary enough. Is that it?

Ruth [00:29:53] Yeah, but it's also like I'm not not a woman. It's just that I'm more than a woman.

Vanessa Yeah.

Ruth And if that can match up with being non-binary, then that's what I want.

Casper Mmm. Mmm.

Vanessa [00:30:09] So it's a fear that you're going to pick a new label that isn't the right label.

Ruth [00:30:15] Yeah, that if I pick a new label, it might constrain me just as much as the old label.

Vanessa [00:30:19] Okay. Okay. I find that much more compelling than “this phantom non-binary person is going to say to me, you're not nonbinary enough.”

Ruth [00:30:29] [laughing] Yeah. I was very brave and sent a message to--I don't have many friends who are non-binary, the, kind of the one real friend I have who is non-binary. I send a message to them and I was like, I'm toying with this. And they were like, I love that for you. Tell me more. And I went, Oh, my gosh. Okay.

Vanessa [00:30:48] I know that friend of yours. And they're actually the president of the non-binary community, [Casper laughs] and they get to decide on behalf of all non-binary folks. So.

Ruth [00:30:55] Oh, fantastic. So I'm in. [Casper laughing]

Vanessa [00:30:59] You're in. If you want to be, but. [Casper laughs]

[transition music plays]

Vanessa [00:31:27] So Ruth, tell us about the second text that you're bringing to help us explore this question together.

Ruth [00:31:33] So the second text addresses this question quite directly and is an article entitled “What Does It Really Mean to Be Non-binary?” And it's by a journalist and writer and podcaster, Tre'vell Anderson, who is non-binary themselves. And for this article they interviewed a bunch of non-binary people, and one of them is another writer and activist called Da'Shaun Harrison. And this quote from Harrison that really stood out to me is “non-binary is the best way for me to name that I am nothing and everything at the same time.”

Casper [00:32:08] Mmm. What does that mean to you?

Ruth [00:32:11] That speaks to me of the possibilities of the exciting interpretation of “a blank, my lord.” Yes, of going, there is room in this identity for *everything*.

Vanessa [00:32:26] Is non-binary the *best* way for you to name that you are nothing and everything at the same time?

Ruth [00:32:35] I love that question. In some ways, I think, yes, because...it is the one that other people recognize. In other ways, the phrase woman plus keeps coming into my head. [laughing]

Vanessa Hmm.

Ruth Like that feeling of, yeah, woman fits some of me. And there's a part of me that is not. That is not that.

Casper [00:33:07] Ruth, this is not about you. But you are making me well up with tears because I'm just like, oh my god, "man plus," that feels so fucking right! Like, I love that language. I've never heard that before. That is beautiful!

Ruth [00:33:23] [laughing] I'm glad you like it. And the reason I don't want to use it is because it's not a thing that is commonly accepted. Right? Like I can't tick a box on a funding application being like my gender identity is woman plus. [Casper and Vanessa laughing] And that's the part of me that wants to answer that question of doesn't everyone feel like this?

Casper Yeah.

Ruth I want to say, well, aren't we all our labels plus?

Casper [00:33:48] Mm. This is such a good tension because I think this is right down to the question that you're asking, which is--on the one hand, we all live in this prison of the construct of gender. And yes, you're right, that holds us all within these boxes. And that at the same time, like, you don't know if everyone feels that. And actually, it doesn't have to matter if they do, because you feel it and that's enough. And so, like, I'm just seeing this crossroads of like, what is right for you, you, you know more than you're currently able to live in public. I think that's that's fair.

Ruth Yeah.

Casper And on the other hand, you're also looking at the lanes that have been established beautifully and rightly so for many, many people, and being like well, that's, that's not quite, that's not quite the lane I'm traveling in. Is this a moment, Ruth, when we can create new, like, gender identities? Because I am here for it. [laughing a little]

Ruth [00:34:42] I mean, I love it in this in this article, Anderson, and some of the people that they interview, talk about the different ways that they explore their identity and the different ways they label it. Like someone uses the phrase gender deviant.

Casper Mm-hmm.

Ruth Which they find really exciting. So maybe one of my answers to the question is that, like, in spaces where colorful language is welcomed, maybe I want to bring out my colorful language.

Casper Hmm.

Ruth And explain my gender is not not a woman, but also bits that aren't woman. Hmm.

Casper [00:35:24] Hmm. [laughs] I just love how that resonates with the final line of this article, which is quoting a Lucille Clifton poem where she writes, Won't you celebrate with me what I have shaped into a kind of life. It's so bold.

Ruth [00:35:38] And the very last line, which is gender is a scam. [Casper laughs]

Vanessa [00:35:48] I guess if I were to try to name what I am understanding where you are with this. And please be like, no, that's not it. It's you feel genderfluid in a world that asks you to name yourself and say, what are your gender pronouns, put it in your Twitter

bio. And you're like, eh, but it's just like way more complicated than that. And so I feel like I have to pick a word, because otherwise it annoys people and it's too hard to not pick a word. But like none of these words are right for me.

Ruth [00:36:32] That describes how I feel pretty damn well. Yeah. It's a way of boxing people, and sometimes we need people to be boxed for ease of use.

Vanessa Yeah.

Ruth But that can get real dangerous and can get really dehumanizing.

Vanessa Yep. Hmm.

Casper [00:36:51] Hmm. The final thing I'll say, Ruth, is just, in what you've shared with us, I think that's such a beautiful and daunting creative task that you are taking up and that I feel invited into by you, which is to be creative in the language that we're using to describe ourselves. Like someone had to come up with the, with the phrase non-binary. And it really works for a number of people and like, thank goodness. And it also doesn't work for everyone. And you've given us a morsel of potential new language in terms of this woman plus frame. And I just think that is the most exciting thing because we're not done, like, the gender binary may be starting to fray, but like that spectrum is not yet fully grown with all of its colors. We haven't claimed every beautiful snowflake detail of it, [laughing] and I'm claiming that snowflake language, but I feel like that's part of what makes this so tricky, is that it's, this isn't a question of what box do I fit in, but it's a question of what language can I create that gives dignity to the experience that I have. And I think in doing that, you're not just breaking a ceiling. You're creating new nests for so many other people, to, to find safety and relief and freedom in. And that's worth everything.

Ruth [00:38:12] That feels so affirming. Thank you.

Vanessa [00:38:15] I'm wondering how you feel about code switching. Does that sound like an exhausting way to spend your life?

Ruth [00:38:21] No, it sounds quite fun, actually. Yeah. Maybe in the spaces where it is safe to do so, I do want to claim the non-binary label. And in even fewer spaces, a woman plus.

Casper [00:38:41] Well, that that's let this space be one of the places where that's possible. I feel like that is such a faithful response, Ruth, of acknowledging the always changing nature of this. Right. The everything the nothing, not being imprisoned and silent like Viola has to be. Or at least, sharing it with people who can hear it, at this stage?

Ruth Mm-hmm.

Casper Right? Not an Orcina response, but a, but but but your wonderful friend response. It's like, you smile every time I say they. And let that circle grow as it feels right and as it feels safe and who knows who it includes. And if it's Twitter trolls, ignore them.

Ruth Yeah. [laughs]

Casper Right, and who knows? At some stage, just like coming out, as bi, when the right moment came, you shared that with your mom, and maybe there'll be a right moment for

this, and bless that moment when it comes. But I think this is such a faithful next step that you've illustrated.

Ruth [00:39:39] Mm. I feel like you've helped me at least begin to answer my question. And I love that.

Vanessa [00:39:45] It was such a pleasure to meet you. You're so lovely.

Ruth [00:39:48] Thank you. It was lovely to chat with you guys. Thank you so much.

[outro music starts]

Casper [00:39:55] After that beautiful conversation with Ruth, I thought of this maxim from Karen Monteith, who's in Gambrills, Maryland, who says that comparison is the thief of joy. Thanks, Karen.

Vanessa [00:40:09] You've been listening to The Real Question. Please check out our Patreon at patreon.com/realquestionpod. And if you love the show, please leave us a review on Apple Podcast. You can also follow us on Instagram and Facebook @realquestionpod and Twitter @therealqpod.

Casper [00:40:26] A big shout out to our BFF tier patrons: Amanda Schram, Ethan How, Ashley Male, Louise Faring, Mary Margaret, Stephanie Featherweights, Kristin Hall, Becky Boo, and Ari, we're so grateful. We are a Not Sorry production. Our executive producer is Ariana Nedelman. We're mixed by Erica Huang. Our music is by Nick Bohl and we're distributed by Acast. Thanks so much to Ruth for joining us as our special guest today. Thanks as ever to Julia Argy, to Nicki Zoltan, Lara Glass, AJ Aramas, Gaby Iori, and Stephanie Paulsell.