

Not Sorry Works

The Real Question

Stories We Tell Ourselves

Published October 25, 2021



Tovah [00:00:00] Hi Vanessa, Casper, and The Real Question team. I'm responding to the prompt about a time you've had to change a self narrative, as I'm negotiating this process right now. When I was 13, I had cancer. I was very lucky, it was caught early, it wasn't too serious. And after several surgeries and a course of radiation, I was in remission. My narrative since then has been that it wasn't a big deal and that even though I'll be on medication for the rest of my life, I don't like for people to talk about it in terms of something that must have been so hard.

This last year or so, almost 15 years past that original diagnosis, I've started to reexamine what it meant and what it actually still means for me. The first thing that prompted this was COVID. For me, those early days of the pandemic, before we knew if we were carrying the virus and could infect our community, it brought back really strong memories of being radioactive and needing to be physically isolated from any other living being for several days. I really struggled with this feeling of being able to hurt someone just by being near them.

Another thing that changed my perspective was attending my younger cousin's bat mitzvah. I was so excited for her to take this step into adulthood. It was also achingly obvious to me how young 13 really is. I began to grieve for how much I felt the need to be an adult about the whole situation, even though I was just barely out of childhood. But I'm still in the process of rethinking the space this experience occupies in my narrative. It's helped me to be more gentle with myself. If I can look back on 13 year old me and start to see a child rather than an adult who's responsible for getting through this kind of challenge, I can imagine 50, 60, or even 70 year old me doing the same for myself now and start to extend that grace even a little bit earlier.

[Introduction music begins playing]

Casper ter Kuile [00:02:00] I'm Casper ter Kuile.

Vanessa Zoltan [00:02:02] And I'm Vanessa Zoltan.

Casper [00:02:04] And this is The Real Question.

[Introduction music fades out]

Thank you so much for everyone who signed up for our Patreon. We're so grateful to Emily G., Kelsey E, Leslie E, Aurora A. - what a name - and Charlotte F. We could not create this podcast without you and everyone supporting us on Patreon. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Vanessa [00:02:34] And they are about to go on a mission to Mars together.

Casper [00:02:37] Oh, it's the astronaut crew!

Vanessa [00:02:39] I'm proud of all of them.

Casper [00:02:40] Charlotte - you know, no one thought she would make it, but she did.

Vanessa: I know.

Casper: She proved the doubters wrong.

Vanessa [00:02:46] She did. The training is really hard, Charlotte, so I think that you're amazing. The struggle was beautiful to watch.

Casper [00:02:54] [Both laugh] And the victory even sweeter. So, Vanessa, you're bringing a question I'm really interested in learning more about this week. What do you - what do you want to think about together?

Vanessa [00:03:04] Yeah, Tovah started us off so well with their voicemail by talking about how: there are stories we tell ourselves at certain moments in our lives and our situations change. You know, Tovah, luckily now sounds like they're cancer free. And what do we do with these old stories that we had about ourselves? [Affirmation] And obviously my situation is different, but I have been struggling with depression since I was five years old. I did not get diagnosed until I was 23. But I've had a psychiatrist say to me, "oh, yes, you clearly had, you know, pediatric depression."

And starting in high school, the way that I thought about my depression was that I would have to spend days in bed. And I started this narrative for myself because I felt very *guilty* about my days in bed, about the fact that I was, like, burning those days in bed on the altar of mental health. That they were necessary days in bed in order to mentally heal enough in order to go out into the world.

Casper: Yeah.

Vanessa: And that, like healing from a broken bone, you couldn't rush the process. And sometimes it was really frustrating because you wanted to rush the process... and - but that, but that it was medically necessary. Right? And and - *and* I, you know, like, I really think that the analogy stands that, you know, sometimes you're out of your cast, but you're still a little bit afraid to put weight on it.

Casper: Right.

Vanessa: And sometimes at the end of a depression, I would need someone to be like, "No, no, it's time to get out of bed." Right? Which I feel like always confuses people about mental health that like - maybe you're healthy a few days before you start to realize it.

But now I am 39 years old, I am pretty well medicated, and I still sometimes feel the need to spend a day in bed. And to be honest, I really just like, can't - I *can't*. I have responsibilities. I run a company. I have a dog, and part of the reason I got the dog was *for* depression. I was

like, "I'm going to have to get out of bed three times a day." You know, I have parents who are aging. I just have responsibilities, I have people who are counting on me. And so what I definitely can't do is spontaneously take a day in bed, right? I can't be like, "Do you know what, I'm sad today. I'm going to just spend the day in bed."

So I just - I need a new story, and there's a lot of guilt associated with it because I do not *need* the days in bed in the same way that I physically, literally needed them when I wasn't as well medicated. In college, you know, a depression would hit me and there was just nothing I could do. I would miss things that were destructive to my life, which is one of the definitions of depression, right? Like, that it is interrupting your ability to thrive. I would miss class sometimes for weeks on end. It was like a real dance of hiding and lying because I felt a *tremendous* amount of shame about the fact that I couldn't get out of bed. I would tell myself stories about being lazy and a lot of really destructive stories until I got this really helpful one - of, of healing, right? That was a story that helped me not feel shame about what was physically necessary at the time.

And now, I mean, to continue my, like, broken ankle metaphor, there are days that it, like, really hurts to walk on it, right? Like there are days that it is painful to be out in the world because of my depression. And because of my medication, I am *capable* of being out in the world - my ankle is not broken anymore - and because of my responsibilities, I do not feel as though I have permission to be like, "Do you know what? I'm just going to not walk on it today." And so I need a new story [affirmation], and I don't know what it should be, but I am at my limit. Like, I have not taken a day in bed - I've taken two in the last 3 to 4 years, and I literally rented an AirBNB for a night and told everybody I was going to work on my book and just like - I worked on my book for 4 hours, and then slept and watched movies for [laughs], for the other 20.

And so I just I need to figure out what this next phase of mental health self-care looks like. And like, I know medically all the right things that I can do, but what I really need is a narrative, right? Like - I need the story of why I'm entitled to it, why it's actually really important that I do it - because I know otherwise I won't, right? Like - or I'll tell myself really negative things like I did the last time I would go to bed, of "you're lazy," right. This previous narrative of like, "No, this is healing. This is, you know, a sacrifice on the altar of your health" was such a freeing story, and I just feel like I need a new one for this new phase of health, this new like medicated phase of health and healing that I've gone through, and also for this new phase in my life where I have a different level of responsibilities in the world.

Casper [00:08:26] Mm. Well, the first thing I want to say is that I love you very much.

Vanessa [00:08:31] I mean, that always helps [Casper laughs]. So thank you. I love you, too.

Casper [00:08:35] We've talked a lot about mental health, and I look to you as someone in my life who just has such - obviously lived experience, but also so much wisdom about how to live and love people, you know, who are struggling with their mental health. So I - I'm so grateful for you bringing this question, not just for yourself, but I think for a lot of us who are listening. So thank you for that.

I want to make sure I'm understanding everything that's wrapped up in this, because it feels like you've been through this experience once before where you had one story - which felt awful, right, that shame that you mentioned - and that you, you realized that there was another story which was about: this, this was a healing process. I needed this in order to be healthy. Vanessa, was that a story that you had retroactively? Or was it also a story that you could use, like in the moment when you were actually taking a day in bed?

Vanessa [00:09:27] Yeah, it shifted, right. So for years I would have to be in bed and feel shame about it. And then after my diagnosis, I would *have* to be in bed, but *in bed* would tell myself a productive story of like: I need this. And then there would be days when I was working in my mid-twenties where I'd be like: I am so sad. It will be physically difficult for me to get to work today. Do you know what? It doesn't have to be *impossible* for me to need to stay in bed. I'm just allowed to stay in bed. And that was when that story I think was the most helpful, was when it actually gave me *permission* to stay in bed. And I would say, like, that was in my late twenties. You know - I had, I had not a big job, but, you know, I was manager level at a company, I was making a good wage, I was in a, you know, long term stable relationship. And I would be like: it's okay. It doesn't have to be *this* hard, you know? And at that point, I would take a mental health day and that would be a real day that I would take and think of it as my physical health, the same way as if it was a really bad cold and I *could* technically go to work, but it's contagious and like, you don't have to. Right? And I think that that was when the story - the story was helpful to mitigate shame, but it was most helpful when I was like, "no, no, you can stay home."

Casper [00:10:56] Yeah. It's like this permission giving process - like the image that I have in my head and I'm wondering if this feels right, is like: there's a river of responsibility, and as a child, it's like a trickle, right? And then as you grow older, it grows and grows. And like, even as a young professional person, like: the river of responsibility could be met by the dam of, of permission. That would be like, "no, I can interrupt this river just for a little while." Right? Like "I can take this day." But it feels like in the years since then, maybe that river has grown and it's just, like, overwhelming this dam. And what you're looking for, it sounds like, is, "well, how can I strengthen this dam? Because I know that I need to do this." Like, that's what it sounds like to me, is that you know it's the right thing to do, but it just feels impossible.

Vanessa [00:11:46] And I'm not sure it looks like days in bed anymore.

Casper [00:11:49] Oh, that's interesting. Say more. Like what do you imagine - when, when you daydream about this, like, what's the thing that you would do?

Vanessa [00:11:57] I mean, I don't know. Right? Like - and I think that that's part of why I'm bringing this. To some extent, it *can't* be a day in bed at home anymore. I think is really - I don't have a vision of what it is, I just know that the old one didn't work. Because if I'm home, I'm going to do laundry, and I'm going to start thinking about what's for dinner when the kids come on Friday, and I'll decide it's okay to go grocery shopping [laughs]. You know, like, I can't really spend a whole day in bed anymore -

Casper [00:12:24] - well, and you work from home!

Vanessa [00:12:26] [Laughs] I work from home. So, like, if I get a ding on my computer, I'm like, gonna respond to it. So just home - I love my home, and my home is a *safe* place of love and support, but it is not a place of rest.

Casper: Right.

Vanessa: And so I like what I used to do, it just won't - it just doesn't work anymore.

Casper [00:12:48] Well, it makes sense, then - that's why you did that, like, one day AirBNB [Vanessa laughs]. Because it's like a little - it's not even an escape fantasy. It's a, it's like a rest fantasy. Right?

Vanessa [00:12:59] Yeah.

Casper [00:12:59] And it strikes me that you didn't say to the people in your life, "I'm going to rest." You were like, "oh, I'm going to work on my book." Which, by the way, you did. And like 4 hours -

Vanessa: - I did!

Casper - of work on a book is super legit. But it's - I think it's interesting that that's the *story* you told, because it kind of illustrates the story you were telling yourself of why it was okay to do this.

Vanessa [00:13:18] Totally. I did not admit to myself what I was doing [affirmation], and I actually asked permission of Ariana and Julia. I wrote to them [Casper laughs] and I was like, "I worked on my book for two and a half hours and then I worked on promotion for an hour and a half, and these are all the emails I sent, and I edited two chapters. Have I done enough for the day?" [Casper laughs] And both of them were like, "Yeah, you've done more than enough for the day!" And I was like, "Great."

Casper: Yeah.

Vanessa: And I watched Eurovision the movie and ordered in take out and slept, and it was amazing, right? But like - I literally needed permission. And only upon coming home did I realize, "Oh, I drove 45 minutes away [laughs] in order to sleep for a day."

Casper [00:14:00] Yeah.

Vanessa [00:14:01] But like, I can't really afford to do that regularly, right? Like paying to hire a dog walker and, like, take a day off work and spend - there's, like, no real way to go away somewhere comfortable for less than \$200 a night. Like - I can't friggin afford that regularly.

Casper: Yeah.

Vanessa: And I feel like I shouldn't have to. Maybe I start putting money in my budget for this, right?

Casper [00:14:25] Well, it feels like there's some practical questions that we can come to towards the end of the conversation, but I'm really invested in figuring out a story. Something that you have integrity with, that you feel like you can really stand behind, and that has the power to help you be as healthy as you possibly can. Because that's the most important thing. Yeah.

Vanessa: Thanks.

Casper: What's the first text that you've brought to help us think this through?

Vanessa [00:14:48] So I'm very grateful to our Patron, Mary Margaret, who has been supporting us for a while and sent in a recommendation of the musical episode of Buffy the Vampire Slayer, the TV show. And I have never seen an episode of Buffy. And, you know - I love musicals. And so I'm, first of all, grateful to Mary Margaret because it forced Ariana Nedelman to come over [Vanessa laughs] here and watch TV with me, because she was sort of my, like, Virgil guide and she, like, walked me through what the stakes of the episode were and where Buffy was in her emotional journey and her romantic journey. And it was so fun. And there is a song in it that was just, like, so emotionally resonant. So that is what I'm bringing.

Casper [00:15:35] Whoa.

[Excerpt begins playing; music for "Going Through the Motions" begins]

Buffy [00:15:37]
Every single night,
The same arrangement
I go out and fight the fight
Still I always feel
This strange estrangement
Nothing here is real
Nothing here is right
I've been making shows of trading blows
Just hoping no one knows
That I've been going through the motions
Walking through the part
Nothing seems to penetrate my heart

[Excerpt ends]

Casper [00:16:02] Okay, I'm lowkey obsessed with this, and I now want to watch that episode with you [laughs].

Vanessa [00:16:06] So the lyrics are: "This strange estrangement. Nothing here is real, nothing here is right. I've been making shows of trading blows, just hoping no one knows that I've been going through the motions, walking through the part. Nothing seems to penetrate my heart."

Casper [00:16:23] Hmm.

Vanessa [00:16:23] And it's a great description of [laughs] lowkey depression.

Casper: huh.

Vanessa: Right? That, like, you feel estranged from your own life, that you're, like, making shows of going through things, and you're just walking through your life, but you can't really allow anything to penetrate your heart because you'll fall apart, which rhymes. So I've started writing the next part of the song.

Casper [00:16:47] Whoa!

Vanessa [00:16:48] What I like about this is that it offers stakes, no pun intended Buffy [Casper laughs], to why it's important for me to find something rejuvenating. Because I don't want to just go through the motions, right? Like, I want things to penetrate my heart. That's part of being alive. That's part of being in relationship. And I feel like to some extent, I have to really dull myself in order to just like get through the days [affirmation]. I'm like, I don't want to do that.

Casper [00:17:15] I really get that image of like a kind of grayness, like, like a dullness that's to everything. Like that, that's a sign of like something isn't right. Does it feel like, when you did have that day in bed, that over time - maybe it was one day, maybe it was two, maybe it was five - that, that kind of full technicolor version would come back?

Vanessa [00:17:34] I mean, definitely a more... Yes, like a fuller version.

Casper: Yeah.

Vanessa: Right? And one that I was like, more in control of.

Casper: Yeah.

Vanessa: Because the fear is that, that I'll embarrass myself or make other people feel uncomfortable. Or like a feeling that I feel like everyone knows right now, which is, like: if I start crying, I'll never stop. I won't behave in ways that make other people feel comfortable.

Casper [00:18:02] I'd love to hear a story about a time recently when you felt like the opposite of that, when you felt like in control, when you felt technicolor. And maybe it's a little while back, but like: is there a time that your mind goes to when you think about, "Yes, that's really when I was feeling that way. "

Vanessa [00:18:20] Oh, my God - Saturday night. [Casper gasps] I was sitting on the couch with Emma, our 13 year old, watching [Vanessa laughs] the incredible HBO drag show, "We're Here."

Casper [00:18:32] You even texted me about it! [Vanessa laughs] I love that so much.

Vanessa [00:18:34] Because it was so good. And she and I were just sit, cuddled on the couch, and it was so joyful. And I feel like time with the kids is often that for me, because my role is so clear to me. [Affirmation] You know, like - she's really interested and invested in queer culture, and I am a safe space for her to explore that. And sitting on the couch, like, wrapped in each other's arms, watching this fantastic show - I knew who I was, and I was so joyful. And that was a really special rare moment, right? For various reasons - we'd had a dinner party, she and I were the last two people awake, and it was dark out, like - there was nothing else we could do, it was 11:00 at night on a Saturday night. It's not like I was going to start laundry, right? [Laughs] Like - it doesn't feel like something that's easily replicable. It did feel like a snatched moment [affirmation]. And so, yeah - I think that to your point, the goal is to have more easy access to more moments like that.

Casper [00:19:41] Hmm. I kind of want to try on an idea with you. One of the things that felt so powerful in your previous kind of renarration of an experience was like - this wasn't because I was bad or lazy, it was because I was healing. And I think you feel pretty confident that, like - you know, that taking time away and taking time off is the right thing, but what's missing is the story. And so what I'm hearing in the story of this sweet moment with Emma, is that, that it's not so much about like, "Oh, I'm healing," but it's like "I'm a good stepmom," or "I'm successful in this role." Or like - there was something very *grounding* about the image that you painted, and I'm wondering if there's like [affirmation] language or imagery for a story that's in there.

Vanessa [00:20:24] I mean, it's... a moment that I want more easy access to, right? [Affirmation] Not like more time on the couch with Emma watching great TV [Casper laughs], which I do want more access to, but she has friends and school, so I can't spend all my time doing that [Casper laughs]. But like that feeling of like [affirmation]: I am where I am. I don't have anywhere else to be [Affirmation]. Like - I have other places I could be, but I'm making the right decision and I'm not distracted [laughs] by the potential of despair at any moment. Right? Like - for that moment, it didn't feel like despair was at risk of breaking through. And I think the rest would get me there more easily.

Casper [00:21:08] Yeah, I'm just looking at the text and it's like - it feels like maybe there's something about that moment which was like: you *weren't* going through the motions, right? You could just be completely there. Like, I mean, it's a cliché, but you were *present*, right? Like you weren't walking through the part. Like - that connection with her *did* penetrate your heart. There was a realness about that moment, and that in itself was, was life giving.

Vanessa [00:21:32] And what I love about what you're saying is, like... that might be a way to back myself in to justifying more radical acts of self-care.

Casper: Yes!

Vanessa: Like, it's not burning a day on the altar of just, like, just being able to walk again.

Casper: Right.

Vanessa: But it's like, I *need* to do this so that I can be a good stepmom, and -

Casper [00:21:56] Yes!

Vanessa [00:21:58] It's having this image of: I was happy, I was helping make somebody else happy, and it shouldn't [laughs] have to be that hard and that kismet-y in order to make that possible. And like, *that* is a reason to do self care. I think the fact that it's not as desperate, right, is part of why it's harder to get myself there.

Casper [00:22:22] Exactly.

Vanessa [00:22:22] It doesn't have to be desperate and it doesn't have to be for survival. It can be for thriving.

Casper [00:22:29] Oh, that resonates so much! But this show is about you, but I'm just saying it resonates. [Casper laughs]

Vanessa [00:22:35] I mean, I would love to hear about how it resonates with you.

Casper [00:22:38] Well, it just feels like - I don't know if this is true for you as well, but just that sense of like: "I don't deserve it," or like "I haven't done enough," or like, "only when all of this is done do I get to do this" - right? Like, I- I'm so familiar with that feeling and I think a lot of us are, right. Like, the pressure never stops. What I really heard in what you were just saying was this sense of, like: you get to be the person you like being.

Vanessa [00:23:01] Yeah,.

Casper [00:23:02] Right? It's like the Vanessa you want to be and that you *are* when there is some spaciousness, when there is time.

Vanessa [00:23:08] I mean, Casper - it's just like these ideas are so insidious, and they are like, obviously separate from depression: the other day I really wanted fruit and so I really wanted to go to the grocery store because I was out of fruit. And I was like, "I technically have enough food in the fridge. I do not need to take an hour of my time to go to the grocery store." And like: that is the sickness. I am allowed to go get fruit! You know, like - even if I don't *need* to go to the grocery store and just want peaches and plums because it's the end of summer and they're about to go away, like - that is enough reason [laughs] to go to the grocery store.

Casper [00:23:42] Yes.

Vanessa [00:23:42] And the fear is that if we don't do these proactive things, what we end up doing is destructive things in order to just, like, catch up and get our heads above water.

Casper [00:23:51] But this - I think this is huge. Like, because it's not about the depression, is what you just said. It's actually a different thing. Like, depression is still real. I don't want to say that that's not part of the mix. But this specific thing is about a different kind of sickness, this, like, sickness of overwork that so much of our society is like drowning in honestly. Like - I mean, the number of tweets that I see of people being like, "Oh, yes, just going to work, you know, amidst another apocalypse." And the best one was like, "Oh, I know what's going to happen when the zombies come: we will still be taking that 2 m meeting because we have a

deadline on Friday." Like: at this point, is there anything that can interrupt this absurdity of our culture of work? So I, I just feel like you've really landed on something that feels parallel to and similar to but distinctly different from the kind of re-narrating that you'd done a number of years ago.

Vanessa [00:24:47] Yes, I love that. *And* -

Casper: - And [laughs] -

Vanessa: - like, it's not that it feels higher stakes for me - I want everybody to take days off because we've somehow built this capacity within ourselves, which I just don't think is a healthy capacity, to watch the world burn and be like, "Yeah. Got to take that 2pm meeting." So I don't want to take away that. But also with my depression -

Casper [00:25:13] Yeah -

Vanessa [00:25:14] It often feels like I'm a minute or a deep breath away from breaking down. And I don't want to live my life like that. And I don't think you need depression to feel so stressed.

Casper: Yeah.

Vanessa: Right? That- that feels at risk for you, but that's where it comes from with me.

Casper [00:25:30] That's helpful. I mean, the other thing that feels important in addition to the mental health piece, Vanessa, it's like: you're the boss. Like, there's real additional responsibilities of being the ultimate person who is responsible for not just a product, to use that kind of gross word of, you know, things that are being created and put out into the world. But also like people who work for you and with you, for whom you feel a great deal of responsibility.

Vanessa [00:25:57] And love.

Casper [00:25:58] And love [laughs]!

Vanessa [00:25:59] Like - a great deal of affection, right? Like, yeah, I'm not just motivated by a sense of responsibility. I do take that responsibility seriously, but I am so lucky to just *adore* everyone I work with.

Casper: Yeah.

Vanessa: Yeah. I make their lives harder when I disappear.

Casper [00:26:16] Yeah. So I'm wondering how we can hold both this kind of toxic work culture that's true pretty much everywhere, honestly, with this sense of caring and responsibility and, you know, being in a leadership role with other people who you're working with.

Vanessa [00:26:33] I have no idea [Casper laughs]. Like, it really doesn't feel possible. And, like, I don't feel entitled to it. Like - nobody else gets that. People have depression and like get up to like make their three year olds put their shoes on when they want to put their shoes on, and take care of their dying parents because we don't have good home health care benefits, and deal with autoimmune diseases - Like, I have endometriosis and depression, and I'm not comparing suffering, it's just like - these are not debilitating. And they are facts of my life and they change my life, and I feel like one of the questions I keep bringing on to The Real Question is like: now that I've accepted it, these things as true, how do I want to incorporate them into my life?

Casper: Yeah.

Vanessa: But I'm not special. There's a solidarity aspect of this to me that feels important. Not "why me, I don't deserve this," but like... I definitely don't deserve it *more* than other people.

Casper [00:27:34] Yeah.

Vanessa [00:27:35] I think because of our work, right, I want to live my life in a way that is replicable to our listeners [laughs].

Casper: Yeah.

Vanessa: And so I don't want to find a solution for myself that can't be shared.

Casper [00:27:49] Hmm.

Vanessa [00:27:50] I found masks that I really like - I wear glasses full time, and I want to always want to wear a mask to make other people feel more comfortable and everything. And I found masks that don't fog up my glasses, and they cost about \$7 apiece. And I was talking in front of about 100 people, you know, our - a community class, and I mentioned how much I love these masks, and somebody put in the chat, "oh, unfortunately, that's outside of the budget." And I was just like: damn it, like, I shouldn't be offering solutions that *everybody* in this room can't benefit from. Part of me is just like: I want to DM this person to be like, "I'll buy you the masks." Is that good enough?

But I really don't want to find a solution that isn't something that everyone could do. Or do I? Right - like, or is there something to embrace about the fact, like, "look, this is my life. I have my own struggles, too, and I'm going to find something uniquely suitable for me." And maybe there's an empowering story there about like: and *everybody* should find a solution that's *uniquely* powerful for *them*. But that's another just, like, real tension that I'm holding.

Casper [00:28:51] Yeah, I definitely don't believe you when you say, like, "Or maybe I do!" [Casper laughs] Like, no - I feel like that's a deep commitment that you have, and that's something true that I know about you: is that you're always thinking about, well, who doesn't this apply to? Or who doesn't have access to that?

I mean, I'm just - I keep thinking about that AirBNB 24 hours, like - that was one of those solutions that like was okay and it was already like stretching your own sense of like, "is this

possible with my budget?" - but it's definitely not something that's possible for everyone. And that that kind of fed into, maybe, that feeling of like, "is this like - is this okay, you know, at a moral level."

Vanessa [00:29:30] Yeah. And the AirBNB thing, like - I couldn't afford it and also like... it didn't feel like a story I'd be proud to tell the various communities that I facilitate, nor the kids.

Casper: Yeah.

Vanessa: I wasn't like, "And then I went 20 miles away just to be able to sleep. And I felt like I *had* to do enough work in order to feel like I was *allowed* to sleep." [Casper laughs] Like, I'm not proud of that.

Casper [00:30:00] Yeah.

Vanessa [00:30:00] And it was just like such a Band-Aid. Like - I was so on the verge of crumbling under the pressure that I felt like I was under at the time.

Casper: Yeah.

Vanessa: It was like a total act of desperation. It was like, yeah - not only that, I thought I was going to take three or four days. Time kept encroaching and I kept shortening and shortening it. It worked as a Band-Aid and it was like completely insufficient, and it's like not replicable in my own life. I'm not proud of it out in the world. It was necessary, but not sufficient.

Casper [00:30:33] Yeah. I am tracking different words that are standing out to me and they're all starting with the letter P.

Vanessa: Ooh.

Casper: So we talked about *permission* [affirmation], right? That so much of this is about stories that give yourself permission. We've talked about the *pressure* that you feel beyond your own sense of like, "well, this is what's on my to do list," because you have other people depending on you. And then you've now talked about this like - being able to be *proud* of it in *public*. Like: this story is not enough just for *you*, like - you need to feel okay about it being a *public* story. And I'm wondering if your second text might be able to handle all the *p*'s that we're bringing to this question.

Vanessa [00:31:13] Yeah! Tell me them one more time. Permission, pressure

Casper [00:31:16] - and then [both at the same time] proud in public.

Vanessa [00:31:19] Yeah. I mean, if any text can, it's going to be this one. So let's look at it.

[Transition music plays]

So my second text is a text that I love so much. It's the book *Wild* by Cheryl Strayed, her memoir [affirmation]. It was released in 2012. It was obviously made into a beautiful movie

with Reese Witherspoon, written by Nick Hornby, a screenwriter I really love anyway. So for those of you who don't know, this beautiful memoir is really a memoir about grief. It is about how Cheryl Strayed, when she was in her mid-twenties or - in a pretty different phase of life than I'm in now at 39 - her mother passed away quite suddenly, and Cheryl quit her whole life. She literally changed her last name to Strayed.

Casper: Wow!

Vanessa: And set herself up with some real planning, with a *lot* of planning, to hike the Pacific Coast Trail -

Casper: Wow! -

Vanessa: - which is a trail from Southern California to Canada, along the Pacific Coast. And it takes many months to do this, you know, it's like somewhere between three and five months to do it. It's a *huge* undertaking. And part of why I love this book is I am a walker. I love walking and hiking. But Cheryl is going back and forth between hiking the Pacific Coast Trail and how cathartic it was and how frickin hard it was, and flashbacks to her life with her mother and grieving for her mother.

And this moment in the book has really stuck with me. And that is her mother wanted to be cremated after she passed away, and Cheryl went back to her hometown to spread her mother's ashes, and she stole sort of a chunk of her mother's ashes that couldn't burn.

Casper: Wow.

Vanessa: And there's portions of bones that don't burn when you cremate someone. And the quote is, "I put her burnt bones into my mouth and swallowed them whole."

Casper: Whew!

Vanessa: I know. First of all: as someone who loves my mom and is lucky enough that my mom is still alive, I was like - yes, I get this. Like, I would swallow my mom if I could [laughs] [affirmation]. And I mean, obviously this is something that reminds me of you a lot. This was a ritual that she created in the moment that was, like, deeply meaningful to her. And it was an impulse, right? It's like - she didn't give it a lot of thought, she was just like, "I cannot let go of every single part of her. Like, I cannot do it." I will say this moment has gotten a lot of scorn and pushback out in the world, and I am not part of that camp at all. I just think it is, like... beautiful and deeply sad.

And yeah, what I love about this quote is just like... how against the norms it is. Like, if you had asked Cheryl a year before: "would you ever eat your mom's bones?" She'd be like, "No!" Right? Like this is not [Casper laughs] something she anticipated. And I mean, part of what I love about it is that she, like, frickin hiked the Pacific Coast Trail, right? Like she blew up her whole life.

Casper [00:34:36] Yeah.

Vanessa [00:34:37] And I can't do that. You know, Cheryl was at the end of a divorce. Her life was at a moment of real transition anyway. She made huge sacrifices to make this happen, but I don't *want* to blow up my whole life [Vanessa laughs]. I like my life. So I don't want all of this option. But what I *do* want is that level of imagination and commitment and willingness to do things that she never would have thought that she would do.

Casper [00:35:06] Such a beautiful text, Vanessa, and a beautiful invitation in your own thinking of like: what if we don't accept all the premises from which we're starting this question?

Vanessa [00:35:17] Another p-word?

Casper [00:35:19] Oh - Premises! Yes!

Vanessa [00:35:20] Let me just write that down.

Casper [00:35:21] *Premise*. Yes! So let me ask you: what are some of the premises that you wish you could blow up? Not the life that you're living, but some of the assumptions that sit underneath it that drive you into these situations where the only option that feels available is to, like, escape to an AirBNB somewhere.

Vanessa [00:35:39] I don't know, because I just have deep resentment about the systems. Like, I looked last night at my retirement accounts and how far behind I am from where every website says I *should* be. And like, I'll probably be fine [Casper laughs]. I'm partnered and I'm still young. And I have student loans - like, I have to pay off my student loans and I have to save for retirement. And do I think college should be free? Yes. And do I think Social Security should be more robust? Yes. But like, the fact is that, like, I *have* to make a certain amount of money in order to feel safe.

Help me figure it out, because I do feel trapped. Like - I love my life, but I don't see a way out of needing to live this version of my life in order to be safe and a person who I don't hate. But I'm willing to put burnt bones into my mouth and swallow them all, but I'm not willing to hurt the people I love, and I'm not willing to, like, be financially irresponsible to myself.

Casper [00:36:48] Yeah. I'm wondering, Vanessa, if there's like two levers that you can pull. One is like- like: reduce the amount of pressure. One of those p's that we talked about. Pull that lever down in terms of the workload, in terms of responsibilities, all of that. But the other one is to *increase* the escape valve [Casper laughs]. Or just like: the equal to your previous experience of depression was like days in bed - like that was a stabilizing, I don't want to say escape, but like - it gave you what you needed to be able to come back in a way that you felt good about. And that is no longer equal to the task, and so the other option is to increase whatever *that* thing is, right? And we've explored some of what those ideas might be, and I'm not sure this conversation will land exactly on any specific solution, but I'm wondering if it might land on choosing which one of those levers to pull in this moment. Like - is it about increasing escape velocity? Or is it about decreasing the pressure that demands escape in the first place?

Vanessa [00:38:00] So like: decreasing the pressure doesn't feel possible.

Casper: Yeah.

Vanessa: Right? It's like why in the last few years those T-shirts on Etsy of like "it's wine o'clock" [affirmation] have become so popular. Right? It's like: people are just like frickin' coping, and they're like "Chardonnay!" And I'm like - "yes, Chardonnay."

Casper [00:38:21] Bulk orders of Lindt milk chocolate. [Crosstalk] Yes!

Vanessa [00:38:23] Yeah! I know! The thing is, I am - like I have some like self-care, right? Like I, I [laughs] this makes me sound like I'm a much healthier person than I am, but I exercise every day and like, that is a -

Casper: You do.

Vanessa: - like functioning - like, when I'm stressed, I go on a walk. *That* helps me get through my days, in the same way that I think Chardonnay does for people and Lindt chocolate, right? I eat Lindt chocolate for survival, not for self-care. And I drink Chardonnay. I do feel like I have those things to function. [Affirmation] It's the bigger thing, right? I don't want it to be *capitalist*, right? I don't want it to be a spa day.

Casper [00:39:02] Mm.

Vanessa [00:39:03] I don't want it to be another thing I have to fucking save for [laughs]. Like...

Casper [00:39:07] Yes.

Vanessa [00:39:09] And so, I don't know! Like... maybe it is like, doing what I preach and finding a friend to do a spiritual practice with once a month or, you know, like... I just feel like it has to be outside of my current tools because, like: walking longer [laughs] is, like, not going to do it. I, like, need something *new*. I need to grab for something totally new.

Casper [00:39:35] That's what's in this quote, I think, right? Like there's something radical and nearly kind of confronting about what Strayed did and what she's sharing with us. Like - the fix that you're talking about isn't - and, I don't even want to use the word "fix," that's the wrong word - but it's like the action that I hear you walking towards, it has quite a radical nature to it. It's like - it doesn't fit within the Ten Top Tips for Self-Care list because it's kind of out there. That's what I'm getting.

Vanessa [00:40:03] Yeah, yeah. It's like, I don't want -

Casper [00:40:06] Coloring books, meditation apps.

Vanessa [00:40:08] Yeah. And like, all of that stuff is so important, right? It's so important.

Casper [00:40:12] Right. So all of these, like, small actions that we know it isn't feel like it's a rejection of one of the stories that could have been an optional answer here, right? Of like: more self-care things. And I think what I'm hearing you point towards is that the story that you

want to find is like - it's a *big* story. Like, there's something *bold* in this story. It's undoing some of society's expectations, or it's *challenging* them, and maybe we won't land on a specific action, but like - the story that you are going to discover - probably by *doing* it [affirmation], right? Like, that's what happened last time. You went to bed, and then there was a story. I'm wondering if there's going to be a story that comes from taking some bold actions? Maybe doing things you've never done before. And then you'll be like, "Oh my God, it's becoming a tennis professional." So I'm wondering if it's like a *big* story, like something *bold* that no one would expect of you, that maybe you wouldn't expect of *yourself*, that is part of the picture here.

Vanessa [00:41:21] Yeah, I love that because that's absolutely what happened to Cheryl Strayed, right? She was like: "I just *swallowed* part of my mother." [Laughs] Like, she did not 30 seconds prior think that she was going to do that. I mean, what's coming to mind, right, is like - I was like *I could convert to Catholicism*. And then I was like [Casper laughs], what I could do is become a more observant Jew, right? Like -

Casper: Oooh.

Vanessa: and - but I think you're right, is that it feels like I'm at a phase where I'm like: "I want something to be *radically* different." And it's not that I want better escape hatches, it's that I want to be *living* my life differently. [Affirmation] Because my ankle isn't broken anymore. And my current way of life - I mean, it's working in a *million* ways, and it is just not working in other ways.

Casper: Yeah.

Vanessa: And so like: yes, I love this. It's not a once a month solution or a four times a year solution. It's a, like, different orientation of my life in some capacity or another solution. And I think one of the stories that would be really wonderful about that is that "I am capable of radical change" story, and not the like: "I *have* to keep living in the paradigm of the world."

Three months ago I was like, "Maybe it's a weekly newsletter that I send, and that will ground my writing practice," right? Like [Casper laughs] I couldn't even think - I'm not kidding! Because I was like: if I force myself to write every week, I won't do it. So if I have a *newsletter* group that I *have* to, and I was like - what the fuck am I doing? I was just creating more work for myself! Right? Like, all of my solutions were either spending money - which is like money away from my retirement and my student loans [affirmation] - and like quality time, right -like, you and I are planning a trip that I think will be deeply restorative. And so, if I go and like, have a spa day, that's money away from one of those other things that I truly value.

Casper: Yeah.

Vanessa: Or it was creating more work. Like, I could only see solutions that were actually exacerbating the problem. I'm like, feeling compelled to go shave my head - I'm not going to. I love my curly hair. Right, but like - I don't want the solution to be one of the problems [Vanessa laughs], right? I don't want the solution to be based in the economy. I don't want the solution to be based in work.

Casper: Yeah.

Vanessa: It has to be something that I'm not already engaged in. And - the solution is, oh my God, it's Audre Lorde, right? Like one of the tools that's oppressing me is *not* going to be one of the tools that helps me feel freer.

Casper [00:43:59] Yes. Vanessa, I - I'm going to change the rules. I'm going to ask you if I can change the rules a little bit, in terms of how we usually end our conversations. Because I'm wondering if an invitation that might be helpful, in embracing this different story of "I can make radical changes," is to make a list. You've already done two or three of them - become more observant in your in your Jewish practice, completely shape your head. Like, just come up with a list of ten things - you don't have to do them, the practice is just writing them down. And they're not allowed to cost money, and they're not allowed to add more work. Those are the only two things, and they have to be a drastic change. So three rules: no money, no more work, but big, drastic change.

And just practicing thinking of those things I think will help make that story more real, because you *are* capable of drastic changes. You have left jobs and created your own company. You have moved across the continent to go to a place where you didn't know anyone to study something. You have *totally* changed your career to do something that *no one* thought was possible [Vanessa laughs]. You went to read a children's book, even though you weren't really completely convinced that this would work and, like, create a whole beautiful community out of it.

Vanessa: Yes, I did.

Casper: Like, you have done this before. And I hope that this little exercise might be a way of making you remember that you have done it before and you can do it again.

Vanessa [00:45:30] Casper, I'm so grateful for this conversation because I feel like what I was doing was looking at AirBNB-level solutions, and the story that I want to tell myself is that I don't have to wait until I'm *desperate* to try to look for a solution. [Affirmation] The solution doesn't have to be about getting myself back up to the place where my head is above water. It can be like, "I don't even have to live in water." Right? Like I'm a land animal.

Casper: Oh! Yes!

Vanessa: And I feel, like, very excited about that possibility of... change? Change can be embarrassing, right? Because it can fail. Like - right, I could come on and be like, "the thing I'm going to do is be a vegan!" And then two weeks later be like, "I hated it." [Both laugh] Right? But I think I just have to give myself permission - Cheryl Strayed started walking the Pacific Coast Trail, and she had no idea if she was going to keep doing it, right? Like, she could have walked off after a week and been like "that was too hard" and not right for her. And so I think I also just need to give myself permission to be like, I like- "I can radically change things." Everybody live in fear. Who knows what I'm going to do next? [Casper laughs]

Casper [00:46:48] Well I'm living in excitement, because whatever changes come, I love you, and I'm going to be cheering you on.

Vanessa [00:46:54] I love you, too. And so I want to thank you. And I want to thank Mary Margaret for sending in this recommendation. And, of course, I would like to thank Buffy herself, the Vampire Slayer. So many vampires would be alive in the world without her really radical work. So thank you. And I'd like to thank Cheryl Strayed, and I'd like to thank her mom for inspiring her.

Casper [00:47:15] And I want to say a special thanks to Erin Christian from Dallas, Texas, who offered us this little maxim, which I think fits quite well into our conversation today. And she said: "Anything worth doing is worth doing badly."

Vanessa [00:47:28] Uh - *can do*.

[Ending music begins]

Casper [00:47:35] You've been listening to The Real Question. We can only make this show thanks to the incredible support of our patrons. So if you're enjoying listening, please share it with people, but also join us on Patreon. There are hilarious little bloopers in which I make fun of myself most of the time. We'd love to receive a review on Apple Podcasts, and you can follow us on Instagram and Facebook at Real Question Pod and on Twitter at TheRealQPod. We are a Not Sorry Production. Our executive producer is Ariana Nedelman, and we're edited by Malika Gumpangkum. Our music is by Nick Bohl, and we're distributed by Acast.

Vanessa [00:48:08] Thank you this week to Tovah, for sending in our voicemail. Julia Argy, Nicki Zoltan, Lara Glass, Stephanie Paulsell, and AJ Jamaraz. Of course, also to our BFF tier patrons - Amanda Schram, Aofie Hugh, Arie, Ashley Maile, Daniel Kelly, Elouise Fairing, Ava Ware, Jen Wolf, Maya Rothman, Mary Margaret, Rebecca Crowe, and Stephanie Fetterwitch. Thanks, everyone, and we'll talk to you soon!

Casper [00:48:32] Bye!

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