

Not Sorry Works

The Real Question

Trusting Your Gut

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Megan [00:00:01] Hi, Real Question Podcast. My name is Megan. I'm responding to your prompt about listening and trusting your gut. For a while now, I've been struggling with understanding the difference between anxiety and intuition. In just the past two weeks, I had this really, you know, flare up for me in a situation where I was dating someone new. It had been a few months, and over the past two weeks I had noticed that something seemed off with them. And I kept thinking *I* was being anxious, *I* was in my head about it, not trusting my gut or listening to my intuition. It finally came to a head, with them being cagey and uncommunicative, and when I spoke up, they admitted that they weren't prepared to tell me that they weren't interested in seeing me anymore, and that they had been a coward for not speaking up, and that I deserved better.

So I can't say whether or not trusting my gut went, you know, poorly or well in that moment. But just literally in the past few days, that experience has made me significantly more capable of acknowledging when it's intuition versus anxiety, and also knowing that I need to act on my intuition and act on what I'm feeling in my gut, versus waiting for someone else to act on it. *I* need to be able to communicate how I'm feeling and to take those steps versus waiting for something to happen. Thanks so much for your podcast, I really love it.

[Intro music plays]

Vanessa Zoltan [00:01:45] I'm Vanessa Zoltan.

Casper ter Kuile [00:01:47] And I am Casper ter Kuile.

Vanessa [00:01:48] And this is The Real Question.

Casper [00:01:51] Old school!

[Intro music fades out]

Vanessa [00:02:07] Casper, one of the things that I love that Megan made this distinction of in their voicemail was: what is the difference between intuition and fear or concern or anxiety? [Affirmation] And, like, knowing the difference between those two things is *really* hard.

Casper [00:02:26] Yeah, 100%. It's like: can you trust your instincts? Is your instinct just foolishness? Our brains play tricks on us all the time. The world is actually upside down, it's just that our eyes are turning it the right way round for us. That's not quite right science, is it? But I - but I feel like it's connected to somehow how eyes work.

Vanessa [00:02:46] Yeah. We were really lucky enough to get this grant recently from the Greater Good Science Center, and they're interested in exploring the idea of intellectual

humility. And I think that one of the ways that they are thinking about intellectual humility is the idea that we have our opinions, but in conversation with others, we are willing to wonder if our opinions are fact. Right? They are interested in exploring this line of constantly questioning our ideas and making sure that we know where our ideas come from. And where is the line between that being helpful and having an orientation toward curiosity and learning, and when is that just constant self-doubt and making yourself feel like you can never make an actual decision because there's always more information to get?

Casper [00:03:33] And it's not that confidence is a bad thing. That's not what, you know, we mean when we're thinking about intellectual humility. But it's more about being smart about guessing what we know [laughs]. So, for example, there's this really interesting study where they looked at people reflecting back on a disagreement they'd had - could be very minor, could be something major. And of all the respondents, only 4% said that they were less than right half of the time, and only 14% more said that they were right half of the time, which means that like 82% of us, on average, think that we were right *more* than half the time in a disagreement. And I get that because I am always right, as my husband has [crosstalk] learned the hard way [laughs].

Vanessa [00:04:16] Yeah, I happen to be one of those people, too. It's interesting.

Casper [00:04:19] And it's of course, not to say that we *weren't* right, but it's like - that confidence level to be like, "No, I was definitely more than half right" reveals that we probably go around walking through the world with a, an overconfidence in our own ability to understand something correctly. And so as we think about intellectual humility, I think it *is* about opening our perception to understanding different perspectives, different points of views, coming in with as many questions as we have answers.

So we've been thinking about that theme, and we thought it'd be fun to do a couple of episodes exploring it. So, Vanessa, this week we're returning to our old school format, and you're bringing a question that is really on your mind, and I'd love to learn more about it.

Vanessa [00:05:03] Yeah. I mean, Megan set us up really well. I have a question about when I should trust my gut, specifically about people. Right? I feel *very* comfortable when trying to learn - I, I'm thinking about buying a new office chair, and I've been thinking about it for about eight months, and I keep doing research, right, because I'm like, [Casper laughs] "objectively, there's going to be the best office chair." Whereas with *people*, right, when they like - your spidey sense is like, "uh, I don't like this person," I don't always know how much to listen to that. And I think that this started when I was a kid. My dad brought home a colleague, and I did not like this man, and I was six or seven years old. And this man ended up cheating my dad out of some things and doing some not totally legal things and not being a very trustworthy person. And this started my parents treating me like I was a witch. Like every human being they brought into the house, they would have me, like, put my hand on the foreheads of people [Casper laughs] and be like, "Yes, they can be trusted." Like, this really got curated within me.

And I think that that is a wonderful attribute to value in a child. Once, I was with our younger kid, Amy, and this man wanted to hug her goodbye, and she did not want to hug him goodbye. Right? And so she was like, "No, thank you." And that was a moment where I was

like, "yes, I want to *validate* you to trust your gut. You never have to hug anyone who you do not want to hug."

But other times it's any number of things, right? Someone has the same name as your bully [Casper laughing] from elementary school, or more frighteningly, right - someone's a different race than you, or has an accent that you have been raised by movies to think of as scary, right? Sometimes our guts are *very* similar to how systems that I don't have a tremendous amount of respect for have acculturated us. And so this question feels really high stakes to me of: when am I this witchy genius who's like "untrustworthy!" Or, when does it not matter, because I never have to hug anyone I don't want to hug. And when am I just like being judgmental and stereotyping people? This can become really insidious really quickly. To be like, "Well, my guts are always right. And it doesn't even matter if my gut is right, because I don't trust you," right? Like those are the people who call the police when a Black kid is running through their neighborhood. [Affirmation] Right? This can have dire consequences when we trust our gut.

Casper [00:07:45] I- I think that's fair. Like, if we don't challenge our gut, we reify the systems that hurt people who are most vulnerable. Right? Like -

Vanessa [00:07:54] Right. Who have trained our gut.

Casper [00:07:55] Exactly.

Vanessa [00:07:56] But also, if we don't trust our gut, well, then, like - what are we going on? Right? Do we have to run empirical studies [affirmation] every time we go to a dinner party and be like, "My gut said I didn't like this person and we would never enjoy each other's company, but maybe that's for historical reasons and I should hang out with them anyway." [Casper laughs] Like, of course not! Hang out with the people who you like from the dinner party.

Casper [00:08:19] Yeah. So just to hone in, like: are there particular moments - is it in your professional life? Is it in - socially? Like, is there a particular arena in your life where you're like, "this is where I'm least confident about my gut, or this is where I really want to interrogate this question."

Vanessa [00:08:35] Oh, such a good question. I think it's in my professional life that it feels higher stakes. [Affirmation] I don't want to not hire someone because of something that I don't understand. I, you know, I worked in community building - not HR, but adjacent to HR for six years - and one of the things that we talked about was, quote unquote, a "bunker test."

Casper: Huh.

Vanessa: And essentially that you shouldn't hire someone unless you would spend a day in a bunker with them and be fine with it. Right? That [affirmation] working with someone is how you spend your life, and you should *like* the people who you work with.

Casper: Yeah.

Vanessa: And now that I'm in the position where I can hire people, I am *very* concerned that I like a certain kind of person. So I just don't even know if I should be taking that into consideration. There're studies that show that if you think about things like that, people will last longer at your organization. Right? People who *like* each other work better together. But I was raised to like certain people, right? Just - not, my parents weren't like, "like these people and not others." [Casper laughs] But I went to elementary school in a certain setting. Right? Like I was raised a certain way.

Casper [00:09:43] Yeah. And what is 8 hours of Zoom meetings, if not a bunker? I mean, this is very relevant.

Vanessa [00:09:47] Absolutely. [Casper laughs]

Casper [00:09:50] Yeah, I hear you. And I think there's, there's something about *ease* in here that I'm hearing of of like: "oh, it comes quickly." Or, like, "I'm able to form a relationship with this kind of person very quickly" or that, you know, that shared context. And so where is our gut really about familiarity and ease -

Vanessa: Right.

Casper: - and where is it more about like, "oh, this is difficult. I don't like difficult, so let's not go there." [Vanessa laughs]

Vanessa: Right!

Casper: Which, fair enough, you know.

Vanessa [00:10:15] Exactly. Right. When is it not, "I don't like *you*," but it's, "This is hard, and I don't like *that*."

Casper: Yeah.

Vanessa: And, like, I don't - I don't know where that line is.

Casper [00:10:26] Well, why- why don't we look at your first text to dig into this kind of professional judgment zone, especially. What's the first text that you're bringing?

Vanessa [00:10:34] So the first one is a musical by Stephen Sondheim that I recently was lucky enough to see *live* with you [Casper laughs]. And I've not been able to stop thinking about it. It is his musical *Into the Woods*, and the song that I am bringing is Little Red Riding Hood's song. So for those of you who don't know, *Into the Woods* is a musical that interlaces a bunch of fairy tales. So we have Rapunzel, we have Little Red Riding Hood, we have Cinderella - and these stories are all interlaced and all of the characters meet. Jack and the Beanstalk. And so Little Red Riding Hood, this is after her trauma of being eaten by the wolf and then cut out by a hunter, and she's been freed. And so this is the part of the text that I'm bringing you. I'll read you sort of a longer version, and then we'll pull out a shorter one.

"Take extra care with strangers

Even flowers have their dangers
And though scary is exciting
Nice is different than good
Now I know: Don't be scared
Granny is right, Just be prepared
Isn't it nice to know a lot!
And a little bit not?"

[Recording of "I Know Things Now" song from Into the Woods plays]

Little Red Riding Hood, singing [00:11:44] And take extra care with strangers. Even flowers have their dangers. And though scary is exciting, nice is different than good. Now I know: Don't be scared. Granny is right, Just be prepared. Isn't it nice to know a lot and a little bit not?

[Recording ends]

Vanessa [00:12:10] And the part that I think I want us to focus on is, "And though scary is exciting, nice is different than good."

Casper: Hmm. Why? Why do those lines stick out to you?

Vanessa [00:12:22] I think sometimes we find things exciting for the wrong reason. Right? Just because you're attracted to something, just because you find it nice, doesn't mean that they're good. And the other way around. Just because something *isn't* nice doesn't mean that it's bad. It could be really good. And that's the risk with gut, right?

Casper [00:12:42] Yeah. That feels especially powerful for this question. I mean: how do you think about integrating that idea of if even if it's not nice doesn't mean it's bad? This is interesting to me because I feel like one of the things that a gut instinct is about is, like, seeing layers in people. It's like, "Okay, everyone can see this layer of you, right - the outside. But *my* gut tells me I'm seeing something more." Or like, "I understand a deeper insight."

And so I'm curious, like, are there layers that you see often that you're like: this is a pattern. I'm always seeing this and actually I'm wrong. Or like, actually, I'm really good at noticing this particular layer. I'm just - I'm just wondering if it's less about like, "Oh, my gut instinct is right or wrong," and it's more like "this is a *pattern* that I often see. And actually, when I think it's that, I'm often wrong."

Vanessa [00:13:33] Yeah. I would say *trust* is the one that I have the biggest pattern with.

Casper: Hmm.

Vanessa: Like, I will find someone untrustworthy when really I just don't trust them. [Casper laughs] And that is about me.

Casper [00:13:49] That's a *good* distinction.

Vanessa [00:13:50] Right. Like, that's about me and *my* issues with trust. That does not mean that they are untrustworthy. And what I do is, rather than being like, "I don't trust them yet," I'll be like, "well, they're not trustworthy."

Casper: Ahh.

Vanessa: And I will treat them like they're not trustworthy, which is not f-fair? More than fair. It's, like, not productive.

Casper: Mm hmm.

Vanessa: Whenever I have to confront someone these days, I text Ariana first, and I'm like, "I'm going to go in, and I'm going to be very *curious*." Because I struggle with that. [Vanessa laughs]

Casper [00:14:25] Well, this is what struck me actually, even in this whole question and Megan's voicemail as well, is that: honestly, I feel like what Megan did was really beautiful, and was a great example of kind of that intellectual humility of like: I feel something is wrong, and then asking a question of like, "hey, something doesn't feel right. Like - is there something I should know about?" And then sadly finding out that - yeah, like something was wrong, and she was right to have that instinct.

Vanessa: Yeah.

Casper: So I'm really interested in this idea of like: what do you do when you *have* that instinct that can, like, confirm or deny? Like, is there a way of gathering data? And I think what you're just saying of like, how can I show up into this situation with curiosity, like - that's smart. Right? Like, don't ignore that feeling, but just test it. [Casper laughs] Do run your own trial lab experiment with, you know, figuring out if someone is worthy of your trust.

Vanessa [00:15:18] Yeah. I mean, a text that I'm not bringing is Malcolm Gladwell's book *Blink*.

Casper: Oh yeah.

Vanessa: Which is about how trained professionals sometimes can just tell something in an instant and can't necessarily tell you how or why.

Casper: Yeah.

Vanessa: A great doctor is going to be like, "It's cancer. We will run the tests, but I know." Right? [Affirmation] And they can't necessarily tell you why. They've just looked at this so many times, they know. And I don't know - I'm 40. Maybe I'm really good at reading people now, and I don't know why, but I know, and let's get out of here.

Casper: Hmm.

Vanessa: But the other thing that happens at 40 is that you've *inputted* data, but that doesn't mean you *analyzed* the data correctly.

Casper [00:16:02] Well, that feels directly related to this text, right? Red Riding Hood has been attacked. I mean, she's being eaten by a wolf, and it's changing how she's showing up in the world. You know, that's what she's saying later in that quote that you gave. "Isn't it nice to know a lot," right? I'm empowered. I've had this experience. I've learned from it. "And a little bit not?" I don't know, she's - she's also been... uh, it sounds like too small a word, but she's been, like, *fazed* by life a little bit. [Affirmation] Like, you know, she's seen - she's seen real tragedy, and that is now shaping how she engages the world. So I think that question of experience is really important.

Vanessa [00:16:39] And this is usually played for laughs in the play, and it *is* very funny. But Red Riding Hood changes, right?

Casper: Yeah.

Vanessa: She literally becomes not Red Riding Hood in so far as she starts wearing the wolf as a fur coat. But she also starts carrying a *knife*. Right?

Casper: Yeah.

Vanessa: And she's *quick* to draw the knife. She is walking around ready to attack *everyone* the rest of the play. And again, it's *funny*, within the context of the play, but it's also *not* funny that this little kid has had something so traumatic happen to them, you know, and it's- it's the hunter's knife that she's carrying, the knife that rescued her. And so she can see this as, like, this weapon of liberation and of freedom and of saving her. But also, we all know if you're carrying a weapon, you're more likely to use it and be attacked. And so it's literally changed the way she's walked through the world. And in some ways that's great: she probably won't be eaten by another wolf. But, at what cost?

Casper [00:17:39] So I'm going back to the text again because Sondheim has so much to share. "Don't be scared. Granny is right, Just be prepared." And I feel like there's something about that knife wielding that's smart, right? Wolves are in the woods. They do try and eat you. You do need to have protection, right? Like - that judgment, that ability to look for someone's trustworthiness, is important. "Granny is right. Be prepared." So in my mind, there's something about, like: how do we know when to wield the knife of that trust barometer? Right?

Vanessa: Right.

Casper: Like what, what are the moments when you can feel confident that your judgment is right? What are the moments when you can be like: hang on, err - is this just hard? Right? Like we were saying before, is this just more difficult to form a connection with someone? Is this just someone with a different experience? Or whatever it is. What's your best guess in this moment of when to pull out that knife of your gut instinct, and when to leave it sheathed for a moment? [Vanessa laughs]

Vanessa [00:18:35] I mostly feel fine having my knife out for social stuff. I don't need to be equitable in picking my friends. I can just bond with the people who are easy for me to bond

with. I don't even feel like I need any new friends. Like, I'm really, like - I love my friends. I'm all set.

Casper [00:18:54] But what about in your professional life? Because that's where this feels most real.

Vanessa [00:18:57] Yeah. I work with a lot of *venues*, and venues tend to be owned by wealthy white men [affirmation], and I don't like the way they treat me.

Casper [00:19:16] Mhmm.

Vanessa [00:19:16] And I try pretty hard, right? Like, a lot of these relationships, I want to be very long term relationships. And so I really try to keep that in mind and let little things go and keep the ten years in mind. But when I feel like someone is trying to take advantage of me, that knife comes out real fast. And I don't know, I *do* feel like because I'm kind of a short woman with a higher pitched voice, they *do* try to take advantage of me. We had a venue where we'd rented out a whole hotel and it was just a one building hotel, it wasn't a big hotel, and they threw a *prom* one of the nights that we were there. And it was too loud for anyone to go to sleep until one in the morning.

Casper [00:20:05] Without telling you it was happening, to be clear!

Vanessa [00:20:07] Without telling us, yeah, that it was happening. And I do - I just like, don't believe for a second that they would have done that if my name was "Chad" and I wore a suit.

Casper: Yeah.

Vanessa: Like I, I really don't. And so I came in, you know, knife shiny and sharp the next day, [Casper laughs] I mean, like, "I don't know why you felt like this was acceptable, but it was not. The people who I am in charge of and responsible for couldn't sleep! You go to a hotel to sleep!"

Casper: Yeah.

Vanessa: And again, this woman stepped in and was lovely and was like, "You are right. This was completely inappropriate. I'm so sorry." And, like, worked out a deal. And the middle aged white man was still a jerk to me. So part of me is, like, vindicated, right? I'm like: the woman saw it [laughs] and thought he was wrong, but I don't know - right? Like, that is just my, like, being skeptical of patriarchy.

Casper [00:21:07] So one of the things that strikes me, and I think it's helpful to look at the specific example of dealing with venues and the men who run them: are there moments where your gut instinct has made a situation more difficult? Because that's the other thing that can happen is like: when we're coming in with that knife unsheathed, right? Like, it can escalate -

Vanessa: Totally.

Casper: or something can happen that makes it difficult to resolve it. And so even if that, in the initial judgment is right, is the orientation that that judgment *leads* to something that actually makes it more difficult for *you* in the end?

Vanessa [00:21:42] I mean, something that's occurring to me is I am a *very* prompt person.

Casper: Yeah.

Vanessa: And I have equated when other people are late as disrespecting my time. My feeling [affirmation] is genuinely, "You think your time is more important than my time." When lateness is cultural, right? Like - that is a very privileged idea of lateness. And I, I would like to think that I stack it, right? Like, if I know someone has to take the bus, then I'm much more flexible about that. Whereas if it's a *Zoom* meeting, I don't understand why you're late. [Casper laughs] Like, we all have the same cell phone time that comes out of Greenwich. Like, you're just on your computer. Or when someone takes a work call that they didn't warn me they would be taking, like, *while* walking and holding their phone. I'm like, "that just feels disrespectful."

Casper: Hmm.

Vanessa: And it could be that, like, they have a different office culture. They have a different perception about what this meeting is. *I* didn't communicate clearly what this meeting was, so they thought it was a chat and I thought it was a meeting with an agenda. And, it could be any number of other things, whereas I get *pissed*.

Casper: Yeah.

Vanessa: If someone is more than 5 minutes late for a Zoom meeting, I email them being like, "Sorry you didn't show. I'm done."

Casper: Yeah.

Vanessa: And I like, I leave. Unless I got - if I get an email warning me that they're running late, that's fine. But if they're just more than 5 minutes late, I'm like: bye.

Casper [00:23:14] Yeah. So it feels like there's this, there's this sense of respect that's really important. And there are moments when your gut is like: "they're disrespecting me, so it's over." Like, this meeting is over. [affirmation] I'm actually still sitting at my desk. Like, obviously I had this hour, and so if they showed up 7 minutes later -

Vanessa: [Laughing] Right, it's *blocked* -

Casper: - we could still probably get through the agenda in 23 minutes or like 53 minutes, whatever it is. But like: *I* feel wounded by *your* behavior, and so I am putting up this barrier.

Vanessa: Right.

Casper: And like, you know, they could write back and be like, "I'm so sorry, my sitter fell through, I had-." And then you'd be like, "Okay, I understand."

Vanessa [00:23:48] *And* feel like an idiot.

Casper [00:23:49] And feel like an idiot, right? Like I, I feel like we've all been there, where we're like, "I'm putting up boundaries! Oh, wait, you were in a medical emergency, I'm so sorry." [Vanessa laughs]

Vanessa [00:24:00] Right - I'm so sorry! Jesus, my bad! [Casper laughing]

Casper [00:24:03] So it feels like that's a, that's a helpful counterpoint, right, with those situations with the like a-hole male owners of these venues. And so I'm wondering if there's something about, like: when your when you feel disrespected, maybe especially around time, that that's one of those gut instinct things where it's like, "well, hang on, I've been wrong about this before."

Vanessa [00:24:24] [Laughs] But I'm like everybody else in that study you quoted! And I'm like, "I'm right more than 50% of the time. [Casper laughs] It is just that they're not organized and that's infuriating. And *they* think that *my* time is less important than being organized," which like - that doesn't allow for neurodiversity or complicated lives- like, if I know more about the person, then I'm fine with it, right? If I know someone is a new mom and they're 20 minutes late, I'm like, "they're a new mom. It's fine."

Casper: Yeah

Vanessa: Right? If I know anything, I'm *totally* fine with it. And it's just I'll be like, "that person's late, it's disrespectful," and that's, and that's it.

Casper [00:25:06] Well, and so that's the other thing that I'm suddenly thinking is like: can we create more data collection and be like - when it happens, one goes into this chart, and if it was because, you know, something that is a mitigating circumstance that gives us empathy, it goes into the other column and at the end of the week, we - or hopefully it doesn't happen every week - but, you know, the end of whenever, we like look at the data and we're like, "well, I could trust my gut 70% of the time." [Both laugh]

Vanessa [00:25:35] I mean, but like - how do you even collect the data is one of the problems, right? What is data? Like, do you ask the person, "Hey, you were 7 minutes late. Can I ask why?" [Casper laughs] Like, no matter how politely you ask that, it's an attack, right?

Casper: Yeah.

Vanessa: Even if you're *genuinely* curious. But what you're curious about is: can I trust you? Which is - which *is* a knife, right? Like that is Little Red Riding Hood's knife. And so I don't know how to turn that curiosity into, like, *not* a knife.

Casper [00:26:06] Well, can I offer you a challenge?

Vanessa [00:26:09] Please!

Casper [00:26:10] I wonder if it is genuine curiosity. Because I - when I hear you express that question, what I'm hearing is: I feel hurt. Like, I feel disrespected. And obviously, I'm asking you this question of why were you late because I want to know, was that hurt worth it? Right - like, were you looking after an infant and so my hurt doesn't matter so much? Or were you just checking your inbox and you didn't want to go to this call, in which case, like, screw you. Like, it's not like I want you to go to [laughs] every conversation being like, "I feel offended." But like - you know what I mean? Like, when is it curiosity and when is it being like: I feel offended! Like, I feel disrespected.

Vanessa [00:26:51] Well, yeah, it's such a good question. What do I feel? [Pause] Yeah. I mean, it *is* disrespected. Yeah, I don't feel like I can do that, especially in working with men. [affirmation] As like a woman CEO who, I think based on how the world treats me, people see me as younger than I am, and I don't feel like I can say "this is how I feel."

Casper [00:27:16] It would invalidate your, your role as CEO, as the person who's in charge.

Vanessa [00:27:20] Yeah, it would make me seem weak.

Casper [00:27:23] I mean, maybe there's something about power here which suggests that - yeah, if you're dealing with a straight, white, cis man who's, like, in a senior role, maybe he doesn't deserve the same curiosity as someone who's an immigrant, who's navigating, you know, a disability or a new child at home or whatever. Right? Like - that this question of intellectual humility and curiosity does not have to be applied equally to everyone you're dealing with. And actually, as a woman, you're going to have to carry an extra knife for when you're dealing with those guys who are not giving *you* the intellectual curiosity that you deserve.

Vanessa [00:28:00] Yeah. I feel that so hard, because I think you're right. I think I lost track of the fact that my anxiety is with people who have less systemic power than I do. That is where I'm like: wait, what? Like, should I be upset that they are running late? They probably have more demands on their time than I do and have even less access to easy ways to exist in the world than I do. Whereas when it is a straight white cis man who I am paying money to do a service and *he* runs late, I have *no* patience for it.

Casper: Yeah.

Vanessa: I mean, and then it becomes this other question of how to deal with straight white men with power. But that is a question for another episode, [Casper laughs] - that is not about intellectual humility, that is about strategy.

Casper [00:28:49] So I think we've really landed somewhere here with this specific situation in a professional context where *you're* the one who has more institutional power as the boss, or as someone who has more social power in one way or another through the various identities you hold. And the obvious answer in this specific context would be like: yeah, have more intellectual humility. But I guess I'm interested in like: where does that end? Right? Like, is

there a limit to the amount of intellectual curiosity you want to be extending, even when you are the one with the power? Does that resonate?

Vanessa [00:29:26] Yes, absolutely. And I think our next text will bring us there.

[Transition music]

Casper [00:29:52] So what is your second text for today?

Vanessa [00:29:56] My second text for today - I cannot believe I haven't done this yet - is Gilmore Girls.

Casper [00:30:02] [Laughs] Yes!

Vanessa [00:30:03] So what we are about to hear is a scene between our main character, Lorelai Gilmore, and Melissa McCarthy's character, Sookie. And they are best friends, and they work at an inn together. But it is their dream to *own* an inn together. And Lorelai is the inn manager, and Sookie is this *brilliant* chef at the inn. And the first time we meet Sookie, she's, like, accidentally chopped off one of her fingers essentially. She's, like, very klutzy, is constantly changing menus - but she's the best. And so what we are going to hear is a scene between Sookie and Lorelai where they fight, and I'll let, I'll let the scene do the talking.

Casper [00:30:49] Hmm.

[Recording from Gilmore Girls episode]

Sookie [00:30:50] What did I do that's so wrong?

Lorelai: Let's not get into this stuff.

Sookie: No! Get into it.

Lorelai: Well, you're not the most reliable person in the world or the most punctual.

Sookie: Ok, you've always known that about me.

Lorelai: Yes. But now, getting into business, it's not so cute. It could *hurt* us. I mean - you were late for the Fran meeting, you're constantly changing every menu you ever set, even after you've started making it.

Sookie: I don't believe this! Before it was, "Kudos to me for my attention to detail, I was the maestro."

Lorelai: That's fine for an established place like the Independent. But you do that stuff at our place, it could wipe us out. Profit margins in a new business are slim, Sookie.

Sookie: Just stop. Just stop. Now you're talking down to me.

Lorelai: I'm not talking down to you. I'm trying to explain.

Sookie: Yes, you are! Yes, you are, and I don't know *why* you are, but I don't want to start crying in front of you because it'll just give you one more thing to point at to say, "Look, she's too emotional, she's too weak for me to go into business with," so I'm leaving. And I'll see you tomorrow, if I can remember to show up.

[Recording ends]

Casper [00:31:40] Ooh. Oh, I have all the feelings about this. Why, why did you choose this clip?

Vanessa [00:31:45] Because Sookie is an incredible chef, and people travel from all over to eat her food. *And*, Lorelai is right. It is really frustrating to have someone constantly changing the menus, not to mention expensive. That's a waste of food and a waste of money and a waste of people's time. And if you're operating a business on a small margin, those things matter. And they matter to Lorelai in part so she can pay Sookie, right? Like it's this very tight knit situation.

And, not everyone is punctual. Sookie actually has these incredible creative skills, and the reason she's late is because she had another *amazing* idea for a recipe. Right? And so I know that neurodivergent people, people with different cultures, right? Like, there are all sorts of reasons why people won't be on time and worried about the bottom line. And in fact, we don't all *want* to be the same. That would be boring and bad for the world. And so I'm worried - like, my gut gets ticked off when people are late or waste food or waste resources or waste energy. But sometimes that's just part of the process.

Casper [00:32:56] I'm thinking about the fact that for Lorelai, this is really about the sustainability of the business. Like: if Sookie keeps doing these things, right - the business is going to fail. So the stakes are really high. Do you find yourself having that kind of reaction at only the most serious moments, or is it something that happens, you know, even on a meeting where, sure, like- if someone is a few minutes late, it doesn't really matter. Or it's a couple of bucks here and there that doesn't really break the bank. Yeah - is it kind of a consistent response or is it just in those specific situations like this one?

Vanessa [00:33:32] I mean, I could argue that Lorelai is catastrophizing, right?

Casper: Mmm.

Vanessa: Like, I don't think that Lorelai has run the numbers and is like "Sookie, you are throwing away *hundreds* of dollars a week in food, and that ends up being \$15,000 a year. And \$15,000 a year is 10% of our margin. Like, we can't do that." Or if she's just like, "I am now scared, so the fact - like these things that usually I can deal with, I just can't deal with." And that, that's part of the gut that I can't manage, right? Like... Lorelai is right, it is scary when someone is constantly changing things, that just doesn't mean that it'll actually negatively impact anything. [Affirmation] And I'm right. It's not fun to sit around waiting for people. Right?

Casper: No! [Laughs]

Vanessa: But that doesn't mean that the meeting is, is harmed by it or that *I'm* harmed by it, or that they don't have a really good reason and so it doesn't matter.

Casper [00:34:31] Yeah. What do you make of the fact in this scene that there's an argument that they're starting to have and then there's this moment where Sookie says like, "no, *let's* get into it. Like, I want you to tell me what's really going on." And it feels like that's when we drop into this deeper conflict, but it takes a little while to get there.

Vanessa [00:34:50] Well, I would say that Sookie says, "No, let's talk about it," and Lorelei does not actually talk about what's going on.

Casper: Huh.

Vanessa: Right? She says, "You are not reliable. *You* run late." When really it's: "I am now *scared*. And so these things that you do, we need to look closely at them and figure out whether or not they matter. Because they are scaring me, but that doesn't mean that they're scary."

Casper: Mmm.

Vanessa: The more honest version of the conversation would be, like: "the fact that you are late all the time and that you change menus all the time freaks me out. We need to really look at that." And it's *certainly* worth it in this relationship, where there's so much trust built up, and the two of them are so close. Right? The problem for me is - *that*, that is definitely a problem for me. But also when I am just sussing someone out and I'm like, "You changed the menu at the last minute?"

Casper: Yeah. [Laughs]

Vanessa: And I catastrophize. I'm like, "If you keep doing that, it's going to bankrupt the company."

Casper [00:35:53] Yeah. Yeah, why would we keep working together? You're not trustworthy, you're not reliable. Yeah

Vanessa [00:35:57] And early in a relationship, you can't tell if this is a cultural difference or if this is a life difference or a brain difference, or - this isn't going to work. And that feels so high stakes to me. Because we need people like Sookie, I want to eat her food. And so we need her creativity and her taking a bite of a vegetable and being like "this vegetable is not fully ripe" [Casper laughs] and, you know, whatever - like, we need that. *And*, we can't have Sookies if there isn't any money in the bank and we're just trashing food all the time.

Casper [00:36:34] Do you have any experiences where a conversation, maybe not quite like this one that we're hearing in the clip, but where a conversation has reset a relationship? Where it was going off the rails or, you know - you had that sense of like, "this is an untrustworthy person" or "I can't do business with this person," and it changed?

Vanessa [00:36:54] Absolutely. And I think it's because I get worked up about things. I will assume bad intentions and then talk to someone and be like, "Oh, they didn't have any bad intentions." I've also assumed bad intentions and called people out, and it turns out that I was right. Right? But like - but yeah, I definitely go into conversation sometimes being like, "what happened here?!" And something very reasonable happened.

Casper [00:37:22] I'm really interested in that "what happened here?" Like, the looking back. Like, looking at a situation of being like - we all make decisions in the moment because we have to. But then there's a sort of debrief conversation where all the perspectives get to be voiced at whatever level of seniority - you know, everyone has a particular perspective that, that's valuable for the overall picture. And so that kind of debrief conversation feels at least valuable if, if there's enough of a relationship for it to matter. Right?

Vanessa [00:37:48] Right.

Casper [00:37:49] But it's - I'm understanding that this is a real question, because this does not feel like there's an easy answer. Especially when the complexity of the different levels of status are involved, and the impacts are very real.

Vanessa [00:38:04] I mean, to me, we've *landed* on a slightly different question, which is helpful. Which is: sometimes it's fine to just trust your gut, right? Because you're actually the person with less power, or it doesn't hurt anyone to be like, "No, not this melon. *This* melon." Right? Like that's a *fine* time to trust your gut. The other melons feelings are most likely not hurt. [Casper laughs]

But like, when is it possible to pause and actually review the stakes of the situation? I think is the other question. [affirmation] Yeah, I'm trying to think about when someone is 5 minutes late and I just leave the meeting: I do think that it's fine to send the email being like, "Hey, I'm going to hang out in here until 15. I hope everything is okay," and just assume good intentions, especially [affirmation] if it's not someone who I'm going to have a recurring working relationship with. Right? Because I get that mad no matter who it is. [Casper laughs] It could be someone who I have a one time call with and I'm just like, "How the heck are you this late?" Right, like, and it gets me so mad so fast. And so, you know, I think thinking about the *stakes* is another thing, right?

Casper [00:39:20] Mm. Mhmm.

Vanessa [00:39:22] Like, Little Red Riding Hood could be *objectively* right that Jack is a jerk. That doesn't mean he deserves to get stabbed.

Casper [00:39:31] Right. But if there's a wolf being suspicious behind a tree saying, "Hello, little girl," then like, yeah - bring out the knife. [Laughs]

Vanessa [00:39:40] Hell yeah. Make yourself another coat, Little Red Riding Hood. [Casper laughs]

Casper [00:39:46] Yeah. I really appreciate you asking this question and thinking about it out loud, because we all want to give people the benefit of the doubt. Right? We all want to be open and generous and curious, but you can't walk around the world in just that state and survive. Like, you need both the boundary and the openness, and knowing when to lean into one and not the other is shaped by culture and structures of power and our own personal histories, what we've experienced. So navigating all of that in a brief moment of someone not showing up to a call, right? Like - it just illustrates how much is going on in every decision. And no wonder we've developed gut instincts, right? Like, it's how we help navigate the world on a day to day experience.

And so even just taking the time to really reflect on "is there a specific situation where I can *temper* my gut?" I think is an incredibly... I want to say brave, but it's more than that. It's just *hard*. It's just really [crosstalk] hard to do [Casper laughs]

Vanessa: It's hard.

Casper: And it's like, "Wait! We're going against, you know, four and a half billion years of evolution here." [Laughing]

Vanessa [00:40:52] Yeah, it's evolution, right? And then it's also white supremacy. And so you're like: wait - am I listening to my gut from evolution or from, you know, hundreds of years of cultural training on white supremacy? And so it feels really high stakes, I think it is high stakes.

Casper [00:41:11] Yeah. Yeah.

Vanessa [00:41:14] Well, we would like to thank Lorelai Gilmore, Sookie St. James, Little Red Riding Hood, Stephen Sondheim, and the Greater Good Science Center for our conversation this week.

Casper [00:41:26] And I have a maxim from Kelsey Martin in Uppsala, Sweden, who says: "I am imperfectly perfect," which I think is a pretty good one to, to hold on to in this conversation. And I just really appreciate you bringing this one, Vanessa. I always love talking to you about the real question that's going on in our lives.

Vanessa [00:41:48] Back at you. And in two weeks, Casper, *you* will be bringing [Casper gasps] a real question about intellectual humility.

Casper [00:41:55] Yes, so watch this space.

Vanessa [00:41:56] The correct answer, Casper, is you don't have to ever be intellectually humble. You *are* right 100% of the time. [Casper laughs]

[Ending credit music begins playing]

Casper [00:42:02] You've been listening to The Real Question. Please check out our Patreon on [Patreon.com/RealQuestionPod](https://www.patreon.com/RealQuestionPod). And if you love the show, you can also leave us a review at Apple Podcasts. You can follow us on Instagram and Facebook at Real Question Pod and on

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Vanessa [00:43:01] Thank you.

[Music fades out]

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