**TRQ\_Trying to be Cool.mp3**

**Vanessa** [00:00:00] Hi, everybody. Just a note before we start today's episode. Serendipitously, I brought the text from West Side Story, which is a musical whose music is by Leonard Bernstein, but the lyrics were written by Stephen Sondheim. And since we recently lost Stephen Sondheim at the age of 91, I just wanted to say that I'm really grateful for the fortuitous ness of that and say that Stephen Sondheim, we loved you very much, and thank you so much for giving us your beautiful words to be part of this week's episode.

**Devin** [00:00:36] Hi Vanessa and Casper. This is Devin calling from Maryland about the topic of being cool. I am someone who is working to embrace failing at coolness. I have known for a long time that I'm not cool in the traditional sense. I nerd out over things like Gameboy Tetris, and Harry Potter Lego sets. And as a 13 year old, I taught myself to memorize the first 100 digits of pi pass the decimal point for fun. I'm not as painfully shy as I was when I was a kid, but I'm still kind of awkward. When I'm alone I do things like flap my hands when I'm feeling excited and rock in circles when I'm feeling intensely focused on something. As you may have guessed by now, I'm autistic. I was diagnosed as a young teenager, and I've been doing a lot of unlearning work since then. I've noticed that a lot of our world is so stigmatizing against disabled people and that quote unquote coolness, as a lot of people might define it often excludes people like me who are just… different in ways we can't or shouldn't have to control. So… I'm trying to revamp coolness for myself through unlearning the internalized ableism and shame that I carry about being disabled. I'm working on actively reclaiming coolness to not be a kind of social compliance to like the latest trend or whatever, but instead a personal appreciation for the things that bring *me* joy. Which funny enough, I think is pretty cool. Thanks so much.

**Vanessa** [00:02:10] I'm Vanessa Zoltan.

**Casper** [00:02:11] And I'm Casper ter Kuile.

**Vanessa** [00:02:13] And this is the real question. Casper. Did you see that Julia C, Sarah E, Heather L, Jean K, and Jennifer all just won the Emmy. They won best ensemble.

**Casper**] Oh

**Vanessa** I know.

**Casper** I mean, it was a close call.

**Vanessa** It was.

**Casper** [00:02:13] I really loved that sketch when they were like dinosaurs. And I love that Jean was like the flying dinosaur, but like, was afraid of heights.

**Vanessa** [00:02:50] It was an incredible sketch. And I'm really glad to see some of our patrons get recognized like this. So we want to thank them for their support on Patreon. It means so much to us.

**Casper** [00:02:58] And I don't want to say that there's a correlation between supporting us on Patreon and winning an Emmy.

**Vanessa N**o

**Casper B**ut it's not going to hurt. So join us on Patreon. Patreon.com/realquestionpod. Join us at any level for a bunch of goodies. This show cannot work without our community, so thank you for stepping up.

**Vanessa** [00:03:17] So Casper, I mean, Devin was so helpful in setting the stakes of this question that I am going to bring to you. So little story before I frame my exact question: I think you would agree with me, Caspar, that the coolest person either of us know is my nine year old stepdaughter, Amy.

**Casper** [00:03:34] (Laughs) She is undeniably cool.

**Vanessa** [00:03:36] And so we are very proud of how cool she is. The story I like to tell about her is that she couldn't wink and made this very cute face when she tried to wink. And it wasn't her fault, her sister can't wink, her mother can't wink, her grandmother can't wink. This is like obviously something biological that she can't do. And, you know, for like the past five years or so, once a month, once every two months, I'll just wink at her and she'll just go (deep frustrated inhale) and get really frustrated. And this is like a little game we play. And then one night, a couple of months ago, I winked at her at dinner and she just winked back. And so Amy, age nine, stands up from the table and goes, “Yes!”

And I was like, “Oh, my God, how long have you been able to do that?”

She was like, “Over a month. And you haven't been winking at me.”

Me, 30 years older than Amy, 100%. If I taught myself how to wink and this was a bit between you and me, Caspar, I would have sent you a video of, like, every improvement. I would have been like, “look how close I'm getting.”

“I can now wink.”

I absolutely would not wait for the perfect moment and then just casually, not even changing my facial expression, just calmly wink back. Like there is zero chance that I would be able to pull that off. And Ariana Nedelman, our producer, came over the next day and I told Arianna the story and I was very not cool about it. And I was like, “Amy, Amy, show Arianna how you can wink now.”

And Amy winks at Arianna and it's like clearly kind of getting annoyed with me, like, I'm not your monkey, this isn't that exciting. And I was like, “Isn't she just the coolest kid?”

And Arianna looked at Amy and went, “Amy, I just want you to know, that we will love you even if you're not cool, you do not have to be cool.”

And I was like, Oh, no, that's true. And what Arianna made me think of when she said that was that we were tacitly encouraging Amy to be cool, right? Every time we were like, “Oh, my God, you're so cool.”

We were giving her, like, very positive attention for coolness. And I was suddenly worried, like, do I want to encourage this? Because I want her to be authentic to herself and not feel like she has to perform for us. But also, I want her to be the most powerful person in the world. And I'm like, this is apparently like a magic that you know how to harness and play with. Do it. It is going to *serve* you. But I think Devin is right that that power is an ableist power and is sometimes about gender and wealth and like a bunch of things that I have no respect for. *And* I think it's a tremendous amount of pressure. So is cool ever an asset? Because it sure is sexy.

**Casper** [00:06:29] (Laughs) Well, is it ever an asset or is it more something that should be desired?

**Vanessa** [00:06:33] Absolutely. Because whether we want it to be or not, it's definitely an asset.

**Casper** [00:06:38] Right. I *so* recognize this question. And like, I also, and this is about you. But I will say, like, I find, I struggle with that in myself of like *wanting* to be amongst the cool kids because I definitely wasn't in high school, but boy did I learn how to climb that social ladder. So I have some of the skills, but it's like, do I want to be that person? And so, I'm curious like, have you had experiences of being cool where you've suddenly not trusted it?

**Vanessa** [00:07:08] I don't think I've ever been like, “Look at me, aren't I cool?”

What I have felt right, is over the last four or five years, I've started buying better quality clothes and far fewer clothes. And because of that, I'm like, well dressed when I go out socially in a way that I feel like, five, ten years ago. I wasn't. And so, you know, I was out with a podcaster who I really admire. And she was like, “Vanessa, I love your outfit.”

Like, that felt so good that I, like, knew how to put together an outfit. Did it take me until 39 to learn that? Yes. But I was like, Yeah, I can put together an outfit that, like, suits me. And there are moments where I just feel comfortable in my skin. But that's not… It's more for me that there are moments where I know I can choose cool, or *cooler*, right? Not actually cool. Like become a cool person, but someone emails me who I'm really excited about, and I don't respond to them within one minute. Right? I'm like, “Ahh,This person emailed me! I'm going to wait till tomorrow”

Right? And I don't know what that's about. Right. But it feels like important social capital. Because being overeager can be off putting, and I, with certain people am in control of that. And so should I sometimes play it cool? It sometimes feels like something that I have remote access to.

**Casper** [00:08:36] This is really helpful because it's reminding me that so much of what cool is about is about seeming to care, right? Like, are you a try hard? Are you someone who doesn't give a damn, right? And like you just live by your own rules and that's, that's kind of the high school rebel, cool vibe that still continues. And the replying immediately to someone seems to suggest like, “(Gasp) I want something!”

Or like, you're the one who has the power and I'm trying to like, get close to you or something while delaying it means like “While it's on my timetable and I'm not that impressed.”

**Vanessa** Right

**Casper E**ven if we are, but we're just trying to project that. So that feels like a definition that I'm used to. But then Devin has offered us this really beautiful project of like reshaping what cool means at this point in their life. So yeah, I'm wondering if this is also a question of choosing what you want cool to be at this point in your life?

**Vanessa** [00:09:30] Totally. Absolutely. But I think that there are maybe two kinds of cool to be really, really crass about it. I mean, we say cool because it comes from cold. Right? Like cool comes from the idea of being cold and being aloof and so not really caring.

**Casper** [00:09:47] Well, not seeming to care.

**Vanessa** [00:09:49] Or not seeming to care. Absolutely. But, and I will say. Right, I think that sometimes that's the right strategy. It's something my mom would tell me to do with my brothers when they were bothering me. Right. Ignore them and they'll stop, and it's true. Right. And that is choosing to act cool. And sometimes that's true with bullies. Sometimes you have to stand up to bullies, but also sometimes just ignoring them and acting like it doesn't bother you like, takes a little bit of wind out of their sails and I right like and that's a good thing so I think that there are times where you want to harness a little bit of that and then of course, like as an adult, like Peter knows everything about Bach and I think that that is so cool. And of course like on a high school level like that is not at all about being cold. That is about something that he is passionate about and actually has a great love for and has spent a lot of time studying. So what I have, which I think is the second definition, right, which is a form of awe or respect for someone that I think that, is of course, the definition that I want us all to be aspiring to. But I also just want to acknowledge that that other one, strategically, has a time and place. And whether or not we want it to matter, if frickin does.

**Casper** [00:11:00] So is your question about whether it's *okay* to embrace that less kind of *good* version of cool, because it's, it's social manipulation.

**Vanessa** Yeah

**Casper R**ight, like that's what it comes down to. So is this an ethical question?

**Vanessa** [00:11:14] Yeah. So let me tell you at a moment where it was really important to me to be cool. Yeah. I had been on just like three dates with a guy, maybe a few more, and he broke up with me, and it was so important to me to be like, great, I don't care.

**Casper** Whatever.

**Vanessa** Walked away, cried, had ice cream with my friend Nick. Right. Like, which I was just hurt. I didn't. Right. I wasn't in love with this guy. I barely knew him. But my pride was hurt. But it was very important to me that he think I not care.

**Casper** Yeah.

**Vanessa** Like, is that bad? Should that be a moment of, like, authenticity where I say to him, look, I'm really hurt. And, you know, I obviously don't know you very well, but I'm embarrassed and like, why not be cool?

**Casper** [00:11:55] What would have happened if you'd done that? What would have changed? And I don't mean for him. I mean for you.

**Vanessa** [00:12:00] Potentially, I would have been more embarrassed.

**Casper** Yeah.

**Vanessa** He could have rolled his eyes at me. Right. Like, vulnerability is a risk that, like, I only think maybe we should take with people we trust.

**Casper** [00:12:10] Right.

**Vanessa** [00:12:10] Or as an intentional gamble. Or when we can't control it.

**Casper** [00:12:15] And it also feels like there's something about the story we tell about who we are. Like, I've definitely had moments where I'm, like, holding it together in the room. And then when I've left, I'm like a puddle of tears. But like, I can tell myself the story that I held it together, you know, or something, or that I was strong or something like that.

**Vanessa** [00:12:33] Right. But I do wonder if I had been maybe vulnerable with him. I don't know. Maybe we both kind of, like, learned about ourselves and had an honest conversation, right? He didn't do anything wrong, but, like, maybe he would have thought more about what it is to go on a fourth date.

**Casper** Hmm.

**Vanessa** Right. Or I would have learned that, like, I should check in with someone after third date. Or we kind of realize that we should be friends. Vulnerability is definitely going to allow for the potential for more human connection, which is like why I do the work I do. I think we should all be connecting as much as possible. Like as a way to fight tyranny and fascism. Like, I think connection is really important.

**Casper** Mm hmm.

**Vanessa** And I didn't want to connect with him in that moment. I wanted to have dignity and power in that moment.

**Casper** [00:13:21] Mm hmm. So it feels like we're landing in this place where cool is a disconnecting thing, but sometimes helps us feel like we're in control even though we're not.

**Vanessa** Right.

**Casper** And so the question is, when do we use it and when do we not.

**Vanessa** [00:13:36] And when do we try to use it? Because I'm don’t sure like, cool is something I have access to. I just like to pretend I do.

**Casper** [00:13:43] Well, that's I mean, that's a good question. And I feel like there's a first text that might help us answer it.

**Vanessa** [00:13:49] So, Caspar, my first text is from a not very well-known musical called West Side Story, you've probably never heard of it.

**Casper** [00:13:57] I've heard of it, but I only just watched it this year. So *genuinely* may not know this one

**Vanessa** [00:14:04] Oh! This is a beloved, beloved film in my life. The Natalie Wood version from the Sixties. And I've seen it on Broadway. I've seen high school productions of it. I'm excited for the Steven Spielberg version of it coming out on Christmas this year. I've been waiting for it since Christmas last year when it was supposed to come out. I really love this musical, a great deal. Umm, and there's a song called “Cool”. For those of you who don't know, West Side Story is based on Romeo and Juliet. Romeo is Tony, and his friends, like, the Montagues are a gang called the Jets and Juliet, is Maria. And the Capulets are represented by a gang called the Sharks. And there's just been an altercation between the Jets and the Sharks and two people have died. And we follow the Jets as they are grieving this horrible thing that's happened. And they are trying to figure out what to do next. You know, they're like, should we be violent and go kill more of the sharks? Should we go to the police? What should we do? And this is the song they sing. Their leader has been killed in this fight and their new leader is saying, look, you're feeling hot, but you have to stay cool.

**Riff of the Jets** [00:15:14] Don't get hot cuz, man, you've got some high times ahead. Take it slow and daddy-o, you can live it up and die in bed.

**Vanessa** [00:15:26] And so here is the lyric that I pulled. It's “Don't get hot cuz, man, you've got some high times ahead. Take it slow and daddy-o, you can live it up and die in bed.”

And I think that there's something to that about being cool if you don't go in hot all the time. Right. If you play it close to the vest, you can come back later and be like, I've thought about this, right? Like if you play it cool. I think it is entirely possible that you live a little slower and a little longer, and a little more on your terms.

**Casper** [00:16:02] Hmm.

**Vanessa** [00:16:03] And to Devin's point, even within this gang, in that presentation of the dancing, there are some members of this group who find it much easier to be cool and calm than others. There's someone whose name is Action and like he is *really* agitated and *really* wants to do something and it is much harder for him. And he he essentially doesn't act cool. He just, like, follows the rule of the gang. But he is *very* upset about this and agitated, whereas other characters find it much easier to be cool. So I think that another great thing about the song is that it shows that, yes, cool has to be a choice and some people are capable of it and some people are not, even if they're part of the tribe and you love them. But should, we, as a group be trying to be cool in the face of something?

**Casper** [00:16:53] Hmm. But here's the thing. Being cool can also mean you're always waiting for your life to happen. Because that's the other part of this quote, right? It's like, take it slow and you can live it up and die in bed. I guess it's saying live it up, like, that you can live in the future.

**Vanessa** Yeah

**Casper** But like, how do you think about that distance that coolness creates from the moments of potential connection, as you talked about, or adventure or the risk of rejection, that if it went well, maybe there's a flourishing relationship, romantic or not, maybe there's a professional opportunity. Maybe you step onto a boat that crosses the Atlantic like my friend Dev, on his third or fourth date with this girl he had just met. And they had talked about randomly, like, oh, long distance travel on a boat. And he said, “Do you want to go?”

And she said, kind of half jokingly, “Yes.”

And then he called and said, I have two tickets crossing the Atlantic. It leaves on Tuesday. Are you coming? And they got on that boat and they fell in love over ten days. And now they've gotten married. Like, that's not cool. But because it's so uncool, it is cool again.

**Vanessa** Sure.

**Casper** Do you know what I mean? So, like, how, how do we make sense of that?

**Vanessa** [00:18:03] Right. What if I didn't wink at Amy? Yeah, right. For a year. And she had this skill for a year that we could be bonding over, and she was just holding it in her pocket. She did the coolest fricken thing ever, which was not be cool, right. Because she's super cared about being able to wink.

**Casper** Yeah.

**Vanessa** And she practiced in front of the mirrors for *hours* and told no one. Right. Like that's actually a real try hard move. Right.

**Casper** [00:18:29] It points to the presentation of cool. Like even, even the distressed jean jacket. Right? Like that looks so ease full and casual. Someone has been sitting there with, like, a little razor to, like, have the cut just so, right. Like, behind that kind of cool is so much effort. Like in West Side Story where it takes a whole lot of effort to manage this group, not to act out after this, you know, altercation.

**Vanessa** [00:18:53] But I would say that cool *is* only presentation, right? Because if you really don't care, I don't know. Aren't you just a jerk? If you like, profoundly don't care about other people? You're not cool. You're an asshole. Being cool is about noticing your excitement and being like, that's not the appropriate presentation of it right now. And choosing another presentation, and. And I don't know, I'm like super into authenticity. And I think often authenticity, is very vulnerable. And again, let me be clear. I do not feel like cool is something I have a ton of access to, but there are moments where I know I could choose it. I usually don't because I'm like, I'm not going to perform for this person, but why not? Getting the upper hand is a good thing sometimes.

**Casper** [00:19:47] Okay, but this is really helpful because I'm now seeing cool isn't a linear spectrum between caring and not caring. There's a sort of 2D nature to it, which there's also something about like skill or maybe it's authenticity, I don't know. But there's something about right, because if you just don't care about anyone or anything, then you're just awful. So..

**Vanessa** [00:20:07] A sociopath?

**Casper** [00:20:08] Yeah, exactly. So that has to be something else to what cool is. I'm really struck by how you're thinking about cool as a resource. Right. Like moments to switch it on or moments to use it. But the moments that you've described are all moments of restraint. Like it's about not doing something rather than performing. Right. You're not talking about putting on that jean jacket, whether it's distressed elbows or whatever it is, but it's about not responding to an email or something. So I'm curious, what is the thing that you're not doing that makes it cool.

**Vanessa** [00:20:41] Or why is it powerful, right? Like, can I ever gotten an email back from someone quickly and been like, “loser”? No. Right. I think it's just trying to avoid embarrassment. I respond to emails one of two ways immediately or not for months. Those are the ways that I respond to emails. And somebody emailed me and I responded immediately because it was in my inbox and he commented on it. He was like, Whoa. Wasn't expecting such a quick response. I was embarrassed. I was like, Okay, dude, I don't know why I was embarrassed, like, but I suddenly felt like I had to explain myself and, like, make a joke about it and be like, “Yeah, I have two modes, I respond immediately or not at all.”

It just being cool is a shield to hide behind where you are only revealing things about yourself that you want to reveal.

**Casper** [00:21:33] Hmm.

**Vanessa** [00:21:34] And so by waiting 20 minutes to respond to a text message, you're saying you have no idea what I'm doing. You don't know if I'm by my phone or not. You don't know if I'm out smoking cigarettes with Leonardo DiCaprio, but like, you don't know if I'm super excited to get this text and just saw it. Right. But it creates ambiguity, whereas a lack of coolness, I think, is all about clarity.

**Casper** [00:22:00] Huh? Ooh I like that.

**Vanessa** [00:22:01] You sometimes want to be obscure to people.

**Casper** [00:22:05] Yes. You know, like eroticism needs distance, right? Like watching a partner brush their teeth and wear there old work t shirt from that work training, they went on, you know, like intimacy doesn't create sexiness. And so in this same way of, like, clarity, you need mystique, right? You need distance. And maybe, as you said, some cigarette air in some French cafe to create that vibe of cool. But implied in that is a loss. Right. It's a it's a loss of connection and intimacy, which we also want. And so it's this constant push and pull in every relationship. And it feels like most of the time that you've talked about wanting to be cool is with people that you don't yet have a relationship with.

**Vanessa** Sure.

**Casper** It's a stranger. It's not like you're trying to pretend to me.

**Vanessa** [00:22:53] I've given up on that.

**Casper** [00:22:54] Yeah, I know that you're not in a French café.

**Vanessa** [00:22:57] When you call me once. When I was in Paris, I was like, “Casper, is everything okay?”

I wasn't like, “Bonjour, you can't talk right now.”

Yes, I think you're absolutely right. Or it's somebody who I am feeling a little hurt by. And so I want to create a little distance in order to get a little power back. And I think, I think sometimes that's helpful. I really do. I think. I think it makes people feel safe that like you don't need them, and like, okay, you don't need me. That's a good reminder. Holding it back a little bit creates a mutual space of comfort.

**Casper** [00:23:36] Yeah, I think I just had an insight. Does this fit? Because the story you told was about Amy and Amy doesn't fit in that box of being a stranger or someone that you want to keep far away. Like she's so close to you, right? She's someone you love and want to protect and want to be close to. And none of that pretending stuff. And yet here was this thing that you were praising her for. That was actually a skill of creating distance.

**Vanessa** Mm Hmm.

**Casper** So I'm thinking, like, yes, you want her to have that skill, but you don't want her to use it with you.

**Vanessa** [00:24:07] Right. I would have thought it was just as cool, and I probably would have thought it was even more exciting if she had just sent me a video one day from her sister's phone. Right. And I would have felt so touched and felt so close to her. Here's the other thing, Amy is someone who creates distance and she does it to protect herself.

**Casper** [00:24:24] Yeah.

**Vanessa** [00:24:25] And I just don't necessarily think that that's bad. She has no self-protection up with Peter or her older sister. Right. Like she is a raw nerve with them, and she's a little more reserved with me. Hmm. And I respect that a great deal.

**Casper** [00:24:43] Yeah, I love that. I love that. That's something that we can celebrate in her. And I think we can say that precisely because we also know that she has relationships where she's not performing.

**Vanessa** [00:24:55] Yeah. And she has moments with me where she's not.

**Casper** [00:24:58] Right.

**Vanessa** [00:24:58] And I intentionally try to cultivate those moments with her. But, yeah, I respect that she keeps me at a distance. And I actually think by her being cool with me, she's teaching me how to love her. Right. She's like, I want you to love me. Like, I'm going to teach myself how to wink because it's a private joke between us.

**Casper** Mm hmm.

**Vanessa** But I'm going to do it in arm's length. And she's communicating something to me in that, that I find really helpful.

**Casper** [00:25:21] Yeah. Because the shadow side of this would be, and I'm shaped so much by my own experience of, like, being in the closet, right. Is that you're constantly performing and that there is no place to be honest or to feel like you can be yourself. And I feel like that's what Devin was pointing to as well on that message of of like having spent so long pretending something that it actually takes a while to unlearn that constant performance, even to yourself, as much as to the rest of the world. And so I love that you can see Amy in both, like she has both gears, right? Like she can cycle on this lane or she can cycle in that lane. And she already has the power to choose which one. She's already got it figured out at nine, but it's like, when are we each choosing? And if we're only in one lane, we're probably missing a beat.

**Vanessa** [00:26:09] But maybe there shouldn't be two lanes. Maybe my reaction to Amy shouldn't have been like, Oh my God, I can't believe you pulled that off. Like, waiting for me to wink. How long? I should have been like, Dude, why didn't you just send me a video? Like, that was really funny, but I just want to love you, right? Instead of congratulating her on being cool. Maybe I should have taken that as an opportunity to break down that barrier and be like, You don't have to be cool with me. Just send me the frickin video as soon as you can do it.

**Casper** [00:26:37] Well, maybe your second text can help us figure that out. So, what's the second piece of culture that you're bringing to us? Vanessa.

**Vanessa** [00:27:11] So I am bringing the book Gone Girl by Gillian Flynn, which was obviously a publishing sensation that came out in 2012. It was like at the top of every list, you know. And I read it and it was super fun. And there is a girl in it. I'm not going to tell you anything about this girl. So I don't spoil anything if you haven't read it. But there's a girl in it who becomes a narrator at one point, and she waxes poetic on being cool.

**Casper** Huh

**Vanessa** So, so she goes on this monologue. This just like pages long monologue about, like, if she's dating a vegetarian, the cool girl loves seitan and knows how to make it taste like meat. If she's dating, you know, a baseball fan, then she's the girl who knows all the stats. Right. And so and, you know, if he's a meat eater, she can, like, pound down a hamburger, but stay a size two.

**Casper** Hmm.

**Vanessa** Right. So she, like, lists all these things that could be a cool girl. And then here is sort of the punch line of it. She says, “Cool girls aren't even pretending to be the woman they want to be. They're pretending to be the woman a man wants them to be.”

**Casper** Mm hmm.

**Vanessa** And that's the bad thing about the cool lane, right? You know, who has set the rules as to what's cool or not? Like white, straight, cis, wealthy men. Two of my best friends and I, whenever we go out, we're very loud because we just, like, laugh so much. And men look at us like we are *so* annoying and, like, *so* not cool. And it is the *most* fun that I have. It's *so* fun to laugh that hard with my friends. Right. And it's like, it's not cool. Right. Jen snorts when she laughs really hard and like, you know, it's like there's nothing cool about it. And I don't want Amy to not get herself to be the woman she wants to be, but the one that she thinks I want her to be like. If she wants to be in control and funny, then what she did was awesome. Like, if that is what she wants, then great. But if she thinks it's what *I* want for her, then I don't want that. It's ablest. It's white supremacist, it's like it's so bad, right? All norms are norms for the people in power. Yeah, including cool norms.

**Casper** [00:29:42] The word that really strikes me is ‘pretending’ because we talked about choosing lanes before, but this is different. Yeah, right. This is about not being who you are. It's not, it's not choosing something. It's feeling stuck or pushed into it. And, as you said, pushed into it by a specific cultural expectation or specific, you know, the male gaze. Right, if you're a woman. So this doesn't feel choice full at all in terms of like choosing cool strategically. This feels like cool as a concept is inherently untrustworthy.

**Vanessa** [00:30:15] Yeah, I think that's right. I will say that within the book, this woman uses it to get what she wants.

**Casper** Hmm.

**Vanessa** Right. It is a power that she has, to figure out what men want her to be. And then, and then take advantage of that. Right. Because, being cool also means that you see what other people want, which makes them vulnerable. Like, is this a power that we want people to harness? Right. You taught me this John O'Donohue line, right? With privilege comes the need for absolute integrity.

**Casper** Yeah

**Vanessa R**ight.

**Casper** That's right.

**Vanessa** So there are certain kind of powers that I know what I want people to do with, right? If you have a lot of money, I want you to give a lot of it away. But that's what I want you to do with that power. If you all have a lot of social stature, I want you to be, like, drawing people's attention to more worthy causes than the celebration of you. There's, like, a lot of power that I know what I want people to do with. And cool is a power that I'm like, “What do I want?”

When I notice that people have that power or right, like I have some money and I know what *I* want to do with that power. I have *some* social stature. I know what *I* want to do with that power. I have *some* ability to *sometimes* play things a little bit cool. What do I want to do with that power?

**Casper** Hmm.

**Vanessa** Including potentially give it up.

**Casper** [00:31:37] So what do you want to do with that power?

**Vanessa** [00:31:39] Abuse it all the time? I don't know. I don't know, because sometimes it feels good.

**Casper** [00:31:47] Yeah.

**Vanessa** [00:31:49] There are some people who never feels good with. The people who I love the most. If ever I'm accidentally cool with them. Not cool, right? Like if I'm ever accidentally ignoring them or not paying attention to them, it just makes me feel bad. I hate it. I don't ever want to make the people I love feel small or like they aren't hugely important to me.

**Casper** Yeah

**Vanessa** But there are other people who I'm like, Oh, that's fine. Think I'm, think I'm a big deal. Think that.

**Casper** [00:32:16] You just said something really interesting. ‘Big deal.” And “feeling small.’ And I.

**Vanessa** [00:32:21] Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah

**Casper** [00:32:22] Think that's a piece of cool that maybe we haven't touched on that. It's not like everyone can be super cool all of the time, at least maybe not in this construction. There's an inherent relational element to it, which is that if you're cool, then I'm not. And I'm curious how that shows up.

**Vanessa** [00:32:38] So I don't want them to feel small in their own lives. I want them to feel like they aren't outsized in my life.

**Casper** Uh huh.

**Vanessa** Right. So when this woman has not reached out to me in years and she just texted me being like, we should get coffee, I don't want her to think that I've been sitting around waiting for this.

**Casper** [00:33:01] Yeah.

**Vanessa** [00:33:02] And that I immediately respond, like now that she's decided to reach out to me for the first time in years. And so I. I want her to know that I haven't been sitting around waiting for it. Actually feels honest. So it's a performance. I was free right in that minute. I could have absolutely responded right in that minute. So it was a performance to, like, leave it unread for half an hour. But I actually think that performance gave a more accurate representation of how I felt. And so it's not that I want her to feel small. It's that I want her to know where we stand. Right. It's such a weird way that we communicate with one another. So dumb, I should have just responded.

**Casper** [00:33:40] This is why I love auto timed emails because like.

**Vanessa** Yeah

**Casper** I'm not really on it straightaway. It's coming into your inbox tomorrow at this time.

**Vanessa** [00:33:50] Right.

**Casper** [00:33:50] But it totally makes sense. Right? There's a sense of agency. There's a sense of control of not seeming eager. And it feels like that's what I like so much about Amy's story as an example. What I'm hearing you say is that this really depends on who you're with. Right. When you're going to use this on, not depends on the person's existing relationship with you. You mentioned the kind of, you know, family or the people closest to you. You want to never be like that. Is there a rule of thumb that you could use in your mind when it's absolutely okay, to do that? Well, maybe even desirable.

**Vanessa** [00:34:25] Right. I think that it is often desirable and maybe never okay. Like.

**Casper** [00:34:30] Say more.

**Vanessa** [00:34:31] So what ended up happening is I responded to this person half an hour later and then she never responded. Right. And so I kind of called her bluff. Right. I was like, Yeah, sure. And so maybe if I had responded immediately, she would have then responded immediately and we would have gone out and had a conversation about what's been going on with us over the last few years. Or maybe not. But like by calling her bluff a little bit and like, acting cool, conversation ended. In my work, like, the way I've articulated my work to myself is that, like, I always want to be allying myself to the person with the least power in the room. Right. I think the wrong people have power. And so I want to be spending my life, redistributing power. And, like, I don't think anybody should have no power. Right. Like, but whatever. White supremacists who are listening don't at me. Right. Like, I want to actively be giving power to people who don't feel like they have it. So I don't want it to be okay to continue power structures. But maybe that is when I feel like I need it. When I feel like somebody else has more power than I do. Yeah, it's a way for me to equalize the power and be like, You think you have more power than I do. Or You do, or *I* feel like you have more power than I do.

**Casper** Mm hmm.

**Vanessa** And so I'm going to take 20 minutes to respond so that for a second, we have the same amount of power.

**Casper** Mm hmm.

**Vanessa** So maybe that's when I think it's okay, when what you're trying to do is equalize the power. But if there's already a power dynamic and you have more power or you feel like power is no longer a part of this relationship, then I think being cool just makes you suck. Right. Is that the answer?

**Casper** [00:36:11] I'm compelled by that. And I think the tricky thing is because you illustrated three different ways in which we conceive power. Right. One might be an actual structure. One, you have lots of money. I don't. Another one is they think they have more power than you. And then the third one is that you think they have more power than you do. But that second and third one, a much, much more complicated and like, yeah, someone who you've never spoken to before writes back saying, “Wow, you responded really quickly.”

They've claimed power in a way that you never gave it to them. Like, you're like, no,

**Vanessa R**ight.

**Casper** That was not the deal. You've just stolen this.

**Vanessa** [00:36:46] Put that down.

**Casper** [00:36:47] Yeah. So now I'm never going to respond to you ever again. A-hole.

**Vanessa** [00:36:52] But do you know what that made me think of is that I'm not even sure that we should be trying to grab power through. Cool, because that's why women pretend to be the woman the man wants. Then a man, the person with more power, is determining how you behave. And I don't want that. I don't want the people with power to determine how, you know, people with less power behave.

**Casper** Yeah.

**Vanessa** The man who teased me about responding so quickly should not respond to emails like that.

**Casper** Yeah.

**Vanessa** Like I'm not the jerk.

**Casper** [00:37:25] Totally.

**Vanessa** [00:37:25] But I don't know how else to get out of that. Except what am I supposed to do? Be like, hey, that was a shitty thing for you to call out. Just be grate- like, what is the move when someone does a power grab? Cool. Feels like the only one I've got. But it reaffirms all the things I hate.

**Casper** [00:37:41] But there's something really interesting in what you're saying. That of how cool can be a defense as much as an attack. Because I do think about the way and you know, what isn't racialized in America, but the way in which people who have been structurally less powerful, cool is something that you can hold onto as a defense. To these perhaps much more structural ways in which you are disempowered. So I'm thinking, for example, about how, you know, corporate America draws on black culture, black music, you know, black fashion. There's so much that's taken from that corner of culture because it's seen as cool.

**Vanessa** Right.

**Casper** And yet in so many ways, like and I'm no expert, but I can imagine that it is in some way a separating mechanism to say like, well, you can't right, you're not this, you can't have this. And then of course it's trys, then grab it anyway it tries and grabs it anyway. So I guess what I'm trying to point to is that like there are moments when cool can be used as an attack, right? As that guy in the email being like, “oh, how quickly you responded.”

 And then cool can also be used as a defense. And so I feel like much more, okay, now I'm just giving you my moral judgments, but I feel much more okay with having cool as a defensive mechanism, right when something comes out. You know, what I don't want to do in my life is be the guy who, who uses it as an attack. That's, that's where it feels gross and manipulative, especially in a gender and race context.

**Vanessa** [00:39:02] Totally. No, I think that's really helpful to I, I mean, what I'm coming down to is using it the way that I think Amy uses it, which is cool as a form of communication. It's when does cool either restore our sense of ourselves or when is it a way to connect with someone right to like make the other person actually feel better, safer or right. Because I think with Amy, I don't think she was actually keeping me at a distance. I think the way that she and I wink is at the dinner table. Right. And she like knew that that was the way that she and I connect over her winking. And it's actually a private joke that happens in public. You know, Ellen and Peter are at the table with us, and they don't know that we're doing it right. Like it's this private joke. And she actually found a very thoughtful way to, like, implement and like sort of blow up this private joke between us. It's been going on for years and it just happened to be very restrained. And I think what Arianna was pointing us to is that in celebrating that restraint as cool and saying that we were teaching her to value coolness, well, maybe what I should have said was like, I can't believe how *patient* you were that you waited, right. And, like, celebrated her patience or I can't believe how *thoughtful* you were that you *waited* for the perfect *moment* to do that joke for *me*. Right? And instead, we were really pumping up this cool thing, and I think I was in part doing it because I'm some level. I want her to be cool. Yeah. I want her to be the kid who has power. So it's not about whether or not she was cool is about whether or not I want to celebrate the moments that she pulls off cool.

**Casper** [00:40:45] She's going to be cool either way. Whatever you do, right, the rest of the world is going to teach her that plenty. And so for you to really hone in on what's the thing that I want to celebrate because it was patient, it was funny, it was thoughtful. It was it was all of those things. And you get to hone in on those values that you want to celebrate in her. And that's the gift, because I think you're right. Like to try and make her behave differently. Wouldn't have felt right.

**Vanessa** [00:41:14] Right.

**Casper** [00:41:15] That's part of how she is. Right? Like that's I think that's really beautiful, Vanessa, because what you're offering, I think for all of us, especially in relationships, right, where you as the adult and she has the child, the relationships where we have more power, we get to choose what we celebrate for those who are in our care or those who are perceived to have less power. And in those dynamics, you have to be really careful about what you shine a light on and celebrate. Yeah.

**Vanessa** [00:41:41] Yeah. And I will say there was evidence that she wasn't cool that night because as soon as I gasped, she stood up from the table and went, “Yes! I did it!”

Right, and like once she got to pull it off. She was *so* proud of herself. And like I interrupted, Peter and Ellen were talking and I was like, “Wait, wait, I have to tell you.”

And Amy was like, “Yeah, guys, listen, listen. I did a thing. I did a thing.”

So she didn't stay cool. Bless her heart.

**Casper** [00:42:12] I love that she took one day. She was like, I've fulfilled it. I'm switching to the lane of love and intimacy. And yeah, I'm not pretending anything right now.

**Vanessa** [00:42:21] Self congratulations, imagine teaching yourself, how to wink.

**Casper** [00:42:26] That's a big deal.

**Vanessa** [00:42:27] This kid's amazing.

**Casper** [00:42:29] Well, thank you, Vanessa, so much for sharing this question. I'm going to think about cool very, very differently.

**Vanessa** [00:42:34] I, of course, want to thank Leonard Bernstein, Stephen Sondheim and Gillian Flynn.

**Casper** [00:42:39] Thanks also to Shannon Fernandez from Hamilton, Ontario, in Canada, who shares these wise words from Bon Jovi. “Words can't say what love can do.”

Thank you, Shannon.

**Vanessa** [00:42:55] You've been listening to the real question. We can only make this show thanks to your support, but luckily your support often includes an Emmy. So if you have the means to help us out, please check us out on Patreon.com/therealquestionpod. If you love the show, please leave us a review on Apple podcast and tell Casper that he's handsome. And you can also follow us on Instagram and Facebook at Realquestionpod and Twitter at therealqpod. We are Not Sorry Production. Our executive producer is the best auntie in the world, Ariana Nedelman. We are edited by the amazing Malika Gumpangkum and our music is by Nick Bohl. We are distributed by Acast.

**Casper** [00:43:30] Thanks to Devin for that voicemail this week. To Julia Argy Nicki Zoltan, Lara Glass Stephanie Paulsell and AJ Erasmus as ever, huge thanks to our BFF Tier patrons. Amanda Schram. Eva Howe. Ari, Ashley Maile. Daniel Kelly. Elouise Fehring. Kristin Hall. Mary Margaret, Rebecca Crowe and Stephanie Fetowish. We're so, so grateful and we'll see you again next time.