

# Not Sorry Works

The Real Question

White Lies

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**Zainab** [00:00:57] Hello, Casper, Vanessa and Ariana. My name is Zainab, and I'm from London. You asked about a time when you were happy that you lied. And what actually came to mind for me wasn't necessarily something that I was happy about, but it's a conversation I've been having with my partner. So basically my partner tends to smoke socially and isn't really something that I'm comfortable with, but I'm always conflicted about whether I want to know or whether I don't want to know. And therefore I feel like when he doesn't tell me, I feel like it maintains a level of comfort in our relationship. But it makes me really uncomfortable because I want to know so then I'm aware and so that I have the full picture.

So I'm really conflicted about whether this is a lie, which is a good thing to tell, or like is a lie of omission if I'm not told, or whether having the truth at all times is the best way to go, especially when it comes to seeing your partner for all that they are. Thank you.

[Intro music begins playing]

**Casper ter Kuile** [00:02:07] I'm Casper ter Kuile.

**Vanessa Zoltan** [00:02:09] And I'm Vanessa Zoltan.

**Casper** [00:02:11] And this is The Real Question. [Intro music fades out]

A huge bow of gratitude and joy to our fabulous patrons. We've got Janet W, Jennifer L., and AD, Kate G and a Z - or Zed, depending if you're Zainab or I - and IOU, and Katie J. Really, we so appreciate each and every one of you. Thank you for supporting the show on Patreon. Without you, we would just be walking on the sands of time alone and friendless.

**Vanessa** [00:02:55] That's a lot of pressure for them. [Casper laughs] Other listeners, don't worry. We're glad you're listening and we're okay. On the sands of time, friendless. We have each other if we need. [Laughing]

**Casper** [00:03:07] Well, there's a way that you can take Vanessa home with you very soon, because your fabulous book, *Praying with Jane Eyre*, comes out on July 6th. I am so excited for everyone to read this book. It's so beautiful. If you've loved listening to Vanessa's stories on this podcast or Harry Potter and the Sacred Text, you are going to be obsessed with this book! Because it's basically Vanessa without the rude interruptions from me. [both laughing]

And - and actually, I think you really develop not just the stories about your family, but, like, you open it up into these beautiful reflections on themes like hope, anger, destiny. It's just a wonderful, wonderful book. It's going to win every prize. Everyone's going to buy it. I can't wait for everyone to sit around campfires talking about it and then, like, giving it to their children [Vanessa laughs] because they just want them to read it now, even if they're only six years old.

So please go out and buy Vanessa's book. It's called *Praying with Jane Eyre*. Order it from your local bookstore. Order it from your local library - wherever you can, get your hands on a copy. It's going to be amazing.

**Vanessa** [00:04:05] Also, there is a free event to celebrate my book launch on July 6th, and it is going to feature Julia Quinn, the writer of *Bridgerton*, and the Casper ter Kuile, and it is at 8 p.m. Eastern. And if you go to [VanessaZoltan.com/events](https://VanessaZoltan.com/events), you can register. You have to register, but it's totally free. And I would just love if everybody came and celebrated this book with me. I've wanted to write a book since I was 12. I'm 39 and I just want to like cheers with everybody who made it possible. And that's all of you. So please come and celebrate with me.

So Casper, Zainab set the stakes of today's episode really well. It's this question of like: when do we want to lie to people and when do we want to be lied to? Right? [Affirmation] And this was all inspired by something that happened super recently. My 13 year old stepdaughter, who on the podcast we call Emma, texted me a couple of weeks ago and said, "I gave myself bangs." [Casper gasps] And I was like: "This could look horrible. This could look adorable. No matter what happens, I am going to tell her she looks amazing." And that was my first response.

And then I was like, "Well, FaceTime me and show me." And I was just ready to tell her it was adorable - it did not matter what it looked like. And it turns out that it looks adorable. So it got really easy. But then I mentioned to her that no matter what, I was going to tell her it was adorable. And she was like, "Oh, do you actually think it's adorable?" And I was like, "I do! I wouldn't have meta-told you this if I didn't think it was adorable."

And - and I couldn't tell if trust was broken in that moment or if trust was built in that moment.

**Casper:** Ooh!

**Vanessa:** If she was like, "Oh, Vanessa's just going to lie to me and say things that I want to hear," or "Vanessa's never going to judge me, so, like, she's the person who I can reach out to." And nothing is more important to me than that the kids trust me, right? Like I want that when they're in trouble, they'll call - no matter how scared they are of like, quote unquote "repercussions," I want them to call - like, trust feels like such a high stakes thing with children. But also with adults - with our friends, with our bosses, with our colleagues. And friends ask us questions - and we know that there's a spectrum, right? Before they buy the shirt or the dress, you can be more honest about whether or not you like it. And when you see them out and about in the shirt or the dress, you love the shirt and the dress, right? Like and that's just the way it is.

But then, like partners, it's a different spectrum, right? [Affirmation] When they go, "What do you think?" [Affirmation] And I'm talking about lies like: "do you like my dress?" And like, "do you like my boyfriend? Do you like my haircut?" I'm not talking about, like, fraud, right? I'm not talking about lying about who you are or lying to the government. That can be a question for another time. I'm talking about these interpersonal lies. Lying is often about breaking trust, but I'm curious if sometimes lying and being the supportive person actually builds trust?

**Casper** [00:07:06] This is such a good question, Vanessa, and it resonates especially with me today because I've just had a couple of conversations with a friend who's in a relationship where there's some like wonderful flags, let's call them blue flags, and then there's some red flags [laughs]. And it's like, you know, my primary experience in that conversation was: I want to support and love my friend. But it also had that, you know, inkling of something else underneath. So this feels not only relevant for you, but for me. So thanks for figuring it out for me in this conversation. [Laughs]

**Vanessa** [00:07:40] But that's the thing is like I also wonder how accurate we are at guessing at red flags. I have thought things were red flags for friends and they aren't. A friend of mine fell in love at first sight and I was like, "That's so dumb. That's like, not a thing, and this is not going to work out." It was an international, online love at first sight, and I was like, "This is a scam." And it's been five years and they're engaged.

**Casper:** Wow - wow!

**Vanessa:** Like, you know, we are not good judges of each other's red flags. So part of that question to me is just humility, of like, I don't know - who the heck am I to know are bangs cute? Like, I might not like them, but that doesn't mean they're not cute. And by the way, again, Emma, if you're listening, your bangs are adorable. But sometimes it's important to share a concern.

You know, a thing that I really remember, my younger brother was a very good baseball player. He still is. And so he was really involved in his little league and was on this traveling All-Star team. And so all the parents and siblings of the team, like it was a little community, right? We were together every Saturday for hours. And this lovely woman who my mom had gotten close to went through an ugly divorce in front of everybody. And then one week before the divorce was final, her soon to be ex-husband brought a 22 year old girl to the game as a date.

**Casper:** Oh wow.

**Vanessa:** And everyone was gossiping about it. And my mom called her that week and was like, "I want you to know, because I don't want everyone else on the team to know and for you to be the person who doesn't know." And her friend was so grateful, right? Her friend was just like: thank you. And it was hard, but better to hear it from someone who loved her [affirmation]. And I think my mom was absolutely right. I think that that would have been a horrible thing to feel like 30 people were withholding that information for you and 30 people knew something about you that you didn't know. But I can absolutely also see the other side of that argument.

**Casper** [00:09:44] Well, and if it was like in a restaurant and he was having a private dinner with her and your mom happened to see it, would that be the same situation? No, because suddenly she's the only one with that information. So you can quickly see how something that feels really clear cut in one context suddenly becomes much more difficult to figure out. So I'm really invested in this question. Like, when is it okay to lie? And is there also a difference between withholding information and actively lying, right? Saying something that isn't true. Because that feels important in Zainab's framing of the question as well of like, [affirmation]

sometimes I just don't want to know something that you could tell me, rather than - you know, if someone came home and said I hadn't smoked when actually they had, that feels different. Right?

**Vanessa** [00:10:28] Totally. And I even think, like: I don't want anybody to tell me anything bad about Peter. I essentially had a friendship end over the fact that I did not ask this person if they liked my ex, and she just one day was like, "I don't like your boyfriend." And I was like, "I super didn't ask that."

But I think that that is also hard, because I would want a friend to admit the truth if they like, I don't know, didn't like Peter's glasses or didn't like his cooking or sense of humor. I'd be like, I don't care. Like, you can admit *that* truth. But if they saw Peter, like, inappropriately flirting with someone, even if I didn't directly ask them, I would want them to come to me with that information. Wouldn't you?

**Casper** [00:11:14] Oh, man, that opens such a good Pandora's box in a way, because if I was to say "I want to hear about it," I kind of I'm opening up myself for all sorts of commentary on a relationship that people don't know the inside off. Right? Like who knows what agreements my partner and I have or we don't have. Like, again, I feel like who I'm hearing this from is as important as what the information is that I'm hearing. And so I feel like that actually already sets some of the scaffolding for this question, because it's not only about the content of the thing that we're lying about or admitting the truth about, but it's also about the quality of the intimacy of the relationship that we have with the person who who we're sharing information with.

**Vanessa** [00:11:58] It's also the how. [Affirmation] If it's like a loving, like, "look, I'm going to support you no matter what, but I'm concerned that your girlfriend isn't always nice to you. And, like, I don't know the inside of your relationship [affirmation] and some relationships are really different in public, but it makes me uncomfortable." Right?

**Casper** [00:12:18] I've had that conversation and it was not easy, but it was important [affirmation] because without that conversation, like, the friendship feels like it's not authentic anymore.

**Vanessa:** Totally.

**Casper:** I really take that. Vanessa, will you share with us what the first text is that's going to help us figure out when and how and with whom it's okay to lie?

**Vanessa** [00:12:39] So my first source is the book *Trust Exercise* by Susan Choi. It was written in 2019 and it won the National Book Award and was a huge success. It's a coming of age story where bad things have happened and it's about the coping strategies that people are using to integrate those bad things that have happened. And it's also about the way people talk about it and the way that secrets are kept and the way that bad men, right, like predators, are counting on the fact that people aren't talking and sharing secrets, even in a very small community, so that they can keep doing their bad things, right? So here is the quote that I have picked from this fantastic novel. "And right away her gaze went hard with the anger we always feel at the person who spoils our idea of ourself."

**Casper** [00:13:40] Ooh. Ooh, that gives me chills.

**Vanessa** [00:13:43] So it's "the anger we always feel at the person who spoils our idea of ourself."

**Casper:** Yeah.

**Vanessa:** And that is what is at risk for me, right? Is if I say to a friend whatever it is - like, I think you got married too soon, or I don't like your haircut. The question is whether or not I think it's worth it for them to get angry at me, because I am spoiling their idea of themselves. And sometimes I'm fine with people being angry at me. Right? If I again, I'm, like, stopping someone from hurting themselves and they are mad at me for it. I'm like, "That's fine. Be mad at me. I don't care." And that is very clear in certain moments and certain dynamics. Right, like - we just had to have a conversation with my father that he's like not allowed to drive anymore, and, he's mad at me [affirmation], and I just don't care. I'm like, I'm sorry that you're mad, and my heart breaks for him, but I'm not - I don't care that he's mad at me.

But this question of like: I don't know if your boyfriend is nice to you. I don't know if that's a cute haircut. I don't know if that tattoo is tacky. Like, I think we just need to bring a whole lot of humility to those statements because I might not like the way that someone has cut their hair, but, like, it might be really important to their identity exploration [laughs] - or, right? We never know what's at stake for other people, in which case, our opinions aren't really always welcome.

And I also think that the other thing is that we reflexively ask for other opinions. Right? It'll be like, "Oh, do you like my haircut?" But we won't necessarily say, "it's a really big deal for me. [Affirmation] I cut it because I'm so tired of spending so much time watching it and I just feel so stressed with long hair all the time." Or "it's a really big deal for me because I've realized I'm balding and I've just decided to embrace it." Right? [Affirmation] We just say, "Do you like my haircut?" But coated in that is so many other things and the other person doesn't know, so like - they shouldn't really answer.

**Casper** [00:15:56] Well, they should answer, just with a reflexive affirmation of like, "yes, it looks great," right? I mean, one of the things that is so richly revealed in this text that you've brought is this idea that one has of one's self. Right? And that when that is disrupted by someone, it feels like an attack, it feels like something unpleasant. And in some ways, if you're in a trusting relationship with a friend or family member, you're like "I know this person, right? I know the story of themselves. And this thing that they're doing or this thing that's happening is not who they are. And that's why I feel I have permission to say something about it or to comment on it."

But of course, we're always changing, right? And how do we *know* that it's a static part of someone's identity? I'm talking very abstractly, but I guess what I want to ask you is: how do you know if the thing that's changed is a deviation from someone's idea of themselves or if it's actually a part of themselves that they're growing into? Like, what's your internal gut check of how - how would you know?

**Vanessa** [00:17:01] I mean, something that I'm thinking about is I will always say something to a friend if I'm worried they're about to embarrass themselves [affirmation]. Like, if I'm afraid that three-months-from-now-they are going to regret what they're gonna do, or five-years-from-now-they, right? I think that that is when I'll say, "maybe I'm overstepping, *but* think twice before you spend half of your income on that car payment." Right, like -

**Casper** [00:17:36] Or you just wrote a caption to an Instagram post which was mistakenly horribly offensive.

**Vanessa** [00:17:45] I knew it was a typo. Yeah - like, right - like you recently typed something wrong on Instagram and I immediately told you. Right? Like, that seems correct to me. I knew you didn't mean "a Jew book", but "a new book" [laughing]

**Casper** [00:17:58] And so, yes, you are immediately activating when it's clear someone's embarrassing themselves or they're about to do something that could actually really hurt them. It's an action of protection in that moment.

**Vanessa** [00:18:08] Right. But if I don't like an outfit that someone's wearing before they go on stage, I could justify that they're about to hurt themselves. Right? [Affirmation] But, like, if you didn't like my outfit before I went on stage, I'd be like, "Screw you. I'm doing this on purpose." [Affirmation] I've had people in my life say to me I shouldn't wear flats on stage because like, "heels really elongate your legs on stage." I'm like, "I don't care! I didn't need to hear that." So they thought that they were protecting me, and instead I was like, "This is not helpful information."

**Casper** [00:18:43] That feels important because I actually think you've helped us see something there, which is like: before giving the feedback or before sharing something, asking a question about why or the context or the stakes of like, "Oh, tell me about your flats." You know, that could sound very passive aggressive, as it just did.

**Vanessa:** Yes [laughing]

**Casper:** So not like that. But what would be a good way of asking about the stakes without it already inferring judgment, as I just did? [Laughing]

**Vanessa** [00:19:11] I don't know. That is the question, right?

**Casper:** Yeah, yeah.

**Vanessa:** It's when are they holding me to a standard of myself that I'm not anymore and I will get mad at them because essentially they'll be saying, like, "you're aging and you're getting lazy." Right? Like, they're going to be saying all these things to me that I'm not hearing. [Affirmation]

**Casper** [00:19:34] Yeah. And then on the flip side, sometimes there's nothing more loving than someone - I use the phrase accountability in a really generous way. Like, someone holds me accountable because they know, I know, I can do better [affirmation], and I'm just scared, right? [affirmation] Those moments where you kind of want to be held to a higher standard or

I don't want to say a higher standard, to a different standard. So that is - that is such a tricky line. Is there anything else in the text that would help us with this?

**Vanessa** [00:20:03] Yeah. To me, this sentence is about the difference between truth and trust. I used to believe that the way to have someone trust you is to constantly tell them the truth. [Affirmation] And that's just not true. [Laughing] Like, that's just not true. And sometimes being a truth teller can get people to not trust you, because you are prioritizing truth over protectiveness, or over love, or over loyalty. And it's like: why are you more committed to the truth, or to your truth, then to *me*? [Affirmation]

But truth needs to be told in a context of trust. [Affirmation] Or in a context where you don't care that someone's going to get mad. Like with my dad, at the end of the day, I don't care that he's going to get mad. I'm trying to save his life, like. And I'm trying to save the life of others. And driving when you shouldn't drive is really high stakes. And so that is a moment where I think that truth and love are actually bedfellows.

**Casper** [00:21:05] This helps me look at Zainab's voicemail more sharply as well, because by the sounds of it, you know, she has a happy partnership. There's a lot of trust there. And so the omission of sharing information about smoking a cigarette or not happens within that pool of safety. Like if that was another thing in a relationship that was founded on distrust, that's a very different conversation. And so I really like this - that there's actually more spaciousness, both for truth telling and for lying by omission or, you know, a gentle lie here and there, when there is more trust and there's more solidity in the relationship.

And as soon as we get into slightly more friction or, you know, just less intimate, loving relationships, we need to become more and more careful because there's less room for making a mistake, there's less forgiveness, there's less good intentions that we can expect from one another. Yeah. That's really helpful.

**Vanessa** [00:22:01] Yeah. So the conclusion we're coming to is like: we can only be truthful with people who we already trust and love. [Affirmation] And simultaneously we need to build trust by flirting with truth levels.

**Casper** [00:22:18] Yeah, I really like that. And it's also a strategy of building trust - is truth telling, if we get it right, right? Like if we say something, we notice something about someone, maybe that they have changed their hair or they have a new necklace or, you know, their French accent has really improved or whatever it is - that we end up recognizing something about the person's story of themselves so that they feel seen. And so that that truth telling actually builds a bridge of relationship rather than, you know, testing it or even breaking it.

**Vanessa** [00:22:49] *And* sometimes it's not anger because someone's not spoiling the idea of ourself, but improving it. Right? [Affirmation] Like, I really think a lot about whether or not, and I this is a word I'll only use about myself, but like whether or not I'm being crazy. Like, I will notice that my car is driving differently, but I just went to the mechanic and I'm like, "Am I being crazy? Am I talking myself into my car being wrong?" And then I will get validated that I wasn't making it up, but it turns out that the person didn't restart the flash thing and so it was driving more poorly. And I'll come home and I'll say to Peter, "I wasn't crazy." And he is always like, "You're never crazy. You are always right about these things." And so he sees a version of

me that's spoiling my idea of myself, but in a wonderful way, where he's like helping me rewrite this version of myself that has not been trusted by the world before. Right? And there are various reasons for that. But it's such a lovely way that he's building trust, by seeing a truth that he sees and one that I have not previously seen.

**Casper** [00:24:02] That's making me teary because it's one of the most generous gifts I think we can give each other. And so there's something in this question about lying of, like, when that gift is taken away, right? Suddenly you fall back into a story of like, "oh, the world can't be trusted" or like, "oh, I'm I'm stupid or I'm not dependable." And I think that's why it hurts so much when it does happen.

**Vanessa** [00:24:28] Yeah. I think that sometimes we risk people being mad at us for spoiling the story we tell about ourselves. But other times we really are trying to build intimacy. [Affirmation] I love that we're ending here, on "always good to lie. Lie to build trust, [laughing] and hold the truth to build trust. Unless the truth is really flattering, then use it to build trust so that one day you can tell people they can't drive."

**Casper** [00:24:59] Well, this is why this show has two texts, because it's always good to be in conversation. So let's take a moment and have a look at our second text. [Transition music]

So we just had a chance to read this beautiful quote from Susan Choi's novel. What's the second text that we're going to read together?

**Vanessa** [00:25:37] Grey's Anatomy.

**Casper** [00:25:39] It was only a matter of time. This is, I feel like I can safely say, a biblical esque source for you and your life.

**Vanessa** [00:25:47] My next book is going to be *Praying with Grey's Anatomy*. Grey's Anatomy, the incredible show by Shonda Rhimes, recently got renewed for its 18th season. I have been in an 18 year long relationship with this show. I fall asleep to it every night. It is the greatest show of all time.

The central relationship of the show is a love story between Dr. Meredith Gray and Dr. Derek Shepherd. The series starts with the two of them waking up from a one night stand. This is a conversation between the two of them where they are still on again, off again in the middle of season four of the show.

So what's happened is that Meredith has recently broken up with Derek. She's like, "I can't trust you. I'm not ready." And so while they aren't together, Derek kisses this woman, Rose. And then that night, Meredith comes at Derek and is like, "Never mind. I don't want you to see other people. I was wrong. Let's be together." And he says, "Great! Yes!" And doesn't tell her about Rose because he didn't do anything wrong. Right?

**Casper** [00:26:54] We're on a break!



**Vanessa** [00:26:54] They were completely broken up. She was like, "I don't want to be with you." It wasn't even Ross and Rachel - like, they were broken up. [laughing] And so this is the quote I want us to look at.

**Excerpt from Grey's Anatomy** [00:27:05] [Clip begins]

Meredith: "Who's Rose?"

Derek: "Um, Rose is a circulating nurse. I kissed her once. I'm sure you know that. It's why you're asking me."

Meredith: When?

Derek: When?

Meredith: When did you kiss her?

Derek: Yesterday, [unclear - maybe "after our talk"] -

Meredith: So yesterday you were making out with scrub nurses. And today you were building your [unclear]

Derek: Yesterday we were dating other people.

Meredith: That's not the point.

Derek: That is the point. I told you I want to marry you. I want to build a house and live with you. And you weren't ready.

Meredith: And Rose is? You don't want to build a life with me. You want someone. You want someone who wants the same things that you want. [End of clip]

**Vanessa** [00:27:43] And so I don't think Derek did anything wrong. They weren't together. And I actually think it would be kind of mean of him to be like, "Oh, I'm so excited you want to be back together. By the way, I kissed someone 6 hours ago." [Laughing] I'd be like, "Why are you telling me this?"

**Casper** [00:28:02] So let's just recap for a second. At the top of the episode, the kind of scaffolding we set up for ourselves to figure out when it's okay to lie or how to tell the truth when it's painful, was what it is that's being said. Right. Is it trivial? Is it serious? Who's doing the saying? Are you an intimate friend? Are you a stranger? And then what's the tone or how are you doing it? Right. When is the moment that you're approaching them? How are you bringing it up? Is it a question or an accusation? I wonder if you can go through those three things in this scene and see what you find.

**Vanessa** [00:28:37] Yeah, that's so interesting because I think part of what's hard for Meredith is that one of her friends says it to her as if she knew. One of her friends overhears Derek very politely going up to Rose and being like "That kiss was great, but Meredith and I are back together now." And one of Meredith's friends overhears that and says to Meredith, completely innocently, like, "oh, the kiss with Rose, that wasn't a big deal." And so I think Meredith feels this like humiliation, that her friend knew something that she didn't know, and Rose knew something that she didn't know. [Affirmation] And if the friend had come up to her and been like, "Hey, I overheard this thing, I'm *sure* it's not a big deal." And Meredith was able to process that for a second and be like, "Look, we weren't together," right? This conversation may have gone differently. And so I do think part of the problem is that George said it to her with no bad intention, but without scaffolding it and any number of other issues around it.

**Casper** [00:29:46] And that's how it happens, right? That's real life. This is what happens all the time. That unintentional but impactful sharing of information. Yeah.

**Vanessa** [00:29:56] And that I completely resonate with Meredith, because my biggest fear in the world, as you know, is that everybody thinks something about me that I don't. Right? That like - I'm about to put out my first book, that everybody knows my book is crap and were like, everybody is saying it behind my back but won't say it to my face. And the book is a great example of like: I feel so bad for my friends and family who read it. They can't tell me it's bad. So really, I'm sort of measuring how much they actually like it by how over the top their language is. Like if somebody is like, "it was really good," I'm like, "Oh, they hated it," [Casper laughs] right?

Like, there are all these weird calibrations where, you know, a person can't be honest with you. You don't actually want them to be honest with you. Because if, like, my brother doesn't like my book, how mean would he be if he told me? It's definitely too late! Right? And so it's just this mind game of trust and, I will never trust whether or not my brother loves my book. I will trust that he loves me. And he is just out of the realm of people who I will ever trust about whether or not they like my book.

**Casper** [00:31:09] This is also just such a good insight for needing different kinds of relationships in our lives. Right? Like there are some people, you are included, you know, Sean, a few other people where I'm like, "Whatever I do, I want you to be on my side." Like, even if I made huge mistakes, I want you to be like, "yup, but - look at the context. You're totally trustworthy for a, b, and c reasons."

**Vanessa:** Yeah.

**Casper:** And then there are other people who I have less of a relational stake with who I will be able to hear something more difficult from. Is that true? No, I'd be able to hear it from you too, but I don't want you to be the person to tell me. [Laughs]

**Vanessa** [00:31:45] And so here's the thing. Like 99% of the time I won't. But if I really think that you're about to do something risky and bad [affirmation], I will tell you. But absolutely with you, mostly I'm not even critically listening. I'm just listening to support you. And it's not like I just supported you day one of knowing you. It was after five years of watching you be a trusting, self-reflective person who, when you mess up, no one is harder on you than you. [Affirmation] And so I get to be that for you because I genuinely think you're so wonderful.

And so that also becomes an iterative thing, right? Where I'm like: I don't even have to think about it. Casper's already probably thought of all the bad things about this. [Casper laughs] I get to just point out the good things.

**Casper** [00:32:40] Well, that's very sweet. And I also think it helps us understand the text, because that's what's missing between Dr. Gray and Dr. Shepherd. There's too much of a pattern, it seems, of mistrust or hurting each other, or something going wrong, that a moment like this, which in a different relational context could be like, "you know what? Gosh, I'm noticing I'm kind of hurt that he kissed this lovely nurse, but let me go talk to him and like, let's sit down and figure it out." Rather than coming in, you know, pretty aggressive and being like, "well, it's off again." It seems like that relationship has a pattern which actually can't hold. It's very fragile in a way.

**Vanessa** [00:33:15] Yeah. Oh, absolutely. And you know, everyone go back and watch seasons one and two to understand why. But it reminds me in that way of our first text, because the reason that he doesn't tell her - the reason that Derek, Dr. Shepherd, doesn't tell Meredith - is because he feels angry that she is spoiling the idea of himself. He - she sees him as someone who's not trustworthy. He sees himself as incredibly trustworthy. If he tells her about Rose, it'll validate that view that he doesn't like about himself. There's a big - it's not even a joke, it's just a fact in our house. I'm a very clumsy person. I am a *very* clumsy person. And I've just learned eventually to not mind that about myself and laugh about it. And so when Peter teases me about it, it doesn't anger me because I know this story about myself. Ten years ago when people pointed it out to me, I had not yet accepted that about myself, and I was like, "Look, I already spilled on my nice shirt. I also don't need a joke." [Casper laughs] Right? Like, I just dropped all the pasta on the floor and have to start from scratch and wasted pasta. I don't also need a comment.

**Casper** [00:34:34] Yeah. So here's the thing that actually is also maybe helpful for this bigger question, which is I'm adding a fourth piece of scaffolding. So we've got who's saying it? How are you saying it? What is being said? But there's also something about how long or when into a relationship, or when into your own self-knowledge, is something being shared? Like, if I'm saying something to a 65 year old mentor who knows themselves really well, they can take it. And not in a way that I'm trying to be mean. But like, there's a - there's a groundedness and a confidence and an ease with themselves, which means they can integrate something that's difficult, just, better. That's very different from saying it to a 14 year old girl who just got a new hairstyle and is anxious, probably because she's a 14 year old girl. My God! 14 year old anything is just - it's hard. And so that also helps me think about like, just the the state of maturity, maybe? Is that the right way to say it? There's something there, I think.

**Vanessa** [00:35:40] Yeah, absolutely. And I think both of them are being immature. Right? Like he didn't not tell Meredith in order to protect *her* feelings. He didn't tell Meredith to protect this idea of himself. And like that intention is in the air, and that omission becomes something else. And I feel for that instinct - when I know someone has a view of me, I want to counteract it, right? If I think one of my friends thinks I always run late, I'm going to do everything I can to show up early the next ten times. Right? Like we constantly are trying to counteract that narrative. [Affirmation] But he's not trying to counteract the narrative by being like, "hey, we have had a history of a lack of trust. And I just want to be really honest with you that I kissed Rose today." He's running away from it and is like, "I'm just not going to tell her because it will validate the narrative."

**Casper** [00:36:33] Yes. Yes, I think that's exactly right. It requires courage, actually - both sometimes choosing to withhold and sometimes choosing to share. In some ways... I'm thinking about [laughs] just a little extra bonus text with a little Harry Potter reference, but like the difference between what is right and what is easy. Nearly always the easy option when this question comes up is probably worth examining again. The one that demands a little bit more courage, a little bit more thought and planning or vulnerability - it's at least worth considering.

**Vanessa** [00:37:11] Right. Or hu - humility. Right?

**Casper** [00:37:15] It's so interesting. You've said that word like three times in this conversation. What does that mean for you? What's the humility about?

**Vanessa** [00:37:23] I just remember, you know, I have very toxic aunts and uncles in my life. And I would see them every Friday night at Shabbat dinner, and they would comment on my clothes as if there's an objective truth about clothes. Right? And they didn't know what was in fashion and they didn't know that whatever it was - like, I was trying to be punk because I was super into Weezer and Garbage that year. And they would just say things with such confidence. Or someone will say that someone else's music is *bad*. And I'm like, "That's not an objective truth."

I hate it when people think that they are speaking truth, and they're not. And so I feel like truth needs to be shared either in an attempt to genuinely understand or in an attempt to get closer to someone. [Affirmation]. But like speaking your truth when it has something to do with someone else - like, your truth is not the truth.

**Casper** [00:38:28] I mean, that's maybe a whole other piece of scaffolding is like: do you need to say it? Like, what's behind your reason for sharing the information in the first place or the commentary? Is it your genuinely wanting to build a relationship? Right, and you're saying this is a way to build rapport, get to know someone better, or to have a shared joke? Or are you just unloading your own stuff all over everyone else? And like, that wasn't asked for.

**Vanessa** [00:38:54] So she thought she was doing me a favor with the, "those clothes aren't flattering," right? She thought, "I'm going to save you from going out in the world looking bigger than you have to. I'm going to save you from buying clothes that don't suit you." And she wasn't - like, I wasn't going to change the way I dressed for her. I liked the way I dressed. And so it was just offensive and hurtful. And so that's what's at stake for me with humility. If I were to say to someone, "I don't like your boyfriend" - so, well I'm not the arbiter! [Laughs]

**Casper** [00:39:28] Right. Right

**Vanessa** [00:39:28] What does it matter what I think? And I probably don't know him. Not everyone makes the best first impression. And so I'm going to default to liking people. And to be honest, that has served me really well. [Affirmation]

So, Casper, the thing that I want to question is something that you reflected back to me at the beginning, which is that the first step is trust building, and *then* it's truth telling. And I wonder if that is inverted, that you have to do some truth telling at the beginning in order to build the trust, to just make sure you're living in the same reality and the same expectations and the same the same shared experience with the other person. [Affirmation] And I don't think that those truths should be about the other person. Right. I don't think it's like, "hi, nice to meet you. That shirt doesn't look good on you." It's like, "Hi, nice to meet you. Let me tell you some deep, true things about myself. And, 'Oh, that hurt me when you said that.'" Right? And really bartering on truth at the beginning feels important, at least certain truths.

**Casper** [00:40:40] I like that a lot because actually I'm starting to see a sequence of that truth telling about yourself first, which establishes trust. And with that trust, we can venture into truths about each other, right? Or venturing -

**Vanessa:** Oooh!

**Casper:** - commentary on each other's lives. But we could never get there without the truth about ourselves and that trust building first.

**Vanessa** [00:41:00] Oh, my God, I love that. Peter and I, on our first date, was like, "I don't really like dogs." [Casper laughs] And he knew that, caring about dogs was really important to me, and I just loved that. He was like, "I'm putting my worst foot forward. I want you to know all the things you might not like about me." And, like, now he gets to tell me truths about me, right? And now, of course, he loves the dog, but like, that makes me trust someone when they are willing to tell me truths about themselves, or about how they read the situation.

**Casper** [00:41:38] So this is what I want to say as we come to the end of this conversation, usually in this show, right, we're coming with a question, we end up somewhere different. I actually want to reflect back to you that the story you shared about Emma and her bangs, I think you did all of the things that we've pointed to in this conversation. Because it's actually super skilled level, because you did two things at the same time. One is you affirmed her, right? You said: you look amazing. That's super cute. I love that you've got bangs. So great. Show me. You know, you were excited. You were with her.

And because then they genuinely looked good, you then also developed the relationship by being like, listen, I was going to say they look good, whatever they look like, but they genuinely look really good. And so it's like you were also teaching her how to be with people that you love, right? That generosity comes first and that support comes first. And that on an issue like a haircut - the hair is going to grow, right? You're like, time's going to change. This is not a high stakes situation. You were both affirming her and teaching her. And I think that's beautiful, beautiful parenting. So I don't want you to feel any different than what you have. I think you've done this really well.

**Vanessa** [00:42:51] But I'm also teaching her that the next time I compliment her, maybe I'm just being supportive.

**Casper** [00:42:56] But isn't that great? Because then she'll know she'll always be supported. That's a mini truth that kind of helps you readjust to the world, but actually affirms you at the same time.

**Vanessa** [00:43:07] Totally. I think it's the right thing. I want her to think of me as the person who she can *always* come to, and I am going to be like, "You look fabulous. You are wonderful, you are perfect." But also, I know that that means that I am not the person who she is going to come to when she really needs a discerning opinion. Right? Like I've risked something. And you know, Peter, her father, is more honest and she trusts him just as much. She didn't text him about the bangs, but she'll text him about other things. Right? So I think we just have to be aware that we're losing some things when people know we're gonna lie - and we're losing some things when people know we're willing to tell the truth, right? Like, I got the first text about the bangs because what she wanted in that moment was unwavering support. That's when she was like, "Dad, do you really like" - right, so I don't know. Right? Like, these are all choices that come with compromises.

**Casper** [00:44:11] But the most important thing is that she has both.

**Vanessa:** Yeah.

**Casper:** Like, let every child be so lucky to have that unwavering love and support, which, of course, she has from her father as well, on issues that are bigger than bangs, but also has someone who's like, "Yeah, I'll tell you honestly. Yeah," but I still love you either way!

**Vanessa** [00:44:31] Right. And he thinks the bangs are cute. He was just like, he's so funny. He's like, "bangs are very high risk. They take a very long time to grow out and I just don't want that for you." So he's very happy.

Well, thank you so much, Casper. Thank you, Susan Choi, and thank you, Shonda Rhimes, for creating the greatest show in television history.

**Casper** [00:44:55] And a big thanks to Shannon Fernandez all the way from Ontario in Canada, who shared this fabulous piece of wisdom from Bon Jovi. "Words can't say what love can do."

**Vanessa** [00:45:07] Oh, that's right, Bon Jovi. We're all just living on a prayer. We're only halfway there. Love him.

**Casper** [00:45:16] And I'm going to be asking in an upcoming episode a question about whether I should change part of my name. So I'm really curious if you've had an experience of changing your name, would you send us a voicemail of about 2 minutes and email it to [RealQuestion@NotSorryProductions.com](mailto:RealQuestion@NotSorryProductions.com). I'm really excited to listen to what you've got to say.

**Vanessa** [00:45:35] Are you thinking about changing your name to Casper Zoltan?

**Casper** [00:45:38] It's the best last name in the world. I mean.

**Vanessa** [00:45:41] Do it! Do it!

**Casper** [00:45:45] [Laughing] Maybe a double barreled ter Kuile-Zoltan.

**Vanessa** [00:45:48] I love it.

**Casper** [00:45:48] That's amazing. Yes. [Outro music begins] You've been listening to The Real Question. We can only make the show because of the incredible people supporting us on Patreon, so if you have the means, please share a few bucks a month with us at [Patreon.com/RealQuestionPod](https://www.patreon.com/RealQuestionPod). And if you love the show, please tell people about it. Leave a review on iTunes. Share it on your Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, wherever you want. We'll be so glad to double tap that share.

And don't forget to preorder Vanessa's book at [VanessaZoltan.com](https://www.vanessazoltan.com). You can buy it in all local bookshops, order it online, take it from the library - I mean, don't take it, borrow it, return it [Vanessa laughs]. But tell people about it. Let's sell some books, people!

**Vanessa** [00:46:32] We are Not Sorry Production. Our Executive Producer is the great and good and wonderful Ariana Nedelman. Our music is by Nick Bohl and we are distributed by Acast. We want to thank Zainab for our voicemail this week, Julia Argy, Nicki Zoltan, Molly Baxter, Stephanie Paulsell, and each and every one of our 658 patrons. Thank you so much and thank you, everyone, for listening.

**Casper** [00:46:52] Bye. [Outro music fades out]

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