

Candice Schutter: Hello and welcome back to The Deeper Pulse, as we continue to explore what puts the cult in culture.

When I started exploring this question, I had no idea how deep the rabbit hole goes. So deep in fact that many of you have joined me over on Patreon to explore these topics through collaborative discussion. Patreon exclusive bonus episodes drop weekly and this week features the continuation of our conversation with Susan McCulley, longtime movement facilitator and former Org teacher. So if you're interested in accessing the bonus content or learning more about how you can support the podcast, head over to patreon.com/thedeeperpulse.

Just a quick heads up that this episode may be triggering to some. It includes reference to abuse and emotionally coercive relationships, so please listen with care. Okay, onward.

A few days ago, I decided to revisit transcripts from the first two episodes in the culture series, that's #32 and 33 if you missed them. And it was pretty wild to listen back, to realize just how far I've come in my process of recovery.

Honestly, when I shared my story back in August of last year, I didn't even consider it 'recovery.' It just felt like something I needed to do. And I didn't have any idea that I'd still be exploring these themes nearly a year later, in some ways, still feeling like I've hardly even scratched the surface.

And I have to say that what struck me the most as I was reading through the words that I penned and read aloud all those many moons ago, was just how much painstaking effort that I'd put into trying to tell my story the right way. Trying to sort through the chaos inside of me, making sure that I didn't make a bigger mess of things. And whether this attention to detail was charitable on my part, or chicken shit, I'm honestly still not sure.

But no matter. What's done is done. And however tidy or imperfect it may be, my story is out there. And telling it did offer me some relief.

But the bulk of my healing has come from y'all. I was in no way prepared for just how many people would come forward to say, damn straight, me too, and boy, do I have a story for you. I wanna thank those of you who have so generously shared your stories with me behind the scenes. And who have made room for my guests to share theirs, many of whom are doing so publicly for the first time.

More so than being seen. Being able to witness has made the biggest difference in my life. it's helped me to know that I'm not alone.

Sharing what's painful out loud, why is this such a balm to so many of us? I can't know for sure, but I think it's in part because so many of us have been taught not to. Especially those of us who've been socialized as women. It's really not okay to make things all about us. To say that hurt, no way, and never again.

We are cult conditioned to live without boundary. To always turn the tables, empathize and keep our hearts wide open. To smile often, look at the bright side and focus on the best in everything and everyone. And so I suppose it's no wonder that when our feelings are hurt, we keep it to our damn selves. Being vulnerable is hard enough, but it can be even more painful when we are told that our expression is simply too much. When we are reflexively reminded that we must own our part and never ever play the victim card.

It's exhausting figuring out when, how, and what to share. And so most of us. Well, we don't.

All of this is baked into the patriarchal cake. It's an intergenerational trauma adaptation that keeps us frozen in time, fawning rather than challenging systems that have been built to keep us compliant.

It would cost too much to walk away. So instead we double down. Pledge our loyalty, override our resistance. And carry a shame that is not our own. Many of us have internalized a social message that says it's your own damn fault if you get caught in a coercive web of cultic influence. Especially if you've entered into it on your own.

Victim blaming is insidious in our culture, which is why I'll soon be devoting an entire episode to this topic. But I'm bringing it up now because it might just be the number one reason why survivors of one-on-one cultic abuse are so reluctant to share their stories.

When we think of cult dynamics, most of us imagine a narcissistic leader with a band of devoted followers. It's very easy to forget that coercive control relies on weaponized tools of interpersonal engagement. And one of the best ways to understand cult dynamics better is to look at how they show up in one-on-one relationships.

Thanks to the hard work of social justice activists in recent years, mainstream discourse is expanding to include language that points us to some of these invisible forces. More and more, folks understand the meaning of terms like narcissism and gaslighting, and there are a growing number of documentaries that feature stories that center the perspectives of cult of one survivors.

In HBO's Phoenix Rising actress Evan Rachel Wood shares about her relationship with Brian Warner, better known as Marilyn Manson. She bravely shares about how he allegedly groomed, drugged, and terrorized her for years. Despite Manson's many legal attempts to silence her wood continues to speak out as a domestic violence advocate.

There's also the Netflix three season release Surviving R Kelly, which features a staggering number of victims who report having been sexually abused and held psychologically captive by the pop musician. I highly recommend this doc.

Also on Netflix, Bad Vegan, a docu-series about a vegan restaurateur, Sarma Melngailis. She fell under the spell of a conman and career criminal, who she would eventually marry, and who allegedly coerced her into sabotaging her livelihood. She lost everything. In the end, she would find herself facing 15 years in prison.

Side note, if you do watch Bad Vegan, you should know that the makers of this film have been criticized for their questionable editing, particularly toward the end of the series where according to Sarma, they vastly misrepresent the end of the story for the sake of dramatic entertainment value.

And I mentioned this because I want you to keep it in mind if you watch it, but also because, well, it's no wonder why so many victims are reluctant to come forward when these sorts of things commonly happen. When it comes to cult of one abuse, the blame falls disproportionately on victims, and apparently even doc filmmakers are prone to this bias.

Why speak up when you run the risk of not only being re-traumatized, but also scapegoated? It's a damn good question. And it's one that today's guest has had to grapple with.

The cult of one story that you are about to hear isn't what you might expect. It's not about romantic infatuation or love gone wrong. It's about someone with social capital, an individual who had been supposedly trained to create a safe space for healing, abusing her power.

When Emma's next door neighbor, a licensed psychologist with a long list of credentials, offered to work with her one-on-one, Emma went all in. Eager to understand her personal history and better her life, Emma shared about her journey as an adoptee, doing as one does in therapy, making herself immediately vulnerable to someone she assumed had her best interest at heart.

In her poignant, bittersweet memoir, *A Fire Is Coming*, Emma offers an unflinching look at this abusive relationship, how it developed, and what it took to eventually break herself free.

Emma's story sheds light on how our primal wounds can shape our choices. And why it's so imperative for each of us to do our inner work while also creating pathways for informed accountability so that all trauma survivors are safe to share their stories and protect others from the same harm that they've experienced.

Here's my conversation with Emma Stevens.

Hi Emma.

Emma Stevens: Hi Candice. How are you?

Candice Schutter: Wonderful.

Well, it's exciting. You have released, this is your second book, right?

Emma Stevens: Yes.

Candice Schutter: Yeah. So you've released your second book and that's kind of what we're gonna focus on today. But I really wanna touch on the overall arc of your journey, which will of course point people towards your first book as well.

But before we go there, let's talk about how we got connected and what, you know, what landed you here today?

Emma Stevens: Well, Janja Lalich decided and agreed to endorse my book, my second um, I tried to find anything and everything she's done. I listened to her Take Back Your Life on Audible that was narrated by Sarah Edmondson. So that was really neat. And then, um, looked up every podcast that she's been on. And so then I, that's how I found you and I really liked the podcast, and, um, so then I just, I have no problem it seems like just reaching out and saying, we have a common interest. And I felt like you would take up right away with my topic and it would be just what I was looking for to create awareness.

Candice Schutter: Yeah. Yeah, absolutely. Well, and the timing, just for the listeners out there was just really fortuitous, because I've been wanting to have a conversation around, you know, what's known in the cultiverse as cult of one dynamics and how that can look and function and impact survivors. And then you just showed up in my inbox. It was just beautiful.

Um, and your story's really compelling. Not just your cult of one story that you share in your second book, A Fire Is Coming. But the, again, the overall arc of your story and how one of the things in the 'cult'ure series that has been really important to me is to look at sort of the micro and the macro simultaneously.

And I felt, when we started communicating and especially once I read your book, I really felt that sense of, okay, Emma really has done the work and really understands how her origin story, so to speak, helped to lay the foundation for many different experiences and this, the specific stories that you share in this second book.

So would you be willing to kind of start by giving us a sense of your background, like where you came from and anything you feel like is relevant to the foundation that I just mentioned? The foundation for this story.

Emma Stevens: yes. Um, and I'd have to start in utero. Because if you are a woman that's pregnant knowing that you're not going to keep your baby and that you're going to relinquish. Then the mother is transferring all of that energy into the baby. And at the point of when she did give birth in a maternity home, she knew full well she was going to sign the papers.

And I'm sure that that was something that was extremely difficult for her. Um, but as a baby, it's that severance from your mother um, is just, that some of us call it the primal wound, because it's that lack of oxytocin that you've had that symbiotic relationship with your mother and then all of a sudden, you know, you were one and now you are split apart.

And I feel like from the beginning, uh, developmentally speaking, and neurologically, adoptees or relinquish babies have a difficulty developing in the same way because of the lack of the natural, you know, oxytocin and the bonding. And then we could get into why I feel like I have disorganized attachment. And it kind of just compounds, it keeps going throughout the developmental stages of my life where it is been an issue and it's just colored my entire life.

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm.

So is this kind of what you're describing here, really what moved you to write your first book? Tell us about your first book. Tell just so, so folks are familiar with both titles.

Emma Stevens: Okay. The first book is *The Gathering Place: An Adoptee Story*. And, um, it brings a smile to my face because uh, when I first started writing therapeutically and I wanted to write a book, it really read like a diary. And it just was, you know, at three I did this, and at four, and then on and on.

And then once I found a way to weave my factual story around a structure or decorate my Christmas tree, is what I often refer to it as, that um, it was EMDR through psychology where I was with my therapist, learning how to connect my right brain, left brain. And oftentimes that's preverbal back to implicit memories. And when you do EMDR, it helps you integrate all of uh, early, early memories. And once I started doing that modality and I thought of the gathering place, which to me was the oak tree with the vista looking out over the hills and a, a swing that was hanging from the tree. And it gave me an idea to weave all my inner parts through the story as if I'm having a conversation with each one of them. And it helps, um, I think move the story in a way that a lot of people are saying it was really meaningful that they saw their own story just by reading mine. And so it was very therapeutic for me to talk about how adoption, relinquishment, has colored my entire life.

But at the end I try to reconcile of what does that mean to me now? And just because you find yourself in a broken story doesn't mean you have to stay there. So what would I rather choose for my, for myself now? And that's what *The Gathering Place* represents to me.

Candice Schutter: Mm.

Emma Stevens: I'd also like to offer that it became clear to me when I was doing all this research for the book, how adoption itself, especially the adoption industry, is a little bit culty. Because it's an industry, it's a money making industry that is trying to, um, give the, usually, I'm sorry, the privileged white couples, the babies. Because they're saying that people in poverty aren't good enough parents.

And so it's um, that mindset that if you are poor, you can't have a child. You need to give that child to this couple who's gonna pay, I don't know, 40,000, \$70,000 for a baby.

And then the worst thing is when the child's placed for adoption and then they're told you, you can never ask anything about your roots. And if you do, then you're going to be told that you're selfish, ungrateful. And aren't you happy we saved you.

And that's a real strong narrative. Even though nowadays we say we have open adoption. But what I've heard from the statistics is that very few adoptions last for the whole period of time as being open. They usually close within the first two years of the adoption, because the adoptive parents need to be solely the parents. And they usually move away from, I mean, some of the scenarios of moving away or stopping the phone calls or somehow saying, this is our child not yours anymore. You signed the papers.

And so, you know, who pays the price? The adoptee.

Candice Schutter: Hmm. Yeah. Wow. So in that way, like the child is sort of commodified essentially.

Emma Stevens: Absolutely. We use that word all the time. Adoptees do.

Candice Schutter: And so rather than looking at what's in the best interest of the child, it's that hierarchical structure where the adoptive parents are the ones calling the shots and deciding where those lines should be drawn. And, and in some ways, maybe feeling protective because of their own inherited traumas and sensitivities, which I can have empathy towards.

Emma Stevens: Infertility.

Candice Schutter: Yeah. And all the things, like the fear of losing the child leads them to make a choice that isn't actually in the best interest of the child.

Emma Stevens: Yeah. And that should never be placed on the child's shoulders. Of the parents who had infertility and never solved their problem. And then they place all their hopes and dreams on this adopted baby. That's so unfair to place all that burden. Like, you know, you're the person, you're the child we could never have had. And so you're gonna play that role. That's an impossible role to play.

And so that's why so many adoptees are trying to say, ask us what it's like. Don't ask an adoptive parent or the industry. The adoptee's gonna tell you that it's a very hard, difficult life. Identity crisis on steroids.

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm.

Emma Stevens: We all have identity crisis, I know. But for an adoptee, let's say even a donor conceived child or a late discovery adoptee. Or now that we have dna, there's a lot of misattributed parentage where find out, someone finds out that their father is not really their father, and they've been lied to all their lives.

Candice Schutter: Wow.

Emma Stevens: And they always knew something was a little off. You know, we didn't look alike. Or we didn't mirror each other in our personality traits. And it is just, gets so far away from being child-centered.

Candice Schutter: Yeah. Wow, that's really important. I'm so glad that you brought that in.

Emma Stevens: It's a huge topic.

Candice Schutter: Yeah. And although it's not the specific focus of this episode, we could go in way into that. Cause there's just so much about that, that, that is pointing to these larger, what I call capital-C cult dynamics that exist systemically and, and in our family systems.

Emma Stevens: Right. And how I was already under a spell from relinquishment and then into adoption, which made it that much easier to get caught into the marriage I got caught into. And then with the psychologist, because that was just my normal.

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm.

And when did you release that book?

Emma Stevens: That was in 2021, September, I believe, of 2021. So they came fast and furious, the two books. Because what happened is after I finished the first one, I, about maybe six months later, I thought, I haven't said every, everything I would like to say. Especially about the second topic, the second book. I wanted to do a deep dive that dealt just with that experience of my life so I could help others. And plus help myself, because I still connected lot of do dots just by writing therapeutically.

Candice Schutter: Absolutely. Absolutely.

In your book, I, one of the things that I really love about *A Fire Is Coming*. I haven't read your first book yet, which I plan to. Um, one of the things I really love is the way that, well, your transparency and your vulnerability is really moving to me. And I think that because of that, because of how much of that you bring, there's a depth in terms of what you share and the way that it can tra. Like I, I'm a firm believer as a writer and as a creator, that the more specific we are, the more universal it becomes in terms of the way that people can relate. And so you showing us, and telling us, both. It was a good balance of showing and telling, what was happening internally for you. And we're gonna get into the story in a moment, but like what was happening internally for you in a way that I think readers can really, myself, I could find myself and my experiences in it.

And I wanna say to folks out there who, you know, read the title of this podcast and are like, well, I'm not really planning on going to therapy, so I don't know if I need to listen to this. That I, I didn't have the experience you had in a cult of one dynamic with a therapist. But I have experienced it elsewhere in intimate romantic partnership specifically. And I found myself in your story so many times. And you gave language to things, experiences that I had had in a completely different structure of a relationship. But ultimately it was the same dynamics at work. And I love that you shared those details.

And then also it was instructive, you kind of wove in insights. This is a red flag, for example. There were moments when you actually identified those red flags and I just wanna commend you on really writing something, it really does feel like a healing memoir. I could feel that it was healing for you, and I think for folks who read it, they're gonna have that experience, too. At least I definitely was having that experience.

So thank you for being so brave on the page.

Emma Stevens: I really just didn't think there'd be any other way than to get into it. I had to put music on that I listened to at the time to really get me back in touch with what I was thinking, what I was feeling. And um, it was painful. But I knew that I had to go there, not to relapse or anything like that, but I had to get close enough to it because I wanted the reader to understand and maybe, like you said, see themselves in this, that yes, it could happen to you. And if we don't get this message out of, let's be aware and look for those red flags. Um, I think that's the only way that we're gonna be able to prevent this sort of thing. And um, is just the key, is awareness.

And I had to write it in a way that I felt like I could take them along my journey, my thinking pattern, and see that it just, it didn't happen on day one. It didn't happen, you know, day two. It was the cumulative thing where it was just before I knew it, it was a wave crashing in on me.

Candice Schutter: Yeah. Well, let's, let's begin to share a little bit with the listeners, tell us about how this relationship that this book centers around came to be. Like, tell us about how all of this started.

Emma Stevens: It all started in, in my front yard, in my driveway. And I needed to go to my mailbox. And if you've ever lived in a coastal city um, that's pretty populated, you can, you can imagine how one driveway is really on top of another driveway. And your mailbox is really almost part of the other mailbox. So for me to be at my mailbox and this person that we're gonna talk about, she was getting her mail at this very same time.

So it was a very close encounter. I'd never met her before. She was my next door neighbor. I didn't know anything about her. Or, um, my husband and I had maybe seen her coming and going and that was about it. But it was in that meeting I found out that she was a psychologist in a nearby town. And it got me thinking about, wow, I've been thinking I need to go to therapy.

So the next time I met her, I said, casually, would you, you know, be my therapist? Or could you refer me to someone? And that's when she gave me her card.

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm.

Emma Stevens: found myself in her office, I don't know, less than a week later.

Candice Schutter: And just so we have a sense of timeline here, what age were you when this relationship began?

Emma Stevens: I was around 32, and I'd been married about a year. But my husband at the time and I had been together by that time, I wanna say five years.

Candice Schutter: So you were in a place in your life where you were already feeling like maybe some outside support and counsel would be, had you been in therapy before?

Emma Stevens: Very briefly in college. I was engaged to someone and felt that I wasn't ready. And so I went to a counselor just to hear them, the woman say, she didn't tell me not to marry him, but she was giving me guidance with, you know, what would you like to do? What are your thoughts? And for me, as an adoptee, I hardly ever knew what I wanted. Because it was always told to me, and I always adapted to things. So I needed just to hear her say, it's okay if you don't marry him. And that gave me permission to do exactly what I wanted. So that's why I had gone to the counselor in college.

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm.

But you didn't see her for long.

Emma Stevens: No, it was only maybe three or four times. Yeah.

Candice Schutter: Okay. Okay. And that experience had been helpful.

Emma Stevens: Yes, absolutely.

Candice Schutter: Yeah. So, you have this well, and I don't know where your headspace was then, but did it feel like a fortuitous meeting? Like, oh wow, like I just bumped into this person when I have this need, and was that leveraged in any way, like it was synchronistic?

Emma Stevens: I think it was, it was an emotionally, electrically charged meeting because of the way she treated me at our mailboxes. I felt like an immediate, some kind of connection, some kind of, uh, adoration maybe. And felt like this is gonna lead somewhere. So I kind of knew looking back at that time, that um, it was an electrically charged meeting.

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm.

And I think it would help, since I've read the book, just for us to underscore what your adoptive family dynamic was like, just so as, as we're unraveling this story, around like this need for attachment. It wasn't just around this primary wound, having been an adoptee.

It was, you went into a family that was what? Can you describe the family that raised you?

Emma Stevens: My adoptive mom and dad were very authoritarian, totalitarian. There was no room for really children in the house. And we couldn't have any, my brother and I, my adoptive brother, and he was adopted from a separate family, so he was not their biological son. But we were to have no needs. We were to have no difference of opinion. There was no showing of your true self. And it was the idea that we purchased you. And we wanted you to play that part, and you don't get to play any other part. And if you try it, then there's gonna be hell to pay.

So I learned very early how to fawn, because my, um, fight or flight response was I wanted them to love me, but at the same time I knew that they were kind of killing parts of me off. Because they were asking me not to be myself. And I was not sure how to not be yourself.

So after years of doing that, then when I was free and out of the house, I forgot who I was. Growing up, I always thought when I get out of the house, then I can be my true self. But when that happened, I completely forgot cuz I'd cut myself off from all of those, um, which is very important in the gathering place because I try to reconcile that by going back and soothing and being an advocate for my younger parts.

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm.

Emma Stevens: So yes, it was not a home that treated me very well.

[00:28:55] transition

Candice Schutter: Right. So how would you describe the space that you were in at 32 standing at the mailbox when it comes to your relationship to yourself?

Emma Stevens: I would say very insecure. Um, still looking for external validation. And I saw this woman of authority, and the way she'd look at me, and she had this title. And I thought, surely she could save me, or she could help me. And I think I immediately attached some kind of, um, guru status to her from the get go.

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm. Yeah.

So she gives you her card. You say you meet with her about a week later. How did the therapy relationship develop from there?

Emma Stevens: There was a lot of push and pull. In the book, I describe how often she would say your resistance is keeping you from having a breakthrough. And I kept hearing those words, that repetitive nature that she had where if she wanted to plant an idea in my head, she would do it repeatedly.

And then there were a lot of covert hypnotic techniques that she would use. And they really worked on me, because I was actually looking for a savior. So she didn't have to try, probably very hard.

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm.

Emma Stevens: I, um, very quickly found myself falling in step with I must please my therapist. And that is innate in me because of being the, a adaptable adoptee who always had to be a chameleon. To be, well, what do you want me to be? I'll be that and I'll, you know, that's why I just never knew really what my wants and likes or dislikes were. Cuz I had never gone there to even question that.

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

From reading your book, I sort of witnessed how, well, there was a real parallel, I'll say, between the relationship that you had with this therapist and relationships that I've had with

guru type people in the past. Now, of course, I never called them gurus, and I would've insisted that that's not what it was back then.

But that sense of, of surrendering authority to. But in the name of your own development. Like it's this weird mind fuck of like, I really saw a parallel in terms of how she was continually imposing her agenda in the name of your own growth and development.

This is what needs to happen for you. I know best. I mean, there's a, a moment you said that she would literally say, I'm the only one who can help you with this.

Emma Stevens: Yes.

Candice Schutter: Those were literal words that came from her mouth.

Emma Stevens: Yes, they were.

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm.

And how did that land for you in the moment?

Emma Stevens: I wanted to believe her.

You know, I'm just trying to remember from the brain that I had back then. But that's absolutely, I wanted and needed to believe her. Because I was so out there on a raft in the ocean of not knowing who I was, where I was, just, my world was just upside down. And I had come to her for help with, um, adoption angst. For infertility. For, uh, marital problems. We were already having difficulties.

And, um, none of those issues were addressed. It all quickly became, don't you see that your husband is not good for you? And why are you with him? You should get a divorce.

Candice Schutter: So looking back now, knowing, and I know this, but to share with the listeners, what was her end game? Like what was really, what do you see now was really going on in terms of the focus she was feeding you?

Emma Stevens: Well, I can say from the having, you know, this happened 29 years ago. So I've had a lot of time to reflect on how everything pieced together and how insidious every move she made, how calculated it was. But it started at the mailbox that first day when we met each other. And she had already planted a couple of ideas in my head about, uh, I think it was about my job, and asking, well, how difficult is that? And then the next thing that she dropped in my head was, doesn't it give you pause that your husband is 20 years your senior.

And since I was so open and receptive to whatever she wanted to say, those things really started working on me. And I think she knew that she was wanting to make me her mate from day one.

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm.

Yeah. And reading your story, I think it's sort of undeniable to come to that conclusion just based on how things played out. And so tell us how things progressed and sort of really moved toward that end, how it progressed quickly from there. And also maybe the title of your book feels really relevant when it comes to this question.

Emma Stevens: Ah. Yeah.

Candice Schutter: So maybe you can speak to that.

Yeah.

Emma Stevens: Well, and it isn't even made up because there truly was a fire that happened in Laguna Beach in 1993 when this all happened with my therapist. And the relationship with the therapist started a few months before the fire. But I try to weave through this actual fire that my husband and I are trying to flee for our lives.

And I weave it around how then my therapist comes into play, and she tries to attach me to her. And she becomes the fire. She's drawing me into her fire. And then as the story progresses, and I see that she's trying to melt me to my core. Then I take my life back, agency over my own life, and I become the fire. Uh, in a therapeutic way, not in the same way she was using it, but a fire that ignited me to reclaim myself.

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm.

Emma Stevens: So that's how fire's symbolic through the whole, the whole book.

Candice Schutter: Yeah. And, and it really did progress quite significantly. Like she did succeed in, in breaking your marriage up for a period of time, correct?

Emma Stevens: Yes, she did.

And, and she didn't have to really try real hard, and I make that clear in the book too. That we did definitely have our issues, my husband and I. And it was just that slow chipping away at the foundation, which was already built on a house of cards. My marriage was not solid. So she saw a pretty easy endgame, I believe. And as she got me to wrap my emotions around her, and get me to believe everything she said.

One of the biggest things she said is, think of me as the mother you never had. And that to an adoptee, a relinquished adoptee, to a dysfunctional family that never really had a mother, that sounded like heaven to me. It sounded like she was giving me my heart's desire on a silver platter. And I resisted it for a long time. And then she would become angry and say, if you don't drop the resistance, you'll never have your breakthrough.

So you'll see in the book where finally I decide that, okay, okay, I'm gonna play your game. And then she really had me.

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

And this part of, you know, there's many purposes of us having this conversation. And one of them is really, you know, that huge red flag. I mean, it's the opposite of what therapists are trained to do in terms of ethics. And when we, when we don't know that. You know, you didn't know that. It sounds like, from what I read in your book, like you didn't have a sense that that was a red flag.

Am I correct?

Emma Stevens: I had no idea what transference was. And now I see that she used that phenomenon of therapy that's well known. And I know that now because I went to school for it to get myself healthy and well. But she used it intentionally and, um, wrapped myself inside out and to her, her total advantage.

Candice Schutter: Yes, yes. So there's the, her feeding off of the attachment wound toward her own end.

What are some other things that she did that bound you to her? Like what are some other things in terms of red flags for folks out there to say like, things that she did to groom you, essentially. What are some examples?

Emma Stevens: The one that comes to mind specifically is it was not very hard to get me to doubt myself, because I had low self-esteem. And I was always looking for external validation. And so it was not very hard to make me just, you know, one sentence of, your marriage is not working. And I'd go away and think that's the truth.

And there was a little, you know, the thing about one-on-one cultic, sociopathic people. There's always a kernel of truth that that gets you to buy into it. And for mine it was, you know, my heart's desire on a silver platter. What could be wrong with that? I finally get a mother. Or that kind of love that I've always needed.

And so it's not that she presented herself from the get-go of an evil witch that was trying to tear my, my life apart and my marriage apart. That was not apparent. I was just, you know, bought into the emotional hook of the truth as she presented it.

Candice Schutter: Yes. Beautifully said.

You know, there's a moment when you described. This is when I, I have like my, when I'm reading a book, I have like my little light highlights that I do here and there, and then there's, every now and then there's just a deep one, right, where I'm just like, oh.

And you were describing an interaction with her when you were really bound to her. And you, you described it as you were "feeling a mixture of nausea and ecstasy."

And I was like, yes.

Emma Stevens: Yeah.

Candice Schutter: That's that disorganized bond, right? Like, yes.

Can you say a little bit more about that?

Emma Stevens: Um, I truly think that that was my fawn response. And I've just been reading about that recently. I, I've always known about fawn as one of the responses. But when I read a deeper version of it, I can see a pattern in my life of where I've been fawning since the day I was trying to be pleasing to my parents, which made me a cult hopper.

Because it felt familiar from the dysfunctional family, to the dysfunctional narcissistic marriage, and then to this psychopathic therapist. And I knew no difference. It all seemed like that equaled love to me. Until I broke the pattern. I went to get my master's in psychology and started realizing what psychological disorders were. And that really helped heal me and get out of a, a total depression that happened after this whole situation was over.

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm. Yeah. I could only imagine.

Emma Stevens: Yeah.

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

Emma Stevens: I was depressed to the point of being mute. I, I couldn't even talk above a whisper. So when I did decide to, um, first of all, I had to go to counseling again. How hard was that? You know, to trust another counselor?

Candice Schutter: How did you, how did you do that? Did you vet in a different way? Or were you just so desperate you just jumped in and hoped for the best?

Emma Stevens: I think that there were a network of people, supportive people around me at the time that found this one particular person. I agreed and she was a very, uh, soft spoken, calm person. And I think my nervous system needed a calm person at that time.

Now, I don't think she was equipped to be able to deprogram me from what had happened. But I do see now looking back that, uh, it was the calmness. And that she allowed me to breathe. And it helped me start out thinking what to do next? What's the next right step to take? And that was going to school.

And when I went to school and learned about psychology, I had to interact with teachers, professors, and other students. So I had to start talking again. And so that progressed and then

it became that my husband at the time and I decided to get infertility treatment and we were able to get pregnant. And that was just a very joyful thing to me is to finally get pregnant.

Candice Schutter: Yeah. That's beautiful.

So, just to circle back to the moment when you are in this disorganized attachment state with your therapist at the time, and you're describing the sort of symptoms around that. Like you, you talked about how you sort of stopped sleeping and eating, like red flag.

Right. When we're in a relationship, I think sometimes this was definitely the case for me thinking, I had my body issue stuff and I remember being in a, uh, cult of one, my most damaging relationship of that nature, and I stopped eating, almost completely. And I was so excited because I lost weight. Which was a screwy part of it. But that I thought that that was like a sign of love, like you say. Like for me, anxiety equaled love.

Emma Stevens: Mm-hmm.

Candice Schutter: Feeling anxious. That sense of, that's why I love this nausea and ecstasy, like that mixture of emotions, that's what I thought love was. And then when I, later in life, experienced a true healthy attachment and love. It felt sort of boring. And, you know, comparatively cuz I was used to this like, traumatic cocktail of energies inside of me.

And, and so, um, I share that just, you know, to, to draw this parallel between us.

But just to say that, that place that you were in, when you were in the relationship with her and you were so confused and you do such a great job in the book of, of describing that, that ambivalence. You say, actually say, "I was unable to continue staying with her, yet I was unable to leave her."

Those two things are both true simultaneously. How did you end up leaving the relationship given that tension?

Like what happened that, that made it such that you were able to renegotiate that?

Emma Stevens: Yeah, it's so much like having one foot on the gas pedal and one foot on the brake. And so I think that motion alone makes you just kind of spin, something. And that's the chaos I grew up on, just like you, it sounds like that kind of chaos. And if there wasn't drama going on, you know, I guess I learned how to recreate it in my own life.

But with the psychologist that, by the time the event is that you're talking about, we are in such close proximity. And as we know, not even the best narcissist can hold it together all the time. So eventually the mask starts slipping and they start showing their true selves. And fortunately for me that she did it for a long enough time and consistently enough where she started, the psychologist, started representing my adoptive mother, and the way I was abused as a child.

And, uh, it just became so reminiscent of the same kind of scare tactics and the same kind of angry, fiery, hatred look in the eye, the stare that she'd give me. Or the physical part where she starts, the psychologist starts to, to make a point, slam me against a wall. And that, all of that started really working on me.

In addition, at the same time, my husband at the time was feeding me information of things he was looking up about cultic one-on-one behavior. And he was saying, does she check that box? Does she do this to you? Does she do that? And I, that again, I, in my brain, I started ruminating on all of those pieces of information and saying, yeah, she is doing that.

And so it became a brief window of clarity where I saw an opportunity. And I just became so scared and so frightened that I grabbed everything and removed myself from her, from that location. And I kind of knew there was no going back.

So it was adrenaline because the next day I already was thinking, oh my gosh, what have I done? I need her for my survival.

So I was not healed. I just happened to have a lot of energy to get away.

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm.

You also wrote, which feels connected to my next question, "it was as if my need for connecting and attaching had become an addiction."

So when you speak about having left and then waking up that next morning and the fix, right? Like that sort of, it kicks back in. Like you had this lucid moment, and then suddenly you're like, oh my God, what have I done? I need, I need her, I need her. That, that attachment bond.

How did you stay clean, so to speak? And not reenter?

Emma Stevens: Oh, that's, that's a big answer because it took a long time. Long, long, long time. And it wasn't easy. It was probably the hardest thing I've ever done. And it's probably why I'm still talking about it 29 years later.

I didn't have a lot of therapy throughout the time I was raising my children. And so the last seven years I've had a lot of therapy, and it's been very productive in revisiting some of those long ago things and connecting the dots.

But I can't really answer. It was just a combination of going to school, learning about psychology, trying to get healthy, getting pregnant, and a lot of those were actually just distractions and not dealing with the core issue.

So I really didn't deal with all of it until seven years ago.

And there was a catalyst.

Candice Schutter: There was a catalyst seven years ago?

Emma Stevens: Yes.

Candice Schutter: Do you wanna share what that was or not?

Emma Stevens: Absolutely. Because you touched on it.

All of this is addiction. I was addicted to her. And so I was able to get away from her in that terror moment. Which, you know, a lot of people say, I'm not gonna have another drink. They say that that night, but the next morning or about five o'clock time, they're like, I can't handle that. I've gotta have a drink. Cuz your brain, or your body is physically addicted to it.

Well, it was the same with this person. And that she had fostered that dependency. And so to actually start breaking that addiction.

Well, you know, fast forward to this seven year ago situation. I was an alcoholic. And discovered that I have an ability to get addicted to personalities, to substances, to, um, I don't know, emotional responses. I had to learn how to have emotional maturity. And that was another whole realm to deconstruct and dismantle. Um, there was a whole reconstruction of learning who I was. And so if I hadn't. If everything hadn't converged seven years ago. Um, to really revisit everything I thought was true, and that includes who I think the holy mystery is. And that's who I call God is the holy mystery, the web of our universe. It just, uh, was gonna continue.

So I was able to say, no more cult hopping, no more external validation.

And I'm really grateful to have become an alcoholic, because it taught me a lot. And it's not that I enjoyed being an alcoholic. And I don't wish that on anyone. But it was a catalyst for me to, um, to finally reclaim my life and get out of a broken story and start living the life I wanna live.

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm.

And have you been sober since? Is that seven year mark a sobriety marker?

Emma Stevens: Yeah. That's the sobriety mark. Yes.

Candice Schutter: Yeah. Congratulations.

Yeah. Sober in so many ways, right?

Emma Stevens: In so many ways. Thank you for that.

Because it wasn't just the alcohol. That was just one of the symptoms.

Candice Schutter: Yes, exactly.

Yeah. I really love that you, what you just described in terms of the way that addiction can be connected to all these different things. We like to think of it in terms of a substance, but these relational addictions that don't get discussed enough, and like what the root and the core of it is.

Like that's really the purpose of this conversation is for us to kind of look at that and what I feel like your book helps to, for folks to read and reveal, like how does that, the grooming happen? How does the connection, the hook occur? What happens when we're in it? And what does it really take to extricate ourselves, not just from that relationship, but from the pattern as a whole. And your story's just such a beautiful example of that.

[00:51:25] transition

Candice Schutter: There was a certain point in your healing where you made the choice to pursue legal action against this individual who had violated so many ethical standards.

When was that? And tell us a little bit about what that was like and how and if that served you.

Emma Stevens: That happened relatively quickly after I left. And that was pretty much driven by my ex-husband or my husband at the time. That during the time I was still with the psychologist, living in her house, she had moved me into her home. And, um, he had fed me the information of she qualifies as a sociopathic psychologist getting her own needs met and being so unethical, violating boundaries. And he had already researched and found an attorney that was in that field.

And, he asked my, you know, permission, can we call him and get this started? And that's what we did. So that whole process took a long time, but the decision was made pretty much right after I came back to the home with my husband.

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm.

Was that helpful to you in terms of creating accountability right away? Did it make it more difficult? Like how, how was that for you? Cause I know, any sort of predatorial behavior whenever we're calling it out and trying to obtain legal action, often the victim is the one who ends up on trial.

Did that happen for you? Or how, how did all that play out?

Emma Stevens: Well, yes, yes and yes. All of it.

That I was put on trial, even by the board of ethics. And the mediator of the trial, he was not educated about what psychological damage can do to anyone. I happen to be a relinquished adoptee and all of that, but I think anyone in transition can be caught by the sociopathic

types, one-on-one cultic abusive. And I don't wanna be saying that I think that it only happened because I am an adoptee. It can happen to anyone.

Um, but it was very difficult because also she had told me it was all my fault. She'd say, point blank, you can never turn me in because you instigated this whole relationship by asking me to be your therapist. And so you realize you can't turn me in. And then got me to feel sorry for her because she'd say I'd lose my license. And then she'd go on and expand on how many other people she'd done these same things to, and she had made sure that she squelched them to where they couldn't come and turn her in.

Because honestly, because they had been so psychologically damaged that they would not come forth and do what I did, was to get retraumatized by the judge, by the mediator. Yeah.

There was a deposition about that thick with how many, you know, the defense attorney was saying terrible things. The mediator was saying terrible things. I burned it. I just couldn't, I couldn't even look at it once it was all finished,

I burned the whole thing. But even with that, at the end, I did get awarded. They settled the case so it wouldn't go to court. And they made an offer. And it was a sizable offer. And I didn't wanna take it because I felt defeated. But at the same time, I was convinced by our attorney that a jury could be just as ignorant about the psychological effects. And he said you could walk away with nothing.

And by that time, I'd lost my job. And, um, I was trying to go to school. I was trying to, you know, pay for therapy to correct the things that she had done to me. And any way I decided to go with the offer. And I think even looking back, it was the best thing to do.

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm.

Well, I gotta say I just admire your fortitude to do that. It's just such a incredible, talk about kicking against a current to hold somebody like that accountable. And how many people, I'm hoping that, I don't know what the outcome is. Is she still practicing?

Emma Stevens: Unfortunately, she is for a very high price ticket of \$400 an hour.

Candice Schutter: Oh my. Wow.

Emma Stevens: She had multiple certifications and I was able to get the board of psychology to revoke her license. And, um, but with social worker, which is what she's practicing with now, they gave her some penalties where she could reinstate if she did a few things. And she apparently did those and then now is fully reinstated.

Candice Schutter: Wow. That's really, really disturbing to hear. And sadly, not surprising. You know, there's so many systemic issues and so much ignorance around this kind of thing. Which is why these conversations are so important. Like, unfortunately it's in the hands of You know, individuals to vet for this sort of thing and to, to understand about these dynamics.

That's why it's so important that you're doing this work that you're doing and telling the story again and again. I mean, wow.

Emma Stevens: Well, and another thing is for other people that wanna write their story is that you can change names and places and dates. And, um, and if it's memoir, I've heard that, you know, it's your story.

And I, I have a small fear of, you know, of her reading it or, taking some kind of action against me. But at the same time, I needed to say. Even if she does, it's still worth it cuz I needed to say it. And I need to help anyone else out there that I could possibly help.

Candice Schutter: Yeah. Well, you're doing that, and this is totally a side note, but I couldn't help but think of it this limited series that came out A Shrink Next Door.

Emma Stevens: Oh, yes.

Candice Schutter: Yes. I watched that with my partner like many months ago. And I know it was based on actual events, and it just seemed so, I just wanna say this, for the listeners out there who might have seen it and say like, it seems so farfetched, and then you hear a story like this and you realize how common this sort of thing can be. Like how, I guess what I'm saying is how many of these instances have we never heard anything about? How often does this sort of thing happen and we are just not even aware of it. So it's so important for people like you to speak up.

Emma Stevens: Well, and here's the thing that I think it happens, it's more prevalent than things that get reported because it's so similar in nature to child molestation or a rape where the unethical person tries to get you to hold the shame. And so the likelihood of you coming forth is very, you know, very small.

Candice Schutter: And then the system itself reinforces that shame, which is part of what we need to change. And, and I really feel strongly that that stories like this are part of that change. As more and more folks understand how this kind of thing works. And we understand what coercive control is. We understand undue influence. We understand how our traumas make us susceptible to certain kinds of experiences. And, and that people can take advantage of us when they're trying to help us, which we see, I mean, I'm constantly talking about it in new age wellness, right?

Um, but I love that, that you have brought attention to how this can happen in therapeutic spaces, too.

Emma Stevens: Well, and the first thing they say is you have to become vulnerable for psychology or for therapy to work. And if you hand your life over right then and there and you, you think you're in a safe place.

And my big thing is I would really like to tell people, you can interview your therapist. You can see if you have rapport. And you don't have to pay them for that time.

And if at any time you feel like things aren't going right, the boundaries aren't being upheld. Um, but then again, that takes awareness to know what the boundaries of therapy are. And the more we get educated about that.

And let me just say that, um, shows we watch movies we see really kind of elevate the whole thing of a therapist dating their client. Or they see no problem with the dual relationships that happen. And those are therapeutic no-nos. You, you just can't do that. But in our movies and the shows we watch, they blur the lines and making it seem like, ah, it's okay for them cuz they really like each other.

Candice Schutter: Right? Yeah.

Emma Stevens: So it educates mainstream that that's okay. And we need to get a louder narrative out there that says, no, these boundaries are in place for a reason. And it's protect not only the client, but also the therapist.

Candice Schutter: So if somebody is interviewing a potential therapist, are there certain questions they should be asking? Certain things they should be looking for? What would you suggest knowing what you know now?

Emma Stevens: I would say I'd wanna know their biases. Just because someone says, for example, in my situation, there are therapists called adoptee competent therapists. And so I would wanna know how are they touched by adoption? Are they an adoptive parent? Are they saying they just know people that are adopted? I would wanna know more about what that means to them. And

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm.

Emma Stevens: Or biases about male, female, race, religion, spirituality, all of it. You know, just to make sure that someone's not gonna try to impose their beliefs on you. And see if they are that type of person. If they're gonna, a therapist should never tell you what to do. They should always just give you options and, uh, you know, be a conduit so you can see what it is within yourself.

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm.

Emma Stevens: And if you get the idea that they're trying to wrap you, your emotions around them. Like, oh, call me anytime, here's my phone number. No. You cannot go over to your therapist's house. And, um, yeah, there's, it just kind of, you have to be careful.

Candice Schutter: Yeah. And I think that last piece, I think you bring up something really important. If, if you grew up the way that I did, and it sounds like maybe the way that you did codependency was the water we swam in. That that sense of boundary can actually feel awkward if you're not used to it. Right?

So I remember that feeling that with, with therapists that I worked with in the past, early on. Just sort of like, wow, that they're done, like the hour's done, and that's it. Like there's no warm and fuzzy, there's no, I can call them in between sessions. There's no,

Emma Stevens: Right.

Candice Schutter: But those boundaries, I think you bring up a really excellent point that those boundaries are there to protect you, the client. And that to really sort of test the waters in terms of bias and also in terms of boundary.

And that when we feel that that sense of boundary, that's a good thing. And maybe we're not used to seeing that as a good thing.

Mm-hmm.

Emma Stevens: Absolutely. I would've taken it as being off-putting, or maybe even mean, that, like the scenario that you just mentioned. And it had nothing to do with what your therapist thought of you or if they like you or not. They were playing it by the book. And there was a reason for that.

And you know, really, a good therapist will describe that to you and say,

Candice Schutter: True.

Emma Stevens: This is what therapy, good therapy looks like. Because we wanna get you healthy. And ultimately we want you to start making decisions on your own and have agency over your own life.

They never should say, I want to see you for the next 20 years.

Candice Schutter: Right.

Emma Stevens: I'm not your chiropractor.

Candice Schutter: There's no forging of a dependency. It's in fact, very much the opposite. Right. That's another red, red flag for sure.

Emma Stevens: Mm-hmm.

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

So what's life like for you now on the other side of this? Tell us where you are and where all of this recovery has landed you. I know you're still in process as we always are with, with the healing around all of this, but, has writing your book helped you in some way? Like where are you now?

Emma Stevens: So therapeutic. The writing process is in itself is art form. And I feel like anytime I am creative that I feel my endorphins kick in.

And, you know, I feel comfortable in my own skin now, where I never have in my entire life until seven years ago. And it's just been, the research I've done, the educations that I've made sure that I've gotten to understand things more thoroughly and to get to know myself better. Um, it is just all worked together to keep me expanding. And each time I expand more, there's more chances to get liberated more. And more lessons to have.

And I feel like with life, you have to have contrast. My life is not excellent all the time. But it's the way I approach it now. And the way that I stay true to myself and have trust that regardless of what happens, I'm gonna have faith in myself that I'm gonna work it out. And understand that there's the good and the bad. There's the non-dualistic thinking about life now.

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm. Yeah.

Emma Stevens: And I feel like that gave me integration.

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm.

Emma Stevens: As where I've been fragmented for most of my life. And I think a lot of people in my life had a vested interest to keep me that way. Because that was their control over me.

So yeah, it feels pretty good to be in that chair now.

Candice Schutter: Yeah. That's beautiful.

Is there anything else that you wanted to share that I haven't pointed us toward that feels really important to you as we wrap?

Emma Stevens: I, I guess it would be another part of my healing has been getting connected with my community. And that could mean community, all kinds to different people. It could be sexual assault support groups. It could be adoptee support groups. And I'm involved in quite a few and being an advocate for other people, too. And is just, um, I think is just that way for us to feel like we're not alone.

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm.

Emma Stevens: And continued healing that happens. And then along the way you get to help somebody else, wow, that's terrific.

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

Emma Stevens: And having the platform that you have. You know, that must feel a lot the same way.

Candice Schutter: Yeah, it does. And it, it's really such a privilege and a blessing both, to be able to have conversations like this. To really create an opportunity for hopefully others to glean something from it. And to just be in that space of sort of trading stories and sharing.

It's like the more, again, the more detail you share, the more that I can find my own healing through it. And I just love that you have written these books that I know are just touching so many people's lives and giving language to experiences. And then that you are willing to come on and have conversations around it, because it's evolving.

We're really, you know, thanks to pioneers like Janja Lalich Alexandra Stein and all these folks who have created language around this. I feel like what we're doing now as survivors, as stories are now becoming more mainstream, is we're creating more of a common lay person's language around it. And we're taking some of their language and by weaving story into it, it becomes relevant to people who maybe don't relate to the word cult, but actually are experiencing these very same dynamics.

So I just feel like the work that you're doing is so beautiful and important. So thank you for, for coming on and being willing to have this conversation with me.

Emma Stevens: Well, it's been my pleasure, Candice. I can't tell you how happy I was then you accepted my desire to be a guest.

Candice Schutter: Well, thanks for showing up and thanks for your book.

And I recommend *A Fire is Coming* to everyone, to check it out. And also *The Gathering Place*, which I look forward to reading as well.

And yeah, just thanks for showing up at just the right moment. This has been really great.

Thank you, Emma, for being so generous in this conversation and in your honest writing. You'll find links to Emma's books in the show notes. *The Gathering Place* and *A Fire Is Coming* are both available online in print and audio formats.

And remember if you are seeking the help of a therapist, do your research and ask lots of questions before hiring any mental health professional.

And if today's content hits close to home and you're in need of immediate support, you can reach the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 800-799-7233, or text the word START to 88788.

Safety is your birthright, and it's not your fault. When in doubt, reach out.

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And if you have a story to share or you wanna offer feedback on this or any other episode, you can reach me at thedeeperpulse.com/share.

Thanks so much for tuning in, and I hope to see you back here next week.

Caio.