

Candice Schutter: [00:00:00] Hello and welcome back to The Deeper Pulse and a brand new chapter in the 'cult'ure series. A special shout out to patrons of the pod who keep the main feed of this podcast editorially independent and entirely ad-free. If you'd like to learn more about how to support this work, or if you're interested in accessing 60+ bonus hours of content, head over to patreon.com/thedeeperpulse to learn more.

So today I'm coming to you with another solo episode, and in the first half, it's story time. I'll be reading once again from the unpublished pages of my memoir, sharing parts of a story that I told very early on in the podcast. But I'll be expanding on it to share how it is I first [00:01:00] learned about the social costs of standing up for what's right.

And then from there I'll be touching upon some culture war topics. So, yes, trigger warning in more ways than one. Please keep in mind that today's episode makes reference to domestic abuse, cycles of trauma, and politics.

As always, the stories and opinions shared here are based on personal experience and are not intended to malign any individual, group, or organization.

Let's dive in.

Hey y'all, so I've been working on this episode for a while, and I want to share a really quick story about something that happened a few weeks ago. How, as part of volunteer advocacy work that I do, I had a rather eye opening interpersonal interaction.

I was operating in my official capacity, visiting a teacher in the local public [00:02:00] school system. And I'm not really at liberty to share the details surrounding this interaction, so I'm gonna do my best to speak about it generally.

In a nutshell, a typically routine visit to the school gave me a more immediate and sobering glimpse into the culture war divide here in the States. And I want to be clear that from where I was sitting, our inability to see eye to eye wasn't at all a matter of political concern. I was motivated by the fact that, the needs of a child, the one for whom I was there to advocate for, were in my opinion, not being sufficiently considered.

Allow me to paint you a picture. As soon as this gentleman walked into the room, I totally recognized the vibe. His body entered into the space with graceless urgency. His voice booming. He began talking *at* me rather than to me. It was a sort of hyper-masculine [00:03:00] posturing that felt familiar to me. So I braced myself. I sat up a bit taller in my chair.

He continued to speak and, given the volume of his voice, I had no trouble hearing him. His impulse to dominate was reflexive. I kept my cool and awaited the moment when he'd present the topic I'd both been hoping and dreading to discuss with him.

It finally happened. There was an opening. And I did my best to both advocate and inform. And something about the content of my share, or perhaps my tone, it seemed to trigger

something in him. His defenses went up, and in truth, so did mine. Because he was suddenly relying on what sounded like Fox News bigoted soundbites to justify his position.

I kept breathing deep into the fire building in my gut. I challenged him gently at first. But eventually, as he carried on, I was suddenly struggling to override my own desire [00:04:00] to start shouting over him. But of course, given the professional capacity that I was operating in, I did my best to keep it in check. But it wasn't easy. Because many of his statements were objectively appalling.

And to be clear, I wasn't so much *offended* by the fact that he was stepping out of the bounds of political correctness. It was the tone of the interaction and its ramifications that really troubled me. Curiosity was absent. Accountability deflected. And he seemed to have no regard for the fact that as a school teacher, his responsibility is to be in service to the overall well-being of the children he has day to day authority over. Not the other way around.

Candice Schutter: And I know because I can't really share specifics with you, this is all sounding super vague. But the point is, the way the whole interaction went down, it was kind of sort of new for me. Because this was my first like, [00:05:00] real-deal run in with his type in a handful of years. And because of the role I was in, I couldn't really just walk away. I had to make something from this interaction. A certain degree of diplomacy was required.

But here's the part that really stayed with me. I'm proud to say that there was no part of me that wanted to appease this man. I didn't leave my body, nor did I at any point paint on a smile and nod along passively. And somehow I avoided the urge to lash out, even though there were times when I desperately wanted to.

Like the moment when he made a highly inappropriate hand gesture when referencing some of his former students. It's a bit hard to describe, but some of you will remember Archie Bunker from *All in the Family*? You remember the little hand gesture he used to make? Yeah, some of you will get the reference right away. And let me just say, when he did it, also different than usual, I didn't [00:06:00] bother to fix my face. I allowed my eyes to express the horror I felt without apology.

Basically, I kept it honest, and I kept my shit together. Because this moment wasn't about me. I was there to do a job. So I stood my ground, and eventually, I interjected, announcing in a firm, yet somewhat shaky voice, that I wasn't really all that interested in his biased opinions. What I really wanted to know is, what did he plan to *do* to better serve the kiddo I was there to advocate for?

I think he was a bit startled by my tone and so out of nowhere, and I'm not sure if this was a gesture of female solidarity or a desperate attempt to de-escalate the situation, but this was the point at which his female colleague, who on paper, but maybe not in practice, appeared to be his superior. She stepped forward to offer genuine empathy and a Band Aid solution to the problem. And let me tell you something folks, [00:07:00] volunteer in the public sector long enough and you'll learn, sometimes a Band Aid solution is the best you can hope for.

So I said, yes, please, I'll take it. And again, I know this share was a little ambiguous and potentially unfair, given that it's one sided. And so let me acknowledge that I'm quite certain this man has some redeeming qualities. And probably also a wife, a family, and a mortgage.

And he was also textbook bull in a china shop, clueless. Honestly, it was as if I was engaging with a caricature of Red State America Charlie, or whatever you want to call him. And no, this guy's name is not Charlie.

The point of the story is, thanks to culture war divides, it felt like there was an ocean between us. And try as I might, he wasn't at all interested in hearing me. And truth be told, at a certain point, I stopped listening to him as well.

The Daily Beast [00:08:00] contributor, Thor Benson, describes the culture war climate well: quote,

"This kind of hostile environment creates division within cultures themselves, and it pits the bulls against each other, While the matador watches from a safe place."

Yep, that tracks. I was totes ready to lock horns with this dude. And I'm not even a brawler.

When people ask me how I'm able to stomach this work, listening to and sharing stories of cult survivors, I very often think of this bigger picture. And how for me, this series has really been a training ground of sorts, preparing me to turn and face a much bigger Oz behind the curtain.

But isn't it a drag? People will ask. Being present for stories that focus on so much interpersonal pain and hardship?

Well, to be honest, sometimes. But, all in all, not [00:09:00] really.

If you've been listening for a while now, you already know that I have many regrets surrounding the decade and a half I spent working as a quote unquote life coach, a job title that I now find quite cringey.

However, I won't lie and say that I look back on those years without gratitude. Because the truth is, I learned a ton sitting across from literally hundreds of people over the course of 16 years. And despite all the screwy new age bullshit that I was imbibing and therefore passing along to my clients, in one on one interactions, my favorite part of the work was and always has been making room for big emotions and difficult truths. And so I'm imagining that doing that, day in and day out for so many years, maybe it helped me to develop a certain capacity. The ability to sit unflinchingly in the presence of someone else's pain.

Or maybe it has nothing at all to do with the coaching. It's possible it goes back much further than that. The fact that I feel at [00:10:00] ease when listening to people share gnarly truths and difficult stories. Maybe it's because I know how it feels to yearn for the comfort of a steady shoulder to cry on. To feel driven by a hunger and need to share.

It's a place that I used to call home.

1983 - a personal story

Candice Schutter: We leave just after sunrise. Our trailer and everything we own fishtailing behind us through western Kansas.

It's 1983, and I ride unbuckled in the back seat. I'm eight years old. It's our third move in two years. And this time, we're headed to Southern California.

California. It feels like a dream. I try to imagine it. Ocean beaches, movie sets, and Tiger Beat heartthrobs flashing through my mind. But my excitement feels hypothetical. Lifeless. Tempered by grief.

Every few [00:11:00] miles, my unspent rage spills forward toward the passenger seat in the general direction of my mother, who I obsessively yet politely plead with. Her, never him. *Please crack the window*, I say, my voice, quivery and shallow.

And as always, with an apology, she pulls the crank on the window, and a whistling gasp of air redirects the cigarette smoke that's been carving a path between us.

The sun is now up, so I peel off my jacket and drop it on the seat next to me. It's a knock off version of a members only jacket, in my favorite shade of lavender. I see it there, and it sends a sharp and stabbing pain into my chest. Kim and I had bought matching jackets early in the school year. We wore them. Together. At school, on weekends. Everywhere. Together.

A couple of days before our move, she and I had made a vow to keep in touch. To write every day. To honor our bond as BFF best friends [00:12:00] forever and ever. It's a promise I'd made twice before, one that I'd make again in the future. Promises. Towns. Just before, and after.

Gary pulls our caterpillar caravan into a truck stop off of I-70. He kills the engine and cuts Bosphus off mid sentence.

As he crawls out the driver's side door, Mom turns to face me, looking over the passenger seat, asking if I want her to grab me anything from inside. I'd kill for a Slim Jim and a six pack of powdered donuts, but I shake my head. *No*.

She stares at me a moment longer, and then I hear the door close behind her.

I exhale.

My eyes narrow as I watch Gary out the side window. He drops a lit cigarette and mashes it onto the ground before reaching for the gas pump. Tears well up inside of me. My body somehow caught between the pavement and his steel-toed boot.

For months now, I've been begging him to [00:13:00] stop calling me *Candi*, the nickname that until about a year ago, everyone had called me since birth. I decided to ditch the moniker in the first grade, after being teased by the boys at school. *Candi, can I get some candy?*

Now this, of course, would pale in comparison to the variations I'd hear later in my adolescent years. But I was still young, naive, and hopeful that I'd be able to choose my own labels in life.

And at my last school, the transition had been pretty straightforward. Mom registered me under my full name, and just like that, the girls and women in my life honored my request without question.

But Gary had refused. I'm assuming this was in part because doing as he pleased was pretty much his MO. And also I suspect, due to the fact that my pint-sized expressions of anger around it all, seemed to endlessly amuse him.

Mom returns, her arms filled with provisions. She passes me a can of pop and a [00:14:00] pack of M& Ms, then rests her elbows on the front seat, turning to face me.

Can, you gotta understand that it's hard for him. Cause, well, you'll always be his little girl.

I stare out the window, blink repeatedly, trying to make sense of her words.

His little girl?

I do my best to reject the whole notion. But the revulsion that I feel is accompanied by an equal and overwhelming sense of yearning.

His little girl.

As she stared at me over the seat. I couldn't help but wonder, was it at all like this for her or did she just know how to love him? This flashed me back to the time when, as a toddler, I discovered my mom in bed with a long haired bearded lover who at the time I imagined to be Jesus. There he was hovering over her body for reasons unknown, and I felt it then, too. The [00:15:00] thrall of his might alongside a terror I couldn't yet name.

Similar to Boyfriend Jesus, Gary had just happened upon our life. But then he'd stuck around, four years and counting. He was 10 years older than my mom, gainfully employed, and in full possession of that unmistakable brand of cowboy charisma that women in need of a savior find both irresistible and intoxicating.

Mom was smitten. And truth be told, deep down, I was too. No one could make me laugh like Gary. But even that was bittersweet at times. Like when he'd tickle my feet until I cried. What sense could I make of it? The way that love and terror seemed to bleed together. My young body no longer able to tell the difference.

The driver's door creaks open and Gary slides back behind the wheel. Mom's body turns itself forward, [00:16:00] reflexively.

I wait for him to start up the engine and shift the car into drive, but he doesn't move. He just sits there, staring out the front window. Mom and I, waiting, bracing. For what? A joke? Anger?

He catches my gaze in the rearview mirror, flashes me a toothy smile, and lifts his chin before speaking. *Hey, kiddo.* His eyes dancing. I feel wary, unsettled, and also disarmed by the syrupy tone of his voice. *How about I make you a deal? I'll stop calling you Candy if you start calling me Dad.*

Candice Schutter: Even though her back is to me, I can feel my mother's face stretch into a slow smile. I can feel it. I occupy her body more than my own.

Yes and no collide. I love him. I hate him. Equal parts. Always equal. And that's when he turns to face [00:17:00] me, his eyes wet for what I imagine must be the very first time. I feel myself losing ground, surrendering to a hunger fulfilled. Chosen. Worthy. Protected.

I nod and smile.

He extends a hand over the seat, hoping to seal the deal. We shake on it.

We spend the next few months living in the lush foothills of the Santa Lucia mountains. And then Gary's job prospects dry up sooner than expected. Midway through the third grade, we're headed north to Paso Robles.

I become what my teachers refer to as a latchkey kid. Returning home to our trailer after school, dropping my books inside. And then taking great pride in my independence, I spend the rest of the afternoon rollerskating in circles on the concrete pad connected to our tiny lot.

I'm never far from my Walkman, so I [00:18:00] drown out the sounds of nearby traffic with the melodic angst of Olivia Newton John.

When my parents return home from work, I head inside to do homework and wait for dinner. And then, soon after, and long before bed each night, my mother escapes into her romance novels, just as Gary passes out on the couch exhausted from a long work day.

After tucking me into the one bedroom in the back each night, Mom returns to the living room, wakes Gary from his slumber, and together they fold out the sleeper sofa. The television continues blaring into the night.

I remember that it was a Friday morning. I was getting ready for school when the phone rang. It was Linda, Gary's first wife. He always left for work before dawn each day, so Linda informs my mother that she'd *had enough*. Gary's youngest daughter, Sherri, was quote, out of control. And hoping that a heavy dose of Gary's militant tough love might scare her

straight, Linda had put [00:19:00] Sherri on a plane to come and live with us. She'd be arriving later that day.

Mom called in sick to work and made the six hour round trip drive to LAX and back. She arrived home late in the evening, the newest member of our family in tow.

Sherri was fourteen. She wore a Styx t-shirt underneath a tattered jean jacket, a safety pin hanging from each ear. Her shoulder length hair was feathered and bleached blonde. Her amber eyes steely and carefully lined in black eyeliner.

She seemed otherworldly to me. A sister thing emerging.

Gary spent the weekend hammering together two by fours and plywood, building custom fit bunk beds to fit the tiny bedroom and back. Due to the trailer's low ceilings, he had to set them up in an L shaped formation, which made it possible for me to gaze down at Sherri whenever I [00:20:00] pleased. Doing my best to act indifferent all the while wishing I'd catch an updraft of her coolness.

My daily chores were split in half. Sherri did my makeup, punk rock, for Halloween. And together we wrote out the lyrics to *Come On Feel the Noize*. She also taught me how to roll my eyes at authority figures behind their backs.

And every night before bed Sherri would write and write. Letters, poetry. Scribbling in her loose leaf diary for hours on end. I'd marvel at the trails of paper strewn across her unmade bed.

I loved having an older sister. For the first few weeks, it was bliss, until she and Gary started fighting.

And once they started, they didn't stop. It was the same drill every time. Gary attempting to flex his authority, and Sherri refusing to submit. She was unflinchingly defiant.

He'd wave around an Ozzy Osbourne album cover, ranting on and on for hours about how *all that dope and bullshit music's rotting your* [00:21:00] *fucking brain*.

I'd tuck myself into the corner of the couch and stare, slack jawed, my heart pounding as she'd fire back. She wasn't afraid of him. She moved through the world as if his opinion didn't matter.

And of course, this is probably untrue. She was, after all, just a child herself. But to me, her courage, it seemed supernatural. Or at the very least, an anomaly in my tiny little world. Looking back, I think Sherri might have been the first girl or woman of any age that I'd ever witnessed stand up for herself boldly, consistently, and unwaveringly.

Even so, my body made special note of the fact that in doing so, it was only making her, my, and our lives even more of a living hell.

Gary wasn't a bad man. It's just that a part of him was still back in Vietnam, fighting a war. His 14 year old, now the stand in for the [00:22:00] enemy.

But Sherri was not the enemy, she was his youngest child. And despite the pedestal that I placed her on, she was not more or less than human. She was a young girl desperate to be loved by her father.

And so despite her iron will, his well worn rage would at some point exhaust her. Sometimes it would take hours, but eventually, tears would start streaming down her face. Her full and flushed cheeks, makeup smeared. The painted on mask she wore, melting to reveal a daughter he'd long ago abandoned. And it was in these moments that I'd leave my body. Confusion and empathy too much to bear. A sister thing broken.

At Christmastime, Sherri's sister Kathy came for a visit and Gary surprised us with Polaroid cameras. Mom made us each a pair of custom made leather pants. We wore them everywhere. To the store, an outdoor concert, on [00:23:00] rides at Knott's Berry Farm.

Two years older than Sherri, Kathy was tall with brown hair. She was more reserved, harder to read. So I studied her, hoping for cracks in her facade I could slip myself into.

I envied their closeness, yet, despite the age difference between us, the novelty of my existence saved me from total banishment. I was left out of countless inside jokes. But I was also willing sister putty that they could shape to fit their image. So they dressed me up in concert t-shirts, scribbled OZZY and ink onto my knuckles, and took great delight in my Tommy Shaw kicks.

At the end of winter break, Kathy returned to her mom's in Kansas, and that's when Sherri fell into a deep depression. Even though she'd made some new burner friends at school, her writing suddenly became more frantic.

She'd stay up late into the night penning letters to her besties back in Wichita. She wore her desperation on the outside. And with [00:24:00] each passing day, she seemed more like a tiger pacing in its cage.

And then, one weekday afternoon, she didn't come home after school.

She and I shared a single house key, so I kicked off my shoes, dug my toes into a pile of dirt, and waited for my parents to come home. That evening was frantic. There were calls to the police, and to Sherri's friends and family back home. They checked airlines and bus stations, but no leads.

Days passed, or was it just hours? Either way, my whole world once again began tilting on its axis, and I saw Gary's eyes wet with tears for a second time. She'll always be his little girl. The words spilled through my mind, or did my mother say them?

Eventually, someone asked the question. Is there another name that she might have used? I felt conflicted. And surely in violation of an unspoken [00:25:00] sister oath of some kind, I

shared with my parents the fantasy rocker pseudonym that I'd watched Sherri etch out in ink on her pages dozens of times. Randi Taylor. *Randi with an "i"*, she'd say, drawing a heart to punctuate the last letter.

And sure enough, on the day of her disappearance, Randi Taylor had boarded a series of Greyhound buses headed to Wichita. She was eventually tracked to her best friend's house, whose name I don't recall. Let's call her Sally. Sherri had been there the whole time. Sally's mother had lied to the authorities.

There was a brief discussion about pressing charges. But after Sherri promised in earnest to run away again should she be forced to return, she was allowed to stay with Sally and her mother. A few months later, the deafening silence of our acquiescence restored, Mom, Gary, and I hitched up the trailer and moved to the next town.

[00:26:00] For much of my life I harbored hard feelings towards Sally's mother. I considered her a villain in this story. How could she? Manipulate my sister. Coax her into her home. Hurt our family with her lies. My resentment toward her wasn't so much ethical, it was personal. She'd been a willing accomplice to Sherri's sudden ejection from my life. But looking back now, as a middle-aged woman who's seen and lived through some shit. I see Sally's mom a bit differently.

My stepsister was unhappy, misunderstood, held captive. I can now better imagine how trapped she felt, bound to well intentioned parents who, despite the love they so clearly felt for her, simply did not possess the skills necessary to acknowledge, let alone soothe her pain. The adults in [00:27:00] Sherri's lives continually pointed to her cries for help, which were, in many ways, age appropriate ways of coping, announcing that it was her behaviors and her that was the real problem.

I won't go so far as to pedestalize Sally's mother. I have very little data to go on, and it very well could be that the home Sherri landed in was just as bad if not worse. But it's also possible that this single mother was a brave ally to Sherri. Someone who was willing to take on the burden of our disgust in order to liberate my sister from an impossible circumstance. My guess is the truth lies somewhere in between.

There's a part of me now that has mad respect for the fact that Sally's mom was willing to place herself between Sherri and the overbearing family system that sought to control rather than love her. Like I said, it's possible that she too was unable to offer Sherri the tenderness and [00:28:00] stability she deserves. But at the very least, in a moment of crisis, she was willing to risk losing face to do the things she imagined might make a real difference in Sherri's life.

Candice Schutter: I remember standing up to Gary one time and one time only in my life. I was 16 years old. And my mother and I had been planning our exit for months. She'd been saving money on the sly, and I'd been packing my room in secret. The anticipation had grown unbearable, and this time I was the tiger pacing.

Interestingly enough, it just occurred to me, I had tigers hanging all over my walls in my bedroom.

Anyway, one evening, just a few days prior to our planned move, Gary laid into me for some benign act that for whatever reason caused him great offense. And my resolve finally snapped. [00:29:00] I started shouting back at him, full volume, for the first time ever.

,And he, of course, responded with profanity and insults and being much more thin skinned than Sherri, his words immediately brought me to my knees. I recall sliding down onto the floor of the kitchen placing my hands over my ears and pulling my knees into my chest, rocking back and forth, back and forth. As my mom's eyes pleaded with me from across the room, *Please stop. Be patient, baby. It's almost time. Whatever you do, don't tell him our secret.*

I kept our promise and we moved out a week later.

I saw Gary only once after that. I'm guessing about six months or so after we left. I don't remember much about the visit, mostly the walk through a maze of apartments that landed me at his door.

What I do recall is how unsettled I felt when confronted by his new peaceful [00:30:00] demeanor. He was a broken man, broken in a way that I would now celebrate. But at the time, I was wary. There was a softness around his edges, and it made me recoil. He wept openly, voiced his regret, and proudly displayed the wedding ring he planned to give my mother, a decade too late.

I knew she'd never accept it. I was terrified that she would.

Watching my mom submit to Gary all those years, it shaped me in ways that I was conscious of. I swore to myself that I'd never invite a domineering man into my home or into my bed. And for the most part, I've kept that promise.

But my romantic life aside, the high-demand environment of my childhood still managed to shape me into someone both pleasing and obedient. In friendships, I became the agreeable sidekick. At [00:31:00] school, I was a star pupil. And I received my first promotion six months into my first job, at the age of 15. In part because I was a natural leader, but mostly because I was so personally invested in carrying out the captain's orders.

Aye, aye, sir.

chapter marker

Candice Schutter: Last week, I released an episode on the main feed that Tracy and I recorded back in February. And in it, we spent time examining the so called high road that many of our critics, former friends and colleagues claim to frequent. And a couple of days following this Patreon exclusive release, a private link to the episode was leaked to someone, about whom we spoke but did not name.

I'd later learned that it had been passed along with good intentions. Sort of a hey ya, heads up, maybe some self reflection is in order here. But it [00:32:00] wasn't received that way. And soon enough, an email landed in my inbox. An unhinged emotional tirade slash informal legal challenge.

Yeah, good times.

But I'm not going to spend time on the particulars here because, well, there's nothing all that interesting or unusual about this story. Because in some ways I've been anticipating a moment like this from day one of this project.

Some of you may even recall this particular excerpt from episode 34.

E xcerpt - Ep.34

Candice Schutter: *Don't poke the bear, because if you do, he'll puff himself up in anger and assume control of the narrative using his reactivity. The message from the top down was clear. The best way to keep the hierarchy intact is to keep your shit together, that way the bear will never be required to learn how to take care of his.*

Listening back, more than a year and a half later, I hear the strength and trepidation in my [00:33:00] voice. Because the truth is, when I started this series, I had never in my life publicly challenged the status quo, at least not in any meaningful way. This is not to say I didn't concern myself with ethics. It's just that when I did have concerns, I more or less resorted to what I'd learn in wellness circles. I leaned into magical thinking and the assumption that if I did my own inner work, it would serve as a valid or even viable substitute for everyday activism.

Needless to say, I see it differently now.

I've been using this term, culture war. It's often used to describe the tensions that emerge between social groups. Tensions that are very often driven by conflicting ideologies. And this digitally connected world we live in is both a blessing and a burden. I often wonder, in the face of all this rising social discord, is it that there is more ideological conflict? Or could it be that we're just [00:34:00] now really seeing the diversity that was always present? With previously silenced voices now amplified.

For better and for worse, it's never been easier to create group allegiances and cultural divides. But it's not an even playing field because the algorithms reward ideas and influencers that tend toward the ideologically extreme. Not because programmers are malicious a-holes. I mean, I'm sure some of them are, but really it doesn't help that human attention gravitates towards the sensationalized. Polarizing viewpoints, conspiracies, and moral outrage. Survivalist curiosity is hardwired into us. It's similar to the way when driving past a car crash, we reflexively slow down to take a look.

So I guess what I'm saying is that I'm hopeful that there is actually far more nuance and critical discourse going on in digital spaces than we are seeing. It's probably just buried beneath the fray.

When I watch the news on [00:35:00] any given day, on any channel really, there are binary reductions of entire groups of people; protesters, for example, who are supposedly anti-this and pro that. Leaving out the nuance that many people who show up to protests are generally interested in harm reduction. And if you look at, for example, the protests that are going on in regards to the conflict between Israel and Palestine. A complex topic I'm not going to go into here. When folks who are protesting an inhumane use of force are framed in a breaking news caption as Anti-Israel. Well, how does this help constructive discourse and accusations around anti-semitism?

I know this is a hot button topic and I really do feel a sense of empathy on all sides of this issue. My point is, is that the extremist pendulum seems to be swinging side to side so steadily it's at a breaking point.

What will it take for us to slow down [00:36:00] and make room for one another? To open ourselves to dialogue and more nuanced perspectives. And even if we do that, even if we are doing that, will our voices even carry over the noise of culture war divisions? I have to believe it's possible.

On Friday, I'll be dropping an episode of Deconstructing Dogma over on Patreon. It was recorded a few weeks ago when I sat down with regular contributors, Tracy Stamper and Adi Goren, for a conversation on safety, belonging, and the challenges of social media.

In case you missed our conversations in episodes 70 and 71, Adi is Israeli. Midway through this Patreon bonus convo, I share with her how I've been struggling with the impulse to simultaneously express two truths at once. And I was sharing with her the concern and care I feel for her, her family, those who've been terrorized by [00:37:00] Hamas, and the everyday citizens of Israel who are attempting to integrate the trauma of October 7th alongside an intergenerational imprint I can't myself fathom.

And that also, I wanted to be able to name the genuine horror that I feel daily given that in my opinion, the Israeli army is carrying out a disproportionate, egregious, and inhumane assault on the Palestinian people.

Both and.

This led the three of us to deepen our examination of safety. And I really appreciated Adi's reminder that sometimes the conversation first needs to be about how to have the conversation.

Indeed.

But here's the thing, Adi, Tracy, and I, we've known one another for a few months now, and we've spoken for many hours, albeit through a screen. But in many ways eye to eye and heart

to heart. We've created a foundation of friendship upon which we [00:38:00] feel a sense of safety and trust. And it's only been after many months that we were able to go there.

And so is it really any wonder that truncated social media captions and AI sorted comment feeds aren't really working all that well as a substitute for long form back and forth face to face discourse. And yet that's where so many of us spend our time engaging in activism and well intentioned dialogue.

So all of that to say, it's a very strange time to be finding one's voice, especially when the language we use has become so loaded.

And just FYI, side note, it's really worth noting here that this is one of Robert Jay Lifton's Eight Criteria For Mind Control, wherein a group reinterprets or attaches hidden meaning to words in ways that only those within the group can understand.

Case in point, I've noticed a lot lately how the language of the left is being absorbed into right wing [00:39:00] propaganda. Terms being thrown around with complete disregard of their complexity. MAGA pundits are making a mockery of things like *social justice*, or what it means to be *woke*. They're even flipping the narrative, accusing trans folks of being, quote, *indoctrinated*.

In fact, every one of these terms have been used against me, somewhat sardonically, as if prescribing them to me provides evidence of something weak minded in my character.

On numerous occasions, I've had to delete comments on videos. So far, only on YouTube and TikTok. Where trolls attack, no surprise, guests who are speaking out because they are already in some way marginalized. It's as if the haters are sweeping in to provide more evidence, their vitriol cloaked in ideology that dehumanizes in a clever new way.

I always delete these comments because I refuse to provide a platform for hate speech, and because my guests [00:40:00] deserve to be shielded from folks who are unwilling to make room for their tender hearts and the privilege of their stories.

But I guess in some twisted way, I have the trolls to thank for helping me to grow a thicker skin. I'm getting braver in my shares, and of course it occasionally means losing a paid Patreon subscriber. Thank God I don't have advertisers to keep happy.

The point is, the bolder I get, the more labels I have to take. I've most recently been called *a mean girl*. And a while back, I'm sharing it here because it's my personal favorite, *a fraud*. On occasion I've lost an hour or two of sleep wondering if this or that comment I made in a moment of unfiltered good humor might be taken out of context and used against me. But oh the damn well, it is getting easier.

When I feel the weight of it all, I find that for me, there are two best practices to choose from. One, take a break and unplug from it all for a while. Or two, what [00:41:00] seems to work better than anything. Show the hell up, and do the next brave thing.

Speaking of, I recently hired a new digital consultant. Her name is Brittany Voie, and she came highly recommended.

First, though, a little context. For years, I've created all my own websites. Which may explain why in the age of advanced algorithms and SEO, my web results have slowly and steadily become a frickin nightmare. Google, in particular, won't allow me to outrun my sordid past. It keeps recycling outdated content and spilling it onto my top feed navigation. Like that hoop dance I taught in 2006. Or the coaching word salad I tossed in 2014. And all sorts of other cringeworthy content that makes it appear as though I'm saying one thing and still doing another.

Needless to say, it's been a bit maddening, so I finally reached out for professional support. Brittany immediately began helping me [00:42:00] out, and we're almost there. It's looking like I may be able to launch my new website sometime in the next few weeks.

But, that unnecessary backstory aside, what I didn't know until I started working with Brittany regularly is that she's also an award-winning writer and former newspaper columnist who on occasion gets herself into a bit of good trouble.

And if by chance you're not familiar with that term, good trouble is how civil rights activist John Lewis describes the sort of trouble that shows up when we speak truth to power.

John Lewis and his fellow patriots got into good trouble protesting and leading the charge in the civil rights movement. As you probably know, despite their nonviolent resistance, protestors were repeatedly beaten, as they quite literally risked their lives for justice and basic human decency.

But as they say, with greater privilege comes less risk and many would argue, greater responsibility. And Brittany Voie doesn't take this responsibility lightly. [00:43:00] For years she's been speaking up and writing articles, holding local politicians accountable.

And I wouldn't know about any of this if Brittany and I hadn't recently become friends on Facebook. Because it just so happens that right around the time she accepted my friend request, Brittany was clapping back on social media, responding to a group of conservative county politicians who were attempting to discredit her.

In a nutshell, they didn't like the fact that Brittany had been hired to build the bones of a website for a political action committee who wanted to get the word out about a Republican gubernatorial candidate with a pretty shady track record. And to be clear, Brittany didn't author any of the content featured on the website. She was simply hired to build a place for it all to live. It was a job like any other.

But on the side that the site was critical of, instead of focusing on an evidence based rebuttal to the allegations, they chose to instead go after Brittany. Writing an op ed piece for a local publication, [00:44:00] questioning her ethics because she was paid to do a job, I guess?

How much was she paid, you might be wondering? Hold on to your hat, folks, because it's public record. Five hundred dollars. Phew, what a hustler.

They also began sharing screenshots from her social media accounts in various groups, focusing in part on her ongoing support of the Pride movement. I'm assuming this is because the fact that she cares about the rights of everyday Americans is somehow evidence of her, progressive agenda?

Anyway, Brittany's Facebook feed became a sort of fascination to me. Peppered between regular funny memes, pregnancy updates, and occasional political commentary, she was responding directly to her haters. She didn't seethe in silence or pretend to ignore the bad press. She leaned into the truth with intelligence and good humor.

[00:45:00] Examples? Well, there's the selfie that Brittany posted wearing the Pride shirt her critics had screenshotted as problematic. It's a t-shirt featuring a smattering of paw prints displaying various Pride flag colors with four words written in big bold letters. *Hate has no home here*. She posted this picture along with a caption explaining its meaning, "in case the haters wanted a closer look."

She also posted a link to the op ed piece that had been written to discredit her, I'm assuming so folks could judge for themselves. Along with a brief yet clarifying response to her critics noting, quote, "if y'all put half as much effort into choosing your candidates [as you do] attacking a person detailing a set of facts, you'd probably be working for slash endorsing better candidates." Kissy face emoji.

I found all of this very amusing and intriguing, but what really got my attention was when Brittany posted a video [00:46:00] montage of a photo shoot she did a few years back, power posing in a Wonder Woman bikini in front of the county courthouse.

They were images that her online critics had apparently unearthed, raising questions about her quote sanity. And I gotta tell you, I call this bully backlash bingo because oftentimes when power players start calling us crazy, it's because we're on the right track and some part of them knows we've got their number.

But if you, like me, are curious about the Wonder Woman photo shoot backstory, I just had to share it here. So with permission, I'm going to read from an email that Brittany sent me when I wrote to her, dying to know what had inspired it.

Here, I'm reading from Brittany's words verbatim.

"Back during COVID, we had a county commissioner who decided that he was going to attempt to use a medical waiver to excuse himself from basic masking requirements. Instead of masking, he'd sit in public meetings (yes, public meetings) without any degree of masking, claiming that his doctor said it would [00:47:00] be detrimental to his health.

He had been offered reasonable accommodation to Zoom in to the meetings from his home or office, but refused. I thought this was, quite frankly, bullshit, and I wanted to test the whole

theory of our top executive branch exercising this medical excuse. So I filed a records request for all communications between Jackson and our prosecutor's office. There was a lot that was protected by attorney-client privilege.

Well, then in the course of things and in his haze of being angry with me for expecting accountability, Jackson decided to detail his conversations with the prosecutor publicly on Facebook, by which he inadvertently violated his own attorney-client privilege and additional public documents became 'fair game' the moment that happened. It turns out the prosecutor's office had specifically warned Jackson that he was opening up the county to a labor and industries fine, not that he shouldn't have to mask as implied previously by Jackson.

So after [00:48:00] that he started playing around with wearing unapproved mask options. He tried variations of different masks and spit guards that he ordered from random places. So I spent some time drilling down on that and asking him why he felt he was above the same regulations that county employees were expected to follow.

Ultimately, he was fined, and finally forced to follow the rules, just like the rest of us and his own public employees, too. To celebrate being right after all the shit I took from his supporters, simply in the interest of fairness and accountability across the board, I dressed up in a Wonder Woman bikini, and my friend came and took photos at the county courthouse.

This was a riff on another time, while I was working for the newspaper when we won a Key Award for proving a county commissioner wrong on an open public meetings act violation, and the publisher of the paper held our award ceremony on that same side of the courthouse. So there's some tradition there.

I also have a Captain America outfit that I'm planning on wearing should I/we prevail in a [00:49:00] public records lawsuit regarding non disclosure agreements later this year."

Signed off with a smiley face emoji.

And what I failed to mention is that that updated video photo montage that Brittany shared on Facebook, it ended with four words in bold letters. *That all you got?* Which then panned out to a shot of the American flag waving in the wind above the courthouse.

When it comes to kicking good girl conditioning to the curb, I think Brittany should be up for a goddamn medal.

Now, of course, it goes without saying that her approach isn't for everyone. I totally get that. But I also think it's kind of a genius example of how to navigate pushback in a way that's somewhat different and disarming. Without moralistic finger-pointing or high-road eggshell walking, Brittany's handling of those who seek to silence her is factual, it's fearless, and it's fun. She's just showing up again and again, because she knows that in the [00:50:00] end, facts matter. And as Rayya Elias used to say, the truth has legs, at the end of the day, it's the only thing left standing.

Bullies, people in power, they're banking on the fact that we will likely cower in the face of their might. Remember, don't poke the bear, because if you do, he'll puff himself up in anger and assume control of the narrative using his reactivity.

Mm hmm, it's page numero uno in the patriarchy playbook.

But the thing is, is that sitting back in our chairs, shaking our heads and clicking our tongues at all the big bad bully bears tromping through the playground, I'm not sure it does much good. Despite the advice I was given by my teachers growing up, ignoring bullies never really solved the problem.

That said, it takes a certain amount of privilege, audacity, and a certain skill set to not take the bait and engage in the bully brawl. And [00:51:00] I've just been looking everywhere I can for alternatives. I'm going to share another example.

I've been following writer, performance artist, and activist, Alok Vaid for a couple of years now, admiring their unique approach to the haters that troll them. Alok is gender non conforming and trans feminine, and they have 1.3 million followers on Instagram. And the only reason I mention that stat is because high visibility comes with added risk, particularly given the way that Alok regularly defies conventions when it comes to the gender binary. Watching Alok respond to trolls is a sort of masterclass in peaceful resistance.

For example, in a recent post, Alok shares a screenshot from a commenter, who posted, "I wish there was a puke reaction button. I'd use it on all your photos." a hateful comment, to be sure.

And here's how Alok chose to respond. *"Your projection [00:52:00] is not my reality. I release myself of your shame and choose my joy. What's disgusting is not my appearance, but rather the way you treat yourself. And by extension, me. I love you more than you could ever hate me."*

Now if you're not familiar with Alok and their work, you might mistake this response for something resembling toxic positivity or spiritual bypassing. But hear them talk and you'll soon learn the sentiments expressed here, are toxic. are in earnest and consistent with the unique and powerful lens through which they see beauty, themselves, in the world.

Alok has seemingly learned, and I'm sure the hard way, not to take on the shame that's being offloaded onto them by the bullies of the world. And I'd actually argue that both Alok and Brittany are doing something similar, rejecting emotional baggage that others would love for them to carry. They're each doing it in their own ways, by standing strong in [00:53:00] their values and authentic in their expression.

So, truth be told, I'm currently a little bit obsessed with whistleblowers and studying them in order to understand what it actually takes to move beyond lip service and into true activism. One definition I found online of the term whistleblower reads, *someone who provides information to the right people that they believe demonstrates wrongdoing. The information*

shared is typically about illegal, immoral, unsafe, or fraudulent activity within a public or private organization.

As we know, whistleblowers very often face pushback, and variations on this run the gamut, from relatively benign harassment to the horror stories we've all heard and read about.

Just this morning, I read a report [00:54:00] estimating that as of now, 142 media workers have been killed reporting on the ongoing assault in Gaza. These are folks who quite literally sacrificed their lives to give voice to the voiceless.

A couple of weeks ago I finished reading Christine Blasey Ford's new memoir, *One Way Back*, where she shares about the events surrounding the testimony she gave in 2018 as part of Brett Kavanaugh's Supreme Court confirmation hearing. She shares how the choice to testify has impacted her life in countless ways. And I learned reading her book that following her testimony, due to safety concerns, she and her family lived in hotels for months. They moved four times and had to pay out of pocket for around the clock security detail.

She writes candidly about how she's struggled to make meaning from such a harrowing experience, especially given the fact that despite "believing her", leaders in Washington chose to confirm Kavanaugh anyway.

It's in reading the tens of thousands of letters that she's received from [00:55:00] her fellow survivors that she's been able to carry on and imagine that her story has, in some long game, a certain purpose.

And then there's Shaye Moss and Ruby Freeman. You might remember that following the 2020 election, politician turned lackey conspiracist, Rudy Giuliani, publicly broadcast the lie that these two black women, both Georgia State election workers, had somehow helped to rig the outcome of the election. Of course, they'd done no such thing. And soon after, these two women and their families began receiving death threats from violent extremists.

In a truly heroic act, Moss and Freeman testified before the January 6th Committee, where, among other staggering revelations, it was alleged that Trump himself had repeated the lie, naming the two women in a call with the Georgia Secretary of State. Trump. The ultimate bully at the pulpit. Perpetually trumpeting his lies, calling forth his flying monkeys, and endangering the [00:56:00] lives of good people.

Now, in case you don't know, in December of 2023, three years after their lives were turned upside down and inside out, Ruby Freeman and Shaye Moss won their defamation suit against Giuliani and were awarded \$148 million in damages. Although, of course, it's unclear if and when they'll see this money. And I really just can't help but wonder, will a cash settlement make up for the trauma they've experienced? I ask the same question when I look at what's gone down with Alex Jones and the Sandy Hook parents, who won their class action suits against him. Alex Jones, who still to this day, is given the privilege of a microphone.

And now, in his largest ever reality TV broadcast, it's endless live stream coverage of Trump and his legal team attempting, and in many instances succeeding, to leverage money, power, and influence to sidestep consequence.

His lawyers continue to [00:57:00] shake the proverbial kid keys, hey, look over here, folks. Trying to do anything and everything they can think of to draw attention away from his many alleged criminal activities. More and more it's looking like they might successfully hold justice at bay long enough for him to take another swing at American democracy in early November of this year.

You just can't make this shit up, folks. This is what happens when we create systems that favor some more than others.

And I might as well speak to the elephant in the room, because there's ongoing debate as to whether or not the MAGA movement is, in fact, a quote unquote cult. Honestly, I don't really care so much where we land on the particulars when it comes to that four letter word. Because, once again, as with almost every other example featured in this series, I don't know that it really matters all that much what we call it.

But I will say looking at Trumpism, it certainly fits the bill when it comes to the way that, in cults, reason and common decency are very often [00:58:00] sacrificed to identity and ideology. And how despite the repeated and egregious acts of group leaders, supporters justify the shady means in favor of the supposed end that's been promised.

And if you're feeling frustrated by the fact that I'm getting political. Well, sorry, not sorry. Because in my mind, this conversation goes far beyond partisanship. The stakes are too high for me to continually pander to all sides. Because this isn't about policy platforms. It's kind of hard to overstate the degree to which hardcore MAGA loyalists are on board with Trump.

Last month on The Daily Show, Jon Stewart spoke pointedly about the distorted reality of MAGA's so-called patriots, playing clips of Trump supporters saying things that offer kind of sort of indisputable evidence that the cult of Trump is a very real thing.

Folks are saying things like: *"What this country [00:59:00] needs is a dictator."* Or, *"He could stand on the front steps of the White House and commit murder, and I'm with him."*

This is freaky stuff, y'all. But these folks aren't the real problem. They're just pawns in a much larger plan. They are the misguided followers of people who've been setting the stage for this moment for decades. And when I say that, I'm not throwing shade on MAGA followers. I've followed more misguided leaders than I care to admit.

If you hang in with me, next week, Nikki G returns to the podcast. And she and I are going to be taking a closer look at all that, not for the sake of shock value, but so that we can all make a little more sense of the madness. And shed a blinding light on why and how the Republican Party has been, for the most part, taken over by Christian nationalism.

If that sounds overly dramatic, please stay tuned. And keep in mind that I of course know that not every Republican voter is an insurrectionist, not by a long shot. However, there [01:00:00] are a great many religiously radicalized voters who happen to believe that Trump, despite his many glaring and obvious faults, is their party's one and only savior.

So yeah, we're going to be getting political because how can I talk about high control power dynamics week after week after week and ignore the fact that extremists are trying to take over the freaking White House. These are folks supported by a large coalition of conservative Christians who have come together to author a 900+ page presidential playbook for a swift and immediate shift toward authoritarianism. This is real deal happening, y'all. It's called Project 2025. You can Google it if you want to learn more.

But we'll be touching upon it in the next couple of weeks. And the point is to get the word out to more voters, especially those who are hedging in terms of who to vote for, or who are just understandably disenchanted and thinking of sitting this one out.

And I want to be crystal clear, I'm not pedestalizing the Biden administration, even as I [01:01:00] do think there's a whole hell of a lot that they're getting right.

But yeah, Biden's age is worrisome. And for the record, like many, I'm appalled by the U. S. 's funding of the Israeli government's attacks on Gaza. I'm not going to pretend I have a better answer to the crisis in the Middle East, but I know for sure that annihilation of an entire population of people is not only inhumane, it's not going to lend itself to lasting peace.

And having said that, I cannot in good conscience not vote for Biden, given the candidate on the other side of the ticket. Like it or not, in this royally effed up two party system, there are only two viable candidates we have to choose from this go around.

And keeping in mind that even if you were to switch one or both of them out for someone else, there really isn't any one man making the decisions alone on either side of the aisle.

At least, not yet, there isn't.

Because that's exactly what the Republicans have in mind.

And so, assuming things continue as [01:02:00] they are, which is a big assumption given how much seems to happen in eight months time, I will be holding this same tension as I fill out my ballot. I'll be voting for Biden and the Democrats because I believe that if he and they win, there is still a chance we'll be able to continue making inroads, stirring up good trouble to influence policies. But if we turn our country over to a dictator, there won't be any room for negotiation.

If you think whistleblowers are unsafe in this current culture, just wait until the moment American democracy crumbles. We all know what can happen then. Rest in power, Alexai Navalny.

So yes, this episode has taken quite a departure from where it began. Where I tried, and perhaps failed to connect the trailer park tales of my youth to a much larger commentary on the power-flex patriarchy. And just in case, let me state what may or may not be obvious, which is that the family [01:03:00] systems that we normalize in our day to day interactions, they influence how and if we respond to power players later in life.

And my story isn't really all that unique. Emotionally immature figurehead. Enablers standing by his side, talking him down when he tantrums and doing the hard emotional labor for him. And in many cases attacking one another, rather than keeping their focus on the way he stands to benefit from their social divisions.

I'm not going to pretend I have any solutions here. But it feels pretty clear to me that an approach that oversimplifies things into us vs. them binary, it's not really part of the answer. And our expressions of moral outrage around it all don't really seem to be moving the needle either.

I use social media, a little reluctantly admittedly, but I do realize that at its best, it's an unparalleled platform for raising awareness. And it's worst, it exacerbates [01:04:00] culture war divisions.

In her book, *Doppelganger: A Trip into the Mirror World*, Naomi Klein writes:

"When looking at the mirror world, it can seem obvious that millions of people have given themselves over to fantasy, to make believe, to play acting. The trickier thing, the uncanny thing, really, is that that's what they see when they look at us. The point is, is that on either side of the reflective glass, we are not having disagreements about differing interpretations of reality. We are having disagreements about who is in reality, and who is in a simulation."

Yes, this.

So what do we do about that? I'm really not sure. Because ignorance is relative to experience and given humanity's diversity, solutions to problems like these will never be one size fits all. And this whole idea of peace, that isn't easy either, because that looks and [01:05:00] feels different to each person; and in many instances, our definitions of peace run counter to each other.

Am I cheering you up yet? Yeah. The point is, I've got none of this figured out. And the end of this episode isn't going to be wrapped in a neat little bow. Because we're just getting started.

So I'm going to keep featuring difficult conversations for a while longer because the only thing I can see might make a difference is being willing to slow down, take our time, and engage in heart to heart dialogues.

The one takeaway I will offer is this. Very often, meaningful resolution requires a certain amount of tension and conflict. Which may mean, not only sitting in the face of awkward and

unexpected truth, but also finding ways to keep progress plugging along when the bullies push back in an attempt to intimidate and silence.

Next week, as I said, we're going to be [01:06:00] jumping into the deep end. Nikki G joins me once again for a two-part conversation on what she calls *spiritual colonialism*. Sharing with us more personal stories and an informed history of how we got where we are now as a country. You won't want to miss it.

If you'd like to get to know Nikki in the meantime, check out Episode 77 and if you're wanting more of what the 'cult'ure series has to offer, consider checking out the bonuses over at patreon.com/thedeeperpulse.

Thanks for tuning in. And bye for now.

[01:07:00]