

Candice Schutter: [00:00:00] Tone policing is a smokescreen, every woman I know has been subjected to this utter horseshit and has been disallowed the experience of their outrage, because well, it's impolite to express discontent, pain, or anger, period, end of story, now would you please shut the hell up?

Regardless of how it shows up, it's fucking maddening to be gaslit in this way, especially because tone policing disregards our perspective entirely. Because in reality, it isn't at all about what we're saying, or even the way we're saying it. It's about the fact that we're saying anything at all.

/ Well, I don't know about you, but I am deep breathing through each day. We are in the midst of a constitutional crisis here in the US, face to face with a fascist government takeover. [00:01:00] And it's a lot right now. It's a fuck lot.

Um, I am going to pop in this brief intro, because the content that I'm dropping today is one of my longer solo episode drops. It's from way back in July of 2023. So believe it or not, it's almost two years ago. But the content in this episode speaks so directly to so much of what we are facing right now here in the US, specifically, where we are learning the importance of collective activism and standing together, banding together. We are all being impacted by the actions of the Trump administration and some more than others.

So I am doing what I can to engage in activism at a level I, I certainly never have. And I know many people close to me who are also stepping up and [00:02:00] meeting this moment with the intensity and urgency that is required. And we're learning as we go.

So I just wanna say, next week I'm gonna be dropping an episode with a friend of the podcast who has really stepped into the role of community leader in her own community and online. And we're gonna discuss what she's learning, what I'm learning, and what it really means to find our footing during these times. Doing the things that are necessary and taking care of ourselves in the process. We are certainly not experts, nor are we gonna claim to be. But we want to share with you in real time what's going on for us.

Because one of the things that I'm finding more than anything right now is the thing that's keeping me vertical, the thing that's keeping me sane and able to breathe and move through another day around all of this, is connection and community. And it sounds so trite and even a little old school wellness for me to say that. But [00:03:00] I mean it in a very different way. I mean it in the sense of people who are coming together, not in service to some idealistic and lofty mission, so much as in service to one another and people we've never met before. If you're curious how those two things are different, then go back and listen to episodes 32 onward of the podcast. I don't wanna repeat myself.

But just to say that, right now, there is a sobriety that is required. And the best way for me to stay sober, in any sense of the word, is to reach for connection with others who get it, who are willing to be in the feels with me, the honest and authentic feels of the moment, without the need to escape so much as just to truly connect around it all.

And interestingly enough, what happens for me in my relationships around all of that is we do end up finding a sense of levity and joy when we're just super real with each other and we feel like we have [00:04:00] someone and something to lean against.

So this is just to say that if you're feeling the intensity of all of this is just too, too much, find your people. Lean into your people.

The other thing that's really helping me is being in my body and my five senses and in nature. Connecting to either a natural setting if you have access to that, not all of us do. When I say a natural setting, I mean, an area without pavement and human made structures.

But let's say you can't get in touch with that. Listening to music or speakers or authors that move you. Enjoying a nourishing meal with friends. Watching the sunrise. There's so many small ways that we can help regulate our own nervous systems. And it's so important right now that we find ways to ground ourselves, especially if we're gonna put our boots on the ground and be a part of [00:05:00] this resistance movement. Which I hope that those of you listening to this from the United States will join in the fight.

And again, I'm just figuring all of this out as I go along. I mean, I, I am really having to adjust to being a little more out there. I am an introvert, an outgoing introvert, but an introvert nonetheless. And last week, I was blasted at the end of the week. I mean, I did more things than usual. I did some online activism, made some phone calls, and I attended a town hall in my local community where of course, the Republican representative was a no show. But it was a very moving experience, being there with so many people. There were about 200 people there who really give a shit. And we got to hear stories from people who've been intimately and significantly impacted by some of the policies that are rolling out. That was once again, a sobering and inspiring experience.

And then the next day I went with some friends to the Phoenix area, to Tempe, Arizona for the [00:06:00] Bernie/AOC rally, their Fighting Oligarchy tour. The rally was held on the ASU campus at the Mullet Arena, and I think it holds like 5,000, 7,000 people, something like that. There were 15,000 of us who showed up to that event. And so we spent a lot of time wandering through the streets with lines and lines and lines of people. And it was incredibly peaceful and encouraging just how many people showed up to this event.

But I'm not used to being so out there, right. And in addition to my graduate studies and the podcast and, you know, life, family matters, all of that, it was a lot. And I am having to find new ways to regulate myself and get used to a new norm. This is our new norm. This is where we are, folks. So I'm showing up to it, and I hope that you will too, in the ways that you can, in the ways that work for you. And I'm taking breaks when I need them. [00:07:00] Because we're no good to one another or to the collective when we are fried.

I was just messaging with a friend earlier today. I have lots of group texts, mostly with other women, where we're sort of processing and experiencing all of this out loud with each other. And in the thread with this particular friend, I shared with her that, you know, sometimes when the anxiety really kicks in, action is the thing that I need to do. I talked about this quite a bit on the Hope is a Verb episode; I believe that's episode 85. Like one of the things that happens for me when I'm anxious is that I need to take action. It's the thing that rests me

down. And then at other times, I need to unplug from it all. And the ability to discern and to know the difference is part of the learning curve. And for me, if I don't catch myself in that spin cycle and that need to sort of control the uncontrollable. And if I just start [00:08:00] to struggle in that way, I'm no use to anyone, let alone the world at large.

So we all have to find that balance and also reach for the joy.

You know, yesterday, after this really long week, what I needed was something to take me out of it all. And so I taught my usual dance class on Sunday morning, and then I joined a friend for a flamenco class. Never in my life have I danced flamenco. It was a blast. And for that 90 minutes, I didn't think about any of this shit. And I was able to stomp and clap and move my hips, and I felt better on the other side of it. It brought me a lot of joy to connect with the people in that room and to connect with my body.

So just a reminder to make space for the things that regulate you, that, that bring you a sense of joy. Because that's what we're fighting for after all, is the right to have agency choice and joy in our lives. [00:09:00]

So I'm re-releasing this particular episode, because everything that I talk about here is so alive right now in the zeitgeist. Because it really speaks to many of the features of authoritarianism. The perpetual gaslighting. The scapegoating of entire groups of people. And the way that Christianity, new age dogma, or our founding father's ideology shapes our behavior and our reluctance to express our righteous anger. I really hope you'll listen to the end of this episode where I talk about tone policing, because this is something that we're seeing a lot of right now.

You know, I saw a clip recently of Elon Musk on Fox News. He was being interviewed by Sean Hannity. And it was the perfect illustration of so much of what I talk about here. You know, Elon's sitting there and Sean and he are basically [00:10:00] bemoaning the fact that Elon has been so victimized in terms of the attacks on the Tesla organization.

Nevermind the fact that Elon, who decided to, among many, many, many other things, defund USAID and one particular program I was just reading about recently, wherein roughly a million children are expected to die as a result of his policies. He's on Fox News whining about the fact that cars are being blown up. And, you know, I'm not, I'm not gonna make some sort of commentary on vandalism and whether or not it should or shouldn't happen, but I get it. I get the impulse. And also, you know, vandalism and violence are often conflated, and they are not the same thing.

So point being, the violence that this administration is inflicting upon the world is astounding. And to see Elon, quote unquote *playing the victim*, keep listening for more on that, ah, [00:11:00] it's just, it's everything that's discussed in this episode on steroids.

So I hope that there's something here that will help you to understand better. You know, some people may wonder like, why spend all this time analyzing all of this, we need to be taking action. Well, the truth of the matter is, is that we can't take right action unless we really understand what we're dealing with and we understand ourselves and the sociological forces that are getting in the way of us doing things that are different and constructive.

And right now, I'm taking a class in my graduate program on critical theory, and I'm not gonna elaborate on it now. I'll save that for another time 'cause I'm still in the learning process around it all. But it's really about acknowledging the fact that the ways that we've solved problems in the past have gotten us to where we are. So how do we do different? We have to take time to examine and learn what stands between us and creating a new experience for our [00:12:00] species. Because right now we're on an existential edge, and all we've got is us.

And if we all start to do different, maybe we can actually create a different outcome this time around. I keep saying, hope is a verb. Understanding what our actual goals are, how the pathways we've used in the past haven't always worked out for us, and reimagining something different as we move forward and engage in activism, which again, next week's episode will touch upon. I think this is, hopefully, more helpful foundation for all of us.

So, here it is, episode number 59, an exploration of gaslighting, victim shaming and tone policing for social control.

BEGIN Ep.59

Candice Schutter: / The stories and opinions shared in this episode are based on personal experience and are not intended to malign any individual, group, or organization. [00:13:00]

As much as I love the clear blue skies and red rocks of Arizona, we're pretty isolated in our small town. Now I've very much settled in since landing here full time, about two years ago, but I haven't really found my people. Which is why my recent visit to Portland was so nourishing. It's a place that really feels like home to me.

And a few days into my time there, I went on a walk through Laurelhurst Park with friend of the pod, Monica Welty. She and I share a passionate interest in these topics. As soon as we headed out on our walk, she caught herself launching right into our usual banter, so she backpedaled right quick and said something to the effect of: "ugh, sorry to go there right outta the gate. I really wanna hear about your real life too."

At which point, I laughed out loud and said, this is my real life, my friend.

I'm a bit obsessed with trying to [00:14:00] understand the interpersonal and intrapsychic forces that shape our everyday choices. And I'm not just talking about landmines of influence. I do find all of that fascinating. But really what I'm most interested in is why cults are even a thing. I wanna understand it all. Epigenetics, cognitive biases, systems of power, and the many, many psychosocial mechanisms that long ago laid the tracks for these runaway trains to run on.

And yet, personally speaking, I'm really learning that I have to be careful with this. This othering of groups of people, labeling them as culty, or not. It's a very clever way to distance ourselves from these dynamics.

Now, obviously, I believe that cult survivor stories are so very helpful because knowing red flags can help us to understand and avoid these social landmines.

But how about actively shifting the cultures that we occupy daily? Because [00:15:00] subtly screwy, culty shit is happening all the damn time, in our face-to-face interactions, digital communications, through the power we give to certain people, and the meaning we give to the events unfolding around us. All of the dynamics that make cults possible are operating unchecked inside and around each and every one of us. Because cults are born of a much larger culture. They're reflections of the patriarchy, which has taught us to embody influence as power over. They're byproducts of white supremacy, which has socially positioned each one of us, and taught us to think hierarchically. And cult dynamics are demonstrated through capitalism, which profits from our existential insecurities.

Social justice advocates have been speaking to cult dynamics for centuries, using different language, but nonetheless pointing out to us that we are all influenced by systems of power and influence that elevate some and dehumanize [00:16:00] others. If we are born into, and or if we adhere to certain guidelines, we are rewarded with belonging, the benefit of the doubt, and resources. And if we deviate from socially invented ideals, be it through choice or by luck of the draw, we become a less privileged outsider. Hard to imagine anything more culty than that.

But I'm not cynical. I don't think it's any coincidence that a variety of social movements are now converging. Me Too, Black Lives Matter. LGBTQ+ rights advocacy. Critiques around socioeconomic privilege. Global climate change initiatives. And growing public discourse around abuse of power and authoritarian rule worldwide. Thankfully, the list goes on.

And what do all these movements have in common? They all require we grapple with psychosocial conditioning, and that we learn how to be individually active in collective [00:17:00] accountability.

In the coming weeks, I'm gonna be wrapping up the 'cult'ure series by taking a closer look at accountability, and what does, and very often doesn't happen when it's requested. At the damage that's done when trauma begets trauma begets trauma. When leaders and or everyday humans respond to requests for accountability with dysregulation, entitlement, and the projection of shame and blame.

Because despite cult of personality appearances, the real cult creator and enabler is trauma, a pattern of conditioning that leads us to continually avoid the difficult work and hard conversations required to dismantle cyclical patterns of abuse. And it's a both and endeavor, meaning that sometimes we have to look outward, at this person and that particular group of people. We have to be brave enough to say, that shit can't fly. I'm no longer turning a blind eye to that.

And also, we have to do our inner work. We have to be careful that we aren't inadvertently [00:18:00] perpetuating more of the same, just in a different direction. Culty biases are embedded into our culture, and breaking free is nowhere near as simple as it sounds.

Honestly, I know way more about what doesn't work than I do about how a new paradigm might operate, so why don't we start there?

Derek Beres, Matthew Remski, and Julian Walker, hosts of the Conspirituality Podcast just released a new book by the same title. In it, they write, "the cult is a macrocosm of domestic power abuse, and it's a microcosm of capitalistic power abuse."

Now that's a bit of a thinker. So let me translate.

In other words, if you wanna really understand cult dynamics, you have to zoom in and out simultaneously. You've gotta look at how interpersonal dynamics are shaped by systems of power and vice versa.

And in this episode, I wanna poke a bit at this chicken or the [00:19:00] egg fustercluck, specifically as it relates to gaslighting, blame, and the offloading of accountability. This is a super complex topic that I've been totally preoccupied with for the past few months, and we're barely gonna scratch the surface. Because I don't have all the answers. But I'm hoping that I can shine a small ray of clarifying light on the following questions:

What is gaslighting and why do we do it?

When is identifying with the label of victim helpful? And when is it disempowering? Can it be both?

Why is accountability such a tall order, especially when power is at play?

And has spirituality been co-opted by capitalism? And how has this changed what we believe about ourselves?

Let's start with the last question.

Candice Schutter: Scrolling on Facebook the other morning I came across a post on a Sedona event page. It was written by a [00:20:00] self-proclaimed spiritual intuitive who was warning against the dangers of labels such as empath, narcissist, and sociopath.

She made it clear that from her perspective, these labels are inherently shortsighted, unenlightened, and divisive. In her posts, she speaks directly to people who use the label of narcissist to describe another person's behavior and seemingly to them, she writes:

"If you can't or don't see your own narcissistic patterns, this," which I'm assuming means her work, "could hold great insight for you."

Candice Schutter: Then she writes, "labels provide information about the labeler and not the labeleee."

Ah, yes. That old new age trope one that I am very, very familiar with. Everything is a projection. Whatever you think about someone else must be true about you. It's not them, it's you. It's always about the work you haven't yet done.

And well, wouldn't you know it [00:21:00] turns out she can help with that. At the end of the post, she shares a link to private sessions, offering her services to those who want to quote "learn more about radical responsibility and explore new ways of interacting with reality."

Yeah, I'll say.

A former colleague of mine who has nearly 20,000 Instagram followers and a thriving online business, posts to her feed regularly. Peppered in among occasional selfie sermons is a smattering of memes.

One reads: "You are the cause and solution to every problem you've ever had in your life." Another advises: "Be so positive that negative people delete you on social media."

A decade and a half ago, she and I traveled and taught together throughout the US and UK, and our friendship was a truly pivotal moment in my life. It was very helpful to me at the time. We went our separate ways back in 2009, [00:22:00] 2010, and a little over a year ago we reconnected. She was passing through Sedona for a light workers conference of some sort, and we shared a meal and a great conversation. She's beautiful, smart, charismatic, and a successful purveyor of online courses and love and light group awareness trainings. Even though we are on very different paths, I still consider her a friend. That said, I tend to totally avoid her online persona, because it's honestly pretty remarkable and slightly triggering to me that she's still pitching the new age snake oil that I once helped her to bottle and sell.

Circling back to Conspiratorship the book, in a chapter aptly entitled, Charisma, Belief, Bullshit, & Longing. Beres, Remski, and Walker write:

" If you're new to thinking about cults, conspiracies, propaganda, and pseudoscience charlatany, it's natural to look for the bright line that separates bad actors from those who cause harm in good [00:23:00] faith. This distinction matters psychologically. But the investigation is complicated by ecosystem forces, and by the metaphysics that create interpenetrating webs of causality that don't require huge amounts of malevolence or sociopathy to spin out real damage."

The authors then briefly explore the differences between spiritual influencers who knowingly versus unknowingly spread misinformation and cause harm. Then they go on to say:

"The most vexing category of influencer falls in between. These are people who seem to be earnestly high on their own supply, but not so much that they lose their entrepreneurial instincts. We might call them messianic marketers, believers who measure virtue in dollars."

Messianic marketers. Yes. A few come to mind.

In a capitalist culture, when the savior complex meets survival mode, that's when shit [00:24:00] goes sideways. And I oughta know, because I did that dance. *Be your own hero. Power your life.* These are taglines that I had etched across the front of my business cards.

Now, there's nothing wrong with being a champion for personal empowerment. But the deeper pulse beneath my service oriented messaging was a very real need to pay my bills. I had absolutely convinced myself that I was changing lives, when in fact, I was just trying to keep my own head above water and make a buck. Check out episode 47 if you want more on that.

But now let's take a closer look at one of the memes I referenced a moment ago. "You are the cause and solution to every problem you've ever had in your life." So let's look at how someone could buy into a dogma that insists we are all individually at cause for all the problems in our lives, and that we alone can fix it. That the solution to things like global pandemics, mass shootings, [00:25:00] pedophilia, Nazism, are as simple as self-care and love and light mindset shifts.

If you're confused by all this, it might be helpful to remember just how insular the world of financially stable new age spiritualists can be. Being at cause for all the things, this seems sort of feasible, and a little bit reassuring, when you're able to sequester yourself in a myopic reality where your needs are for the most part met and where everyone looks, thinks, and behaves like you. Folks in these spaces are steadfast in this conviction, because they've been taught that their privilege is something they have called in or energetically earned.

And it stands to new age reason that if each soul gets what it deserves, there's nothing more for each of us to do than to think positively and focus solely on the self. The best way to solve the world's problems is through clear thinking, self perfection of our [00:26:00] bodies, and the shoring up of good vibes.

And I feel at liberty to be this critical and to speak this plainly about this because this is the self-righteous headspace that I was once in. And make no mistake, as someone who lives right outside of Sedona, I'm gonna argue that new ageism is a religion of sorts. And I was once a diehard convert and proselytizer.

But back to my point, I cannot stress enough how much utopian ideals seem totally achievable when you're living in the insular world of woo wellness. Because if you are all in like me, you've shut out anything and everything that offers evidence to the contrary. You've deliberately detoxed and depoliticized your life to such a degree that the world looks pretty damn easy breezy. And sort of seems like it's working when you scroll through a carefully curated newsfeed.

But opting out of the real world isn't the same thing as actively [00:27:00] changing it for the better. And what's really been eye-opening for me is realizing now that I'm out of it, just how fucking oppressive these utopian ideals can be.

Candice Schutter: When I first decided to share my own cult recovery story, and this was before episode 33 ever dropped, a former Org colleague sent me a series of emails, all but begging me not to share the ugly details about my time with the company. She wrote many

emails and many words to me. Sometimes the tone was angry at other times, warm and encouraging. And then toward the end of it all, she made a request of me, writing:

"Please move through this victim lens and look and listen for the truly deeper pulse."

Victim lens. The deeper pulse. Both of these phrases really got me.

I mean, perhaps all she was saying was that accountability is a two-way street, and of course, I wholeheartedly agree with that.

But what was [00:28:00] motivating her to spend so much time talking me out of sharing my story? Did she really think that I was gonna throw a pity party parade? Or was she just making a case for my continued silence?

And am I in the victim lens when I tell the truth about people who treated me less than stellar? And is that a bad thing?

Now, I will agree that an obsession with blame can be very counterproductive when it's a primary and practice deflection of personal responsibility. But how about when we've been carrying shame that isn't our own for years, simply because it's been so frowned upon to speak four words?

I am a victim.

Why is this such a problem? Does using the word victim lock us in a trauma bond forever? Or can it be used to constructively liberate agency?

Now, side note, of course, the word victim may not apply to all instances [00:29:00] where harm happens. Sometimes after an honest accounting of events, it's easy for me to see how my messy humanity and another person's messy humanity have clashed in some way. And it's our private business to tend to that.

If I'm the one operating in blind spots or causing harm, it is my duty to own up to my mistakes and face some difficult truths about myself. Accountability requires humility and the admission "I am to blame." and therefore I will make an earnest and consistent effort to make repairs.

But sometimes harm is most definitely more one-sided. And when a pattern of misconduct is unapologetic and consistent, when I'm the one who's experienced the harm, particularly a harm that looks and feels like power over coercion or abuse, and my requests for accountability are not only ignored, but deflected, offloaded back [00:30:00] on me as shame. In my mind, the irony of the matter is, I am only truly a victim as long as I stay silent.

But it sucks royally when our requests for accountability are ignored, or when the narrative is spun back on us. Those who abuse their power will often do exactly this, insisting that our injuries are invented, exaggerated, or somehow invalid.

Which circles me all the way back to the original Sedona Event page post and the spiritual influencer who was insisting against all labels. If you'll remember, she wrote, "If you can't or don't see your own narcissistic patterns, this could hold great insight. Labels provide information about the labeler and not the labelee."

Now, she's not wrong that the word narcissist has become popularized, and as a result it's at times misunderstood and somewhat overused. And yet the argument she's making here, it honestly could have been taken [00:31:00] straight out of the narcissistic playbook. It's Gaslighting 101.

Could someone be mislabeled as a narcissist? Certainly, without a doubt, this has to be true. But it's also important to note that a clinical narcissist would never, ever agree to the label of narcissist. Those who regularly engage in this sort of power over abuse are typically offloading their own unresolved shame, and it's their victims who are expected to carry it.

It's not me. It's you. This is very often the default when unchecked harm is happening.

Candice Schutter: Gaslighting. Miriam Webster's made it the word of the year in 2022 when web searches for the term rose by 1740% in one year's [00:32:00] time. I first learned about it a decade ago when I was once again struggling in an intimate relationship. And the definition I read online at the time said something to the effect of "gaslighting is when a person is manipulated to second guess their own perceptions of reality through denial, deflection, or outright lies."

I remember staring slack jaw at the computer screen thinking, wait, what? There's an actual word for this? This, my most insidious relational trigger. That crazy making full body sensation of confusion and self-doubt that had cost me God knows how many sleepless nights wondering, am I crazy? Imagining things? Or just too fucking high maintenance for my own good?

Night after night, I'd replay events over and over again in my mind, trying to determine how I had once again misread the situation. I was probably remembering [00:33:00] things wrong. Taking things too personally. Mistaken in my perceptions. Wanting for all the wrong things.

Back in those days, being misunderstood was acutely painful for me. Which made gaslighting a surefire way to shut me up or to keep me coming back again and again to make another strong case for my worth. When I felt like bosses, colleagues, partners, or even randos on the street didn't get me. When I was labeled selfish, a bitch, naive, or without worth in any way, I would become desperate to prove otherwise. I do whatever was necessary to restore belonging, love, or approval. Even if it meant sacrificing my dignity in the process.

When I was in my mid thirties, I worked part-time as a cocktail waitress. One Friday evening, I turned the corner in the dish room and ran face-to-face into a new hire. He was the new sous chef, and I was toast. [00:34:00] The attraction was mutual, immediate, and red flag electric. I spent the better part of a year consumed by this toxic relationship. No matter how hard I tried, I just couldn't resist the disorienting lure of our attraction.

During a late night meetup about two weeks in, he and I sipped on vodka tonics at a local dive bar while he confided to me his personal history. It contains some very dark twists and turns that probably should have sent me running for the door. But his eyes were wet with emotion, I was likewise wounded, and each tender admission only pulled me in deeper. From that night on, every time my loyalty toward him wavered, due most often to the way his affections often wandered, I'd pull away protectively. And then he'd seduce me all over again, revealing yet another new and vulnerable part of himself over drinks that would lead to another late night sleepover.

But these moments of [00:35:00] intimacy were rare. He was, for the most part, emotionally unavailable. But our sexual connection was intoxicating, and it just kept me coming back for more. His touch was rough, and something about that was revelatory to me. The time we spent together was a disorienting blend of anxiety and elation, and it created an untenable trauma bond between us.

He had a closeted coke addiction, and I pretended not to notice, instead explaining away his dramatic mood swings using the psych degree I was still waiting tables to pay for. I gave him my own armchair mental health diagnosis of borderline personality disorder. Then I made excuses for his erratic behavior in the name of understanding and unconditional acceptance. Even as he lied to me pathologically for no reason.

And all of the half read self-help books that lined to my bookshelves inspired me to infuse our trauma fueled connection with meaning and purpose. My [00:36:00] attraction to him was so strong, it was sure, surely soulful. Deep down his intentions, they had to be pure.

But in reality, it was the chaos that had attracted me to him. I was glamored by the intensity of his attention, and the way it seemed to fly in at me out of nowhere before all of a sudden disappearing all over again.

I was in an altered state. Occupying a space that was sort of otherworldly. While he was doing lines in the bathroom, our bond was my drug of choice. I fixated on our non-relationship full-time. Stopped eating for the most part. And worked overtime to distract myself during his long emotional absences.

But I wasn't asleep at the wheel the whole time. I would regularly confront him about his avoidance and blatant deceptions. And each and every time he'd shake his head, his jade green eyes fixed on me, conveying a mixture of innocence and confusion.

"Oh, [00:37:00] no," he'd never said that. I had clearly misunderstood, or I was remembering it wrong. Ghosting me? Gosh, no way. He *had* texted me, multiple times. He'd shake his head emphatically, brow furrowed with concern for my wellbeing. "Do you wanna see my phone?" He'd offer incredulously. At which point I would decline feeling too needy and ashamed to insist upon such an unwarranted violation of his privacy.

On and on it went. It's not what you think it is.

Each time I questioned his motives, the subtext of every text was, it's you, not me. You are being irrational, insecure, unreasonable, too needy. Or my personal favorite: you're just overthinking things.

I'd leave our conversations feeling flustered, self-conscious, unsure of my own sanity. This went on for nearly a year.

[00:38:00] Eventually, I had enough. Breaking things off was a whole other shit show given his leadership role at the restaurant. The all male management team couldn't seem to wrap their heads around our situation and what a healthy resolution might look like. I was told: he's just being himself; you really should have known better.

It was all on me to learn from my mistakes, to ignore his continued advances, to avoid the back hallway, the dish room, and the wait station where he'd corner me and insist upon eye contact till I was putty in his hands all over again.

I almost quit my job despite the fact that I had worked there three to four times as long as him, until one day I woke up and realized what in the actual fuck?

Instead of leaving, I wrote a letter to HR detailing his continued advances, admitting my part in our regretful involvement, and requesting support moving forward. A phone call from the corporate team was [00:39:00] all it took and things leveled out soon after that. He moved on with his affections. And I sought the support of a therapist.

He and I continued working together for a number of years, and once the spell had lifted, we even became distantly friendly. And it was in those later years that I marveled it how had this even happened in the first place?

But I kind of knew, because even though this relationship was the worst of the bunch, it hadn't really been a one-off event. Toward the end of my relationship just prior to him, I'd caught my partner shaving his privates in the shower before heading out for a night on the town. When I inquired as to the timing of this typically rare grooming ritual, I was shamed for my insecure paranoia.

Of course, it was just a coincidence. Why was I making up stories?

A few months later when we were breaking up, for the second and final time, I learned that he'd hooked up with a female coworker that same night.

Go [00:40:00] figure.

But this isn't just about the men in my life.

When I first met my current partner back in 2012, he had a close female friend. And it's worth noting that around the time we met, they just very recently ended an on and off again, friends with benefits arrangement.

Nevertheless, when he and I started dating, he asked for my blessing that they remain friends. I was a bit wary, but totally willing to roll with it. After all, she was his bestie. I had no interest in denying him a platonic relationship that was important to him.

But the lines of emotional intimacy between the two of them were continually blurry, particularly when it came to her demands on his time. Each time I questioned things, he'd reassure me. But even so, something always felt a bit off about it. When I pressed the matter, she stepped in emphatically insisting that it was my insecurities, not their friendship that was the real problem here.

And here's the thing [00:41:00] about gaslighting. There's usually a modicum of truth buried in the center of all the projection. And that's why it sticks. I *was* insecure and anxious in any new relationship. I did freak the fuck out unnecessarily about next to nothing sometimes. There was no denying that I had abandonment issues.

And so she continually leveraged this fact using it against me and the both of us really. When he or I would attempt to draw a clear boundary between them, she'd chide us for our weak willed codependency, something she knew we'd both long been working on.

Her attempts to gaslight me and us worked for far longer than I care to admit, but eventually I just couldn't take it anymore. I drew a hard line in the sand. Either it's her or it's me. Take your pick. I'm done.

And done I was. I loved my partner. And I'd gotten to a point where I was more [00:42:00] than willing to sacrifice our connection for the sake of my own sanity.

As it turns out, he was relieved. I'd done the thing he'd been too afraid to do himself. He made his choice, and we're still together 10 years later.

One more story.

Back in my late twenties when I was first getting culty with it, I was in an intimate partnership with a woman. She and I were together for two years, and it was a pivotal relationship in my life through which I learned a lot and grew a ton.

But as partners, we didn't have staying power. When the time came to end things, I did my best to draw healthy for me boundaries, but they never seemed to take. Partially because of our individual attachment issues. We both run anxious, making separation difficult and painful.

But also because I was sending mixed messages her way. I didn't really know how to speak truthfully about what I did and did not want from her and [00:43:00] us. And I'd sabotaged a long-term relationship just two years prior, in part to be with her. I still had a lot of shame and regret about my handling of my last breakup. I didn't wanna cause harm the way I had before.

And she had big needs, and she wasn't afraid to express them. So during our breakup, each time I would find myself wanting something different than her, I would gaslight myself back into relational compliance. I'd give in into her impassioned desires every single time, and then resent her like hell a day later.

I eventually had to cease communication entirely in order to end things. It was the only way I could keep myself from self abandonment. Fortunately, I got over my need to please, and we're still friends all these years later.

Now, I'm hoping that all of these examples help to illustrate what gaslighting is, how it can look a lot of [00:44:00] different ways and the complications of breaking free from it.

Sometimes gaslighting is pathological and overt, and at other times it's a subtly coercive cloud of persuasion that we walk ourselves through. Gaslighting is common in emotionally abusive relationships, and it's also a defense mechanism that any one of us might deftly employ from time to time in an unconscious effort to offload our feelings, deflect responsibility, or to protect ourselves from a truth we're not yet ready to admit.

And being gaslit isn't as simple as being misled or being lied to in some way. We're not being gaslit every time we disagree with someone or just because we have been invited to examine our perceptions and biases.

No, gaslighting is a very real deal qualitative experience. It's an offloading of accountability that leads us to second guess our own sanity. And if we aren't careful, we might even [00:45:00] internalize its message.

Recently a friend shared in our After The Org group that she once witnessed a group of women debate whether or not it's even appropriate to call people out on their gaslighting behavior. They argued, isn't this just a perpetuation of victim mentality?

Well, I guess it depends on who you ask. The gaslighter probably thinks so.

But seriously, I would argue that collective gaslighting is a thing.

And what's collective gaslighting? Honestly, I'm not totally sure. I might have just made it up. But in my mind it's when we're gaslit to such a degree that we're kind of sort of indoctrinated to pass it on. We see this sort of thing in homophobia, for example, or women hating on other women.

At any rate, I don't think it's any accident that gaslighting, narcissism, and cult dynamics have all become such a big part of the cultural zeitgeist simultaneously at this same moment in history. It's all very up right now [00:46:00] because these dynamics are inextricably connected.

Candice Schutter: The desire to be known is a healthy one. We all need people in our lives who mirror us accurately. Who perceive us as we see ourselves. But we certainly can't expect this from everyone. And when someone sees us differently than we would like, how do we

know if they're reflecting back something helpful? And how do we know when we're being gaslit?

Unfortunately, it's not always easy to parse out. All we can do is our best to own our shit, to be self-aware, to be open to critical inquiry. And also to honor a felt sense of when we're being grossly manipulated or softly coerced into doubting or questioning our own sense of what is real and true.

From what I understand, gaslighting happens when the gaslighter has [00:47:00] maxed out their capacity to accept accountability or reflect upon their own actions. As I've already noted, it's a self-protective offloading of shame.

Now, this isn't an excuse. It's an explanation. And understanding doesn't have to mean enabling. I spent year after year and relationship after relationship doing emotional labor that was not mine to do, never leaving quite enough room for the feelings that were mine to feel. And all of this was made so much more complicated by New age dogma that had hammered into me. No one can make you feel anything. And your reactivity is the real problem.

Once again, two reframes that can be quite helpful until they concretize into dogma.

Case in point, never be a victim.

This thought terminating cliché implies that victimhood isn't a thing that happens to [00:48:00] us. It's either something we choose or it's something that's assigned to us on purpose.

In the early aughts, I was an avid student of metaphysics and New Thought Ministries. The Science of Mind and a Course in Miracles were two texts that I underlined and cited from regularly. A Course in Miracles is a 1300 page text that was published in 1976. It's printed on lightweight paper in a Bible esque sort of presentation. And it's very doubtful that this is by accident, given that the book's author Helen Shukman claims it was a quote, "inner dictation" from Jesus Christ himself.

Matthew Remski, one of the authors I referenced earlier was once in an ACIM inspired cult, and he does some fascinating deep dives on the topic. Especially as it relates to Marianne Williamson, who helped popularize the book in 1992 when she referenced it on the Oprah Winfrey show.

Williamson is making her second bid for the White [00:49:00] House, which if you ask me, takes some serious hubris on her part, given how far it is outside of her high priestess wheelhouse. Remski has done a few episodes that have, no doubt, informed my take on this, and if you're interested, be sure to check out my personal favorite episode 148, which is entitled Marianne Williamson & Asshole Jesus. I'll link to it in the show notes.

Like other spiritual influencers, Marianne Williamson has some valuable things to say, and I agree with her some of the time. But, and here we go again, despite her public love and light sermons, some on her campaign staff have alleged emotional and verbal abuse behind closed

doors. Which at this point might make anyone wonder, Asshole Jesus, is this ever not the case?

In a Course in Miracles, there's a commonly cited lesson entitled, "In my defenselessness my safety lies." This entire section argues that [00:50:00] defensiveness of any kind is an egoic weakness, and that all safety is an illusion.

One sentence reads, "we look past dreams today and recognize that we need no defense because we are created unassailable without all thought or wish or dream in which attack has any meaning."

It's really "turn the other cheek" molly-laced on steroids.

Now, metaphorically speaking, turn the other cheek is not bad advice. In some instances. Similar to cool your jets, take a beat, don't be so quick to attack. There's a time and a place for all that for sure. But in this new age Bible of sorts, this incessant advice is meant to be taken literally. This idea that each and every time we feel attacked, it isn't a thing. It's just a failure of perception. [00:51:00]

And it might seem like I'm being nitpicky here, but if you read this text, you'll really get just how often it insists that life as we know it is just an illusion and that all the pain and hardship we're experiencing is nothing but an error in our thinking. It teaches: do not resist, anything, ever. All is just as the divine intended it. It's not hard to see why this is so problematic.

I'm no brawler. I'm not one to get tangled in unnecessary drama. But I have to ask, isn't defense at certain times warranted? Should we really disable our instinctual reflex to resist at all times? And are we really safer when saying, oh hell no, is totally off the table?

Again, chronic reactivity can wreak havoc on our lives. I've been there. I've done that. But is it wise [00:52:00] to swing to the opposite extreme where we condition ourselves to never react, feel wrong, or cry out when injured?

I once said to a friend, and she and I were both in the new age world. "I love you, and I also very often feel unsafe in this relationship." To which she quite warmly replied Well, you know, that doesn't have anything to do with me, right?"

I remember being deeply conflicted hearing these words because I knew what she was getting at. It's not anyone else's job to make you feel safe. Your insecurities are your own. I get that. And also, it felt like a deflection of responsibility. Because I believe that relational safety is something we have to work on. It's so much more than an inside job. But high-minded dogma that insists otherwise can distance us from nuance [00:53:00] and the responsive curiosity that feeds long-term connection.

And it's not that we don't care. Even the woo wellness world is filled with genuine helpers, with wide open hearts and lots of love to give. But altruism in action is very often derailed by the premise that all suffering is instructive. Dogma is used to justify inequity, hardship,

illness, abuse, all of it as spiritual redirections that will in time reveal deeper meaning and truth.

But just because we can make meaning from our pain. Just because we might even find greater purpose on the other side of surviving hellacious atrocities. Does that have to mean that the suffering we experienced was somehow meant?

If so, why? And how far should we take it? Should we see all abusive trauma bonded relationships as spiritually fortifying rather than harmful? Should we really be making our trauma holy?

I [00:54:00] guess I kind of sort of already know part of the answer, because sometimes we have to make meaning from our pain in order to survive it. But we also have to draw the line somewhere, or else our survivalist tendencies will make us complacent toward the suffering of others.

For years, I lost touch with my outrage, which I now see as fuel for restorative justice. Now, I'm more willing to get angry when it's warranted, and to think critically about the stories I'm telling myself. And it's all landing me in a messy middle where hardline dogma just doesn't cut it.

Once again, never always.

Don't be reactive. This can be a helpful reframe in the face of life's little inconveniences, or even small T traumas. But it can also be a way of gaslighting ourselves or others into slow burn complacency with an unhealthy status quo.

Forgive and forget. This is a useful reminder when our [00:55:00] partner or someone we love makes a mistake, then later apologizes and makes meaningful repairs. It's healthy to let go of everyday resentments. But when a victim of abuse is recovering from trauma, especially when the perpetrator of said abuse is unwilling to be held to account. Pressure to forgive can feel like a violence on its own.

Do your own work is good advice when we keep experiencing the same relational challenges over and over again, even though the personalities and parties involved keep changing. When there's something we need to look at and reconcile within. But when self-inquiry isn't reciprocal, no amount of inner work will ever make up for a one-sided relationship.

And this is perhaps the aspect of new age ideology that I find most damaging both individually and collectively. This is assertion that if we each do our own myopically focused inner work, the outer world will somehow magically align itself [00:56:00] accordingly.

This is the narcissism at the core of New Age self-help.

Thanks to my research into these topics, Facebook's algorithms have started showing me even more posts similar to the ones I cited earlier. The other day, my feed displayed a meme that read:

"Some people were not put here to evolve. They're here to remind you what it looks like if you don't."

It was probably meant to be a joke, but there were over 200,000 likes, loves, and laughing face emojis on this baby, and I wanna take a second to read between the lines here.

It sounds like what it's saying is that some people on this planet were put here,

not for their own sake, but for *you*. For the purpose of bolstering your feelings of spiritual superiority. They haven't done, and never will do, 'the real work' that only you and your people know about. Therefore, they don't know, and will never know,

how their lives could and should comply with your standards. But hey, it's okay that they don't know because that's [00:57:00] why they're here, right? So you have someone to punch down at.

Does it sound like I'm being too critical here? I don't think so. Because this tongue, tongue-in-cheek meme points to supremacist dynamics that make this culty world go round. Spiritual supremacy is just modern day white supremacy laundered for mainstream consumption.

How so? Because it's a point of view that dehumanizes and ignores systemic disparities entirely. 'They' are the way they are because they're less than or because they just don't know any better. Because God, divine privilege, bad vibes, karma.

It's maddening. And when I say that, I mean that I'm angry at myself for not seeing through the bullshit that I was imbibing, and in some cases selling, much sooner than this.

The recent Prime Video release, Shiny Happy People, features survivors of IBLP, a fundamentalist Christian ministry that many alleged to be a [00:58:00] cult due to, oh so many of their teachings, homeschooling practices, and alleged sexual abuse of minors. One survivor describes how she was able to overlook the culty dysfunction for so many years.

She says, " if you are preoccupied with self-examination, you're not going to have enough energy to challenge the system itself."

That's right.

And this is the moral injury at the heart of supremacist rhetoric. When we are fixated on self perfecting in the name of high-minded ideals that supposedly benefit all, we stop noticing, let alone resisting the harm that's still happening all around us. We are so siloed in self-consciousness that we also stop actively caring for people who exist outside of our current social positioning.

But deep down inside, most of us know that something ain't right, and that victimhood is real. So we offer our thoughts and [00:59:00] prayers. We engage in symbolic actions that soothe our anxiety and feelings of helplessness. Which isn't wrong, so much as it is incomplete.

Self-regulation is important, it's key. And spiritual practices can really help with this. But sometimes this includes magical thinking, which can be soothing to the soul, but is not a practical way out of this mess we are in. And it is in this regard that this entire series is self-critiquing. For the last few years, I've really been asking myself, why haven't I done more? Why have I been unable or unwilling to speak truth to power and actively challenge the status quo?

And I've really come to realize that the undercurrent that's been running strongest for me, that's been keeping me from standing in strong and vocal advocacy for myself and others brings us to the meat of this episode. So much of the cognitive dissonance that I am wrestling with, gravitates around one [01:00:00] single solitary idea. Victimhood.

Candice Schutter: I find it so interesting that the root of the word *victim* is the same as the word *vicarious*, which means 'to take the place of another.'

The word *victim* has its roots in times of religious sacrifice. In the late 15th century, a *victim* was any living thing that was killed and offered at an altar for the purpose of appeasing the gods. It wasn't until the mid 1600s that the word began to take on its more contemporary meaning.

And I can't help but wonder whether or not our collective ambivalence around victimhood stems from this oppressive and violent history. Are we still sacrificing one another to stay in the good graces of powers that be?

Victim blaming, I am gonna describe it as the [01:01:00] gaslighting of any individual who's experienced physical, psychological, or spiritual harm. Victim blaming is a culturally supported trauma reflex, and it happens everywhere we human - in our schools, our homes, workplaces, online spaces. It's even evidenced in the way we set up our global economies.

And generally speaking, said-blame, it's not doled out equally. Due to longstanding social hierarchies, and here I'm talking about race, gender, ability, class, so on. Certain groups of folks are much more likely to be blamed and shamed than others.

One of the most commonly cited theories around why humans victim shame is the cognitive bias known as the just world fallacy. Coined by Melvin Lerner in the early 1960s. The just world bias is when we default to the belief that the world is a just and fair place, and that if we hold out long enough, justice will always prevail in the [01:02:00] end. It's a psychological defense mechanism that shields us from feelings of helplessness and helps us to make meaning in a chaotic world.

So how is this related to victim blaming? Well, people who say that they've suffered harm are very often closely critiqued, dismissed in their claims, and sometimes even ostracized due to the perceived contagion of their plight.

Because if we believe that the world is a fair and just place where moral compliance and hard-earned goodness is rewarded, well then, bad things just don't happen to good people. And if and when they do, it must be because those on the receiving end have done something

to bring it upon themselves, or because it was the only way for them to learn a very important spiritual lesson.

It's the presumption that it's somehow possible to control for every possible outcome or to be somehow immune to collateral damage and the offloading of trauma from the people around us.

[01:03:00] Certainly, you could have done something to avoid this. Let's just keep our focus on the part you're responsible for. You really shouldn't let your anger own you. According to the just world bias, people say these things, not because they're assholes, but more often because they're trying to soothe themselves. To make sense of a nonsensical world, to assuage feelings of anxiety and powerlessness in the face of fuck all.

Sometimes we need for there to be a justifiable reason for other people's suffering, because if we can figure out what happened to them, maybe then we can make sure it will never happen to us.

We might turn away from the so-called drama because we just can't stomach it. Or maybe we micromanage the narrative. Okay, tell me all of what happened in great detail, so that I can pinpoint for myself what you failed to see, notice, or perfectly respond to. By critiquing someone else's improper handling of the situation, we can make ourselves feel safe again and confident [01:04:00] in our ability to protect ourselves,.

Which explains why victims, of power over abuse in particular, are often the ones who are put on trial. Made to prove their innocence. And that the wounds that they've suffered were not somehow earned. That they are worthy of our support and attention.

Which brings us to another bias at play.

The fundamental attribution error is our tendency to attribute another person's action to their character rather than looking at external situational factors outside of their control. It's a close cousin of the just world bias, because it's likewise working from the premise that people do, or in this case, experience bad things because they are bad or wrong in some way.

Yeah, of course, sexual assault is just awful. But as a woman, she really should have been more careful. I mean, what did she expect when she ordered a third cocktail?

Yeah, I was so sad to hear about so-and-so's recent cancer [01:05:00] diagnosis. It's such tragic news, and I really feel for her and her family. Although, have you seen how she eats? I mean, it's really, no wonder.

I could go on, but you get the gist. Once again, blame defaults toward the victim who really could have avoided it if they tried.

Now, having said all that, it's really important to understand the other side of arguments around victimhood. Because the fundamental attribution error can also work the other way around.

My mother in love, but not in-law, whom I adore, is 87 years old. She's experienced a tremendous amount of trauma in her life, and I think it's fair to say that she's suffered from complex PTSD since childhood. Due to said trauma, which I won't go into, her chronic dysregulation very often presents as paranoia. As a result, she's had an almost impossible time sustaining relationships.

[01:06:00] She is a pure delight of a person to engage with. She's warm, empathic, funny, and as generous as they come. In the beginning, her new relationships start off beautifully. But at some point, inevitably, the other person says or does something that rubs her the wrong way. And she reflexively attributes a difference of opinion or perspective to some character flaw in them.

Anxiety builds and the narrative escalates in her mind, and soon enough, she's imagining that they must be out to get her in some way. At this point, she sabotages the relationship before they can take advantage of her, ending things in an effort to quote, protect herself.

It's the same story every time. And honestly, it's utterly heartbreaking. I've watched it happen more times than I can count, with family members, friends, healthcare workers, financial advisors. And there's often no talking her out of her contempt once it's landed. Chris and I [01:07:00] are quite literally the only two people in the world that she trusts, and even our bond with her is at times precarious.

We both love her beyond words. And it can be difficult to do love with someone who's convinced the world, and you, are out to get them.

Which is really, I suppose, what people mean when they say someone is stuck in victim mentality. They're trapped in a psychological web of impossibility. It's a fixed mindset that says bad things happen no matter what I do. So why bother doing anything different at all

At the core of victim mentality is something known as learned helplessness. A psychological adaptation born of trauma, learned helplessness is that thing where people who've had traumatic experiences genuinely believe that they will never escape the lair of their past, no matter what they do.

Victim mentality and learned helplessness can go hand in hand. And I wanna be clear that this is a very real thing, when an [01:08:00] individual simply does not have the willingness or the capacity to see how they might be contributing to their own lived experiences of pain and trauma. So instead, they just keep repeating the same cycle over and over and over again. That is, unless they find their way out of it through long-term specialized trauma therapy.

And yet having said all that, victim mentality as an assumed everyday adaptation, this is a hand that's *way* overplayed in new age wellness circles. And what I mean by this is naming the harm we've experienced isn't at all the same thing as becoming over-identified with it.

In my humble opinion, this I must never be a victim paranoia, isn't really about protecting ourselves from victim mentality. I think it's actually a reflection of a deeper insecurity.

Perhaps the fear of admitting the pain we feel. Maybe it's a self-protection from a victim shaming culture that [01:09:00] surrounds us.

You've heard me mention the HBO docuseries, *The Vow* a number of times over the course of the series, because its release was a helpful turning point in my own personal journey of cult recovery. And back in January of this year, I sat down with NXIVM whistleblowers and hosts of the *A Little Bit Culty* podcast, Sarah Edmondson and Nippy Ames for an insightful conversation. That's episode 43, if you missed it.

Now, if you watch the *vow*, you may recognize the name Nicki Clyne. We saw a lot of her in season two. She was one of a small group of Keith Raniere loyalists who continued to defend him years after his conviction and arrest.

Well, in late March of this year, it was hella big news in the cultiverse when, out of nowhere, Nicki released a public statement writing: "I have changed my position on Keith Raniere. I no longer believe he's a man of noble character, as I once did."

In this statement, she shared a bit about what had drawn her into the cult and what it was [01:10:00] like waking up and speaking out against her mentor after being one of his most vocal public defenders.

She writes: "Little did I know that this," and by this, she means the choice to join Keith Raniere's inner Circle. "Little did I know that this would lead to 18 years of suffering, self-rejection, and the sacrifice of my own wants, desires, and priorities. I say this not for sympathy, and I am not seeking any retribution. I have no one to blame but myself and my myopic view that Keith was the ultimate guide for my spiritual advancement."

Nicki suffered psychological manipulation and sexual abuse for more than a decade, and she has a long road of recovery ahead of her. Not only because she was on the receiving end of so much harm, but also because she was a victim turned perpetrator.

Trauma specialist and cult recovery expert, Daniel Shaw, describes it well when he says, narcissistic leaders "violate our boundaries and then teach us to violate other people's [01:11:00] boundaries on their behalf."

This is spot on in Nicki's case. So in addition to grappling with the harm that she both experienced and perpetuated. She also has to endure an onslaught of public criticism.

I took a quick scroll through the comment feed beneath her post just a few days into this announcement. And damn, so many of the comments are critical and biting.

What took her so long? How about all the people she hurt along the way? And why should we even care about her feelings after what she's done? On and on it went a churning sea of shame and cynicism.

I think one of the reasons why victims get such a bad rap can be summed up in the phrase *playing the victim*.

So I've already talked about victim mentality. That thing where someone is psychologically stuck in a state of learned helplessness. And I've defined victim blaming, what it is and why we point fingers at people who have experienced [01:12:00] legitimate harm. Suggesting, or at times insisting, that it's their mindset or their choices that have landed them where they are. And if I haven't made it clear enough yet, I'm here to say that victimhood is real.

And now I wanna talk about why it's so critically important that we differentiate the actual experience of victimhood from instances when the idea itself is co-opted.

Sarah Schulman published her book, *Conflict Is Not Abuse*, back in 2016. But I only heard about it recently. And I gotta be honest with you, I almost didn't read it.

Conflict is Not Abuse. I cringed hard the first time I heard the book's title. Now it turns out that I don't disagree with the overall premise, and I'll get to all that in a minute. But I was wary of it because gaslighting, and even more so because of how [01:13:00] I first heard about it.

A friend of mine was recommended Schulman's book by someone immediately following separation from a dysfunctional relationship, a relationship in which my friend had felt consistently deceived, manipulated, and emotionally mistreated.

Needless to say, this person was a live wire of emotions in the aftermath of a very painful parting of ways. So when during this very tender time, someone offered, Hey fyi, conflict is not abuse and, you know, you really should read this book.

Let's just say it didn't land so well. It only added insult to injury.

I couldn't get the book's title out of my head, so just recently I ordered it. And I'm really glad that I did. Because I've since read it cover to cover.

I appreciate this book as an exercise in critical thinking. Having said that, it is not a book that I would recommend to just anyone. Because despite making some very helpful and important arguments that I can very much get behind, and again, I'll touch upon all [01:14:00] that in a minute, Schulman's approach to this topic at different times throughout the book might be read as a bit callous and or stigmatizing to trauma survivors. So as a lead into referencing this body of work, I just wanna say that I feel very adamantly that it should not be prescribed as self-help, especially to anyone recovering from abuse.

Now, ironically, the book spends very little time exploring what actually is the critical difference between conflict and abuse? Instead, it focuses on paths to reconciliation and on how the word abuse is so often co-opted by those who are causing real systemic harm. This is fan freaking tastic if you ask me, more on that in a sec.

But at times, Schulman writes about victimhood with the familiar paternalism that I find very off-putting. I feel like there's a reductive undercurrent running through the pages, this implication that more often than not when someone uses the word victim, that this [01:15:00] equates with an abnegation of responsibility. As if saying, I am a victim of X, is the same

thing as being stuck in the place of learned helplessness that I spoke of earlier. As if one can't possibly be a victim without losing a sense of agency,

pointing fingers, and getting entirely mired in victim mentality.

And I just wanna say that I feel like

these pitiful characterizations of victimhood have really gotta stop. It just lends to a culture of silence, because who among us wants to see ourselves that way? So when shit happens, we suck it up and default to, oh no, not me, *I'm* not a victim.

These warranted sensitivities aside, I do wanna highlight what I really appreciate about this book and Schulman's perspective. Which is the way in which she consistently speaks to how playing the victim, those are my words not hers, consistently shows up in power over dynamics. When in her own words, Schulman writes about what she describes as "the [01:16:00] overstatement of harm, as a justification for cruelty."

Now in this context, she's speaking about what happens when those who are in power flip the narrative, so to speak, and people with less power are "falsely positioned as dangerous, when in fact they are the ones endangered and in desperate need of outside intervention."

Yes.

These are moments that are all too common, when the one doing the oppressing cries out 'abuse' whenever they're met with justifiable restorative resistance.

In such instances, power players will very often use this perceived, or in some cases entirely fabricated, sense of personal violation as cause to justify further abuse, punishment, bullying, marginalization, etc.

The war in Ukraine is a perfect example. But let's look at another one.

On April 6th of this year, two Democratic lawmakers were expelled from the Tennessee legislature after protesting [01:17:00] against gun violence from the floor of the State House of Representatives.

Justin Jones and Justin Pearson, both Black men, along with Gloria Johnson, a white woman led chants using a megaphone at the house lectern. Jones and Pearson were expelled, and Johnson held onto her seat thanks to a single vote. Prior to the final vote around their expulsion, each representative was given the opportunity to speak to the House chamber.

I watched about an hour of footage of these exchanges, and I'll never forget the disturbing and memorable moment when Republican representative Andrew Farmer appearing visibly shaken and indignant, described Justin Pearson's choice to protest as quote, a temper tantrum.

Pearson stood calmly at the podium while his colleague chastised him, and I used that word very deliberately, given Farmer's body language and choice of words. His tone was unmistakably, patronizing.

Pearson's response, on the other hand, was remarkably self [01:18:00] restrained. And when it was his turn to speak, he responded calmly asking his colleagues who were listening in more than once, "how many of you want to be spoken to like that?"

Let us not forget that Jones and Pearson had chosen to join their constituents in the expression of their constitutional right to hold elected officials accountable for a pattern of inaction, in this case, around gun legislation just six days after six people, three of which were nine year olds, were shot and killed in a Tennessee elementary school.

And so, in the aftermath of yet another act of murder and senseless violence, it was the protesters that fell under hard scrutiny for their lack of decorum.

Jones and Pearson were made an example of, expelled as a punishment for their resistance to the politically gridlocked status quo. And as is very often the case, resistance was made to be the real problem.

Tone [01:19:00] policing is a term that was popularized in the early 2010s by feminists and anti-racism activists who were seeking language to describe how their political opponents often criticized the way that they presented their arguments rather than engaging with the arguments themselves. Tone policing is a smokescreen, often used to deflect blame and divert attention away from relational accountability. Every woman I know has been subjected to this utter horseshit and has been disallowed the experience of their outrage because well, it's impolite to express discontent, pain, or anger, period, end of story, now would you please shut the hell up?

And it should be noted that because tone policing is an offloading of trauma, the intersectionality of race, gender, and class even, can and does increase its likelihood. Women of color experience tone policing far more than white women, and very often, regardless of their actual real time demeanor. A white person's racialized [01:20:00] anxiety can invent danger even in the most benign of circumstances.

Regardless of how it shows up, it's fucking maddening to be gaslit in this way, especially because tone policing disregards our perspective entirely. Because in reality, it isn't at all about what we're saying, or even the way we're saying it. It's about the fact that we're saying anything at all.

Tone policing is just another clever manipulation that keeps victims silent and those with privilege in power.

And we know that tone policing is about power and influence, because the rules seem to apply more to some than others. Those at the top of the hierarchy often have carte blanc permission to express their rage and discontent in a way that those below them are not permitted to do.

Which brings us back to Shulman's book, where she writes about dynamics in group supremacy. She writes, "one group deserves the right to be unquestioned. And they are entitled to dehumanize the other whom they misrepresent [01:21:00] as 'a threat'... Indifferent to the pain they cause and the long-term negative consequences of their actions."

If you've seen the HBO series *Succession*, you've seen examples of how this can play out. Loosely inspired by the real world dynasty of media tycoon, Rupert Murdoch, CEO of Fox News, the fictitious Roy family is as wealthy and entitled as they come.

Logan Roy is the patriarch at the center of this family cult drama. And throughout the series, we watch as his four grown children vie for his favor and their inheritance, entirely indifferent to the collateral damage they cause along the way.

And there's a moment in the drama that really stood out to me, when they're attempting to bury a company scandal that involved sexual assault and I think murder even. The victims of these attacks were apparently migrant workers and sex workers, so the family and their associates repeatedly dismiss the importance of the charges callously using the [01:22:00] phrase "No RPI" repeatedly, which we later learned stands for 'no real persons involved.'

In other words, those low on the social hierarchy don't deserve our sympathies, let alone accountability and justice.

Similarly in her book, Schulman makes repeated note of the AIDS epidemic, where in millions were outcasts, condemned to suffer and die in the eighties and early nineties, all while being scapegoated as the real source of the problem. As she so succinctly describes it, "bullies often conceptualized themselves as being under attack when they are the ones originating the pain."

Yeah, that tracks.

And so playing the victim is a phrase that I now reserve solely for power over scenarios such as these. In my mind, someone is playing the victim when the harm they cite is a deflection of accountability or a hyperbolized or [01:23:00] fabricated departure from the truth.

And the point is, being held to account is not at all the same thing as being on the receiving end of abuse. When power players 'play the victim,' the real victim in the scenario's injuries are not only disregarded, they're left doing all or most of the emotional labor when it comes to repair, accountability, or the restoration of connection. Their needs are once again subjugated. And in this way, the power over abuse is still happening.

I think one of the things at the heart of this debate is our limited cultural understanding of what actual accountability might look like. I spoke to this briefly in the intro to episode 58 where I referenced Mia Mingus as well as an article by Kate McCord with the Virginia's Sexual and Domestic Violence Action Alliance, where she outlines the critical differences between accountability and punishment.

I'll link to the article in the show notes, but I wanna touch upon just a couple of passages that really stood out [01:24:00] to me.

McCord writes, "punishment is steeped in either or thinking one is either guilty or innocent, a perpetrator or a victim. To explore and find alternatives to punishment. We must move away from simple binaries and acknowledge that all of us both commit and suffer harm at some point in our lives."

Now so far, that tracks with what I was taught in wellness circles. But then she takes it a few essential steps further, describing how focusing less on retribution makes us more available to repair and restorative justice.

She continues. "The process of accountability is founded on the premise that when a harm is done, the harm creates an obligation to the person harmed and often to others in a group or community. Accountability builds connection by acknowledging the harm and its impact."

Yes, to all that.

And also, as I've just demonstrated in the [01:25:00] tone policing example that I gave, the realities of shared accountability are often exceedingly complex, given the fact that very often those who are being called toward it lack the capacity to acknowledge, let alone repair, the harm they've caused. And here we must examine the importance of the victim label.

It's unreasonable to assert that there's no need for such an identity when all around us there are power dynamics at play. It feels both naive and insensitive to expect someone with less power, influencer, or social standing to simply shrug off or rise above an abuse of power, especially when it's being ignored. It's painful and unfair for them to do this emotional labor on top of healing from the abuse they've already experienced.

And so in the best of cases, it's victim advocates who call for accountability, shielding the traumatized person from the line of fire, so to speak.

Now, in my personal and professional experience, when we [01:26:00] admit that there is such a thing as victimhood, we're very often forced to turn and face our own vulnerabilities and the unaddressed traumas that we carry. Weaknesses we'd rather not admit. Pains we'd rather not feel.

Anyone who's actually grappled with abuse or any deep and lasting harm knows that tending to the unspent anguish inside of us, and the shame that we've since internalized around it all, this is difficult and agonizing work. But it's work worth doing because in time it frees us from anger, shame, and the inability to accept responsibility for our own blind spots. When we stop carrying the pain that was at one time offloaded onto us, then we can stop passing it on to others.

So I guess what I'm saying is, and I could be totally wrong here, bullies, narcissists, culty, conspiritualists. Maybe they need to believe in a world [01:27:00] without victims because to admit that they exist would be to not only take responsibility for the harm that they

themselves may have caused, but it would also mean accepting the fact that they may have caused it because they themselves may have at some point in time been victimized.

Ouch.

I know the feeling.

It's hard work. But it's necessary. And it might just be our only way forward.

END – Ep.59

Thank you so much again for tuning in and if you made it this far, I hope you'll consider supporting this work. You can learn more over at patreon.com/thedeeperpulse.

I'll see you next time.