

0:00:02.2 Nicole Antoinette: Welcome to the Pop-up Pod, a new podcast that's similar to a pop-up shop or a pop-up restaurant in that it's sporadic. Sometimes it's here and sometimes it's not. Each 12-episode season dives deep into a single question and our question for season one is this: Should I get married? I'm your host, Nicole Antoinette. 36 years old, divorced, close friends with my former spouse, child-free by choice, self-employed, almost three years into a committed romantic relationship with a guy I love and I'm genuinely unsure of how I feel about marriage, at least for myself. This uncertainty got me thinking, how do other people really feel about their own relationships? What's working? What's not working? Let's find out. 12 episodes, 12 different people, honest conversations about the joys and struggles of long-term romantic relationships. In today's episode, you'll get to meet Melissa Fabello. Melissa, whose pronouns are she, her, is one of my favorite people to interview. She's an educator whose work centers on the politics of wellness with a special focus on sex, relationships and bodies. Her goal is to help her audiences explore what it means to be in right relationship with ourselves and with others through a liberatory social justice lens.

0:01:22.8 NA: In this conversation, Melissa and I talk primarily about commitment. What does it mean to be committed to someone, particularly if like Melissa, you don't wanna get married? What does commitment look like in real daily life? We also talk about relationship anarchy, about maintaining friendships and outside bonds while in a romantic partnership and so much more. Here we go. Hooray! Melissa, I am so excited to be having this conversation.

0:02:00.6 Melissa Fabello: I love having this conversation everywhere I can have this conversation, so I'm happy to have it with you.

0:02:06.1 NA: That's great. So this might be a strange place to start, but I would love... I feel like most podcasts, I know this is a generalization, but oftentimes people wind up talking about their work, it has something to do with the work that you do, and often it will start with kind of a, "Tell us what you do, tell us..." Kind of a shortened bio. I would love for you to share a relationship bio, less what do you do and more who and how do you love to sort of situate the conversation we're gonna be having.

0:02:36.9 MF: Oh my gosh, I love this. So I wish I had prepared something to read off of a note card or something. My relationship bio. Okay, the things that are coming up for me really immediately is I am a clear bisexual fem woman who practices polyamory, and those are unique ways of loving, I think that we tend, as a society for better or for worse, to think about queer love in this very kind of like... How do I wanna put it? Kind of like bleached out kind of way where it's like queer love is basically exactly like straight love, and I get why people reach for that and I can understand how that creates safety for queer people, but queer love is not. It is a unique, special thing and loving in a queer way, queering relationships is its own unique thing, and so I think that it is a really special thing. And I think with the fem aspect of it, something that comes up a lot for me and that I know we're gonna talk about his friendships and really taking out the hierarchy of relationships and letting friendships be these beautiful, powerful, central relationships in our lives, and obviously the polyamory or non-monogamy of believing in the power of being able to love multiple people at one time.

0:03:58.8 MF: That's some of my relationship bio.

0:04:01.3 NA: Yeah, it's great. Right before we got on this call, I had the idea to ask you about the relationship bio, it wasn't something that I had pre-planned and I had the same thought of like, "Man, I wonder if she's gonna wanna have prepared this in advance, and instead..." But that was a wonderful bio. I love it.

0:04:13.1 MF: No. That's great. I could have just started throwing exes under the bus but I was like, "Let's be classy. Let's work with integrity."

0:04:22.9 NA: I feel like that's a different kind of relationship CV, right?

0:04:25.6 MF: Totally. Absolutely. That's a different podcast.

0:04:28.7 NA: Two follow-up questions based on what you've just said before we get into something else. So you phrased it as practicing polyamory, do you think of it more as a practice versus a part of who you are identity?

0:04:40.5 MF: Different people have different feelings about this, and I would say that however people understand it is great for them in their own life. I feel like I am inherently polyamorous. I think that I have the experience of an innate ability, desire, preference for being in multiple relationships at once. Some people think of it more of a practice as like, "I'm choosing to do this thing," some people are happy to be monogamous or polyamorous or whatever it is, whatever fits my life in the moment. I do feel like it's something that's more innate for me personally.

0:05:15.3 NA: Do you have a strong recollection of a point when you realized that that was true, or has this been... I assume there's been gradual evolution, but can you look back and be like, "Oh, okay."

0:05:24.8 MF: You know, it's interesting. A few years ago, five years ago, what is time, I was in therapy and one of the things that... I'm in therapy now, but I was with another therapist at this time and I was working... One of the things I was working through is that I've cheated in almost all of my relationships, and we were doing a lot of work around cheating and why I cheat and all of these things and it was very helpful to have that conversation. And around that time where I was doing a lot of thinking about this, I was in a romantic relationship where we were having conversations about my bisexuality and about... I don't wanna get into the myth that bisexual people can't be monogamous or that bisexual people can never be satisfied by one person of one gender, but I do think that at that time in my life I was talking about, it's hard to imagine long-term relationships because it means never having these other experiences ever again and so that's sort of hard. And so in that relationship, we started talking about non-monogamy and the possibility of practicing non-monogamy from a political standpoint of, we don't own our partners and we don't own our love from our partners, and just kind of like coming to the realization of part of the reason why I've cheated, which is...

0:06:39.6 MF: And I also don't want to conflate cheating in non-monogamy, but part of what happens for me is I fall in love and different people meet different needs of mine, and that's what happens, or it has happened, and I think that suddenly I was kind of realizing, "Oh, we can do this ethically, there's a way to have these needs met ethically." And so that's how I got kind of interested.

0:07:06.9 NA: Yeah, I definitely was not raised with any sort of conception or knowledge of non-monogamy as an option. It was, "This is the one right way to do relationships and anything else is cheating." Right? Basically.

0:07:22.0 MF: Absolutely.

0:07:23.1 NA: It was really only a couple of years ago, thank you Internet, to even learn, which sounds like... I'm in my 30s, I feel like a couple of years ago is not that long ago, to really deep dive into, "Oh, there's a lot of different ways to do relationships" and that for me, it was such an interesting eye-opening experience. The relationship that I'm in now, we are practicing monogamy, but it feels more like a conscious choice and something that we check in about, actually really regularly, like maybe every six-ish weeks with the understanding that that might change and it's... I don't know, it's been really refreshing for me to have this... It's like the same experience, the monogamy is the same experience, but feeling like I'm choosing it instead of defaulting into it has a really made a big difference for me.

0:08:12.1 MF: That makes total sense to me. I was in a somewhat lucky situation where at the... I have a PhD in Human Sexuality Studies. At the time I had a Master's, I was thinking, I was in my PhD program, so I had an understanding intellectually of non-monogamy, and so it was then realizing that it was a thing that I could do, but I agree with you. It's definitely not something that we're taught, it's definitely not something that we're given as an option. It's something that we really have to pave our own way, and that idea of, I get to choose what kind of relationship I'm in or what the structure of that relationship is and maybe that changes relationship to relationship... I think it's a really powerful sense of autonomy to decide that, and I think that most people who are practicing monogamy or not choosing monogamy. It's defaulting to monogamy. And I think that there is a difference and being like, "I could do something else, but this is what I want right now" and maybe forever, but this is what I want right now. I think it does make a difference to be able to say, I'm actively making this versus I have fallen into this choice 'cause I didn't have a choice. That's different.

0:09:16.6 NA: I also think it changed some things for me to help me grow in an empathetic capacity of, in order to feel like you're making one choice, oftentimes that means you have to get to the place where you see the other choices as equally valid. And that was a real... I felt like it was almost a healing experience. I definitely have a lot of memories of what I would call slut-shaming in my life and history and kind of unpacking that, making sense of that, being like, "Oh, there's lots of different ways to do things," for me it felt, even though again, the relationship structure is technically the same, it was a big aha moment for me. So I'm glad we're talking about it.

0:09:51.2 MF: I love that. Yeah, we all have stuff to work through, and so I think that however we get there, that can only improve our relationships and our relationship to ourself.

0:10:00.8 NA: Totally. So the other thing you said in your relationship bio that I wanted to ask about, you talked about the idea of queering your relationships. Will you say a little bit more about that for people who might not know what that means?

0:10:10.0 MF: Sure, so there's sort of like a theoretical or academic way of understanding this idea and then there's more of a lived experience version, but when we talk about queer as a verb, we're kind of talking about subverting norms often within cis hetero normativity, within the norms that are related to gender and sexuality, but also, as we know, we can't do any kind of understanding of norms that are siloed, so it would also be subverting notions of capitalism, subverting notions of white supremacy and so on and so forth. And so when we talk about queering relationships, it's like, how do we take away or how do we work on subverting some of what we've been taught about what it means to be a gendered person, what it means to be sexual person? What does that look like? So it's a little bit complicated, but the lived experience version of it can be as simple as, I put my relationships, my friendships with other queer fem women, I hold those in really, really high regard.

0:11:18.4 MF: That is abnormal in our culture, to hold friendships in a high regard. It can be being really intentional about gender roles rather than falling into gender roles, but thinking about who in the house, if you're living with someone, 'cause that can also be a thing, is to decide, "I don't wanna live with someone." That's odd in our culture, but if you're living with someone, how are domestic tasks divided? Are we thinking about that really actively? But it's a very politicized way of being in relationship and it's not necessarily a simple thing, but it's like a way of seeing the world through a queer lens of being like, we don't have to behave within the normative structure, basically of cis hetero normativity, we don't have to do it.

0:12:06.4 NA: Yeah, those are great examples. Thank you. Thank you for sharing. So the next thing that I would love to ask you about is something that I first learned about from you. I don't know if it was yours initially, but that you are my reference point to this. I don't remember what you called it, but in my mind I call it the relationship bucket exercise.

0:12:25.0 MF: Yes.

0:12:26.6 NA: Do you know what I'm talking about? Okay. First of all, I'm obsessed with this. I cannot tell you how many people that I've shared this with and it has been really impactful, and so I would love for you, 'cause I think this could be something useful for everyone listening, can you give a breakdown of what this is? And if you're comfortable, maybe examples of people in your life with whom you've done it and what happened.

0:12:45.9 MF: Yeah, so we're talking about... So this idea, the smorgasbord is the technical, I think, official term for it. It's the relationship anarchy smorgasbord. So relationship anarchy is this kind of way of thinking about relationships where we are very actively undoing the hierarchy of

relationships where your romantic and familial relationships take center stage in your life, and also thinking about relationships as something that you choose and something that is between two people and that you can choose rather than to say, "Okay, we have the title of partnership" and then assuming therefore what the relationship entails, saying, let's not focus so much on the title, but focus on what each of us want in our relationship between us, and so this is where the idea of the bucket comes in, is if you kind of imagine every relationship is a bucket and you get to decide what do we want in our bucket and what do we not? Do we wanna share finances? Is finances in our bucket? Yes or no. Do we want to have a sexual relationship, is sex in our bucket? If sex is in our bucket, is kink in our bucket? Is that something that we wanna put in the bucket? Do we want to be emotionally vulnerable with one another, do we want emotional intimacy in our relationship, yes or no?

0:14:07.1 MF: And going through that in an intentional way with someone to say, "What do we want our relationship to look like? And we should revisit this." And the way that I've done it with some people intentionally in my own life is by thinking about things in a traffic light kind of way, like a red, yellow, green kind of way, which is "Absolutely not, we don't want this in our bucket," would be like a red. That's not in the bucket. Green is "Yes, 100%, we agree this is in our bucket," and then a yellow is like, "maybe it's not in our bucket now, but maybe eventually" or "under certain circumstances, I would be open to this being in our bucket" kind of thing. And you can do that with all of your relationships. It can be romantic partners, it can be your friends, because there might be friends that you can have a sexual relationship with, and it's not like, "Oh, because we're friends, we can't have a sexual relationship." And that is kind of how we think about things. If you ask someone like, "What's the difference between a friend and a romantic partner..." You know, all the things that you can do with a romantic partner, you can do with a friend. You can move in with a friend, you can share finances with a friend, you can marry a friend, you can have kids with a friend, you can... You could do that, but we don't think of it like that.

0:15:21.8 MF: And so kind of re-imagining what relationships are and not letting the socialized way of thinking about relationships get in the way of having fulfilling relationships.

0:15:35.2 NA: Yeah, so much of what you're talking about now and earlier, it's like being willing to pull up the scripts that we were given or the scripts that are all around us, and instead of having them be subtle or under the surface, like let's actually unroll the script, put it in front of our faces, be very clear about what the script says and then take a step back and be like, "Does this actually work for me? What are the pros and cons of adhering to this script?" Like you mentioned safety before. What am I gaining if I adhere to this? What am I losing if I don't? And then, I don't know, there's just so much freedom and so much permission in just this bucket analogy, I think.

0:16:13.9 MF: I think so too. I really like it, and I think the idea of scripts is really, really important because that is how we engage as social creatures, is we follow social behavioral scripts, that is what we do. And it's like, sociologists have looked at when people don't follow scripts, we have a reaction to it, like something as simple as there's a social script for how you stand in an elevator. Like, if someone walked into an elevator and didn't face the door, that would be weird, right? That would be weird. You would be like, "What? This person... Are they a murderer?" It'd be very

strange. And it's not really weird, but we have a social script. And I talk a lot about social scripts when it comes to sex, because I think the interesting thing about queer sex is the social script that you have for sex cannot exist because you cannot necessarily do those things. So the idea that how sex is supposed to go in a cis hetero situation, there's a script for it. Even when you think about the bases, you kiss and then you go to second base and you, whatever, feel someone up and then third base is like under the pants and then... It's such a thing.

0:17:27.4 MF: But when you're having queer sex, for example, there might be no penetration... You don't have to penetrate in hetero situation either, but that is the script. And so in the situation where you no longer have a script, it's like, "Well, what do you wanna do?" It becomes like a completely different play of having sex. And so even unpacking like, oh, why do we just naturally follow? We do this and then we do this and we do this and then we do this and that's how you have sex. It's ingrained and it's not a bad thing, because it's how we survive as social beings, is to follow scripts, but there is something about exactly what you're saying, let's unfurl the script and look at it line by line and cross out what we don't want anymore. Rewrite it.

0:18:10.1 MF: I have a clear memory of when I realized that one of the sexual scripts that I had been following was the purpose of sex is orgasm and it's over when that happen... And that was kind of like, "That's what you're there for" and realizing like, oh, could I have a really fulfilling, enjoyable experience that didn't necessarily have that as the pinnacle? Yes. Okay, what would that look like? And I think just the act of making the scripts known to yourself is worthwhile, regardless of what you choose to do with it, but for me that was like, oh okay, maybe that means I could also try another way and not just follow this script.

0:18:49.0 MF: Well, it's like you're saying about making choices. And it's like if you don't realize how so many ways in our lives we're not making choices, we're just following dominant power structures, and that's the thing that's interesting about it too. When you think about sex, when you think about relationships, we can't fool ourselves into thinking that heteronormative doesn't play a role in how we do relationships. Even being a queer person and people will ask, who's the boy in the relationship? And it's like, wow, that is so beyond. That is a level of heteronormativity that I can't even comprehend, that you would ask that. But that is a thing that people do. Or we can't pretend that white supremacy doesn't play a role in our relationships or capitalism doesn't play a role in how we do relationships, it all does. And so it's these dominant structures, patriarchy, it's like, duh. That plays a huge role in how we do relationships. And so when we sit back and say, "Well, who is this benefiting? And do I wanna do it this way," I think that we can say, "No, I don't."

0:19:50.7 NA: Okay, so back to the buckets. Tell me about a time where you did this exercise with someone and maybe if there was something you were surprised that came out of it. I'd love to hear an example of something that came up for you.

0:20:04.9 MF: I think the thing that you have to be prepared for when you do this is, if a friend, let's say in particular, someone who you're conceptualizing as a friend, which just already that conception goes against relationship anarchy, but whatever. If they... The preparation of if someone is interested in you that you're not interested in in a sexual or romantic way. And I think that this has

come up for me, where either I've been surprised, where I've been like, "Okay, I'm gonna tell this person that I would want these things with them and it's gonna be awkward when they say no." And then they would be like, "I would also be interested in that." There's that surprised, which is maybe more positive, and then there is the surprise of like, "Oh, this person wants to have sex with me. I could not be less interested in having sex with this person. How do you say that nicely? [chuckle] And I think that it's like, that to me tends to be the thing that's hard when I sit down to do it with someone who's like I already... And that's what's interesting about it, is I have preconceived notions based on what I want out of the relationship of what this person is gonna want out of the relationship. And it might be that they want something else and being prepared that you're gonna disagree on some of the options.

0:21:19.1 NA: Yeah. Do you find, like in that scenario specifically, it's like if the person with whom you don't wanna have sex wants to have sex with you, that's true, whether or not you do the bucket thing and the truth always comes out somewhere. So I think there's an... There could be an argument to be made for the benefits of making it explicit, but that doesn't mean that it's not potentially awkward and uncomfortable.

0:21:41.0 MF: Yeah, I think it's a good conversation to have. It's like maybe thinking for yourself, like "How will I respond to this if this happens? What will I say?" How will I be clear and direct, but also kind and compassionate? And I really struggle with rejecting people, I'm very conflict-avoidant in some ways and will just kinda be like, "Oh, hahaha." I don't think, I'm really bad at being like, "That is so flattering, and I'll keep you updated if my feelings change or whatever." I'm really bad at it, it makes me intensely uncomfortable. So knowing that about yourself is good.

0:22:19.9 NA: Yeah. Yeah, I'm just... I'm so fascinated with this. I had an example recently with... Yeah, it's funny when you say like, "What even is a friend? What are these different categories?" But it's someone who I conceptualize as a very close friend. We wound up having a conversation that was sort of joking in nature, but ended up with the understanding and sort of like declaration between us that our relationship was at a point that we were able to request spontaneous air travel from the other person. We don't live in the same place, that if you need me or you're doing this thing that you want celebration, I would show up. I would buy a plane ticket for that. That type of thing.

0:22:57.5 MF: That's so nice, yeah.

0:23:00.6 NA: And it was such an interesting... What she wound up saying was, I think our friendship was already there, but it's nice to have named it. And it was like a small interaction, it's not like we sat down to have a conversation, it's just something that came organic out of a text message conversation we were having, but it really was impactful for me. And I've been thinking ever since then of like, not that I feel differently about her, but it's really, it's nice to make commitments to people and to do that on purpose. And I feel like there is a lot of narrative and there are a lot of tools around doing that in a romantic context, not to say that it's not still challenging, but a lot less so in other relationships. And what does it look like to sort of make some of those, I don't know, things more known? And I've been thinking about like, "Oh, maybe I wanna have this conversation with other friends." It's kind of parallel to the bucket exercise.

0:23:51.6 MF: Yeah, I love that. I think there's so many different ways to be intimate and to express intimacy with people, and it's nice when you discover, I don't know, those ways that might work in a relationship. And that's a very intimate and sweet thing to be like, I would buy a plane ticket to be with you, whether it was something maybe that you were hurt and you were sad or whatever or if you wanted to celebrate or whatever, because I wouldn't do that for everyone. And I think that that is really awesome and powerful and I think it's nice to figure that, yeah, figure that stuff out with folks. That's just cute and nice.

0:24:27.7 NA: I know, right? It feels good. So I know insane that I mentioned the word commitment. I'm interested in how you think about commitment in regard to your current relationships, particularly since, as you just said, for you commitment is not synonymous with monogamy, which I think it is for a lot of people.

0:24:43.1 MF: And I would argue that it shouldn't be, because I think that the conflation of commitment and monogamy is overarchingly a problem. Because what is that commitment? That is a commitment to like sexual exclusivity, but what else are you committed to? There's other things to be committed to in a relationship. And so I think that monogamy is a type of commitment arguably, but I feel like you could also then arguably say that non-monogamy is a type of commitment, it's a commitment to, I want your relationships to flow organically without the holding back of our relationship. And so when I think about commitment, when I think about people in my life to whom I'm committed, that can look so many ways. Overall to me, commitment is, I am committed for the foreseeable future to your well-being. That is what I'm committed to. I am committed to your growth, I'm committed to your happiness, I'm committed to your safety, those are things that I'm committed to, that I am going to show up and be committed to. If you need me in these ways, I wanna show up for you and I want you to show up for me in those ways. It might be... For me, sometimes there's varying levels of commitment in my life around how quickly I get back to a person. Sometimes it's like, "This is a person who, within 24 hours absolutely, I will respond to. This is the person who I will respond to as soon as possible. This is someone who I can wait a week."

0:26:14.2 MF: So there's an... Those are just varying levels of commitment in one domain, but I think that there's a commitment to, I'm not going to just disappear, I'm committed to showing up. And different people need different things in their lives and in their relationships, and I think different relationships need different commitments. But overall, I think about commitment as I am committed to your journey toward your most authentic self, that is what I am committed to and that is what I would like to be a part of on your journey. To me, that's how I kind of conceptualize what it means to be committed to a person.

0:26:51.6 NA: That's incredibly beautiful.

0:26:55.1 MF: And I think, you know, it's one of those things that we were just talking about. It's not like the monogamy can't be a great thing in your bucket. But it's... When you think about commitment to just... Commitment to a person... Because we only have so much room in our lives.

Scientifically only have, biologically only have so much room to be... So many people that we can be committed to in a deep way. And when we almost like cheapen commitment, the concept of commitment by saying commitment is monogamy to a romantic and sexual partner, we are kind of like robbing ourselves of the richness of what it can mean to be committed to a person. So I think even just to sit with ourselves and say, what actually am I committed to? Who have committed to in my life? Am I only committed to my partner? Am I committed to my family? Am I committed to my friends? Am I committed to my co-workers? Am I committed to my community? Who am I committed to, and what does that commitment look like? I think that you can... How am I committed to myself? How am I committed to my animal friends? Those are real questions to ask, and I think that when you really sit in the beauty and the power of what commitment is and what it means to be in community with people and other beings, that is an inherently stunning concept. And I think it gives us the ability to really sit and, wow. Like, being a person is beautiful.

0:28:28.1 NA: Yeah, what you're saying opens up so many pathways for nuanced specificity. It makes me wanna ask you, what to me feels like the necessary follow-up question is, even the word commitment, it's one of these big words, like what is love? It almost en-boundaries. In the abstract, I feel like means nothing, and in the specifics means everything. And so I wonder if you could share almost like what some of mundane commitment looks like for you. On an actual day-to-day, real-life basis with some of the folks that you mentioned that you are committed to their joy, their growth, becoming their more authentic selves or most authentic selves. How? Then what? Does that make sense?

0:29:15.0 MF: Totally. So I'm thinking, for example with my best friend, one tiny way that commitment shows up is I know when she has therapy and I try to always remember to ask her how was therapy. What did you talk about in therapy? I am committed to her therapeutic process, so it's that simple. I'm thinking about food, I really love sharing food with people, so I'm committed to making sure people are fed. I'm committed to maybe going out to dinner or cooking for people or that kind of thing. I feel committed to that. I'm thinking about what we were talking about, the commitment of, I will pick up the phone when you call me as often as possible. That to me is a small version of commitment. Or I will take our shared animal to the vet, so you don't have to, to me that's commitment in these small ways, or it's a commitment to accountability. So I'm in a process right now where I've chosen to focus my energy through the end of the calendar year, at least, to doing some acknowledgement and repair of harm in three major relationships in my life.

0:30:32.3 MF: And I've hired a somatic accountability coach, which is a fancy thing, to help me figure out, where am I causing harm, why am I causing harm, how do I feel it in my body when I've hurt people, and how do I feel it in my body when I'm being accountable to my actions? And something super small that I'm noticing is that I'm very uncomfortable with difficult conversations, I tend to change the subject. Someone will say something uncomfortable to me and I'll be like, "Yeah. Anyway." And I'll change and start talking about something else. And so honestly, one of the tiniest little changes that I'm making in my life is, "Don't change the subject. Don't change the subject. Don't change... Like, sit with it, sit with it, sit with it. Ask a question." Actually engage people when they're vulnerable with you and show vulnerability. That for me is a huge commitment because it's going against my nature. It's going against my relational... Kind of orientation. But that

is, I think, important to having relationships that are safe and being safe in a relationship. So those are some ways that I feel like I extend commitment to people.

0:31:42.9 NA: What are some things that you feel like you need in order to feel like others are committed to you?

0:31:53.8 MF: One of the things I spend a lot of time talking about in therapy is... So I have the experience of, I don't know how familiar listeners are with the concept of attachment theory, it's worth looking into. But attachment theory is basically the idea that we attach to our caregivers in different ways as children based on how our caregivers attune to our emotional and physical needs and that can impact how we then attached to our "attachment objects", which are often romantic partners, but could be anyone in our adult life. And I'm avoidantly attached, which often means, I swear this is going somewhere, which often means that in childhood, you are not attuned to the extent that you took care of yourself. That because your emotional needs weren't being met, you would say, I'll take care of it, I'll do it myself. And so in adulthood that can look like, "I don't ask for help. I don't need support, I'll do it myself. I'm fine. Don't worry about me. I'll do it. I'll do it. I'll do it. I'll do it." And so to me, to really, really feel like a person is committed to me, to me that looks like recognizing my pain, it looks like supporting me, pushing me to accept support. And it looks like the kinds of people who I would have no problem calling, crying hysterically, because that's not something that I feel very comfortable...

0:33:23.7 MF: That kind of vulnerability is really hard for me. So if I can call you and be sobbing, to me that's like I feel safe with you, because I feel like you're gonna be able to hold this.

0:33:36.5 NA: In response to what you just said and feeling almost like a visceral discomfort, imagining, calling people sobbing. So I definitely hear you. I am like that. This is something I've thought about before, that if I look back at my relationship CV, if that's what we're gonna call it, I have traditionally been much more comfortable with that type and expression of vulnerability with romantic partners than with anybody else. And yeah, for... If I have a friendship that's at a level or of a type that I am willing to be sobbing in front of them, I'm like, "Okay, this is life-long partnership also."

0:34:13.1 MF: No, absolutely. And I think that that's real. And it just makes me think about how some of the most important, impactful, powerful relationships in my life have been best friendships, because they are romantic in nature, it's like we are... And that's not the same as sexual in the nature, although it could be that too. But that feeling of like, this person sees all the way through me. I can't trick this person, I can't... Yeah. This person sees me raw and loves me. That, no matter who it's coming from, that is a powerful, powerful... It is hard to be a person. And I feel like to let someone see the hurt parts of you and have them continue to show up for you and love you, nothing compares to that.

0:35:06.3 NA: When you said before that friendships can be romantic in nature, I'm so interested in the word and the concept of romance. Because especially if we separate it from sex, which it is separate, or not necessarily separate, but they're not the same thing, even though they're often talked

about that way, I feel like I don't have a good answer to what is romance.

0:35:29.8 MF: I struggle with this too and this is something that I think a lot about. And it's like I don't... It's a feeling, I can feel it. When you're asking me this question, I feel it in my body, but I don't really have a good way to articulate it. And maybe that's true all the time. How do you articulate love? What is it? How did you explain what love is? You can't, it's a feeling. But to me, romance, the way that I think... I guess when I think about it, with friendships it's like there are friendships I've had, and it's not every friendship, but there are friendships I've had in my life where I've been like, I am in love with this person. I love them. They are a part of me. I feel that soul mate feeling with them. And yeah, romance as a concept, what does it mean to have romantic feelings? Some people try to parse it out as the crush kind of feeling, the flirtation, that kind of stuff. But I'm like, I don't know, I think that there's more to it than that. I think that romance... I don't know, it has something to do with, for me, it's like a deep well of love is to me, I think what romance is. And I think that love can be platonic, I don't think love has to be sexual. It doesn't, that's just a fact.

0:36:44.6 NA: Yeah, I feel like the only thing concrete that comes up for me when I think about this is that romantic feelings for me mean that I wanna hold their hand, which is such a small thing, but there really is a difference in my life of people... There can be people that I love their company and there's... There would be a lot of other things in our bucket, but I don't feel drawn to hold their hand. I don't know, maybe that's a silly example, but that sticks out to me as something. I don't think that encapsulates all of what romance is, but...

0:37:22.5 MF: But no, there's something about, this is landing for me. Because I feel like there's people I could sleep in a bed with and be able to sleep, and to me, those are people that our relationship is so close that I would be able to just fall asleep. I wouldn't be stressed. But for me, I get really uncomfortable, because sleeping is vulnerable. Me and vulnerability, we're not best friends. And so I feel like there's so many people in my life where I would be like, if we went on a vacation or something and under some circumstances had to share a bed, or even a room, I might not be able to sleep. But in some of my friendships, I would be like, yeah, you can literally sleep in my bed and I would have... That would be fine. So yeah, I don't know, it's like... That's maybe a thing for people to ponder, is like, what does romance mean to me? Who have I felt romantic toward? Some of the best friendships that I've had in my life, what made them different? What made them different? You know it when you're like, what were the best, most important friendships of your life, you can pick them out. And it's like, what made them special? What was it, what was the quality that separates it? And is it something that you can easily explain, or is it a more energetic thing?

0:38:35.7 NA: So one of the folks in my Patreon community, I had a bunch of people put questions forth for this series, and there's a question that I pulled out that I thought that you would be perfectly suited to talk about. This person asks, "How do people really maintain their friendships and outside bonds when they're in romantic partnerships? What sacrifices do they make? What do they prioritize? How do they navigate conflict when maybe their partner and a friend are both asking for a specific block of time or have some other conflicting need?" And I'm wondering if you have any insight into that. I think particularly... And maybe this isn't as relevant for you personally,

but particularly for folks who maybe aren't trying to practice relationship anarchy and are maybe operating more from those traditional expectations of like, "Well, my partner should come first, but I do still wanna maintain these other bonds," yeah, anything come up for you on that?

0:39:34.9 MF: So I think the first thing to really kind of consider, and I'm a Capricorn, so this is gonna sound very like, "Write this down and map it out," but I feel like there's one thing that you can reflect on, which is, is there a hierarchy in my life around relationships? And trying to take away the ethics of that, like whether that's ethical or not, and just be honest with yourself. Do I have a hierarchy in my life? And I also feel like for me, with relationship anarchy, I believe in the concept of relationship anarchy. To me, it's almost like anti-capitalism. Can you practice it perfectly? No, not within the system that we exist, and I don't think we can. And so it's like this is something to intend toward for people who wanna do it. I don't think that it's something that it's like, "Oh yeah, I have this totally covered." But okay, so be honest with yourself. What does the hierarchy look like? Who do I feel like comes first? All other things equal, who comes first? Then I think the question becomes, is kind of hierarchy... I don't know how you would make that a verb. Kind of creating a hierarchy around need.

0:40:40.1 MF: If I've decided in my first hierarchy, okay, my partner comes first, and then it's my best friend, and so on a normal day, all other things equal, they want the same block of time, my partner is gonna get it. Let's say four times out of five, that's what's gonna happen. But then the hierarchy of need. So if my partner wants to watch TV, my best friend is in the hospital, my best friend gets the time, that's what... Or my best friend's going through a divorce, well, then that's the person who I'm gonna go to. And I think that we naturally do that because we understand in a community setting when someone needs more of our energy, and I think that... I think I would argue that most people, even though I'm very skeptical of the ways that we're socialized, I do think that most people are understanding around the idea that we have multiple commitments in our lives. We have commitments to our family, we have commitments to our children, we have commitments to our friends, we have lots of commitments to work, we have lots of different kinds of commitment, and I think people are generally pretty understanding around that. So yeah, I think that there's this kind of way of thinking about it and then I think it's...

0:41:50.9 MF: If someone is important to you and thinking about... It's kind of like that bucket thing. Is time together important? Is it important for us to spend time together? If we're not able to spend a lot of time together for various reasons, is this the person I call on my commute home from work three days a week? Is it... How do I make the time? And especially in a more kind of traditional nuclear family system where it's like you become more and more responsible for people like, "Okay, maybe I have a partner now, maybe I have kids and that's already a lot of responsibility, never mind adding on other relationships," but I think some of it is about re-conceptualizing what's important. And the nuclear family system is a little dangerous. It's very insulated and very... And I think that we have to be careful about that because we can get kind of stuck in this idea, like that's my whole life now, but... So who do you go to if you're having relationship problems? Who do you go to to talk through the struggle of being a parent? You have to have other...

0:42:55.3 MF: You have to have ways to reach out. And so I think that thinking about what is

important and what does it mean to be healthy, we actually have more balance if we have multiple ways that we get to be a person with other people.

0:43:13.6 NA: Yeah, I love that. That is a fantastic response. It made me think when you were talking about sort of the first step of being honest with yourself about if there actually is a hierarchy, I feel like that's important to underscore, and I'm definitely taking something from this too, because it's one thing for whether or not you wish there were a hierarchy or what your politics tell you there should be... But getting really honest about what actually is true versus what you think should be true, or maybe you're aspiring to be true, there is something to be said for starting with what's just actually true in your current experience.

0:43:52.5 MF: And if you wanna shift it, that's awesome too, but you have to be honest about where you're at before you can shift anything. So I think that yeah, I think that that honesty is really really important.

0:44:02.9 NA: Something that I'm going through right now is, particularly with my romantic partner that I live with, is shifting more of a priority into my relationship with myself, which has been its own whole journey, very, very uncomfortable. I've recently realized that I need and want a lot more alone time than I've ever given myself permission to want because I have, quite extroverted, I have a very high tolerance for not having alone time, but I'm realizing that that just does not serve me, it doesn't work for me, it doesn't work for some of the personal creative passion projects that I wanna do. And it's been really interesting, first of all, me getting okay with changing where I am in my own hierarchy and then having to actually have conversations about, "Okay, what does that look like? Does that look like, please... We have separate bedrooms, so please don't come into my room on work mornings because I wanna start my day by reading and meditating or stretching or that type of stuff." And yeah, it's been interesting, and I had never really thought about what does it look like tangibly to change where you are in your own relationship hierarchy?

0:45:09.1 MF: Yes, I've been thinking about this too and thinking a lot about like, "Okay, if I have the capacity to have, let's say five close relationships at once, one of those relations has to be with myself or else I become over-extended." And so if one of the relationships that I'm saying I am committed to this person and I'm committed to their needs, if one of the people isn't me, I'm not actually gonna be able to show up in any of my relationships. And so I think that even relationship to self is really, really important. And I think, kind of like what I was saying is, you are a different person with different people, different parts of you come out with different people, and that's what's beautiful about having multiple people in your life. And so what can it mean to give yourself the space, gift to yourself that experience of being able to explore various aspects of yourself.

0:45:58.2 NA: I don't know how I'm gonna formulate this into a question, but I'm interested in your experience of navigating when one of these things changes. I know we keep talking about it through the lens of hierarchy, but if something needs to shift or change in a relationship, maybe you're not gonna be as available for that person as you've been in the past, I don't know what that looks like, because the example that just popped up for me in this making myself one of those five people, let's say, using your example, putting myself there, one of the things I realized that I need to do is not

just keep my phone on silent, but turn the buzzing off, which at first made me very uncomfortable because there are certain people that I'd like to be able to respond to them right away, but I've decided my phone is gonna be a silent brick that makes no noise for most of the day, it's gonna be in another room, and I'll get to it when I get to it, and I had to think through, who are the people that I am going to communicate this change to in advance?

0:46:52.7 NA: And so that was an interesting thing. And I don't know, it just makes me wanna ask for your experiences with navigating if you need to make a change in maybe how your commitments have looked, but that feels uncomfortable.

[chuckle]

0:47:08.7 MF: Yeah, it is. I think there's something for me around the people who are committed to you, if they're also committed to your safety and your well-being and your happiness, it's a little easier to say, "Hey, I'm realizing that for my own health, I can only do X, Y or Z thing, so I'm gonna have to make this change. How does that land for you? Or what do you need around that?" I think that that's... They can take that a little bit differently. I do think that it can be uncomfortable. I've been thinking a lot about this and talking about it in therapy over the course of pandemic and just thinking about, now that so many of my kind of responsibilities around seeing people, communicating with people have changed, what about that do I actually like? And what does that mean for as we start moving in a different direction and moving kind of out of the heaviest part of the crisis, how do I now communicate to people as we're reconnecting, I don't necessarily want our relationship to look how it looked pre-pandemic? I actually need to focus on other people or need to focus on myself, and I don't actually have the energy to focus here.

0:48:29.6 MF: I wish that I had a good answer for this, because if I had a good answer for this, I would be communicating this all over the place, and instead I've just been pondering it for months. It's like, how do I communicate to certain people like, this is what I need out of our connection, how does that land for you, kind of thing. And I think that sometimes it can be hard and that's just a natural part of life too, is that sometimes what people want out of a connection with you is different from what you want out of the connection. And sometimes people feel closer to you than you feel to them and that that's okay, and I think that it's easy to kind of moralize that and be like, oh my gosh, I want to be able to show up for as many people as possible, but realistically I cannot. And especially if people in my life are dealing with things that are really hard or I'm dealing with transition or like whatever, certain people are gonna take up more energy, and I have to allow that to be okay too. I think when we have to make a change, it's sort of coming from a place of, I need this and that's okay and I'm gonna communicate it in a way that's as kind and as collaborative as I can. I'm gonna need this or I'm gonna have this new boundary in my life, this is why.

0:49:42.8 MF: How do you feel about it? What can we... What do you think? How... If you have an emergency, how would you like to get in touch with me, if you actually need me, for example? Or like let's talk about what it means to have an emergency. What is and what is not an emergency? I think you can communicate those things. I think it is especially hard, but the really more marginalized you want, especially if you're a feminized person, I think it's incredibly difficult for

people to accept, or especially in relationships where you have less power than another person's social power, I think it's really, really hard for people to accept that you will not just give them all of you. And so there's something about the self-respect and the dignity to be like, "I am one person, I cannot do it. And this is what I can do."

0:50:29.4 NA: Yeah. I like that really tangible thing you just said at the end of, "I can't do that, but this is what I can do." Sometimes I get fearful of communicating boundaries that I want or asking for things that I want because I see it in this very black and white, all or nothing binary context of, well if I wanna change the relationship in this way, that means the relationship's over. I guess in theory, it might mean that, but I have found in practice that a lot of relationships are a lot more malleable and resilient and can evolve and grow more than maybe my fear brain wants me to believe that they are, and that tangible thing of like, it can feel really awful to have to say no, but it's like, no, I can't do that, but how about this? Yeah, which seems like such a simple thing, but simple doesn't necessarily mean that it's easy.

0:51:19.2 MF: Well, I feel like there's something about practicing in relationship, accepting no, and this is something that's really, really hard. And something that I try to do with people, for example, is if we have plans, I tend to check in with people, "Hey, are we still good for tomorrow? Are we still good for later today?" And I will say, "Hey, are you still good to meet for coffee at 3:00? If yes, great, I'll see you then. If not, would you like to reschedule?" I try to make it clear that it's okay for them to be like, "Actually, no." Or I have tried to practice being honest. This is such a weird thing. It's like I'm sure so many people will relate to this. Sometimes being able to say, "I just don't feel like it." "Hey, I know we have this plan today, I'm just not feeling in the mood to be social," rather than lying like, "I feel under the weather." I don't. I actually just am drained energetically and I don't wanna do this today. And it means nothing about you or our relationship. Or I try, when people say no, to be like, "Thank you so much for stating that boundary, I really appreciate that. That's really helpful for me. That sounds great." Positive reinforcement for that kind of stuff. Or even I know my best friend, something I see that she does a lot is if I'll be like, "I can't get to this right now, I'll try to get back to you after I do whatever," she'll say, "Okay, I understand."

0:52:36.7 MF: She will say, "I hear that." She will just reflect back to me, "I understand." It's just really helpful and I feel like we don't do that enough for each other, is that... And I think something that I like too is the meta-communication of being able to say to someone, "Hey, I'm really trying to work on boundaries. Would it be okay if we communicate about things like this so that I can get comfortable with boundaries? This is something that I'm working on." I think that that's a way that, I don't know, we can really help each other get more comfortable saying no, because almost never is a no to a certain thing like a no to you. It's not really a... Usually, it can be, but it's not usually a rejection of you. It's like, "No, I don't wanna do that thing" or "I don't wanna do it today" or whatever.

0:53:22.6 NA: Yeah, yeah. Oh my gosh, yes, yes to all of that. I had an experience recently with a close friend who, we were trying to schedule a time to have kinda like our walk-and-talk phone chat and we're on different time zones, and a time that she put forth is the time that I have committed to myself that on work days, I am going to be at the desk writing 1,000 words a day, four days a week,

like this is something I'm really, again, showing up for yourself, like working on that. And I expressed excitement about the phone call wanting to do this, and I said, "That's the time that I'm writing. How about this other time?" And I didn't think about it too much when I said it, and her response back was so beautiful and it was... She named like, "That's a great... That's a great boundary. That's a boundary I'm trying to work on. It really can be just that easy of, 'No, I'm sorry, I'm writing at that time. How about this instead?'" And her acknowledgement and really seeing the fact that I had had that boundary makes me feel closer to her.

0:54:23.2 MF: Right. And it gives you more allowance to be honest and to be able to... Yeah, I think that there's something really beautiful in affirming one another's boundaries, because a boundary... And I think some people have a fear of boundaries and hearing boundaries and can be sensitive to rejection and that's like... Something to communicate too is like I hear that and I'm having feelings about it. I think that that's also okay, but I do think that there's something really powerful about affirming one another's boundaries, because a boundary is, again, particularly in a relationship that already has a commitment, is not a rejection of you, it's a protection of self. And I struggle with that too with time, I've had to get so much better at being like, "No, I don't work at that time. I cannot do it then. I don't work then" or I'm like... Whatever it is. Or "Oh, that's the time that I'm doing this other thing." Or sometimes it's about just giving yourself a moment to sit in your body and be like, do I wanna do that on that day, at that time or not?

0:55:22.5 NA: Yeah. What you said earlier about normalizing, saying, "I don't feel like it," I feel like that's my revolutionary takeaway from this conversation like, "Oh my God, you can do that?" Because I... As I try to... This has been like a 10-plus-year journey for me, basically starting with getting sober, of trying to be in integrity with myself, and I feel like, I guess outside of some real outlier situations, lying is out of integrity. And so for me to say, "Oh, I'm sick" or "Oh, the car won't start" or any of those things that would be like very clear excuses to get out of something that no one's gonna argue with, like, "Oh, the dog's sick" "Oh, this kind of thing," I used to do that kind of thing all the time and I didn't, I felt whatever about it, and now I'm like, I don't wanna lie about it. So if there's something in this relationship where I can't say, "You know what, I'm really not feeling up to this, can we reschedule," to me, that's like a red flag about the overall... Something needs to change in the relationship if I don't feel like that's possible, but yeah, I'm no longer willing to lie to get out of plans, which to me, that sounds silly to say out loud, but I feel it's a growth point.

0:56:29.1 MF: It's not because it is what we do. That is the social script. And I think that we can decide... 'Cause you know when someone's like, "Oh man, I'm just like real..." "You could tell that you're like, "No you're not. I'll just... I'll allow the lie because I understand what you're trying to communicate." But it's like, to just say to someone, "Hey, I was really looking forward to this, but I'm just not feeling up to it, I would love to re-schedule. I'm so sorry for the inconvenience," it's like... I'm fortunate that most of my friends are very introverted, so they really just get it and they're just like, "Yeah, totally, that's fine." But yeah, I think that... I mean again, it's like the thing I was saying before about not changing the subject when I wanna change the subject. It's such a small thing, like let me give myself a pause and realize I am about to text a lie. I don't have to do that. I can do something else.

0:57:20.0 NA: Yeah. And also to your point from before of when you check in with a friend, "Hey, are we still on for coffee? If not, we can definitely reschedule," I think there's something really generous in A, creating that space in that way and B, with this example, in not lying. 'Cause you're creating then, the culture or the relationship that you wanna be a part of where then hopefully that type of honest communication is just normal in the relationship.

0:57:49.4 MF: Absolutely. I feel like, yeah, giving people an out, I'm a fan.

0:57:52.7 NA: Yeah. So I assume that I know the answer to this, but I'm gonna ask it anyway. Do you wanna get married, ever?

0:58:00.6 MF: Absolutely not.

0:58:02.9 NA: Okay.

0:58:04.1 MF: Absolutely not.

0:58:04.8 NA: Well, I was gonna say tell me more of that, but actually, was there ever a time that that wasn't true?

0:58:09.2 MF: Yes, because I live in the world. [chuckle] So yeah, I grew up with the understanding or the assumption that I would get married. I, yeah, consistently thought about relationships in that way. That said, I did have a little bit of a wrench that my first ever relation... My first love was with another woman and at the time it was not legal for us to get married. And so I also lived with an understanding for my developmental years of, if I want to marry a woman... Not that time, I had a very limited sense of gender, but if I want to marry a woman, or if I want to have a life-long relationship with a woman, we will not get married. And so I had at least something that made me think about the institution of marriage from a young age.

0:59:05.3 MF: But I definitely have assumed in my life, I was engaged in my early 20s. Yeah, have definitely assumed that I wanted to get married, but I think it was exactly, what we're talking about is it never occurred to me that I could choose to not do that. And so it was once I had the understanding that that's a choice and I can choose not to do it, I realized there's nothing about marriage that is appealing to me. Specifically long-term relationships are appealing to me, but there's nothing about marriage that I find appealing personally.

0:59:44.8 NA: Yeah, that's interesting. Have you... Since you have made that sort of realization or decision, have you been in partnership with people who don't feel that way, has that been a point of contention?

0:59:58.1 MF: No, 'cause I wouldn't... I have not been in a relationship with people who have wanted to be married. I've been in relationship with people who could take it or leave it, kind of thing, but I've not been in relationship with people who are like, "I absolutely wanna get married." I've had conversations with partners before about, we wanna do some kind of a ceremony, like a

commitment ceremony for our love, that's something I would be open to. I'm also not, if... My thing about the institution of marriage is it is an institution. It is a governmental institution. That is what marriage is. We can fool ourselves all day and pretend that it's something else, but that is not what the institution of marriage is, realistically. In the history of marriage, it is functional. And the romantic reasons why people wanna get married, to conceptualize, you don't actually need marriage to have that. And so we have to be able to separate that. Even though I know that's hard because we really sold on this idea that they're one and the same. If we can separate it and we look at marriage as an institution, there are lots of ways which I would be comfortable fucking with the institution. So I think that marrying someone for immigration purposes, brilliant, do that, because the immigration system is fucked up.

1:01:16.0 MF: And until we fix that, fuck with the system. For tax purposes. I think that if there's an issue where it's like, I need to be married in order to... Yeah, save money or whatever it is, I think that that's a great reason. So if I was in a relationship where it was like... Or for health insurance. Again, if this system is gonna be the way that it is, where people cannot get their basic needs met without adhering to this thing, it's like, do the thing for those reasons, I feel like that's totally fair and I understand why people make that those choices, and I would make those choices for someone who needed me to make those choices for sure. But I think the thing that pisses me off is, why do people who are married get this, get these things? Why are there benefits to being married? Why are there governmental benefits to being married? I think that's fucked up, and I think that, how do you then look at the institution of marriage and say this is fair? It's not... I think the institution of marriage is inherently oppressive.

1:02:30.1 MF: I don't think you can argue with that. I don't think that there's an argument for marriage is not inherently oppressive, you can make the choice to do it, just like we make choices every day to oppressive things, everyday, we all do it. And I think that you can make the choice, but it's like, know that by virtue of marriage existing as an institution in which you have access to things that other people do not, that's oppression.

1:02:55.1 NA: Right. The unearned tax privileges or insurance privilege, any of the things that you just mentioned that you only have because you are in this institution and people who don't have access to that institution don't have someone to marry, or like you said, potentially legally can't or couldn't if we're going back in time with marriage, yeah, that's oppressive. And to your point from before about, no one's living in perfect relationship anarchy, no one's living in perfect anti-capitalist world, because we're under the system we're in, then it's, I think can be really challenging to grapple with acknowledging that everything you just said is true, and also if you need health insurance, right, you need health insurance. And it's like that's what's so... One of the many things that's so frustrating about systems like this.

1:03:45.1 MF: Absolutely, that's... It's really, really... In some other ways too, I remember reading the story of two best friends that decided to legally get married so that they have the tax benefits and the health insurance benefits and it... That's what I mean, fuck with the system. If the system is gonna exist, fuck with the sanctity of marriage. What is the... I understand obviously in some religious contexts, there is a sanctity of marriage, but what does that even mean? And so I think...

And really what I think a lot about is I don't believe personally in the romanticized idea that a life-long relationship is the most successful relationship, I don't think that that's true. And so I think... I go into relationships honestly with the assumption that those relationships will end, because I think the likelihood is gonna be that we are gonna grow in such ways that we no longer make sense and we can't grow together anymore and we need to grow separately. And that relationship can still be so successful and important and beautiful and whatever. And so then when I think about divorce, part of why I don't believe or personally don't wanna get married is 'cause I don't wanna get divorced.

1:04:54.9 NA: As somebody who is divorced, you are correct. Yes.

1:04:57.3 MF: Getting divorce is hard. It is really hard to get to divorced. And so like... And it's traumatic and it's painful, and the ending of a relationship is already painful. Why exacerbate the pain with the system of divorce? I just feel like I don't wanna do it. And so it's like one sure fire way to never have to get divorced is to never be married.

1:05:22.2 NA: Yeah, yes, yeah. I think all the time about how, my... When you said getting into all relationships with the assumption that they're gonna end, my sort of asterisks, that would be end or change into something else. Like my former spouse and I had a wonderful five-year marriage that came to a natural conclusion in that form and now we're really close friends. And I know that maybe that's not the norm and whatever, but we had arguably the best divorce of all time given that even though it was really sad, we both wanted to do it and we both wanted it at... And we were choosing it at the same time, and still it was like a logistical help scape. I'm still on his mortgage, we couldn't get them to take the thing off... And that has given me a lot of pause in decisions going forward of how much with or without marriage am I willing to legally and particularly financially entwined my life with people. And yeah, you mentioned before when you were giving the bucket examples of, "Do we wanna share finances in any way?" So I'm curious, do you have that kind of relationship where your finances are combined with anyone?

1:06:28.4 MF: No. And it's somewhat of a point of contention with my partner because my partner does want to have shared finances. I am not opposed to it, I've never done it and so I just don't know how. And that's kind of what I've shared, is I'm like I... It's probably not my preference. I think that I, again, we talked about attachment, I'm avoidantly attached. Anyone who's familiar with attachment theory is probably like, "This bitch is just avoidantly attached and that's why she's saying everything she's saying." But I feel like... And that probably does play a role. And again, we have to be honest with ourselves. But I'm so afraid... And this is like me, this is the vulnerable version of this, I'm so afraid of the entanglement and the lack of independence that it doesn't make sense to me to do it. But it's also like a cost-benefit analysis. Like in what ways would it be helpful to me to do certain things? And so I think that... No, I don't currently have a relationship where I share finances, I have never had a relationship where I share finances.

1:07:34.8 MF: In the situations where I've lived with a partner, we have shared finances in the way of like, we each pay half of rent. Whatever in that way, but I've never had a shared account or... I can't even tell you what my past partners, how much money they've made, I couldn't tell you that

because I just don't... It's not something that occurs to me, I just don't care necessarily.

1:07:55.5 MF: And so is it something that I would do? I would definitely be open to it. I don't know. And it's also my parents, I... My parents are married still and they were, for our generation, my parents are married still. They have a complicated... They've always had separate bank accounts. They've always had separate bank accounts, it's a little complicated because my dad is disabled, so my mom is the only one who's worked, she retired a year ago. And so technically, they shared finances because my dad lived off of my mom's salary, but yeah, not in that traditional sense of two people contributing to an account where then stuff comes out of. And so I don't even have a model for it. And I think that in life, it is important for us to have models to then behave, model after. And so sometimes I wonder if that's part of it. But I guess for me, if I... When I sit in that kind of sense of relationships end, it's like, "Why entwine my finances and then have to undo all of that? Why bother?" It's kind of like where I started. Why bother?

1:09:04.6 NA: As someone who has done that, yeah, I get it. And I did it, it's not that we talked about it and I'm just super into personal finance, was very happy to be the money manager in our household, money was something we had really open conversations about, but I just sort of, again, defaulted into that system, 'cause, "That's what you do." You're married, you share finances. And while I right now feel sort of take it or leave it on whether I would get married again, I could make arguments in both directions, I unequivocally would not share finances again. My partner and I have talked about, if we were to get married, we would do a prenup, we would do... That's the thing that I'm no longer willing to do, is, same as you, split the rent split the... Doesn't mean that you don't contribute to things, and obviously, I guess I can never say never because who knows, 20 years down the line, if the needs change or the circumstances change, so I guess I shouldn't have such a hard line in the sand. But that at the moment feels like crystal clear to me that I would not do that.

1:10:08.4 MF: And I think that... And there's also the part of it that's like, I had this traumatic experience with this thing, and so right now with the healing, the protective mechanism is I'm not gonna do this. Maybe if I feel from that traumatic experience, I would be open to it. But I live and I learn, I might do it differently. I do think that there are... We grow and I think... I totally agree that there is this idea of, this is what it means to be in a relationship, this is what happens when you're in a relationship. There's this concept within monogamy, we talk a lot about the relationship escalator and the relationship escalator being like, you do this and then you do this. And it's like, you get together, you become committed. You move in together, you get engaged, you get married, you have children. You buy a house, you... There's a process. And I think when we say you can step off of, or move off of the relationship escalator, you don't have to actually do all these things, you have more choice.

1:11:01.3 MF: I think that that's... I think it's always powerful for people to realize to have more autonomy than we're socialized to believe.

1:11:05.8 NA: Yeah, I agree with that. And I guess just to underscore this even more, never do I get more DMs than when I talk about this kind of stuff about money or surprisingly, and this has been a really funny revelation. So my partner and I don't like sleeping in the same bed, and mostly I'm not

a great sleeper and I really don't sleep well sharing a bed with somebody else, and again, never thought that that was an option until getting divorced and being like, "Huh, sleeping in my own bed is really nice." And realizing how much better I slept. So not only do we not like sharing beds, we'd also prefer not to share a bedroom, we have separate bedrooms. Having my own space is incredible, and any time I mention that, I feel like my DMs just blow up. That people either wanna talk about how they've been doing that for years, but they haven't told any of their friends because it's really taboo or, "Oh my God, that's what they want, but they don't think that their partner would be up for it or..." It's just so funny, these scripting things that I was raised to think, "Oh, they're not sleeping in the same room, that relationship's in trouble."

1:12:09.2 MF: Oh, absolutely, and it's interesting, my parents don't sleep in the same room, they have different rooms. And that wasn't true my whole life, but my mom has sleep apnea and she doesn't like the CPAP machine, and so she snores, and valid, she doesn't wanna use the machine, she doesn't like it. Alright. But then my dad can't sleep, and so he slept on the couch for a huge chunk of my life. And then when I moved out of the house, literally moved into my old bedroom and now it's his room. They have separate rooms. And it's like, when you communicate to other people they're like, "Oh, what's going on?" And I'm like, "Literally, what's going on is that my mother's snores and then my dad can't sleep and so he sleep somewhere else." That's it, that's the whole story. And yeah, it's a really interesting... I think a lot about space, and I've come to a lot of realizations over pandemic, around needing space. Because I, over the course of pandemic was essentially living in two houses with two different partners and was constantly with a person and just never had space. And I eventually came to a place of being like, I need my own house, like it's actually...

1:13:14.2 MF: And maybe this isn't true for my whole life, but at least for the time being, I have to have a space where I am alone, utterly alone. I don't need another person chew, I don't hear another person's sneeze, I don't hear another person walk around. Every sound that I hear, I made or a cat. And I feel like... Yeah, that has become so important to me. It's like, I just need that space. And people feeling like, "Oh, you're taking a big step back in terms of being in relationship. Or whatever, like you are becoming a recluse." Kind of being like, I just need to be alone sometimes and over a pandemic, I could never be alone and it came to a place of, I am like unwell. I can't function like this. And I don't know, just being like, I don't know, you can call that weird if you want to, you can call it avoidant if you want to, you call it whatever you want, but I have come to the realization that I am a healthier person if I can just be alone. If I can take a nap and not have to hear another person talking in a Zoom meeting, I just need to be able to be like, "It is quiet."

1:14:27.7 NA: Yeah, when you mentioned that you've been thinking about space, I feel like I've been thinking about both space and time in the context of romantic relationships and what the default is. For a long time, 'cause I've co-habitated with many partners and, well, many... With multiple partners. And I realized a couple of years ago that I was treating any time where we didn't explicitly have work or plans with other people as time together. Of course we're gonna have dinner together, of course... It's sort of everything defaults into shared time and it's a thing to be like, "Hey, babe, I want alone time. I'm gonna go up here." And I started to ask myself, what would happen if I flipped that, where the default is all time is individual time? And then we ask, "Would you like to

have dinner tonight with me?" Even if you live together. And that can feel really strange, and I'm not advocating for this as a thing for people to do or a thing that would work, or it's not even really a thing that I do, but even just thinking about that sometimes is helpful for me to realize where I'm giving my autonomy away.

1:15:40.5 MF: And even, I think's just an understanding too when it comes to the concept of space, is like different people need a different amount of spaciousness. Different people have different needs, different people process things differently. I have come to understand that like, "Oh, I need a lot of processing time alone before I can have a hard conversation, or that's how I'm gonna be able to show up as my best self in order to be in line with my values, in order to shop in integrity, I have to ask for that thing, and that's not a diss to whoever is asking me for something else. It's not a rejection, it's like, this is how I operate best and if that..." And this is so much easier said than done. If that doesn't work for you, this connection cannot work. Because I can... This is something I cannot sacrifice. So when we think about boundaries, even thinking about coarse boundaries versus rigid boundaries, that sometimes it is okay to have a rigid boundary. In fact, a lot of times it's okay to have a rigid boundary, which is I cannot compromise on this thing. And we're often taught, again, the more marginalized you are, feminised people, we're often taught that our boundary should always be porous and that our main purpose in life is relational and it's to relate to other people and to give to other people, but how do you give when I have not gotten? I can't.

1:17:03.0 MF: I want to give to you. This idea of commitment of... It kind of like encapsulates everything we've been saying, in order for me to give to you and be committed to it, which is something I want, I have to be committed to myself and my own health, that is how I'm gonna be able to be committed to you.

1:17:18.6 NA: Yeah. That makes me wanna ask you... There's one more thing that I would love to talk about in the time that we have left that I feel like goes really well with what you were just saying about honoring those most authentic parts of yourself. I think it was in 2020, it was in one of your relationship columns for Greatest. Something that I learned about from a column that you wrote was the concept of de-selfing.

1:17:44.7 MF: Oh, yes.

1:17:47.5 NA: That term that, I think the way that you described it, and I know it's not your term, but the process of giving up core parts of ourselves, our values, our identities, our desires, in order to maintain important relationships... First of all, I love that there's a term for that. That's excellent.

1:18:03.6 NA: And I would really love if you'd be open to maybe telling a story of a time that that happened to you, because I feel like this is almost a universally relatable experience, at least in some degree, or rather on the spectrum, when you said like the rigid boundaries, some things are for compromise and some things aren't. Even like, how do you conceptualize, what are the core parts that you are not willing to give up in order to maintain the relationship, and then where is it more porous?

1:18:30.6 MF: Sure. Something that I think about and that can be really hard for people to accept as truth is like, I am polyamorous, I will not, not be... I cannot be that way. So in order... 'Cause sometimes people will say like, "Well, if you met the right person or if you loved me enough, you would be monogamous for me," it's like, I cannot love you so much that I stop loving myself. That is an impossibility. I cannot sacrifice an understanding of myself to make you happy, that is a point at which... That's a sacrifice, not a compromise. I might be able to compromise and say, "I can non-monogamy in a different way, maybe a way that is more... I'm meeting you in the middle rather than what my preference would be," that is a compromise.

1:19:21.0 MF: But it would be sacrificial for me to give up this part of myself to make you feel safer. Or I know it comes up a lot, and part of why I was inspired to write that article was I know so many people in my life, so many bisexual women whose straight cis male partners are uncomfortable with their queerness. And so they hide it, they stuff it. It's like they're not not bisexual, but they don't talk about it, they don't engage in queer community, they don't engage their partner in their queer identity because it makes your partner uncomfortable and it's like, for some people it might feel like that's not important enough to me to rock the boat in the relationship, but for other people, it's like, "This is a core part of my identity that I can't hide, I can't pretend it doesn't exist for the comfort of another person."

1:20:11.2 MF: That is sacrificial, that hurts me, that makes me feel like I'm inauthentic, it makes me feel like I'm not showing up as my full self. And again... And this is something that I'm working on, so by no means am I saying this is easy. But there's a somatic experience of knowing when you're hiding yourself, of knowing when you're de-selfing. There's an experience in your body of, I can't be my full self here. And sometimes an easy way to think about that is at work most people don't feel like they can show up as their full, authentic self at work. And that feeling of I have to hide parts of myself or I can't talk about certain things or I can't be honest in certain ways here, those are experiences of de-selfing, which I also don't think that we should have to deal with in the workplace.

1:20:57.9 MF: I feel like we can accept that in a way that maybe we don't as much accept in our personal relationships, but just that feeling in our body of like, I am not my full self, I'm not showing up as my full self. We know when we are overstepping our own boundaries. It is a feeling. And similar to... I know people who've probably done somatic practices of knowing when they feel stressed, I know for myself that my shoulders creep up when I'm stressed and so, okay, that's a Somatic cue that I'm feeling stressed. I know that for me, my boundaries being crossed, it's like a solar plexus feeling, I can... It's like a tightening, I feel it. It's like, "Oh, I can feel that my boundary is being crossed." And so similarly, it's like that feeling of, what does it feel like for me when almost like my boundary of self is being crossed? I am not allowed to be myself. What does that feel like in my body and am I willing... I don't even know if this is a question. Am I willing to put up with that? I don't think we should ever have to.

1:21:58.4 MF: I mean, unless it's a survival mechanism of like, I have to be in this relationship for some reason to survive, and there's various reasons how that could happen, but I think in a situation where we have more freedom to choose who we wanna be with, I think that we probably should

want to not feel like we are constantly stuffing ourselves for the comfort of another person.

1:22:23.3 NA: And I think it is really nuanced, the example that comes up for me, if I think back like years in my past of stuffing down the identity, a lot of it was around the type of sex that I wanted to be having or feeling like I was more sexual than I should be, if we're gonna go into the good girl paradigm. And not having the tools or the communication skills to... I don't even think that was a conscious... I can say that now in retrospect, but I don't think that was a conscious knowing, but it definitely was the experience of feeling like these are things that I have to hide about myself in order to be in partnership, to be lovable.

1:23:07.9 NA: Because the kind of cultural understanding that I had was, if I'm... That it's an either/or. I can either be... And I'm talking about in a romantic way, or I can be alone and have these things. And in my mind at the time, it was better to stuff the things down to still have the partnership, but again, the truth always comes out, and it came out in weird ways, came out in cheating on people, came out in... So I'm not saying that that was preferable, but it really is interesting, again, the scripts, whatever the scripts are that we're following of, do we accept that part of ourselves?

1:23:47.9 MF: Yes, yeah. And it comes back to this idea of like, what is our relationship to ourselves? And I don't wanna get into a place of being too individualistic, that's a very white and Western kind of concept of the self as so important. But I do think that there's a symbiotic relationship between my relationship with myself and my relationship with other people. I show up differently in relationship to other people, depending on how I show up for myself, and similarly I show up for myself differently depending on my relationships with other people. And I think that our nervous system needs connection and our nervous system needs ourselves, our own connection to ourselves. And I think different people need those at different levels in order to feel safe, but it's like... Yeah, I think the connection to self and being able to know what I need and to be able to communicate what I need, to expect, this is something that I struggle with. How do I expect that people will meet the need? Not just, I've stated it, but it is now your responsibility to meet it.

1:24:54.1 MF: And am I strong enough in myself to know if people can't meet my needs, and of course, that's not every need, nobody can meet every need of yours, but if people can't meet my fundamental needs, they're not my people, they're not right for my nervous system, they're not right for my safety. And that doesn't mean that they're bad, it doesn't mean that they're wrong, it means that it's not a match. I think that we struggle so much, and I think sometimes why so much of the conversation does focus on the self is again, the more marginalized you are, the less self you're allowed to be with. And so I think it's almost like we have to over-focus on this thing, because yeah, we know how to be relational, we've been socialized on how to be relational and how to give ourselves up for other people. And it's almost like work-life balance, we often don't talk about the work aspect of work-life balance, that's a part that we're over-focusing on. We have to focus on the life, like hyper focus on it in order to get the balance. And I think similarly, we're often hyper-focused on relationality and we forget about the self.

1:25:55.7 NA: That's so well said. Is there anything that we haven't talked about that you wanna

bring up?

1:26:03.8 MF: Not that I can think of. I really just... My dream for people, and maybe an activity, if people wanna be like, "Oh, I'm gonna sit down and really think about this," I have a bisexual support group that I run intermittently, and one of the activities that I do in the group is to think about, what is your dream relational landscape? What are you looking for? What are you looking for when it comes to... What is your relationship to yourself? What is your relationship to friends, to partnerships, to community? What... If you could create the ideal relational landscape, what is that? And I have people sit and create some kind of art type project around that, like a collage or whatever, or if people can't do artistic things, which is also fine, we can make a bullet list, whatever it is, but what is that for you? And just like anything else, I probably will never reach our most ideal thing that we hope for because that's dependent on other people, their needs and compromise.

1:27:04.7 MF: But to know for yourself, what is that for me? What is the ideal? And then maybe to ask yourself, what is one small thing that I can do to move towards the ideal? Who can I reach out to? What class can I join to start to meet the people that I wanna meet, or what's a book that I can read that helps me better understand this kind of relational thing? But I think that question of, what is your ideal relational landscape and the question of, what is stopping me from pursuing it, I think it's a powerful question to ask and not one that we sit with enough.

1:27:36.8 NA: Yeah, I love that. And especially not over-estimating what it might take to close that gap. Sometimes I think, "Oh gosh, so many things would have to happen in order for this relationship to feel good or feel different." And then one thing changes by 5% and I feel totally different. Sometimes they are really big pivotal things, but sometimes they're not, sometimes the boundary of having alone time in the morning has changed entirely how I feel the rest of the day, so I almost wanna maintain curiosity in that, 'cause sometimes the difference between where we are and what our dreamiest dream is seems really... The gap can seem really big and sometimes it is, but sometimes maybe it's not.

1:28:20.5 MF: Right, absolutely. Sometimes it can actually be a really simple shift, and I think that that's... And I think that that is also something that I'm thinking a lot about. And again, not to hyper-focus on the self, but like what's our work? What do we bring to Dynamics? I think it's really easy for us to focus on, who are the people I shouldn't be with? And I think that that's a worthwhile question to ask, but I also think there's a question of, what patterns show up in my life over and over and over again, how is that connected to how I started to understand relationships from a very young age? How is that about my parents' relationship? How is it about my relationship with my parents or other caregivers? There's so many questions, and of course, therapy is great for this, but I think self-reflection is also great.

1:29:06.6 MF: It's like, what am I bringing to the table? What's my shit that I have to work on? 'Cause that's the only thing we can control. We can't control other people. There's nothing that we can do to control them. We can ask for what we need and hope that people will meet those things, but the question that I don't necessarily think we tend to ask enough is like, what's my stuff and what do I have... What's the self-work that I'm here on this planet to do in this lifetime? That can

sometimes be the shift. Sometimes the shift isn't, what do I need from someone else? Sometimes the shift is like, what do I have to process or what do I have to understand?

1:29:42.0 NA: I'm the common denominator in all of my relationships, so also I should look at my own shit.

1:29:45.9 MF: I should look at myself as well.

1:29:48.7 NA: Two tiny final questions for you, Melissa, if you could leave people with one affirmation of sorts, I love that exercise that you just gave, but an affirmation of sorts, like what's your wish for everyone listening?

1:30:05.6 MF: I would say that my affirmation or my wish would be kind of a sense of, we are all on a journey and that journey is mostly a healing journey, and that journey necessitates connection with other people. So what is the thing that we need in order to continue on our way in that journey. So I think the affirmation just being like, you were in a spot that... You're gonna be in a different spot at some point, and who are the people that you're bringing along?

1:30:49.0 NA: That's so good. And then lastly, what is the very best place for people to find you and say hi? Do you have a favorite way right now to connect with new folks?

1:30:57.3 MF: That's a great question. I feel like Instagram, I hate Instagram, but I think... I think that's a place where I am the most, my Instagram is fyeahmfabello. My website, melissafabello.com, is a really easy way to have access to like, just an easy link to the Instagram or writing and stuff like that, that's a good place to become acquainted with all the things you might want. But I think to say hi and to connect, Instagram is definitely the best place.

1:31:26.2 NA: Okay, I will put links to the website, links to your dreaded Instagram in the show notes for people. Thank you so much.

1:31:33.1 MF: Thank you so much.

1:31:42.7 NA: Thanks so much for listening to this very first season of the Pop-up Pod. All of the intimate and honest conversations you'll hear on this show are 100% listener funded, paid for by the sliding scale patreon community. That means no ads and no sponsors, just a couple hundred people coming together to ensure that everyone involved in making this podcast gets paid. That includes me as the host and creator, my sound engineer and musician, Adam Day, as well as every single one of our guests. The patron community also funds the creation of a full transcript for each episode, which you can find in the show notes to help make these conversations more accessible for all. Those are our production ethics here at the pop-up pod, and if that aligns with your own values, I would love to invite you to come check out our community at patreon.com/NicoleAntoinette. It's a fun, easy and welcoming space, you also get access to lots of bonuses. And remember, it's run on a sliding scale, so you can pay whatever amount makes most sense for you each month, depending on your circumstances. That's patreon.com/NicoleAntoinette. And hopefully, I'll see you there.

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