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**0:00:02.5 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, when there is one, dives deep into a single question, and our question for season one is this: Should I get married? It's a question I'm asking myself these days. 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. This 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. One of those 12 people who you'll get to meet today is Calvin Michael West. Calvin, whose pronouns are he/they, is a certified professional coach, healer, guide, and teacher. In a previous career, he ran a boutique event design and production shop with his former spouse, who is now his best friend.

**0:01:14.5 NA:** Throughout our conversation, Calvin delves into some fascinating questions such as, "In what ways do you have an invisible job description for your partner?" It's such a good question. And which stories are alive in your relationship that keep each other stuck in certain roles? We also talk about weddings, about boundaries and requests, about how to get more comfortable hearing a no from your partner to one of your own requests, and more. Are you ready for all of that? Here we go.

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**0:01:55.9 NA:** Okay, we are good to go. Calvin, welcome to the show.

**0:02:00.0 Calvin Michael West:** Thank you for having me.

**0:02:00.4 NA:** Oh, I've been looking forward to this for, I was gonna say for a very long time. For all the days since you said yes to being part of this project, so I'm excited to dig in.

**0:02:09.0 CW:** I'm happy to be here.

**0:02:12.1 NA:** So I'm gonna ask you a kind of introduce yourself question, but think of this as less of, "What do you do?" And more, "Who and how do you love?" How do you wanna situate yourself in terms of a relationship bio, I guess, for lack of a different phrase?

**0:02:32.1 CW:** Yeah. What feels good to me right now is that I love expansively. I love deeply, and I love in a myriad of ways. There's romantic love and friend love and professional love and stranger love and nature love and somebody that designs something really useful and works for my life love. And love for me has so many ways it can show up, and the newest love in my life is love for myself. That's a life-long love that we have. I didn't know what that could feel like. I'm still learning what that could feel like. And sometimes it's helpful to see a mirror of that from other people, but I

think the main thing is when others aren't around to mirror that to us, how can we be our own reflection of that? And I'm trans. I've been trans for 20 years, and I was socialized female. That adds a new layer of self-love in a really different way, growing up and having the world tell you, "You're not lovable," not to mention just all the other things we do as humans, and then being socialized as female. And so, for me the journey to self-love... And there's so much talk around love yourself, trust yourself, trust your gut, and what I'm really interested in is the how, is in what does it tactically look like to experiment in those places?

**0:04:35.9 CW:** There's a lot of focus on how to love other people, how do you love your kids? How do you love your fucking self, though? So yeah, maybe we'll talk about some of that today. Maybe we'll talk about what it's like to love other people too. I love things. I do love some things. [chuckle]

**0:05:00.3 NA:** Yeah, I think this is a wonderful place to start, specifically because you mentioned the tactical "how" of things, Would you drop me into your, I guess, current real life a little bit? How are you loving yourself? How is that showing up for you right now?

**0:05:16.1 CW:** I'm gonna give a specific example that I've shared on other podcasts, but I think it's powerful. In 2020, I uncoupled from a 16-year relationship with my partner at the time. We had a business together for nine years, and it was the beginning of COVID, and it was rough. That started the beginning of a new layer of that, and I wanna share one specific thing I started to use in that redefining of myself period. I moved into a new home by myself. I got an apartment by myself. Been living alone for the first time in my life at the age of 37. I'd never lived alone. I'd always had roommates or been in relationship. In this particular home, had many mirrors for what I now know was what I needed. And I would catch myself in the mirror, and something pulled me into just staring at myself, really looking in my own eyeballs. And this is a cringe-worthy thing for many people. It had been for me for a really long time, and I just didn't shy away from that. I got curious about what I saw. I let the stories show up. I let the stories show up about how I saw my body. What did I think about my hair cut? "Need a hair cut. You're ugly. You haven't been working out. You're ugly." Whatever the stories were, I let them show up and I just let them be. I examined if I really believed that they were true.

**0:07:06.6 CW:** Those stories had been hanging out with me for a really long time. Did they still need to be a part of my story posse? Every story that came to me in that time phase got examined. "Are you helpful? Are you harmful? Are you supportive? Are you stifling? Are you helping me see the best version of myself? Where did this story come from? Who gave me the story? How much of this story am I ready to let go? How much of the story is actually helping me, even if it's also giving me a little bit of harm?" That activity of really just... I'd light a candle. I'd sit in front of this giant mirror that was a double door near for the closet. Mirrors in the bathroom, mirrors in the house. And I would just be curious about what showed up. "Who am I now? What do I need now?" I would watch myself as I cried. I would watch myself as I celebrated. It didn't matter. I just made time for that when it felt like it wanted to be there. I share this example because in my work with people in my circle, this continues to stand out as something really profound to other folks, so perhaps that will be true here. And the reason I also share that is as a trans person, I spent so many years not loving my body.

**0:08:56.5 CW:** Then you go through some medical stuff that helps you get there, but even still, after surgeries and after hormones, still feeling like I don't love my body. And when we reject those parts of ourselves, they can get pissed at us. They have something to say about that, and we don't usually meet them until they act out, and then they start sabotaging parts of our life. And then we wonder, "Why the fuck did I do that?" And it's like, "Oh, well, there's a part of you that did that, because that part of you wants to be seen." Somewhere along the way, we got these messages that these parts of us are not good enough, that they need to be changed. We didn't come to those messages on our own, and it feels radical to many of us to think we could abandon that messaging, that we could get new messaging for ourselves, that we could reject that. And that's the part that's so fascinating to me and in the work I do is helping people understand, "Fuck, what are the messages I have?" They've been with us for so long, we don't even hear them anymore. So first, we have to hear them, and for me looking in the mirror was giving myself permission to hear them.

**0:10:17.7 NA:** Yeah, it's like mirror as reclamation, in a way. Yeah, I'm really fascinated by this. I didn't know that we were gonna start here, but in order to have a conversation about loving other people and being in relationship with other people, I think this is a thing that gets glossed over or skipped over, and yeah, so I appreciate that. Also on just a personal note, it's interesting to hear you talk about what the mirror experience, you know, having access and being presented with all of those opportunities to sit with yourself in the mirror, what that was like for you. I had, I don't wanna say the opposite experience, but perhaps somewhere else on that same spectrum. For me, once I got into long distance hiking and part-time van life, those are both situations where you have very little mirror access. And that was transformative for me. It was almost a letting go of obsessing about things that I feel like didn't serve me personally, and to give myself almost the chance of using a more internal mirror of, "How do I actually feel right now?" As opposed to "How do I look?" And yeah, that continues to be one of my favorite parts of those hobbies or lifestyle choices is the fact that it's almost a mirror-less existence.

**0:11:35.8 CW:** Yeah. In 2021, I moved to Portland from living in the Bay Area for 20 years, and I looked at this house, and then I moved in and I was like, "There's some things that are different," including the bathroom had no mirror at all. [chuckle] And for months, I lived in this house with no mirror. Shaved kind of haphazardly my beard, and that brought its own kind of beauty. I didn't need that mirror reflection. I had done the work I needed to do around that. It's fascinating how powerful the mirror or an absence of the mirror can be.

**0:12:22.7 NA:** Have you ever done that relationship exercise where you sit with your partner and you stare into their eyes silently for such number of minutes?

**0:12:31.3 CW:** I did The New York Times, it is a 36 questions, and there's some phase in there where you stare into each other's eyes for four minutes. It felt really short. Eye contact does not scare me. I enjoy eye contact. I don't necessarily like everyone's eye contact. [chuckle] And that's where I think personal boundaries come in, but yeah, I think it's a fascinating experiment when you're looking into someone's eyes, to even share with each other what they see. And I've done that before. Like, "What do you see right now?" And then you get that reflection back, and sometimes

others see us in ways we can't see ourselves, and that reflection is really helpful.

**0:13:23.0 NA:** Yeah. This makes me think about the ways in which eye contact or lack of eye contact can potentially be used as a tool within relationships. What just popped into my mind was how many times in various relationships of all kinds, I have had the most success, well, not the most success, but I've had success with harder conversations in the car on a long drive where you're not looking at each other.

**0:13:47.7 CW:** Yeah. There's actually been some interesting studies about that.

**0:13:52.8 NA:** Really? Okay.

**0:13:53.0 CW:** Yeah, about how there's too much vulnerability with eye contact for some people to communicate certain topics, and in my previous relationship, when we were at the crux of our hardship, we would take a walk around the lake. That was our active strategy, which was like, "Hey, we've got some hard shit to talk about. This here, face-to-face, isn't working, let's go for a walk." And for us, smoking a little weed also helped the truth serum come out, and so we would call it a "Weed and Walk." We would say, "Hey, hey, we want to move past this block we have." And sometimes we would schedule that in advance. And that kind of experimentation, I think, is really helpful. Sometimes relationships feel like you're in a bumper car and constantly ramming into the same shit, so keeping with this metaphor, you've gotta turn the wheel. You've gotta go in another direction. You've gotta try some different things to get a different result.

**0:15:00.8 NA:** Yeah, being willing to experiment has been really key for me as well, and I know that's a word that you used already. So you mentioned the uncoupling a couple of times. I'm interested, first of all, in your word choice, as someone who also uses that word for when I divorced my former spouse about three years ago, ish? Definitely tried to think of it more as an uncoupling and to transition into friendship, which that's where we were, and that was real for our situation. I absolutely know that's not the case for everyone. This feels like a big topic, and I don't really know what my specific question is, but I would love to hear you talk about maybe starting with the word choice, and then how you conceptualized the end of that relationship, which I know obviously it was a transition for you as well.

**0:15:52.5 CW:** That's a great question. It didn't start out being uncoupling. It started out being separation, and the nature of our separate... We had been non-monogamous for a while, and we wanted to participate in non-monogamy differently. We had different needs, and for the most part, us having different needs was okay. The nature of our non-monogamy, it was such that I felt that there was a lot of betrayal, and I ended the relationship in a fury of rage. And I spent the first couple of months of that separation with this pretty firm story that I was the martyr. I did all the things to make this work, that I pushed beyond my comfort zone. I also had this really hard story that I was more capable of evolving than my other partner, and therefore I would do the hard work to make this successful. I had a lot of victim scarcity trauma that I needed to work through. And I had some invisible job descriptions for Vanessa to take care of me and to soothe my nervous system and to show up for me and to support me. That weren't her job, and when she couldn't do that or recognize

it wasn't her job and said "No," I wasn't a kind person.

**0:17:38.5 CW:** And I share this to say, I left that relationship with deep betrayal, deep anger. Do not talk to me. We are done. Fuck you. And in the next few months after that, I made healing my full-time job. I assembled a small posse of people to help me understand what had happened, what I needed, who I was, who I could become. And that's a privilege. I wracked up some debt for that, and I saw that as an investment in myself, and I'd make the same choice in a heartbeat. It was through that process that I started to recognize my responsibility in the dynamic, the way I contributed to that. I came from a lot of abuse, a lot of poverty, and because I didn't sound like my father and I didn't use the language of my father, I thought, "I am amazing. I am not my father. I cracked the code." But I had some of that behavior. It just was in different wrapping, and it caused a lot of harm to Vanessa, harm that I think we're both still working through. And it was in that place of recognizing, "I have some responsibility here. I have some accountability here. It does not excuse her behavior." And that's something we've had to work through.

**0:19:11.1 CW:** It does help me understand why it was so tempting for her to behave in the ways that she did, which essentially was like, "Hey, I wanna hang out with this person and hump sometimes," and then they fell in love. And that wasn't part of the agreement, and I felt super betrayed. So I don't wanna like have there be some cloudiness around what that behavior was, and the way that I found out wasn't straightforward and honest, and so I felt there was a lot of betrayal there. It has since shown itself to me as a beautiful blessing and the liberation that I needed, and I think we both needed to find who we were, and there's still so much love there, that love looks a little different than it did before, it's deeper in a lot of ways, and I couldn't allow Vanessa to be who she was authentically. I didn't know how to do that. I really believed that what she did was a reflection of me. She wore some crazy ass outfits. [chuckle] I had a hard time with that. Her communications that was very different than mine. So there's all these ways in which I didn't see myself as a controlling person, even though that was my modeling from parenting, 'cause I didn't use the same language, I didn't have the same types of controls, but because of my own wounding, I didn't know how to celebrate Vanessa and let her be who she authentically was.

**0:20:46.7 CW:** I actually thought what I was doing was helpful, I thought I was in service of her being better, feeling better, wanting better. So yeah, the uncoupling came to me because divorce felt harsh. Separation felt harsh. Those words didn't feel that there's a redirection full of love still, and that's what we have, and that's what feels like it honors that.

**0:21:20.5 NA:** Yeah. There's so much in there that I wanna dig into. I think, first of all, what you were talking about, when the realization of taking responsibility for your staff and your role, and that that doesn't excuse harm that's been caused by the other person, I feel like that's the ultimate both/and, and being able to get to the point where you can hold space for both of those being true at the same time, that can be quite a challenge.

**0:21:49.9 CW:** Right. And teasing apart blame and responsibility, we conflate those in our culture very easily to say, Oh, this isn't my fault, but I have seen a lot of success just in connection with people when blame isn't a primary part of the purpose, when it really is about understanding, when

the moment that Vanessa and I have the most healing is when we both have been able to share our experience and our needs, and that might take some time. And I'm a wordy person, I'm a processor, I'm a communicator and that isn't how Vanessa moves through the world. She'll draw you something. She's a creative, words are not her first language, and giving space to that, hey, take some time go think about it, we don't have to solve this right now. I still see you, I still love you, it's okay, we have a tendency to say, we can't connect if we don't fix this now, and we allow the thing that needs time to reveal itself to take up so much space in the dynamic, and when we do that, we miss out on the other things that are ready to be received, that can be seen, so to be able to have conversations where you're crying one minute and then laughing the next, to me that's love, that's a version of love that I wanna be a part of.

**0:23:28.0 NA:** That idea that you said before about what is possible if it's not just the back and forth blame, it's something I've been thinking about lately is, at least the way that I was raised, the systems, institutions, relationships that I was raised in, I was never taught how to take accountability, really, I was taught, and I say taught but I think absorbed through example, of you kinda hide the things that you did wrong, or you try to get away with those things, or you try to minimize them, or there's potentially some gas lighting involved or it's anything other than, oh yeah, I made this mistake because the consequences for messing up are so severe and obviously, this is paralleled of course, in our criminal punishment system, that there is no incentive to take responsibility and repair the harm, and so therefore, I noticed a pattern of, it's really intoxicating to latch onto your righteous indignation or anger of such and such person wronged to me in these ways without being willing to look at what your role is in it, and that's definitely something that I'm still unpacking.

**0:24:40.7 CW:** Yeah. And yes, I think we're taught to hide that, and in other ways, we're taught fall on the sword, take responsibility and apologize for shit that isn't yours, and that doesn't feel good in the body either. So, we essentially have modeling of these two extremes, which is, don't own your shit, or own what isn't yours to make the current situation better and where are all these other beautiful places in the middle.

**0:25:15.9 NA:** They're both sort of pointing at the same goal of keep the peace no matter what, so keep the peace by hiding the things and not taking responsibility or sort of murdering yourself and taking too much of the responsibility so that we can quick move past it. That neither of them are necessarily reparative process.

**0:25:31.8 CW:** They're not, right? They're not. And this is kind of fascinating. I've been doing some research and some experimentation around what is this kinda tear and repair look like within friendship? We have such a ghosting culture with friends. And yeah, I'm in a situation right now where I brought forward to a close friend of mine, hey, we're not in connection right now, I think we might need different things but I wanna talk about that with you, and I sent you a voice mail, that hey, is the way I offer support to you in this time of need not what you need? Cool, tell me something else you need, or here's a podcast, and didn't kind get much back and I thought, alright, I'm not being explicit. So, I'm gonna be explicit, because we are not mind readers. And we want other people to be, but that's not how we work. So yeah, I just basically explicitly asked like, do you

wanna work on friendship? And if I'm being honest this is very new territory for me, I don't know what this is like, but I think it will look like us sharing our experience in friendship together.

**0:26:48.8 CW:** What we need in friendship together, how we might get there and if there are any areas that need repair. And it doesn't seem like that conversation is of interest, I'm in the mid-process of this dynamic here, but it didn't feel good to me to just ghost. I want this person to know your meaningful. And I want to do this, but man, I also am just giving grace and space to the fact that this might be the first time they've ever been asked to have a conversation like this. They might need a minute. And it's over text and what's getting lost in translation, and, yeah, we tend to have different ways we approached that in romantic love, yeah, I don't know. That felt like a bit of a tangent.

**0:27:40.3 NA:** No, it's great, we have a room for all the tangents. I wanna circle back to something you said before about this idea of the ways in which we have invisible job descriptions for our partners, let's dig into that.

**0:27:53.3 CW:** Please.

**0:27:53.9 NA:** Can you give me some specific examples? Can be ground basically to some things that are true for you?

**0:27:58.7 CW:** This is one of my favorite things to talk about, is one of my favorite things to work with people around, actually. 'Cause we have invisible job descriptions, 360 degrees around us, we have them for ourselves, we have them for people, we have them for customer service folks too, like they didn't do what I wanted them to do, I'm mad. Okay, but let's talk about it in terms of just romantic partnership, and there are probably some areas that might feel relevant for friendship as well. It is my belief that we create these invisible job descriptions with our partners to get needs met, that we do not know how to give ourselves. And we don't know how to give those ourselves because we were not taught how to do that, and that could be because our caregivers didn't have those skills, so they didn't teach us, or those caregivers did give us those things, but they didn't show us how to give them to ourself some more in a spoon-fed, cuddling kind of way, but either way, there's some other examples too, but either way, we don't believe that we are capable of giving them to ourselves, which is such an interesting journey to go on, to recognize, oh, I am capable of giving myself this shit. So I wanna give some specifics around that, because there's a lot of talk about where to go, but know how to get there, and I love the how to get there part.

**0:29:35.4 CW:** I love GPSing figuring out, What's that path to get there? So, one of the ways I expected Vanessa to show up for me was to soothe my nervous system when I was dysregulated. And this is all fucking true. I went so far, [chuckle] I doubled down on this job description so hard, I made her a Google Slides presentation. [laughter] It's so true.

**0:30:16.4 NA:** Obsessed, I'm obsessed. Keep going. Yes.

**0:30:18.9 CW:** Right? With things I was like, we've been together for 16 years. None of this should

be new, like physical touch, put a chocolate chip cookie in my face or some other kind of snack, just like these things like real... There was nothing, I don't know, I haven't looked at that in a long time, but I'm gonna bet some American dollars here, that there's nothing in that deck that I can't do for myself, but when we are so dysregulated, and the world seems so out of control, we forget we have our own tool box and we just expect that someone else is gonna show up and fix it. So when Vanessa couldn't show up for me in those ways, I was an asshole. I made it known you're failing. You're not doing your job. It causes a lot of harm doing that behavior, I can look back and see that was the modeling that I had, but I couldn't see that at the time because I didn't use the same language, I didn't raise my fist, like my father raised his fist to my mother. I didn't do certain behaviors that really looked obvious. If Vanessa said no to one of my requests, I would be so pissed because I thought, I'm not your biggest priority, and this is how you're showing me that. All of this I kind of bucket into this area of not allowing space for autonomous Vanessa to exist.

**0:32:04.9 CW:** And I can look at how I'm making new choices in my current relationship now, and if I make a request for something or if I have a need, Oh, actually, I'm gonna give you a straight up story. A new version of that where I hadn't quite seen I had an invisible job description for Iris. I find plant medicine and psychedelics to be a very critical part of my healing journey, and I had done some Psilocybin on my own, and I went into a really dark place that was illuminated by some domestic abuse I heard from my neighbors, and that brought up a lot of childhood shit, and I was in an intense place. I had specifically already had an agreement with Iris that day that I was gonna be by myself. I forgot that we had this agreement, so when I'm texting, I'm not in a good place right now I can't take care of myself. Again, not making an explicit request, I did not say to them, can you come here, can you walk six minutes to my house and come to care of me? No, I just expose my situation and expected this person I hadn't been dating for very long would know what the fuck to do for me, that's an example of an invisible job description, and it illuminated quite a bit, it illuminated these ways in which I had set a boundary earlier in that day, forgotten about it, expected this boundary to be overwritten by mind reading. [chuckle] When it's framed that way it's... No wonder I didn't get my needs met.

**0:34:00.5 NA:** Yeah, the part of this that I feel like most interesting is the invisible nature of it, because it's different, I don't hear in any of these stories that either you and Vanessa or you and Iris sat down, not that we work out a permanent job description in a relationship, but I think that there is room for talking about this stuff explicitly, can you meet these needs or not, how do you feel about this? And not, you have that conversation once and never have to have it again, of course, needs and capacity and boundaries and all of that change and in my mind is best served by being an ongoing conversation, but you're right that there's so much that we don't make explicit either because we think that we shouldn't have to, or we tell ourselves stories like if they really love me, dot dot dot, and that there's just so much that happens invisibly and below the surface, and these expectations that we have, a lot of it based on either what's been modeled for us in relationships, what we think a relationship should look like, there's just so much of that that can happen underneath the surface that oftentimes if you have one or two potentially uncomfortable conversations, [chuckle] so much of this stuff can get worked through, but yeah, this idea of invisible job descriptions is just very, very clarifying for me.



**0:35:16.3 CW:** Yeah. And there's another way in which there's just expectations or there's hopes or there's dreams or like so much of this that is connected to boundaries around that for me is also around permissioning and around asking for what we need, and particularly I think this is true of folks that are raised and socialized, female, or in some other capacity where authenticity isn't celebrated. We often don't even make that request because we're afraid of the no, and then it's not just the no though, it's the story we attached to the no. So if I make this request because I'm in need, and I'll give you an example, I have this lower back injury that has resurfaced from previous years, and I have a Fergon device that helps with muscles, but the location of this injury is in a place where I can't administer relief on my own. And I had just done too much and really was in some serious pain, and I thought I'm gonna text Iris and ask if she can come over and use this, and hopefully that will bring me some relief until I can go see somebody professionally. I paused on making that request and I thought, why can't I send this text?

**0:36:40.0 CW:** And I started to get curious about that in the moment, and what showed up for me was, if she says no, what am I gonna do? I'm gonna feel helpless, I'm gonna feel like she doesn't love me, I'm gonna feel unsupported. I'm gonna have to sit here in my pain, I can't work in these conditions. There was a whole fucking auditorium of stories I had about this, and they all were communicating to me at different volumes, but the chorus of them became really overwhelming for me. I haven't lived in Portland that long. I don't have a big network, who else can I call right now in the middle of a work day, who else can help me with this? I had created a story that Iris was the only one, and if she said no, I'm fucked. And when I gave myself permission to say, if Iris is unavailable, I'm gonna A, trust that it's for a good reason, that it is not personal to me, and I'm gonna trust that if it is a no, I am capable of finding another solution. And we deceive ourselves all the time when we think we're not capable of finding another solution, it may not be a solution that's as good, it may not come in the timeframe that we want, but we are capable of doing that. And so that helped me kind of take inventory of what ways am I deceiving myself by saying, I'm not qualified, I'm not good enough, I can't.

**0:38:17.6 NA:** It's such a good, beautiful example. I feel like I'm emotionally responding in a good way to the honesty of just the feeling of rejection and disappointment that can come from hearing a no, and this is the conversation that I wanna be having about boundaries, because I think that there's maybe a more surface level, bright and shiny, just ask for what you need and it's fine to say no and all of this without really addressing how it feels in your body when the story you're telling yourself is, if this person doesn't say, yes, that means they don't care about me and they want me to be in pain the rest of the day, that can feel like a real rejection. And so I'm interested if there's anything that you've been able to do to get more comfortable hearing no from a partner in response to a request that you've made.

**0:39:15.9 CW:** I'm gonna take the scenic route to get to your answer on that. One of the members of the SWAT team I brought on in my massive uncoupling grieve is a codependency recovery coach, which is officially my most expensive Instagram purchase to date. [laughter] Her name is Hailey's page, and I highly recommend her services. First of all, I didn't understand my own codependent brand. I thought, codependency was just weak ass people and I was not fucking weak. And it was in this phase that I started to understand and read more about codependency and then

started to recognize my brand and Vanessa's brand and go, it's actually a fucking miracle. We had 16 years together, given our two brands of codependency. Wow. That's a different topic. Anyway, Hailey's page helped me reframe my relationship to boundaries, and because I had a lifetime of being a people pleaser, by the time I set a boundary, I was so resentful about the position I was in, I had felt so misunderstood, so unseen, and it came very aggressively, so my experience of boundaries had been harsh to receive or to give. They've been very anxiety-provoking in the lead up to, I'm I gonna set a boundary? How do I set one? What does that look like? How can I communicate it?

**0:41:00.5 CW:** The truth is boundary conversations are generally not easy to give and they're generally not easy to receive because they've passed the point of conversation and request. They are now necessary, and Hailey helped me reframe boundaries from a defensive stance to something more close to figuring out and holding what is near and dear to my heart and its protection, but without the armory, boundaries are about protection, protecting something, but we can do that offensively or defensively, and when we recognize, hey, this is a thing that needs protection early on, it's a very different boundary conversation, than this thing, I'm now clenching so tightly and has already been dinged up a little bit because I haven't had any protection around it. So it's softer for me, it can sometimes feel more like a conversation than a boundary, but that takes a lot of practice and let's just understand and know boundaries are discomfort, and when we create a story around the discomfort is when we tend to shy away from them.

**0:42:29.0 CW:** One tool that Iris brought into my life, and you might be familiar with this from your own experience, but is this idea of a "yes, no, counter offer". And I love this because it creates a space for the request to come in. "Do you wanna hang out tonight?" "Okay, well, I might need a second to look at my day and feel into that and do I want to or do I not want to." And whatever the request is, it might be a yes right away. Great. It might feel like a no right away. If it's a no right away, I like to examine, why is it a no? Are there parts of it that could be a yes if something was modified? So that's where the counter offer comes in, it could be a yes, but not tonight. I'd love to hang out with you but I can't hang out tonight, or I can I hang out with you, but only from this time to this time, or I can hang out with you, but can you come to my house and I have to do my laundry and can we just hang when I fold my laundry? What are these ways in which we can make a no be a yes, if it works? And as a people pleaser, we end up making those yeses when they really are not a yes. It isn't a counter offer. It's a bend. It's an invisibleness. It's many, many things. It's a strategy sometimes. There's all kinds of reasons why.

**0:44:00.2 CW:** So this idea of how do we get comfortable with hearing no in our partners, and it's kinda one of those things where it's just about exposure and practice, but I would say some specific things that support the exposure and practice is a trusting that our partner does actually have our best interest, and they are exercising their autonomy. We also want the grace and permission to say no when it doesn't work for us, so we have to be able to give that space when it shows up in front of us. So not assuming that our partner is out to get us or doesn't love us. So it's really around examining what are the stories that show up and we hear a no.

**0:44:48.4 NA:** Yeah, what this brings up for me is something that my partner and I have dealt with

in the past, and I guess dealing with in an ongoing way, is his discomfort and saying no to me for things, and I'm not gonna speculate on where that comes from, that's his to talk about or not. But what it has brought up for me is an invitation to look at, am I and have I been receiving his no in a way that actually subtly tells him that the no isn't okay, right? There's a way to be like okay, but to be passive aggressive about it, or to be resentful or to be any of these things, maybe he's struggling to say no because of people-pleasing tendencies or some of the things that you mentioned that have nothing to do with me. I think the more likely is that it's somewhere on the Venn diagram of that is true, and then also there's something in the way that I was receiving the no that makes that feel not safe to give. And what I have realized through us working this together is what I want more than anything is to be able to trust that a yes is really a yes, and if I get a yes, are you sure? Are you really sure? Is this actually okay? The nudging back that makes me feel insecure. Like, I wanna know if it's a yes, it's a yes. And so that for me is the learning lesson of, "Okay, well, then I have to be okay with a no being a no," and it's not always that simple and flipping a light switch, but it's definitely been something we've been working on.

**0:46:28.7 CW:** Yeah, that's a really beautiful point that you bring forward, and one of the things that Iris and I do with each other is celebrate each other's noes, and yeah, there might be times when it really doesn't feel good to get a no on what you're asking, but this is my personal strategy, is, I can hold my disappointment or my bumminess or my sadness or whatever it isn't feeling that this vision I had isn't gonna be as such, and also I can say, "I'm really glad you're taking the time you need to do this thing," or, "I know it wasn't easy for you to say no to this invitation. And I wanna thank you for your honesty." That can look like all kinds of ways where we can acknowledge, "Dam, I'm super bummed." And also, "I'm here to support you." To me, what that does is it allows... Do you know what it is? It's that middle ground that we talked about earlier of... It's not extreme, it's not I'm saying yes when I don't mean it, and I'm saying no when I don't mean it, or some version of that. It's holding the complexity. It's holding the tension between, "I want this to be a yes, but it cannot be."

**0:48:00.7 CW:** And to add one more example to the mix it's my experience from Iris that they have this really beautiful connection to their intuition, and access to that intuition comes pretty quickly for them, and in some areas, and depending on what's going on my life, it doesn't come quickly for me, and I need more time, and we had gotten into this pattern of Iris having an idea for something and me just saying yes. And defaulting to Iris's intuition. I created the story. Iris's intuition is better than mine, it's faster than mine, it's stronger than mine, it's more accurate than mine. Bullshit. [laughter] But we through a conversation and through some trial and error of, "Oh, we did a thing, and then it was..." "I don't know, we both got sick at this restaurant, or we went to a place and they were actually closed or whatever the thing was, some new part of the experience rebuilt itself, I would say, "Yeah, I got a no on going there." And Iris was like, "Well, why didn't you say something?" And I was like, "Well, because you had such a clear yes." I wasn't trusting my no, or maybe it could be like I didn't even have a pulse, I didn't have a read on that at all, and so just through having different experiences and having conversations around that, I started to uncover the ways in which I was just defaulting and deferring.

**0:49:30.3 CW:** So now we have a new dynamic where I feel comfortable taking time and space. "I

don't have a read on that yet, let me get a minute," or "I'm not sure." You know, I'm not sure is an answer. We have been taught that "I'm not sure, I don't know" is not an answer. It is an answer. And then what we do with that is gonna be helpful or not helpful to ourselves or to others, but that space of just understanding that setting boundaries, asking for what we need, recognizing we had expectations of our partners and then owning that when it shows up, that's the hard work. That to me is a major part of the foundation of trust and of being seen and of ultimately getting our needs met.

**0:50:29.9 NA:** I hear a parallel in the story that you just shared with what we were talking about before about the invisible job descriptions, sort of along the line of which stories exist in the relationship that are keeping us in certain roles, that if Iris is the intuitive one, and therefore I default to them. And maybe that doesn't have to be a problem all of the time, but it makes me think in my relationship, I can't even list, we'd be here for the next couple of hours, the number of hands-on skills that Gent has, that I don't have. And so it's really easy to then default into like, "He's the super handy one, he can do all of this, so I don't even try," or, "He's gonna do it better than me, so I'm just gonna wait for him to do it." And then if that's not talked about explicitly, it is that invisible job description of, "This thing that needs to be assembled, I'm just gonna leave it on the counter and just assume he's gonna get to it because he's the one who does those things." And maybe he does wanna assemble the thing.

**0:51:34.4 CW:** And these are those kinds of things that, I'm gonna just put a happy, generalized happy path here, but these are the types of things that can show up in this way, where when relationships first start, we wanna show up in our zones of genius for the other person, we wanna show up in our strengths, so yeah, I am gonna build that thing and fix that thing for you, it genuinely brings me joy to do this for you, and over time, when that invisible job description starts to show up and it's no longer like, "Hey, can you build this thing for me when you have some time? Yes? Great." That's a permission, that's an agreement that's made. When it's just like, "I'll leave it on the counter, it's there for days. Why the fuck haven't you done this yet? This is your job. I thought you would do this by now." Now we're into that place where resentment has a home to breed. It's like algae needs that sweet spot of temperature and water to survive, it's like, "Where are we creating prime temperatures for things like resentment and anger and bitterness to breed in our relationship?" And this is a perfect example of that, because we're no longer in permission for an assumption, and resentment loves assumption.

**0:52:46.3 NA:** And then how are we effectively blocking our own growth and experimentation by telling myself, "I don't do X, I'm not the one who," whatever. When I probably could. Maybe it would be more difficult for me. Maybe it would take longer. Maybe I wouldn't enjoy it. But what are the things that I don't even try because I've already decided that this other person, that's their thing.

**0:53:11.7 CW:** And what are the goodies that can be there for you when you do that thing? Are you gonna appreciate using this thing more because you built it? Are you gonna have a sense of pride that you otherwise wouldn't have? And, hey, we're all busy. We might be trading time for other things, we might be, "I'll do the dishes if you build this thing." But again, that's all permission, that's

all agreement, and that's the place that I'm finding is a really beautiful place to live in in this new relationship, and I'm bringing that into my friendships, I'm bringing that even back to Vanessa, I'm bringing that into work relationships in this way that I thought I was doing, but I wasn't really. Because I had my own vision and my own expectations of how things should be, I really thought I knew better, I thought I knew what was best for folks. And I remember reading in the book "Codependency No More" I remember reading this one line, basically that when we think we know what's best for people and when we do for them, we play the role of God, and I was like, "Fuck!" And I remember when Hailey asked, "Why do you wanna hire me?" That's the line I gave. And she was like, "I've never had anybody saying that." [chuckle] That to me was the perspective shift that I needed to say like, "I'm in the way of their journey when I do this."

**0:54:39.3 CW:** So I get to always make a choice about yes or no, and sometimes it is around that compromise, but I had a lot of stories for a lot of time, I said yes to a lot of things, 'cause I was like, "Oh well, you can't do it, so I need to. Well, you're not gonna do it as good as me, so let me do it." Or, actually, one of the things I'm working through right now is not being responsible for other people's problems. Okay, I'll give you an example. Iris went on this hiking trip, as you know, got injured.

**0:55:12.2 NA:** Yeah, the hiking trip with me, yes.

**0:55:14.4 CW:** With you. Got injured. Came back to Portland early. Can't walk. Me being the solutions problem-solving ideas guy than I am, which we've named Action Man. So Action Man likes to show up without permission sometimes, and just say, "Here's what you should do."

**0:55:34.6 NA:** Yeah, me, I'm also Action Man.

**0:55:36.7 CW:** Right? So I'm trying to get better at saying, "I have an idea," or, "I have a strategy or I have a solution, Would you like to hear it? Are you interested in knowing that?" So this is the permission piece. Anyways, I offer this idea to Iris, which my idea was to get one of those little knee scooters, which I think are fucking amazing. Iris was not having it. It actually created a moment for us where they were like, fuck, No, fuck no, but that's how I heard it, it was a no, but I heard it as aggressive and it probably wasn't. I went into the story place of, "Iris always rejects my ideas." And my energy is radiating, Iris's energy is radiating. They get up and say, "I'm gonna go to the bathroom, get ready for bed, so get a little space from each other." And I was like, "Oh shit, I am activated right now, like I'm pissed, I'm angry and I'm sidebarred doing a lot of work around anger so I was doing some of my anger curiosities," which I think is a whole another topic I won't get into. But then what showed up for me around that was, "Okay, right now, what do I need to do to take care of my body and start to regulate myself? 'Cause I am off the charts over here."

**0:57:00.8 CW:** I get on the mat, I start doing some stretching. That is a strategy I've learned for me helps regulate my nervous system, so when we talk about actionable things where when I was alone in COVID dealing with some coupling and I didn't have anybody to hug me or rub my back, or for me, physical touch is the quickest way to sooth my nervous system. I had to do other things, and so I learned these stretches and working with someone else around how to do that and tell the nervous

system that I'm safe and I'm okay. Anyways, I go do that, Iris is doing their thing, I start to get more curious around, like, "Why am I so charged up about a no? Like what's going on here?" And that's when I start to realize I'm taking responsibility for Iris's problem. I'm feeling like we can't go walk around, we can't go anywhere, like I'm hearing Iris talk about, "I really wish I could, I really wish I could do this, I really wish I could do that." And in my mind, I'm like, "I gave you the golden ticket to be able to do all these things," but it's a no. You won't even tell me why it's a no. This really opened up for me, like how often I can take responsibility for other people's problems because I tell myself they're my problem too, when they're really not. They're really not.

**0:58:18.6 NA:** Relatable content. Relatable content. This is also a thing that I'm working on. So I feel very not alone in this, so thank you.

**0:58:30.1 CW:** So I'm gonna finish this story because there's another goodie that comes with this, which is, Iris comes back in the room, gets in the bed, I'm still stretching, and I think I hear them crying. And granted, there had been a lot of grief around coming back from this trip and being injured and what that kind of lost man and in my body I'm like, "I cannot deal with some crying right now, I'm cried out, I don't wanna attend to you right now, I'm over this crying situation right now," and I'm just lying there still stretching, I don't even wanna be stretching, because I don't wanna go to crying, and now I'm feeling like trapped, which is one of my core wounding, so I recognize that's coming up for me, "Oh, fuck, here we go! ." I'm like, "There's a lot going on here." Anyways, I finally get up, walk over the bed, Iris is not crying. We look at each other, immediately start giggling. I was like, "Hey, do you wanna hear the story that my brain told me while you were gone?" And they were like, "You wanna hear the story that my brain told me while I was gone?" And we just talked about these stories that our brain gave us and Iris was like, "I'm not using one of those knee scooter things, I don't have an entry that warns that."

**0:59:42.5 CW:** So there's a whole story around what does it mean to be in need of one of those and to not be strong enough and to be dependent, so it's some whole story over there, which some of those might be my words, not Iris's. And then for me, I have this whole other story for myself around that we just came together around what our brains were telling us, and it was this beautiful moment of not giving into those stories. We allow them to come forward. We acknowledge that they were there and then, yeah, we just laughed about it. They did not take up all the space in the evening.

**1:00:21.4 NA:** Yeah, and the reminder that that is possible, that something doesn't necessarily have to spiral out to be a multi-week conflict. [chuckle]

**1:00:30.1 CW:** Yeah, like, I was over here telling myself that you always reject my ideas and they were like, I love your ideas, I love your brain, I just don't want that one for me, it's my body. But here I was thinking I knew better.

**1:00:42.2 NA:** Yeah, I'm working on that as well. [laughter] So yes, not putting other people's stuff into my container is the way that I think about it in my mind. I have a very large container that can hold room and space for lots of people and lots of things, and I too am the action man default and

those tendencies can have strengths attached to them as well, and I'm really, really seeing the boundaries that I'm bumping up against where that's not necessarily true.

**1:01:15.8 CW:** Yeah, and for me, conflating disappointment with responsibility is something I'm teasing out, so I can be bummed, that hey, we can't go to a restaurant and walk around town, 'cause you're injured right now. I know that's temporary. So I can hold my disappointment with that, I can wish for a different reality, I can fight that reality if I want, but I don't have to be responsible for the solution because I so desperately want a reality to change. It isn't my reality. It is, but...

**1:01:48.3 NA:** I didn't have to be responsible for the solution. "Okay, alright, I hear you, I'm gonna take this with me, I'm gonna re-listen to this segment." I will tell you something that's been interesting, that's been coming up with Gent tonight, is we have, through a series of just some external heightened emotional things that have happened, have realized that in, I don't wanna say moments of crisis, that sounds too extreme, but those sort of heightened emotional, difficult times, our response mechanism, coping mechanism, safety mechanism, trauma conditioning, whatever you wanna call it, is completely the opposite. The way that I respond to something and the way that he responds to something and what I need and what he needs, it's like ships in the night. And it's been a really interesting thing to pursue through and to talk about potentially getting some counseling around and look for some proactive solutions of, "Wow, we are not just different, but almost have contradictory approaches that the one person's approach makes the other person's experience even harder," and that's been very humbling to notice. And yet I also feel really grateful to be in partnership with someone that I'm willing to do that work with, because I will tell you that there were many times in the past where that would have not been the case.

[chuckle]

**1:03:07.0 CW:** And also as an examination point to that, recognizing that culturally, we think in partnership, we have to get through these heightened moments together, and that might not be true, so when is it actually beneficial to say, "You go have your experience tend to yourself, I'm gonna go have my experience tend to myself?" Whoever comes out of that, text the other person first, and when the other person's ready... " Part of I think what's so hard about relationships is that over the last century and a half or so, we've become less dependent on community and religion and more dependent on a single person. That's a tall order. Marriage didn't used to have so much pressure. Partnership, committed relationship, it didn't use to have so much pressure to be all the things to the other person. And it's evolved into that, and I think we're finding ourselves in these moments of crisis, and I use that word intentionally, because we're chronically led down and disappointed when this romantic partner we've chosen, if we're monogamous, doesn't fulfill all the fucking things on the list, so where else can we get these needs met? Are we getting enough from this that fulfills us? But also we've kind of stopped looking at ourselves for what we can give ourselves, because we think this one person is gonna give us all of the things.

**1:04:42.6 NA:** Right. And then how do we get out of the pattern of consciously or not punishing our partner for not being all of the things?

**1:04:52.3 CW:** Word up. And do you wanna be punished for that?

**1:04:55.3 NA:** Right.

**1:04:56.5 CW:** I don't.

**1:04:56.8 NA:** No.

**1:04:57.5 CW:** I don't like sushi. It's just a texture situation for me. Do I wanna be punished for not being able to go out to sushi dinner with my partner? No, I want you to go with your friends and enjoy sushi. Now, can you be bummed that this is not a date night experience you're gonna have with me? For sure. Can I hold space for you on that? Yes. But to be punished, that's different.

**1:05:25.5 NA:** So before we move on to talking about weddings, which is something that I definitely wanna talk to you about.

**1:05:30.7 CW:** Oh God, great.

**1:05:31.7 NA:** I know. Under this umbrella of boundaries, essentially, can I ask you a sex and boundaries question?

**1:05:37.5 CW:** Oh, please.

**1:05:39.5 NA:** So this question comes actually from one of the folks in our Patreon community, the foxy fan of the show. So I'm just gonna read you the question and then you can take it in whatever direction that you want, but I feel like it sort of fits under this umbrella.

**1:05:51.6 CW:** Awesome.

**1:05:52.4 NA:** Okay. This person asks, "What if one partner wants sex a lot more than the other partner? What if one partner is into something sexually that the other isn't into? And then of course, the ever popular question, is there a right amount of sex to be having?"

**1:06:10.4 CW:** Wow, how much time do we have?

**1:06:11.1 NA:** I know, I was just gonna say, NBD, right? Like, here you go.

[laughter]

**1:06:18.6 CW:** Yeah, I have a couple of things to say and it might not be what the person wants to hear, but that's okay. The crux of that question is, in large part why non-monogamy became a solution for me and for my other relationships and this current one? Not only I think do we expect this other person to be everything for us, we have our own feelings around not being enough for our partner. I have a very high libido. That is in large part thanks to the testosterone I take every week,



and I do need more sexual activity than other people. The right amount of sex to have in the relationship is whatever fills your tank. There's a lot of articles and research and you can survey your friends about, "How often are you having sex? How much time are you having sex?" Which I think is still interesting to look at. I one time did survey my friends and I was like, "Wow, 20 minutes is kind of the average time people are having sex?" And I was like, "That is not my experience." So it's just information. It starts to take on a meaning when we think other people's reality have to be ours. That's true for everything. So there's all kinds of things we can explore around why someone's libido is really high, is there a drive to seeking a different kind of connection or is it purely physical? So this gets really, really complicated.

**1:08:03.3 CW:** But I think, is it about having different sexual experiences? Which I think was part of the question in there too, if what we're really trying to do is to create a space where people are getting their needs met, it is gonna require releasing some control over your partner. It really is gonna require a freedom for autonomy. I'm not here saying monogamy is bad or that non-monogamy is the only way to solve this question, but there's ways to examine where are these two people's libidos and interest in sexual connection, and maybe what is behind that. So it could just be like, "Hey, sex isn't actually that pleasurable with you, so I don't have a big libido." That's really hard to tell your partner. "I love you, but you don't make me come." So yeah, I don't know. I wanna say a lot, but I also wanna be, it's really complicated. And it's so specific to the individual, so I don't wanna generalize too much here, but I think there's lots of questions that can be asked, and some of that is around what is my driver around having sex or not having sex?

**1:09:28.6 CW:** Is it really about sex? Is it about some other intimacy? Can masturbation actually provide some relief from that? And it's really about carving out a safe space to do that in your home. Is it about being able to tell your partner like, "Hey, I need to have an orgasm, that's what my body needs? I know you don't wanna have sex. Can you make out with me while I touch myself? Can you give me some privacy? Can you go for a walk around the block actually? I can't do that when you're here, or your discomfort is bringing me discomfort." I'm generalizing and I'm not having the most, I think, harmonious language around that, but I think there's a lot of things that can be tried.

**1:10:13.9 NA:** Yeah. I think all of those questions that you asked... 'Cause of course, there is no one answer to this person's question, which is why I'm sure they're not the only one who has some version of this question, right?

**1:10:22.6 CW:** No, no.

**1:10:23.7 NA:** This is a very, very common thing.

**1:10:25.1 CW:** You are not alone with this question.

**1:10:28.1 NA:** Yeah. And everything that you offered, to me, the kind of common denominator is conversation and experimentation.

**1:10:38.9 CW:** It really is, and also we are so afraid of hearing some feedback about how we're not

"good enough", and I use good enough in air quotes, but someone else's need does not make you not good enough, someone else's need does not make you not good enough. If you're not able to provide what it is that they need, how can collectively some permissioning happen so that person can get their need met? It's in that space of, "I have a need, I can't get it met," that creates so much tension in relationship. It just makes that temperature for resentment perfect. And essentially what happens for us when we can't get this need met is we feel unseen, and when we feel unseen, man, we all know. We all know what that feels like. There's a million ways in our day-to-day life that we feel unseen and then to not feel seen by our partner is kind of exponential pain, and it taps into that place really acutely. So what are ways that we can liberate ourselves from that? And I think both parties get liberation if there's a willingness to experiment here. It's really liberating to not feel like you have to have so much control of your partner.

**1:12:17.3 CW:** I know it sounds scary. I'm a six Enneagram. Okay? I want safety, I want predictability, I want control, I want certainty. And over the last two years or so, I've really been shifting my relationship to that and seeing the beauty that comes out from letting that go. Life will surprise you in really fabulous ways. It's not as scary as our brains tell us it will be.

**1:12:46.2 NA:** I love that, I love that so much. Let's talk about weddings.

**1:12:49.2 CW:** Yeah, let's do that.

**1:12:50.3 NA:** So can you give just a really brief summary of the work that you have done in the wedding industry, I guess, Can we call it that?

**1:13:00.9 CW:** Yeah. That's right. So one of my careers, I had a boutique wedding and event design business with Vanessa, we did it for nine years, and we really found this beautiful way to show up for weddings that felt authentic to us, and we had our own lots of conversations around weddings and what that looked like, and marriage, and that was its own journey. There's a lot of traditions in, I'm gonna just say, American culture weddings, that we really wanted to find other ways to express. There's a lot of patriarchal traditions, there's a lot of formalities that just don't work, and I think at the end of the day, there's a bunch of people that wanna be able to celebrate and have new rules, and that's really what we offered, and we did some things that felt very intuitive, but felt very radical to other vendors. And we did weddings for all kinds of people, and it was really about how do we celebrate who the couple are, what their communities are like, and how do we bring those communities together and really create connections?

**1:14:12.5 CW:** So I think we all have had that experience of going to a wedding, we feel some discomfort, maybe we don't know a lot of people there, and so our shoulders are gone up by our ears, and it was our belief that we had about 10 minutes when you arrive to get your shoulders down, and we're gonna do that by showing you that you're cared for and that you're taken care of, and we had lots of strategies in place to do that. A lot of the work that we do with the couples too, is helping them evaluate how do we show the guests that they can actually integrate with each other in a beautiful way? How do we create connection in these so that it isn't just, "I shuttle for five hours, I took a shuttle there, I took a shuttle back. I got wasted. I ate some mediocre food and I left." If it's

really about bringing these communities together, about building new relationships, about building new dynamics, how do we do that? So that's a lot of the work that we did.

**1:15:15.5 NA:** Yeah. Woah, now I'm looking at the clock like I wish we had so much more time to talk about this, but I feel like we can hit some good juicy things. Perhaps we can start, if you wanna share some questions that folks can maybe use to help them define the purpose for their wedding, 'cause that seems sort of the underpinning of what you're talking about.

**1:15:34.5 CW:** Yeah, that's right. And I also feel like COVID brought a lot of that out in folks. I'm just remembering if folks are kind of in the market for this, I think Priya Parker does a really great job of helping to provide some frameworks and some tools for that, and I think she's just a really wise person in the space. Any purpose or reason that you have for wanting a wedding is okay, even if that is, "I want my wedding to be better than someone else in my family. Like better than my sister's, better than my cousin's," whatever that is, like, "Own that. Know that that's part of your story and own that, that doesn't have to be your purpose, but that can be part of why you're driven to do some of the things that you're doing." But I think understanding why you want a wedding, it's a really interesting work. We're taught culturally that to show your commitment to your partner, you get married, and to show that you got married, you have a wedding. And to show that you're successful, you have a big wedding, and you spend a ton of money.

**1:16:50.7 CW:** And one of the least favorite parts of my job would be responding to people over email that came in through our website and had \$50,000 to do a wedding, and for the types of weddings that we did that budget wouldn't get very far, and it was really hard to tell people, "This is a lot of money, and you're seeing our work and they don't match, and I'm really sorry." And being able to communicate that to each person based on what they shared is a bummer. But you don't have to have a ton of money to still create connection, to still celebrate each other, there's lots of ways to do that. It isn't about fancy invitations and all that stuff, right? So for me, it's about, what are the things that are really important? What are the things that you've thought about a lot as a kid growing up? Or you've been in other places, you've been inspired by that, or when you wake up in the morning, you just think about it, when you fall asleep at night, you just think about it, and what are the other things that you could really care less about? And who's telling you, you need to have these things? Does that really feel true for you?

**1:18:04.9 CW:** One of the customary traditions is that the bride, if it's a heterosexual wedding, the bride is hidden away, and the groom is out hanging out with everybody. Bullshit. You wanna see your people, they wanna see you. So one of our primary strategies is as soon as people arrive, there are snacks and there are drinks. Let's bring those shoulders down, let's get that blood sugar level regulated and let's have you there greeting your people. For some people, they wanted that wow factor, "No, I don't wanna see anybody. I wanna come out, and I wanna surprise everyone." Cool, you know you want that, and there's a reason for that. It's not just a formality at that point. But we wanted to permission people to literally do anything. You don't wanna have a cake, fucking don't. You don't wanna have a first dance, don't. These things do not have to happen for people to still feel like they had a really beautiful experience, and I can't tell you how many times we did these events and people would just say, "I've never been to anything like this before. I've never had a vibe like

this before." Because when people really do put forward what's important to them, we feel it. People don't want that cookie-cutter formality anymore. They want authenticity, they want connection.

**1:19:33.6 NA:** Yeah, I definitely agree with that. And I think we know even if we can't put our finger on it, when we're in a situation that doesn't feel that way, that doesn't feel authentic, that doesn't feel like connection is an option. I would love any specifics that you wanna share, whether it was like tips on how to create an experience that more authentically reflects the couple, or things that you've seen work or when you said that feedback that you received was, "I've never been to something like this." Can you give some examples of just why or any ideas that could be spring boards for folks?

**1:20:06.6 CW:** Yeah, I'll give one kind of flow example, which is the more connection points you can have over the course of a few days, the better. And I think there's a formula there that's like... I'm gonna just generalize here, but Friday night, we had the welcome dinner, Saturday we have the wedding, Sunday we have the farewell brunch. You can name those different things and make them feel a little bit more in line with who you are as a couple, but what those things are and what they look like don't have to be the standard thing here. So I'll give you an example of one flow that we helped support was in this kind of small town, there were four events over two days, there was a Friday afternoon event, Friday evening event, Saturday afternoon, Saturday evening. Four different venues, they were all walkable, you could show up, pop in, pop out, people would run into each other in town, so it was basically this takeover of a tiny town. And it wasn't actually that expensive because a lot of the venues were super easy, these little bars, these little restaurants, catered sandwiches, like this picnic by a lake where you brought your own blanket, it wasn't lavish, it wasn't black tie, but it was personable, it was connective.

**1:21:34.2 CW:** People had freedom to show up and leave as they wanted, to hang out before, hang out after, and if you went and got breakfast on Saturday morning, you might run into some other people that you'd hung out with the night before. A lot of people made new relationships from that, because they had more than five hours or six hours to hang out with each other, where things weren't like, "Okay, you sit down, here's the ceremony. Okay, now we're walking over here, here's your cocktails and your snacks. Okay, now sit down for dinner. Okay, now here's dancing. Okay, go on and shuttle. See you later." Our specialty was kind of, not kind of, our specialty was three-day, three days all on one property, or all in one area, and figuring out what's interesting about the two of you that we could invite other people into. And so sometimes that was having a pub quiz, putting people at tables, having people from, "I've known you since I was a kid. I met you in college. I'm your co-worker now." This inter-relationship generational, if you will, and questions that serve your whole life. A lot of what we did was around games and fun and interaction, we created a lot of activities, we created a lot of interactions. And also who we were. We showed up and I was in the crowd with the people, we were not a clipboard wearing all black, standing around bossing people around.

**1:23:05.4 CW:** How we engage with our vendors is also making sure they had everything they needed to be taken care of. We didn't assume we knew better than anybody else. "Here's our goal.

What do you need to get there?" There's a lot of tendencies for people to be like, "This is what I want. Make it happen." But there's a conversation. There's some harmony that needs to happen around that, so think about like, take the structure of wedding away. Take the structure of tradition away. How do you wanna spend your minutes with these people? How do you want these people in your community to spend their minutes with each other? There's really no reason that any scenario can't be a wedding, can't be a celebration of love. Call it something different, if you want, also get people together in a way that you feel good about, and that will create connection, if that's what you're looking for.

**1:23:58.9 NA:** I know this is a real specific ask, but the idea of potentially breaking some of those formulas or traditions, I can see why that would be really appealing to lots of people. And also I know that there can be friction points with maybe other people in their family or their community that don't want those traditions to be broken. Any thoughts on that?

**1:24:21.3 CW:** Yeah. And that's where sometimes life is political, right? And particularly if somebody else is writing the check for you. "My mom really wants a cake. She's buying the cake. We have to have cake." "I don't care about cake. I don't want cake." Cool, can we have a small cake where you do this cake cutting ceremony, because it really, really is so important to your mom? And that is a moment. And in addition, you get something too. So what is it that you really want? We're gonna offer that in abundance to guests, and create a small moment for your mom. Sometimes that is really important to make sure that different people that are participating in this experience have their needs met as well. And for us, that really laddered into fully supporting the guest experience. And the vendors have their own experience they need. The bride and groom, or the couple has their experience. Family has their experience. There might be some VIPs. So how are all of these little ecosystems getting what they need? How can we be in service of that?

**1:25:30.7 CW:** And I'll say, there's another element there, which is that most people in the wedding industry don't operate this way. So hiring a coordinator off the Internet and saying, "I wanna do something so radical and different," it might cost you more money because somebody is moving outside of their template, and they've got to figure things out in a new way. And part of what the guests need is they need that presence there that is showing them, "We know we're being taken care of," and one of the things, we never got on the microphone and made announcements. Ever. No vendors. We had a conversation. Our team walked around. We encouraged people, "Hey, in 15 minutes, we're gonna move over here. This is what's happening for you. Now is a good time to get another drink or go to the bathroom." We walked around, engaged with everybody when they first got there and make sure they knew where the bathrooms were, made sure they knew what time something was happening. Casually, conversationally. We made a lot of friends for a weekend, but that's part of what helps the guests feel like, "Hey, somebody's here looking out for me." We've surveyed so many people that have been like, "I went to this wedding. I didn't know who was in charge. I needed a band-aid. I didn't know who to ask." It's that kind of stuff that as a guest keeps our shoulders up towards our ear. We never really loosen, and when we can't loosen, we can't connect with other people.

**1:27:02.9 NA:** Yeah, that's very well said. I think maybe the last thing in this that I wanna ask is,

anything that you have seen work well when it comes to blending rituals from different backgrounds for folks?

**1:27:14.5 CW:** Yeah. We did a wedding once that blended Latin background and Indian background. We had a white horse bringing the groom in and a mariachi band playing at the ceremony, and part of what we offered in that was some education around those traditions and those histories. Most weddings, we weren't in favor of a program. It's wasteful. People actually don't need a copy of this poem somebody's reading. These are my personal views on that. And so a lot of what we did was around sustainability. But in this case, we had an opportunity to help people see why they were being invited to celebrate this ritual. What's the connection to that? That, to me, is actually a really fascinating part there, because when we understand who's sitting next to us a little bit better, we can create more connection. When we have an appreciation for other parts of culture, we can create more connection. We can ask questions, we can get visibility, we can feel seen. All of that, again, what it goes back to is this north star of a supportive guest experience. You're taking the time to educate me about this thing I have to sit through? That means something.

**1:28:49.0 CW:** It's in our bodies. We cannot articulate that as a guest. And when those small moments happen over and over and over again, we're primed and ready to make best friends with people, or at least be a little bit more open to meeting new people, if we're really guarded in general. It's not gonna be true for everybody, but we're creating a foundation for that to be possible. It's not enough just to have a wedding and expect that your friends are gonna find each other and they're gonna connect. It doesn't actually happen that way, despite all the romcoms we see. It can, but what foundation can be made to support that in a meaningful way?

**1:29:35.6 NA:** Do you think that you wanna get married again?

**1:29:37.7 CW:** Great question. I love parties. [laughter] I love hosting. I love people connecting. I don't know. I don't know how I feel about that, and it may be that I haven't given it much attention because Iris is uninterested in having a wedding or getting married. Yeah, it doesn't feel like something I need to do, but I also wouldn't say no. I also know how much they cost and how much I... Yeah, so I don't know.

**1:30:15.7 NA:** Right. Or rather how much what you would want would cost? 'Cause you can certainly do something that's lovely for not that much money.

**1:30:23.4 CW:** That's right. Yeah, and I can do a lot of it myself, but I like supporting other people still and consulting around that. I don't miss the manual labor and the 16-hour days and carrying shit.

**1:30:43.5 NA:** So you don't feel like getting married is something that your relationship needs to aim toward in order for you to feel fulfilled and committed in that relationship?

**1:30:52.4 CW:** It doesn't, but I will say there are things I think about in terms of the legal and bureaucratic parts that marriage provide, and there are other ways to achieve that. So if there comes

a point in time when it's, like, "I do want my partner to have decision-making privileges around my medical care, around my finances, around other areas," there are powers of attorney and wills and other things that provide that. So I think it's worth asking. I mean, in all honesty, when Vanessa and I got married, and I don't think most people know this, but our wedding was in September. We walked from our house to the court house and got married in April, 'cause I needed healthcare. We didn't tell anybody. We didn't tell our parents. We didn't tell anybody. So what are some of the things that you're doing? And maybe it is about some bureaucraties like that. I mean, I have a friend, and I won't say who they are, but they are here from another country to work, and they legally got married in their native country so that they both could come here on one couples work visa, but they call themselves boyfriend, girlfriend.

**1:32:13.5 CW:** They didn't change anything about how their relationship, they are still planning on getting married and having a wedding, and they're fully committed to each other, but bureaucratically, they needed to do something to solve a particular need they had. So I think it's also another reason to investigate why marriage? Do we feel like we need a commitment from our partner that marriage is gonna give us 'cause we don't feel committed otherwise? That's information.

**1:32:42.7 NA:** Yeah, going through divorce for me was very clarifying around, "What do I believe about commitment?" What did I think that I believed about marriage and forever, right? Because obviously, I don't believe that a marriage has to be forever, because I didn't do that already. So it opens up some, I feel like more interesting questions. Obviously, hence why I'm creating this entire podcast, 'cause this question, though, "Should I get married again?" Is very, I don't wanna say top of mind because it's not something that I feel any sense of urgency around or that I have to decide, but I just am so interested in it, and I'm really grateful for all of the honesty and perspectives that you shared.

**1:33:20.7 CW:** Yeah. And is there some other ceremony that you want to ritualize and use, right? And show this kind of commitment to each other, but it isn't a wedding? And it isn't a marriage certificate, and it isn't... Like, can you wear a ring without being married? Of course you can. Is the ring the thing you need so somebody knows I'm taken in public? Like, What are these stories that we have?

**1:33:44.2 NA:** It's so funny, I'm sorry, I have to interrupt you. When you just say that of, "Can you wear a ring, even if you're not married? Of course you can." It's very interesting that my reaction was like, "Well no, I wouldn't do that." So it's so funny how we're conditioned into certain things. Sorry for interrupting you.

**1:33:55.7 CW:** No, but that's it. We don't even realize that these things we are carrying are fucking stories. We accept them as truth, and that there is no other way, and I guess I'm here just to invite people to examine any belief you have as a story and if that still serves you. Is it actually what you want?

**1:34:16.0 NA:** Yeah, I feel like sort of the underpinning of so much that we've talked about is around how do we get our needs met inside and outside of partnerships? And are there more

authentic and well-fitting ways to get the needs met than perhaps we've been conditioned into?

**1:34:28.6 CW:** Oh my God. That's lifelong work right there.

**1:34:32.1 NA:** I know, right? I think that's a great place for us to start to wrap up. If you could leave folks with one affirmation of sorts based on our conversation, what would it be? Basically, what's your wish for everyone listening?

**1:34:46.3 CW:** My wish for everyone listening? As you move through relationships, which are beautiful and painful, are easy and hard, that you allow space for all of that to be equally okay. The pain is here to teach you something just as much as the beauty is. The hardship will reveal something in ways that easefulness will too. And one is not better than the other. They are just information.

**1:35:23.6 NA:** What's the best place for people to find you and say, "Hi"? Do you have a particular favorite way to connect with new folks?

**1:35:29.0 CW:** [inhealingwetrust.com](https://inhealingwetrust.com) is where you can learn about what I'm up to. I have an Instagram, also [@inhealingwetrust](https://www.instagram.com/inhealingwetrust). It doesn't have a lot of action, 'cause I'm busy doing other stuff, and maybe that will change one day. But hitting me up through the website is the best way to connect, and then we can go from there.

**1:35:55.1 NA:** I love it. I will put links to that in the show notes. Calvin, thank you so much.

**1:35:58.7 CW:** Thank you.

[music]

**1:36:07.7 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 my 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 Patreon 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](https://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](https://patreon.com/nicoleantoinette).

**1:37:12.7 NA:** And hopefully, I'll see you there.



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