

HOW'S WORK S2 LOBBYISTS FINAL

Voiceover: [00:00:00] How's Work is an unscripted one-time counseling session focused on work. For the purposes of maintaining confidentiality, names, employers and other identifiable characteristics have been removed, but their voices and their stories are real.

Speaker 1: [00:00:33] He's been this rock for me in the last five, six years of life. All the things that I almost didn't know that men could be, I just really don't wanna lose it.

Speaker 2: [00:00:45] She's my work wife and I was the work husband, then we got a divorce and we remained friends, but we don't know how to really build a full functioning relationship 'cause many of the suppositions are gone.

Speaker 1: [00:00:57] When we had like our work break up. We didn't know how to have the conversation. And it became clear that we were trying to have the conversation, but we just kept on missing the other person, and it really fell apart.

Speaker 2: [00:01:10] All hell broke loose with conversations around race, racism, white supremacy, racial justice here in Minnesota, and it challenged both of us.

Speaker 1: [00:01:20] The start of the social movement George Floyd happened in our backyard. In the middle of it, I didn't know all of the pressure placed on him.

Speaker 2: [00:01:29] There's kind of like one black neighborhood in the whole state, but the rest of my life, the rest of my days are spent in almost all white environments.

Speaker 1: [00:01:40] He taught me a lot, and one of the conversations that we ended up having was, that if I really wanted to be an ally, it was m- my job to stand aside if there was a person of color that could take my place, that was one of the reasons that I ended up seeing what else was available.

Speaker 2: [00:01:58] At the time, it was a financial decision. She was recruited with a boatload of money.

Speaker 1: [00:02:05] So, we end up in this fight for me to stay, and I found out that the men were getting paid more money than I was. And, when I needed him to have my back, he didn't.

Speaker 2: [00:02:15] And I hired somebody that could do what she couldn't do. She can't be a black woman. I hired somebody who's a black woman and we don't speak about it, like I've never said that to her, but I feel like it is just barely unarticulated.

Speaker 1: [00:02:31] I would love for someone to help guide us through this conversation, that we don't know how to have so that we can heal.

Speaker 2: [00:02:39] If I can't talk to her about race and being a black gay man in government, you know, I'm only gonna be able to go, but so far in the friendship and you know, I wanna go farther. She tells me she wants to go farther, as well.

Esther Perel: [00:03:00] These two people have worked together for years. He was her boss. They were lobbyists together. They have been partners, work spouses, and then they divorced. They've been trying to talk about what happened. Race is a major topic of their conversation, and there is no way that they can talk about race without my addressing the racial composition in this room at this moment. So, before they plunge, it's important that I get to ask him, here is this black man, who's gonna be talking with two white women. How is that for him?

Speaker 2: [00:03:44] Well, I, I appreciate you bringing it up because that was an explicit conversation I had with my therapist last week when I talked about us doing this podcast and she asked me some black concerns. It's like, "Is she going to be okay, sufficiently, okay, with me on race?" And I said, "Well, we're having a conversation, and I wanna own that." So, thank you, you, and you're actually inviting an element of exchange there, um, I wanted to have, so I don't feel like it's two white women against the black out here. Uh, I went into this looking for some skills. There's like a bunch of wood, and there's tools and you need... we're committed to building a house. I don't know how to do it. I need somebody to teach me how to use the hammer and a screwdriver, and then I'm fine. I'm an experiential learner, so.

Esther Perel: [00:04:31] Right? But I'll add a piece. I may think that holding a hammer is super easy, and if I make the wrong assumption, I need to know it.

Speaker 2: [00:04:45] You would hear that from me.

Esther Perel: [00:04:46] Good. I m- I make mistakes, and I ask to stand corrected when I do. Um, I didn't necessarily think you, you anticipate, uh, two white women against, but, but it's two white women with their perception of the world.

Speaker 2: [00:05:02] Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, and I'll just add, I have been on a journey in my time here in Minnesota to really understand the nature of male privilege. And so, there's an element of having a session facilitated by a woman that works for me. The level of understanding I have has gotten me to understand the overwhelming amount that I do not know.

Speaker 1: [00:05:28] Yeah, same here.

Esther Perel: [00:05:35] Some work pairs enter my office and they eye each other as to who's gonna start, and it goes very slow. This pair has been waiting for a year to have this conversation. They've talked to themselves about the other, and with the other in their mind that they haven't been able to start that conversation, but it's ready to burst. And so, when they walk in, I didn't have to do much except to stay out of the way to create a safe container and to slow them down.

Speaker 2: [00:06:17] I gave up everything I thought I wanted when I chose to be open enough to come to Minnesota.

Esther Perel: [00:06:25] Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Speaker 2: [00:06:25] And I was lost, mildly depressed, uh, literally had no bearings, no friends, no relationships, and really didn't know what I wanted to do professionally. So, I left myself open and landed a dream job in what is perhaps one

of the most difficult areas of the country for somebody like me to live. Um, on the surface, it looks perfect right underneath that, it's that shadow side to Minnesota.

Esther Perel: [00:06:58] Somebody like me?

Speaker 2: [00:06:59] A, a gay black man, living in one of the whitest states in the country. It presented a lot of challenges. Once that I didn't understand, I was getting into, when I got into. Where we live, the job I have. It's like, what I want to do, but had no idea how difficult [inaudible 00:07:18]. And so, and I had nobody to talk to. The very challenges I put myself into, I felt like I didn't have any partners, but I had this tremendous capacity to do good. So, within a few months, I felt like, "Wow, God, I'm in the right place in the right season. There's so much to it." And, then you came into my life and there was this, this kind of click and things just kind of grew from there.

And so, as I got a sense of purpose, a sense of direction, I had a sense of like my, I was coming into my own power. And so, there's like growth, growth, growth, and then there's this plateau. And I think that shadow side to life here, and the difficulties of life for people of color came from center, and you were the only white person in my life at that time that I felt was even open to having a conversation about a conversation. And I say plateau because, I got to know you even more deeply, and I felt the friendship was going deeper.

So the question for me is, in this day and age, what does it mean for a black man to have a white woman as a very close friend. And this kind of work interface for our friendship has racial disparities and it's hard.

Esther Perel: [00:08:48] Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Speaker 2: [00:08:49] Working in a space where the authority and pathways to power and from a professional development are based upon sex and gender.

Esther Perel: [00:09:01] Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Speaker 2: [00:09:01] I'm a black man supervising a white woman, and we're supposed to be dealing with racial disparities. There's a tremendous amount of opportunity in this, a whole lot of pitfalls in all of that.

Esther Perel: [00:09:12] What are some of the opportunities and some of the pitfalls?

Speaker 2: [00:09:19] Um, I don't feel like I can mess up. I feel like there are white eyes on me that are waiting to see, is he as good as he has? Is he as good as everybody says? If he messes up, he will not get the benefit of the doubt.

Speaker 1: [00:09:37] I don't disagree with that, that stuff.

Speaker 2: [00:09:39] So, here's the opportunity. What makes Minnesota so fucked up for people of color? These were deliberate choices for how the state was organized, how the history with native Americans, certainly the 20th century history with black Minnesotans, white people listen to white people, they don't listen to black people when it comes to race base difference in outcomes and lived experiences, all the kind of objective and subjective measures. And my assessment and my gut told me that you delivering those messages would be far more

impactful than me or any other person of color. There's something of actually gave me a glimmer of hope that, she's the white person, and may be a bit of break through here. And so, that was the hope and opportunity that you were uniquely qualified to really seize that opportunity.

Speaker 1: [00:10:34] Okay. Now, what breaks my heart about that is the, part of the reason I left is I didn't think you saw it. Like, I was coming up against the only way to have this be solved, the only way to have this position better, was to elevate a person of color and that I didn't belong in that position anymore. And that's the only reason I left.

Esther Perel: [00:10:57] Did you know that?

Speaker 2: [00:10:59] I did not, not until you told me later. I genuinely thought that it really did come down to money. So, the [inaudible 00:11:11] conversations we had about money spoke to my experience with compensation. I took pretty much a two third salary cuts. I gave up a very good paying job because this is what I wanted to do.

Esther Perel: [00:11:24] Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Speaker 2: [00:11:25] And so I knew that money could take you places, if that's what you need in that season of your life. I didn't want you to leave. You could win over the white folks whose minds brewed and needed to be changed. And you'd be able to make space for people of color. You, I felt like, you would grow into a spot personally, professionally, spiritually on this job where I have created this space and now I'm gonna fill it-

Speaker 1: [00:11:55] Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Speaker 2: [00:11:55] ... with all talent, with the people of color. Like that's the, that's the... Like I'm not gonna inhabit it, I'm gonna seed it. You see the way it happened with George Floyd.

Esther Perel: [00:12:06] Yeah.

Speaker 2: [00:12:07] Literally created, were posted out to the entire world.

Esther Perel: [00:12:10] Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Speaker 2: [00:12:12] I never wanted it to be because of me shooting of another black man, I wanted it to be because we decided to be really honest about, how fucked up it is to be a person of color here. [inaudible 00:12:27] everybody black, white, indigenous. White, black everybody said, were done and we're gonna do the really hard work, or be honest about how we [inaudible 00:12:36] got here and how we are gonna change. I saw you as a partner in all of that. That's the reason why I hired you. I mean, it was competitive, but it, but it really was. Like, you were by far the best.

Speaker 1: [00:12:48] I think it was so hard. Like, I'm still with you on all of those things. Like that's what I wanted to do it. And I, what's funny is that, I think that for both of us, like money became the herring that we were fighting over because I think we didn't wanna talk about the other pieces. And, the other reason that money was a thing is because, I knew two guys were making more than me and I

was doing way more work than they were. And then when it was like, "Oh, we reclassified the positions based on your work." I was like, "But those guys didn't even deal with the stuff."

Speaker 2: [00:13:25] Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Speaker 1: [00:13:26] So, that became, you know, like they're gonna get raises too, for work that I was doing and already underpaid for. And that seemed like the easier fight to have because numbers didn't see this personal as like this. And-

Esther Perel: [00:13:40] As, as?

Speaker 1: [00:13:42] As race and gender. And I think that's, what's hard is even hearing me now, like more than anything in the world in that moment, I wanted to hear from you what you just said now. I wanted you to know that I was on your team. And, the hardest thing for me in the job that I'm in now, is I feel like you're on this battle and I'm not part of it anymore. I know that there's huge disparities. I see them play out all the time, and i- i- it's not fair and it's not right. And, and I was under the impression from s- some of what you said, and also like outside sources that the only way to have this work forward is to have somebody that didn't look like me anymore.

We had a conversation once where you said, like, "If you really want to be an ally, step aside to let black people lead." And like I thought that was the only choice I had left. And then it was hard because as I was leaving, not only did I like have the grief of leaving, but then I felt like I let you down. Like, I couldn't panic. And it wasn't that I didn't want to or that I didn't have the passion, it was just, I couldn't find space.

Speaker 2: [00:14:50] It's hard to hear that, um, and I wish we have had some quality time to have talked these things through, 'cause you were right, we were talking past each other. The assessment you made about me saying, good ally step aside, it is true about creating space, the best mechanism for creating space, that being said I believe is the right thing to do. And, I say it's inadequate, 'cause, if staying in that position allows you to create space then it is about [inaudible 00:15:25]. I'm not saying you took it wrong, hearing me now. I'm like, 'Wow, I could see what she, why she took it that way.

Speaker 1: [00:15:34] It was the whole, everything that was happening all at once. And you know, other people in the organization and everything, like there was a huge push for, for movement and change and for people of color to have voices in the rooms that we were in.

Esther Perel: [00:15:49] Meaning?

Speaker 1: [00:15:50] Well, I remember one meeting that we went to, I think it was for a bill that was specifically to help children of color and the authors of this piece of legislation for people of color. And you look around the room and it was mostly people that were white, and, um, I know the privilege that comes in the skin that I am, that I'm in, but like I, I grew up in a family that didn't have much. And I have, you know, family that struggles with mental illness, and I have family that struggles with addiction and, you know, teenage pregnancies and court cases.

But, you know, there are stereotypes for everybody, and there's stereotypes that comes with how I looked and, you know, have privileged in those stereotypes.

Esther Perel: [00:16:35] What does one see when one sees you in that stereotypic frame?

Speaker 1: [00:16:40] I, I mean, I'm a white blonde, skinny, not unattractive female that, you know, has a high degree of education, and I'm usually the one that is dressed to the nines with all my makeup done and, you know, big high heels, and like that just comes with, uh, it opens doors. I know it opens doors.

Speaker 2: [00:17:09] So, you've been a beautiful friend in sharing a family with me. And I understand the struggles in kinda what day-to-day life is like. And so in that makes me proud of you. I get joy when I watch how proud especially your parents, and both your sisters, how much, how proud they are of you. And yet, when I look at your life through my experience, you know even my experience here in Minnesota, I can't help think that their ways never never held me back.

Speaker 1: [00:17:46] You didn't.

Speaker 2: [00:17:46] Your family had a house.

Speaker 1: [00:17:49] Mm-hmm [affirmative], yeah.

Speaker 2: [00:17:49] So, despite all those difficult circumstances. And then that raises the question, why is that so different than in my neighborhood for families?

Speaker 1: [00:17:56] Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Speaker 2: [00:17:57] [crosstalk 00:17:59] exact same thing. And they're unstable announced, economically fragile and have lived on the margins, and that has been historic. Why, why is hard work and determination work for your family, it doesn't, for black and brown families.

Speaker 1: [00:18:17] I mean, racism is huge and the systematic racism and so many things. And like, I understood those pieces, but I think that when we were looking at the conversations between you and I, when I was leaving, um, I was seeing it through like this very personal you and me. I needed you on, you know, my side. That I failed to see the macro level of all of the pressures that you had. And it really wasn't until George Floyd died, and I watched what happened in Minnesota, and watched what happened in our country and world. And I saw where I can take off a lens of like, I recognize systematic racism as thing, and I can take off that lens and I can go home at night, you don't get to do that.

Esther Perel: [00:19:10] What's the story? Who owns the narrative? For her, the story is money, gender, a friend that didn't back me, the man that I relied upon who let me down. His story, money somewhat, gender somewhat, race a lot. She's able to individualize their breakdown. She sees it as part of a much larger context. And so, the question is, can they align the story? And the point is not to try to answer who is right, but to find a way to integrate the different pieces of the story so that they can do the repair, that they are so eager to do.

The sense I get is that, you have had m- m- many conversations in your head with each other, imaginary conversations. And so, they've just been waiting like here at

the prefrontal, you know, to come out. And, um, the only thing you don't know is what's gonna come out first.

Speaker 2: [00:20:33] Hmm.

Esther Perel: [00:20:34] And then, what it's gonna feel like when you actually say it out loud in front of the real person, and that's the discomfort-

Speaker 2: [00:20:45] Yes.

Esther Perel: [00:20:45] ... or the sadness, or the sense of loss, or the sense of missed opportunity, and then to, you know, have fiction and reality find each other.

Speaker 1: [00:20:59] Yeah. How many times have you had this conversation in your head?

Speaker 2: [00:21:02] Oh, I've been having it since the junior, before you left.

Speaker 1: [00:21:07] So many times?

Speaker 2: [00:21:07] [laughs].

Speaker 1: [00:21:08] I mean, it's scary because when you say things, I have to say them out loud, like I am so cautious of, like I said, I already feel like I let you down, I don't wanna hurt you. And I don't wanna be like when we were talking about whether or not we were gonna go on this podcast, and you said one of your biggest fears was that I would be the bougie white girl of the suburbs and like, walk away from this, I never wanna be that for you.

Speaker 2: [00:21:34] I don't want you to be that for yourself. I don't want that choice to be about me.

Speaker 1: [00:21:37] Well, but I, I mean, that's who I... Like at my core I think that's who I am. Like, that's who I wanna be in this one. I want to be on the right side of history, and I want to be the person that is, you know, giving voices and helping find voice. And, I recognize the mess that this world is in. I mean, and it's not just, you know, for you, you know, like my ga- most of my godchildren are mixed race.

Speaker 2: [00:22:02] Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Speaker 1: [00:22:02] And like, I worry about them every day.

Speaker 2: [00:22:07] The weight of all of that, was in how I interface with you at that point.

Speaker 1: [00:22:14] Yeah.

Speaker 2: [00:22:15] It really was-

Speaker 1: [00:22:17] Yeah.

Speaker 2: [00:22:17] ... at the end of the day, stripping away our relationship, my friendship with you-

Speaker 1: [00:22:22] Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Speaker 2: [00:22:24] ... I'm using a lot of political capital and pushing all of these boundaries for a white woman.

Speaker 1: [00:22:30] Yes. Well, I think that that's what was hard is, I didn't know how much you had to push because there was all of these ways forward. And then, I, I don't know what the barrier was for that to be no, when I have the CEO saying yes, and I have the like senior VP being like, yes, and here's the money. And then all of a sudden, it fell apart that I think that instilled in me that it really wasn't about the money, that it was something that I wasn't doing or that I couldn't do. Which is why I think when you said that, you do think that I ha- was in a position to do that, was so, uh, like cut super deep, because that's what I thought wasn't there.

Esther Perel: [00:23:15] And how many filters were [crosstalk 00:23:18]?

Speaker 1: [00:23:17] A lot [laughs]. I don't, probably a lot.

Esther Perel: [00:23:17] Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Speaker 1: [00:23:17] I, um...

Esther Perel: [00:23:22] What I will just say is, you don't have to be rude for the purpose of being rude or blunt, but you don't have to be nice. You can be caring, but you don't have to be nice. But that's the voice that's been talking. He lets me down, I can't believe that. That's the dialogue inside.

Speaker 1: [00:23:46] Yeah.

Esther Perel: [00:23:46] And he has his own.

Speaker 2: [00:23:48] Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Esther Perel: [00:23:48] I mean, you know, he also has one. And it's these dialogues that are standing in the way of your having the friendship today that you wanna have. Because they have not been addressed. Those voices inside of you that say, let down, betrayal, are you for real?

Speaker 1: [00:24:07] Well, and I think that maybe that's why the let down was, or like, for me it felt so like, so let down is, you... outside of work, you were somebody who like accepted me for who I was, no matter what terrible thing was happening in my life, or how crazy something was going on in my family, or, um, how off the wall I was gonna be with anything.

There was just this like complete level of acceptance for who we were. And, um, I have a history of, you know, uh, sexual assault as a child, um, assault as an adult, and, um, you were somebody that was always so safe for me, and, um, and somebody who saw that and wasn't afraid of that and had those conversations with me. It's a really, you became like, uh, the man in my life that I was closest to.

And, um, somebody that I looked up to, and somebody that I cared about, and somebody that I saw as, um... who had seen of just so much, so much wisdom and, um, uh, p- probably unfair to you. Um, I thought that like that micro relationship

was so valuable to me, that it wouldn't matter what happened with, you know, the board or what happened with, uh, the legislature, what happened with the Senate that even in the breaking that might be like, you would see who I was and that the work that I was trying to do. And it really did feel in that moment that, um, it was like, I wasn't worth fighting for it. And like, i- it, like, it just broke me. Like, it just broke me. And, and it wasn't even that I blamed you for it, it just, you know, it hurt.

Speaker 2: [00:26:05] Uh, I, out of difference and probably fear of our, the scrutiny I had and our HR protocols, um, I was, uh, never able to tell you how I had to fire you, and why it took so long. Um, but I can share with you that the only pathway that I saw, where I could create a path was the example of you and your totality, and it had to have this collateral with the voice. You know, um, it is, it's hard for me to hear you talk about the pay because I'm feeling like while she's holding me accountable for something, I didn't create, a problem I didn't create. That was [crosstalk 00:26:58].

Speaker 1: [00:26:57] No, you didn't create it. Yeah, it was before you.

Speaker 2: [00:26:59] And I, I did a lot. I did everything that I knew was within my power, um, to solve for that. What I think I didn't understand was what it meant to have, to have everybody else [inaudible 00:27:13], um, I think.

Speaker 1: [00:27:12] Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Speaker 2: [00:27:16] Because I would, if, if I had known that I probably, I would have rather had a conversation about like, I got to do it this way, because this is literally the up like this, this size has a ripple effect elsewhere if I can't do it this way, but they're telling me like, it's everybody or nobody. Um, but it was about you. Like, it was easy to do to the extent that it wasn't about you.

So, here's where I'll be unfiltered. I'm hearing the determination in your, in, in how you're talking about this, and it fits a pattern for me that triggers a lot of, uh, resentment. And so what, what you, what this sounds like, and looks like to me, is every other time I, or some other black person I knew never got ahead because a capable, smart, ambitious, pretty white woman got the advantages. That was the person that the organization wanted to take it as the person that society wanted to take care of.

Here we go with throwing money at a white person. Would we do this, if she were black? Would we do this if she were not white? And I'm like, and she's my friend. When you came to my office, you were crying.

Speaker 1: [00:28:35] Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Speaker 2: [00:28:35] I was like, "I can't cry." I'm literally crying, I'm in tears just at the back of my eye sockets, I'm like, "I can't cry."

Speaker 1: [00:28:45] Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Speaker 2: [00:28:45] From my experience, it's like, she's got the privilege, she's got a job offer when she wants it or not. You got a [inaudible 00:28:52] job offer with shit load of money.

Speaker 1: [00:28:53] Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Speaker 2: [00:28:53] Whether you want it, whe- whether you wanted it to not having that, is privilege in and of itself. And like, and I'm sitting here, like I can't even cry. I can't even be emotional. I've got to be stiff back, soft voice-

Speaker 1: [00:29:08] Oh, and you still were. And [crosstalk 00:29:09].

Speaker 2: [00:29:08] And I'm just completely dispassionate about all of it.

Speaker 1: [00:29:14] Is that, I understand the macro pieces, and I, they're all they're valid and I, and you're right about how people get promoted, and you were right about who gets promoted. Um, and we've seen that with a number of our friends in organization that are not promoted. Like, I mean, that's, that's real. That is real.

Speaker 2: [00:29:30] I mean, as, as this is happening, if-

Speaker 1: [00:29:33] This is about me. [laughs]

Speaker 2: [00:29:34] Well, and that's what I want you to understand what these do [crosstalk 00:29:38].

Speaker 1: [00:29:37] Sorry, I feel like we're ignoring you.

Speaker 2: [00:29:40] [laughs].

Esther Perel: [00:29:40] Look, you don't need me. Um, except that every once in a while, I would just say, take off another layer of filter. You on some level, want to individualize this and say, but it's me. And he, on some level is saying to you, there is you, but then there is that bigger thing and you're just one person in it, and I cannot just make it about you and me, I can never leave the macro frame of race, of gender, of power, of money, of double standards. We cannot think that we can insulate ourselves from all these larger factors.

On some level, she may never have really understood why she didn't stand by her or give her the raise that she felt she was fairly due. Because in his mind, there is a bigger unfairness and he could not go too bad for her and separate that from the larger historical and social reality of black, white relationships in the workplace.

Speaker 2: [00:31:13] There's, uh, only two other black people on my floor, so out of a floor of about maybe 100 people, just three, actually two are retiring. I might be the only person. It's a lonely isolating place, and there's a lot of hope that black employees that placed in me that I'm only now becoming aware of. And that gives me hope and inspiration, but fear and trepidation at the same time. And that is disconcerting because it is a reflection of a power differential, a racialized power differential. I shouldn't be going to a black person and success for black people should not rest solely on my shoulders.

Esther Perel: [00:31:59] Of course.

Speaker 2: [00:32:00] Or shoulders of, of a few people, of a handful of people.

Esther Perel: [00:32:04] So, you're isolated as black and you are also isolated as gay, or you have more of, like in the gay world, you have more of a community?

Speaker 2: [00:32:16] To be truthful, it is far more difficult for me to navigate my place of employment and this region as a black man than as a gay man.

Esther Perel: [00:32:25] Wow. You have a partner?

Speaker 2: [00:32:30] Me?

Esther Perel: [00:32:31] No, I'm asking her.

Speaker 2: [00:32:32] Oh, [laughs].

Speaker 1: [00:32:33] No, no. Hmm.

Speaker 2: [00:32:37] I have never understood, why you don't have a train of suitors going after you.

Speaker 1: [00:32:41] Good question, I don't know. I don't know.

Speaker 2: [00:32:41] Do you feel objectified?

Speaker 1: [00:32:41] At [inaudible 00:32:49] at capital all the time.

Speaker 2: [00:32:50] Okay.

Speaker 1: [00:32:50] Like, when we were working in politics, like there were, um, there was a time where like two legislative leaders had a bet on who could sleep with me first.

Speaker 2: [00:32:57] Can you talk about that, like I said-

Esther Perel: [00:33:01] Oh, sure.

Speaker 2: [00:33:02] ... I wanna ask you, what could I have done differently to support you?

Speaker 1: [00:33:05] Were you there?

Speaker 2: [00:33:06] Yeah, I was, it was the four of us.

Speaker 1: [00:33:07] That's funny, I, um-

Speaker 2: [00:33:08] [crosstalk 00:33:12] fuck with me for years now, and I-

Speaker 1: [00:33:14] I didn't know that.

Speaker 2: [00:33:14] ... have never... A question I keep asking myself is what should I have done differently to support you?

Speaker 1: [00:33:23] I wish I had an answer, but I honestly don't remember you were there. Like-

Esther Perel: [00:33:26] That is so telling.

Speaker 2: [00:33:29] Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Speaker 1: [00:33:30] What does it say? Because I, I mean I don't.

Esther Perel: [00:33:33] I totally believe you, you know, when you dissociate [laughs] on some level, he may even remember other things that you don't remember. When he says I was there, but it stayed with you and you never brought it up somehow, why?

Speaker 2: [00:33:54] I think feelings of inadequacy and shame.

Esther Perel: [00:34:00] Of you?

Speaker 2: [00:34:01] Of myself.

Esther Perel: [00:34:02] Oh, wow.

Speaker 2: [00:34:03] I feel badly because I didn't interrupt what was going on.

Speaker 1: [00:34:09] Did you know what was going on?

Speaker 2: [00:34:11] I was very clear to me what was going on.

Speaker 1: [00:34:13] I thought we would keep it like, I, I, I remember trying to make it, uh-

Esther Perel: [00:34:17] Funny.

Speaker 1: [00:34:18] ... well fu- and not to cause a scene because i- like, there all of a sudden were tons of people that [crosstalk 00:34:23].

Speaker 2: [00:34:22] I didn't know about the betting.

Speaker 1: [00:34:23] Yeah.

Speaker 2: [00:34:24] The, the fact that they were putting you in a compromising position. I mean, it was what was important.

Speaker 1: [00:34:29] Yeah.

Esther Perel: [00:34:30] You're, you're being, you know, tossed as a toy and you're trying to be classy about it and not to say anything and to just kind of joke it off or remain gracious or talk about something else-

Speaker 1: [00:34:42] Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Esther Perel: [00:34:42] ... and she's watching the whole thing. And as could have happened, if it was not a woman's story, but a racial story.

Speaker 1: [00:34:49] Yeah.

Esther Perel: [00:34:50] He's saying, "I sat there, I watched the whole thing and I said nothing." And then one question is, since you remember it actually better than her, what happened to you?

Speaker 2: [00:35:01] Um, I kind of stood there and the only thing I thought I could do was to create a diversion-

Speaker 1: [00:35:07] Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Speaker 2: [00:35:08] ... that involved your sister. And mind you, there was a obliquely, homophobic remark that one of these people said to me earlier that evening. And so, I was, I was filtering everything through that, and you know, that's, that's how I walk in. It's like, Oh my God, they're, they're already screwed with me now we're screwing with her. How can I rescue you?

Speaker 1: [00:35:30] Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Speaker 2: [00:35:31] And how can I minimize collateral damage to me? And that was the, she's got to go get her sister.

Speaker 1: [00:35:37] And that, and that worked. Like it got me out.

Esther Perel: [00:35:40] Wow.

Speaker 2: [00:35:42] So, this is helpful, 'cause it's, it's to be honest, ever since then I kept asking myself, why don't you call them out on what was going on? Whether or not just a- articulate that this was wrong, and that you were going to leave, where I had asked you if you wanted to leave.

Speaker 1: [00:35:56] Getting me out of there was huge. Thank you for getting me out of there.

Esther Perel: [00:36:04] This is a tricky situation in which she gets harassed. He sees it. He does help her to his deflection, he gets her out of the situation. And nevertheless, he's been haunted with this for quite a while. Wondering what else he could have done, what else he could have said, what he did and did not do. In this situations as bystanders, where we see other people take a fall, where we see other people blamed for mistakes they didn't make. Many situations that require a form of standing up and speaking out, I think we all have these situations on our chart of conscience accountability. It's very hard to say something in that moment when you have just g- gotten your own dose of toxic stuff.

Speaker 2: [00:37:03] Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Esther Perel: [00:37:05] And you don't wanna be punched literally or metaphorically.

Speaker 2: [00:37:09] You know, I wonder about that though. I-

Esther Perel: [00:37:11] Uh, okay.

Speaker 2: [00:37:13] There's a piece of me, when I talk about not being able to breathe, it creates rage below it all. I'm just, this is, this is not right and it pisses me off. And this piece of me wants to fight, I'm, in some ways itching for a fight. I'm itching for a fight 'cause it's, it's like, I'm gonna to take you motherfuckers home, and I don't care whether I win or not, because it's the, having their bodies on my neck, is dehumanizing. And so, as I'm sitting here with the discomfort of that moment, it's like what? I asked you questions that w- w- what's really at the heart of the question is the piece of it is, did I do enough?

Speaker 1: [00:37:55] Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Speaker 2: [00:37:56] And then it's the, you were mad as fucking hell.

Speaker 1: [00:38:01] Yeah. And then it'd be like, I was still a [inaudible 00:38:03], I couldn't get a meaning for almost two years after that.

Esther Perel: [00:38:09] And when you don't go from the dissociation to the survival strategy, and you're actually measure the emotional resonance of this, because you're, you're, you're so well defendant, as you need to be in the workspace, since the memories creeping in on you, I just wanna bring emotional resonance to this memory not just, uh, the survival skills.

Speaker 1: [00:38:40] I don't know. There's almost a level of consistent fear that follows me around. And it's, it's frustrating and it's degrading and it's dehumanizing. And it's so much about a reminder or, or what i- is said as a reminder, in my mind of why I'm not enough, a- and that's what I carry with me. I'm really bad at naming the feelings game, I apologize. That's always a struggle for me. What is the emotion? What is the feeling?

Esther Perel: [00:39:21] But you know what happens sometimes, when I sit with someone who tells me that, is that I feel it. I was listening and I thought I'm not enough after all what I've done, after how hard I try, after how much I give, after how careful I am, and you're asking me why I don't have a bunch of suitors, because I have a sign on the front end of the back that says stay away.

Speaker 1: [00:39:54] Yeah.

Esther Perel: [00:39:56] Not because I don't want, but I just don't know how to take off the sign and still feel that it's okay to be available and open.

Speaker 1: [00:40:13] Plot twist, I wasn't expecting that one to come today.

Speaker 2: [00:40:18] [laugh].

Esther Perel: [00:40:18] Um, just a minute and I'll be back in a second.

Speaker 2: [00:40:22] Okay.

Speaker 1: [00:40:23] Okay. How you doing? Should we take it-

Speaker 2: [00:40:24] I'm, I'm good but [inaudible 00:40:32] I never saw, I didn't see two thirds of this coming.

Speaker 1: [00:40:34] No, I know.

Speaker 2: [00:40:35] It's like the best therapy session, when you like, you go in with an agenda and it's completely disruptive.

Speaker 1: [00:40:40] I know, right.

Speaker 2: [00:40:41] I'm in a really good head space because it's allowing me to ask like, what's deeper. Like, here's the problem, what's [inaudible 00:40:50].

Speaker 1: [00:40:49] Good, [inaudible 00:40:52].

Speaker 2: [00:40:53] [laughs].

Speaker 1: [00:40:54] So like, holy shit, why are we talking about my dating life. [laughs] Oh, right. That's what hurts.

Speaker 2: [00:40:59] [crosstalk 00:41:00].

Speaker 1: [00:40:59] Got it. [laughs].

Speaker 2: [00:41:03] I just, I never go back to see how much [inaudible 00:41:05].

Speaker 1: [00:41:10] I can't believe I had [inaudible 00:41:08] there. [inaudible 00:41:10], I mean, I mean, there was [inaudible 00:41:11].

Esther Perel: [00:41:19] In a three hour session, I sometimes have to go to the bathroom. And I think that I should go to the bathroom each time, because it's quite interesting what happens in my absence and what they actually say to each other.

Speaker 1: [00:41:32] Welcome back.

Speaker 2: [00:41:32] [laughs].

Esther Perel: [00:41:36] What did I miss? What have we not touched? Where you addressed it in your head, and now is your opportunity to, uh...

Speaker 2: [00:41:48] Um, what like, that discussion of this episode at this restaurant. And until I brought it up and started talking through it, I never realized how much, uh, I could carry it with me.

Speaker 1: [00:42:01] Situations like that, I think are part of the reason that I struggled to trust men and going back to that micro level, um, like you and I, and the expectation of, who you were for me in that moment was probably a little bit unfair.

Esther Perel: [00:42:20] You're shaking your head.

Speaker 2: [00:42:23] That unfair felt, did not sit well with me. That felt like you're being too hard on yourself.

Speaker 1: [00:42:30] That's probably it.

Speaker 2: [00:42:32] You know, critical thought and self shaming are two-

Speaker 1: [00:42:34] Yeah.

Speaker 2: [00:42:34] ... in my mind, they're two very different things. So, my mind went to race.

Speaker 1: [00:42:38] Oh, yeah.

Speaker 2: [00:42:39] And then, it's the, is her work around racial difference, racism, white supremacy based in shame, or is it based in objective views and personal commitments to growth? Why people do it out of guilt? Don't do it for too long.

Speaker 1: [00:42:59] No-

Speaker 2: [00:43:00] That I told you-

Speaker 1: [00:43:01] Yeah. No.

Speaker 2: [00:43:01] ... one of my biggest fears is you're gonna, this friendship will run its course, you'll move to an [inaudible 00:43:07] and be a Republican and have had this episode. You know, life is how I used to have a, I used to have a black friend. One of my big concerns for our friendship, is that for you to, to deeply be my friend in the way that would be meaningful for me, means that you will always be swimming against the current, and a very strong current, and a very personal one, especially if it comes from your family.

Speaker 1: [00:43:30] Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Speaker 2: [00:43:31] And I don't want that to be based in guilt or shame.

Speaker 1: [00:43:36] Like the part about race for me is not driven by what I feel guilty about. The piece about race that really drives me is, comes from the people that I love. But when I started like f- feeling race, and why I thought that race was important, it started long before you. I, I was, you know, 22, and, um, I had a friend one night, you know, she wanted to take me to this church. It was gonna be gospel music. It was like 9:00 o'clock at night. Did you wanna go? And I said, "Okay, you know, sure." And we walk in and we were late and it had already started.

Speaker 2: [00:44:14] Is it [inaudible 00:44:15].

Speaker 1: [00:44:14] It's... Yeah, we were the only two white people in the, in the space, and that was a situation that I had never been at before. And we looked at each other and we're like, "You know what? I think this is going to be uncomfortable, we probably don't belong here, we probably should leave." But they were in the middle of the prayer, so we weren't, we didn't leave. We said, "We're gonna stay, um, and we're gonna wait."

And of course, you know, it's black church, so they're like, "Okay, amen, go hug somebody you don't know." And it was like this huge, like i- there was something in that space that was unlike anything that I had experienced. This group of people were the most kind, loving, supportive, wonderful people that I had ever met. And that was my first experience in like a predominantly black community, and when I moved away, they like sent me off with everything that I could possibly need.

You know, they talk about what they went through in '60s, and, and, and what they go through now. And it, it hurts my spirit because I love these people, and that experience changed how I see the world. It's not that I'm color blind and I don't see race, or, but it isn't fair. There's a level of injustice and it's not [laughs] just not okay.

I have, I'm struggling right now with, I don't know what that looks like for me. I don't know what it looks like to be part of despite right now, because you know, I can, I can go to the protests and I can, you know, write letters and I can do all that. I've learned it's not my job to be the leader, and I'm a, a follower in this journey right now and that's okay. Um, it's hard right now being in a job that we're not doing anything to change the world.

Esther Perel: [00:46:03] At the beginning of the session, they told me that they had brought a bottle of champagne and that they wanted to open at the end and celebrate, but they didn't know what the session was gonna be like. They had to hear a lot of difficult and challenging things from each other. They still thought that they wanted to open the bottle of champagne, that they had cleared the air, even though they were no longer working together. And even though there's a part of her that is deeply frustrated about having lost a profession in which she found tremendous meaning, and that on some level, she had decided that making money was more important for her. And so, they were living with all kinds of misunderstandings and false assumptions. They did send me a picture after the session, showing me that they had opened the bottle, and so, their relationship persevered and I raised my glass to them.

Voiceover: [00:47:11] Esther Perel is a therapist, best-selling author, speaker, and host of the podcasts, "Where Should We Begin?" and "How's Work?" To apply with a colleague or partner, to do a session for the podcast or to follow along with each episode's show notes, go to howswork.estherperel.com.

How's Work is produced by Magnificent Noise for Gimlet and Esther Perel Productions. Our production staff includes, Eric Nuzum, Eva Wolchover, Hiwote Getaneh and Kristin Mueller. Original music and additional production by Paul Schneider. And the executive producers of How's Work are Esther Perel and Jesse Baker. We would also like to thank Lydia Polgreen, Colin Campbell, Courtney Hamilton, Nick Oxenhorn, Sara Kramer, Jack Saul, and the entire Esther Perel Global Media team.