

Announcer (Jesse) ([00:01](#)):

None of the voices in this series are ongoing patients of Esther Perel. Each episode of Where Should We Begin? is a one-time counseling session. For the purposes of maintaining confidentiality, names and some identifiable characteristics have been removed, but their voices and their stories are real.

Esther Perel ([00:27](#)):

They met in high school, they fell in love in college, they had a child soon thereafter.

Him ([00:34](#)):

We dated for about maybe a year and we got pregnant, and we had our daughter, and we broke up probably, let's say, maybe four months after she was born.

Her ([00:52](#)):

And we broke up for a really long time and we really didn't have any kind of communication. I know I did a majority of the parenting.

Esther Perel ([01:00](#)):

He married another woman, she married another woman. He had another child with that woman, she had the daughter that they had together. For the past 15-plus years, they've been in and out.

Her ([01:15](#)):

His family and my family were very skeptical of us getting back together, but we just looked at them and we were like, "Nobody around us has been in a successful relationship, and so I'm not going to listen to anything you have to say about how to do this."

Esther Perel ([01:30](#)):

Each time they come back together, it starts out strong and intense and then it flatlines.

Him ([01:35](#)):

I think that we're missing some things that I haven't quite figured out how to solve it. I think it's mostly me but who knows?

Her ([01:46](#)):

I want to take care of him and I want to love him, but I'm also afraid that if I leave him, he will go further down this really lonely, dark, depressed ... He'll just spiral out.

Esther Perel ([01:58](#)):

This time, she says, "I want to break the pattern. I want a different kind of relationship with him."

Her ([02:04](#)):

I just want that person who is so hopeful about what we could do together, I want that person back.

Esther Perel ([02:12](#)):

But he's so shut down and I need to know if he's going to do the work. And so when we start the session, I ask him, "What would make this a productive conversation? What would make this a useful session?"

Him ([02:35](#)):

It would be me being more capable of opening up and being less closed off and less private, I guess, in my own emotions and inner thoughts and things of that nature.

Esther Perel ([02:55](#)):

Does she have a unique position in your world of closeness or do your daughters benefit from the same closeness, or do they benefit from greater openness?

Him ([03:08](#)):

I would say I'm fairly closed off with everyone for whatever reason. I talk to her about a lot that's going on in my mind but it's all news and politics, and she thinks like, "Well, why is it only that?" But it seems that that's just what's happening in my head all day, all the time.

Esther Perel ([03:33](#)):

You can start with politics but this politics seem to have a great personal meaning for you as well.

Him ([03:43](#)):

I guess in my mind, there are a lot of things that I want to change just like ... I don't like to see so many people struggling and suffering and having such a hard time, and I lived in that position for a long time so I know what it's like. So I guess that's probably the reason why I'm constantly analyzing what's going on and why these things happen the way they do because I've dealt with suffering of my own.

Him ([04:11](#)):

I've struggled. I struggled as a young adult for a long time and probably just over the last maybe five years, got myself to a point of feeling stable and okay with where I am.

Esther Perel ([04:26](#)):

Would you share a little with me?

Him ([04:28](#)):

Well ... So-

Esther Perel ([04:31](#)):

By the way, what you just did was beautiful. You connected your hyper-focus on the news and on politics with your personal struggle. And then the reason I talk about this is because it's a way of talking about me and what I care about and where I once was, and where I don't want to go back to, and where nobody should be.

Him ([04:59](#)):

Yeah, for sure. I mean I graduated high school and I was immature and I didn't like college so much. But as we dated, we became friends, we broke up, all that stuff, went back and forth. But when we got back together, we had our first child. After that happened, I feel like that was the point where my struggles started because before, it was just like, "Well, I could make minimum wage and take care of myself. It didn't matter."

Him (05:29):

But once I had a child, it was like, "Well, I have to figure out a way to make enough money to support myself and to pay for this new being that is here now. And I just didn't have the wisdom or the wherewithal or the connections to know how to make all that work. There was a time where I was staying in a ... I was basically a squatter in these people's homes that took mercy on me.

Him (06:00):

They didn't have a refrigerator or a stove in there, but I stayed there because they weren't changing me rent or anything, and it was going to foreclose and it was the only place I could really afford to be. I had to buy a cooler and keep the kids' food in there, and it was like the only thing I could really afford to do because I couldn't afford anything else.

Esther Perel (06:27):

How long was that period?

Him (06:30):

There were periods of quietness and times of ... small time, short windows of stability, I would say, probably from 2005 to maybe 2010.

Esther Perel (06:40):

When you would think about that time ... Because I thought you were going to talk about even younger.

Him (06:49):

No, it sounds like it. When I describe it, it sounds like it but yeah, it was actually a little bit later in my life. I was 22, so from 22 to maybe 27, it was just like just this huge struggle to make things work.

Esther Perel (07:09):

And when you think about that time, do you have an image that accompanies it for you?

Him (07:19):

I guess that apartment I just mentioned is probably the place I always think about because I was in such a ... I was really in a very, very dark place at the time and I wasn't sure what the next day was going to be like.

Esther Perel (07:42):

What is dark for you?

Him (07:43):

I wasn't sure what I was going to do. I wasn't sure what I was going to do with myself or what I was going to do to survive or anything. I was just getting to a point where I was tired and I felt like there were no options and there was no one who could just say, "I understand where you are right now. Here's where you need to go."

Him ([08:12](#)):

And it was hard. I remember the day probably most vividly that I called my mom, and I was sitting there in this place and I called her and she picked up the phone and the first words I said to her is, "Mom, I'm not okay." And she was like, "Stay on the phone with me."

Him ([08:40](#)):

She rushed over and talked to me, and I ended up moving back in with her and things were a little bit different and it was helpful, but it wasn't ideal by any means.

Esther Perel ([09:00](#)):

It's an amazing thing. You start by saying, "I'm closed off," and the next thing you do is you're telling to this complete stranger the most [inaudible 00:09:13] stuff, how you got to that place that day when you wonder if you want to wake up one more time, how you called to your mama and she said, "Just stay on the line because I'm your lifeline," and then showed up for you and just said, "Come home because you have a home."

Esther Perel ([09:35](#)):

It's a paradox. You talk about being closed off and in the meantime, you're so beautifully open.

Him ([09:46](#)):

I think it's because I know I won't talk to you again after this. So I was like-

Esther Perel ([09:48](#)):

[inaudible 00:09:48], or the person on the plane or something like that?

Him ([09:53](#)):

Right.

Esther Perel ([09:57](#)):

But you're talking through me to her and one of the things I'm hearing you say, because you said it a few times, "I had no one to tell me. I had no one to guide me, I had no one to help me mature." But I'm watching this woman and I'm thinking, "Looks like she's been there, I would say, maybe all along or on and off."

Him ([10:27](#)):

Well, I was super immature when we had our daughter and we split off. I mean we've been apart for 14 years, 14 and a half, 15 years. So we didn't have the type of relationship where I could really talk with her about the things that were going on with me necessarily.

Him ([10:47](#)):

I mean we did for a short period, but I think this is when I began to close myself off to people.

Her ([10:56](#)):

I remember this part of our story very vividly. We had broken up and I was living at home. But long story short, he did reach out. We were talking, he helped me move from my old apartment to the new apartment. There was one night where he asked if we could talk about him moving back in.

Her ([11:24](#)):

We were talking and spending time together, and I remember ... And there was this moment in that apartment where he was crying. I felt like I needed to hug him, but we had had so much history and I didn't trust my feelings. I didn't really trust opening myself back up to him.

Esther Perel ([11:45](#)):

Why didn't you trust him? What was it that-

Her ([11:50](#)):

A part of it is he was just not ready.

Esther Perel ([11:53](#)):

But tell me something, were you ready when you got pregnant?

Her ([11:57](#)):

No.

Esther Perel ([11:57](#)):

So neither of you were ready, but you didn't have much of a choice. You entered the role and you did what you had to do.

Her ([12:08](#)):

Yeah.

Esther Perel ([12:09](#)):

I mean it's not like he was young and that was your next chapter in your life.

Her ([12:18](#)):

Yeah, I agree. I feel like though, I think I've told this to him a couple of times, I didn't know what I was doing. But I was willing to figure it out and fail upwards with this just as long as she had food and she was just taken care of, and both her parents were working.

Her ([12:44](#)):

I just didn't feel like we had a partnership in the parenting. I didn't feel like he was just ready to be a parent and a boyfriend or a committed partner or a husband. And so when we had that moment, I didn't trust it, I didn't trust him, and I didn't trust myself with him at that point.

Her ([13:06](#)):

And so I went to that apartment. I saw where he was living. He had the girls there and I picked [crosstalk 00:13:12]-

Esther Perel ([13:12](#)):

Girls, as in, more than one?

Her ([13:15](#)):

Mm-hmm (affirmative). We have a daughter together and then he got married and had a baby with somebody else.

Esther Perel ([13:23](#)):

And what's their age difference?

Him ([13:24](#)):

About three, four years.

Her ([13:30](#)):

He's probably right. I probably wasn't a person that he could have opened up to. He probably could sense that. But even when we were talking and spending time, I was very cautious.

Esther Perel ([13:41](#)):

Talk to him. It's a little bit more challenging when we are doing them on a screen. You can just literally talk to him across the screen if you want. We get used to it. And then what happened? Just give me a quick sense of ... So I understand you've gone years together, years apart, together, apart. There's a lot that brings you back each time.

Him ([14:13](#)):

Yeah.

Esther Perel ([14:14](#)):

And there's a lot that pushes you far away from each other each time.

Him ([14:19](#)):

Absolutely. I think that I can definitely say I've always been an immature person as a child or whatever. I've always just been like in my mind, life was just a game, one big party, just have a great time and then one day, it's over. In my mind, I never really considered what it would even mean to grow up and become an adult or any of that stuff.

Him ([14:44](#)):

So once we had a child, it was like adulthood and fatherhood and all these things were just thrust on me that I had no idea what was going on or how to prepare or even how to adjust while I was in this situation. I can definitely say it's affected my relationship probably with both my children because of the way that I just wasn't ready. And a lot of times, I doubted my own capability to become ready.

Esther Perel ([15:16](#)):

What was your experience with fatherhood?

Him ([15:20](#)):

None.

Esther Perel ([15:22](#)):

Meaning?

Him ([15:23](#)):

None whatsoever. My father left before I was born and I saw him, I would say, maybe four or five times as a child.

Esther Perel ([15:36](#)):

Were there other people in the extended family, parental figures?

Him ([15:45](#)):

It was mostly women. It was my mom, my grandmother and I would probably say those two probably had the biggest hands in my development as a child.

Esther Perel ([15:59](#)):

As a child or also in the making of the man?

Him ([16:05](#)):

In the making of the man, I don't know if anybody has had a influence on that part. That's [inaudible 00:16:09]. I think that part has got hammered by reality into what you see before you.

Esther Perel ([16:20](#)):

Where are we at in the making of this culture?

Him ([16:25](#)):

It's definitely not complete. We're working with what we got now. It's like I'm flawed, deeply flawed but I think that in some ways, I'm more open to see my shortcomings than I have been in the past. There were times where my mother would tell me about how I was parenting my kids and I didn't want to hear it.

Him ([16:45](#)):

But now, I understand a bit more about where I was and how involved or uninvolved I was with my kids.

Esther Perel ([16:54](#)):

Your partner, how do you call her? Your wife, your girlfriend, your partner?

Him ([16:59](#)):

My girlfriend.

Esther Perel ([17:00](#)):

Your girlfriend. See, I asked you if you turn this wildcard into a wild dream, what would you want for today? And you said, "I would want to at least be more open." We started okay on that. We want to go back to that first question because I want to ask it to her as well, what else would make this a wild dream?

Esther Perel ([17:23](#)):

I'll tell you why I'm asking it because I think it's important for you to know. I have a feeling that you have given a lot of space to the darkness, to the unflawed, to the unimmature, to the, "I don't know," to that side of the story. Now, you can be flawed and likable, which is part of why she's still here.

Esther Perel ([17:54](#)):

But there's a whole other way of telling the story that does not get that much airtime, which is not based on what I'm not but maybe based on what I want, what I can be, what I aspire to, what I want to reach for rather than what you can't ask from me, what you shouldn't rely on me for. What would it be?

Him ([18:23](#)):

Well, that is a very hard question to answer because I guess I beat myself up a bit. I want to be able to give more, give more freely of myself ideally, and not just about necessarily opening myself up, but removing those blocks, removing those blocks that say these are all the reasons why I can't, exactly what you said, just trying to find a way to remove those blocks and being more freely open to giving my love and feeling secure in that.

Him ([19:06](#)):

Do you talk about this all the time, the safe space part and getting myself to feel secure in that just-

Esther Perel ([19:18](#)):

[inaudible 00:19:18] to happen for that.

Him ([19:23](#)):

I don't examine this enough to really understand what it would take. I think that I'm just afraid, for whatever reason, to give into that.

Esther Perel ([19:37](#)):

Time you gave into it is that moment that you just had before when you remembered calling your mom.

Him ([19:46](#)):

Yeah. There's a part of me that I don't ... I dislike feeling that way. Even while I was telling the story, I fought to not feel that way in that moment because it just feels ... Sometimes it just feels silly to feel that way. It's just a weakness. Maybe I wish I just never had to experience that at all. I'm ashamed of it.

Esther Perel ([20:17](#)):

"So when I'm scared and actually low, when I feel all alone or when I feel lost, I fight it, I blame myself, I forget the politics of the world and what it does to black men, what it does to me, what it does to us. I forget the larger story and it just becomes me and my flaws."

Esther Perel ([20:44](#)):

"And if I can't accept those feelings in me, I also can't respond to her which I [inaudible 00:20:55]." And now, project the primary story with her is, "Don't count on me. Here and there every once in a while, but don't really rely on me. Don't count on me. If you don't have expectations, then I can't fail you."

Him ([21:28](#)):

Yeah.

Esther Perel ([21:28](#)):

Same thing you [inaudible 00:21:29].

Him ([21:28](#)):

Yeah. I think that that's exactly what it is. I don't want people ... It's like I don't want you to expect too much from me because I don't want to have to expect too much from myself or have to count on myself for these same things. Because I think I always want the room to give myself an excuse to say, "Well, that's why that didn't happen."

Him ([21:59](#)):

I ultimately have this ... I think it just boils down to this issue with failure. I don't want to put my effort into something and then fail because it just kills my confidence in my abilities.

Esther Perel ([22:47](#)):

Tell me or tell him, actually, what did you hear? What did you understand that he said? I just want him to hear himself back.

Her ([22:57](#)):

That would have a focus. So he's obsessed with the pain, and we talk a lot about not having the tools to get out of a rut or an idea or a circumstance or situation. And so even though he's doing better, it's he's done lots of really great things to make sure that he's never in that situation that he was in that apartment again.

Her ([23:27](#)):

But sometimes what I still see and I still hear is that he's just in survival mode like, "I'm only really going to do and commit myself to what I control, what I can control. And because I have these kids, I'm always

going to make sure that my kids are taken care of, and they're always going to have food, they're always going to have a place to live. But that's all I can handle."

Her ([23:54](#)):

And then beyond just basic survival, I don't know that he knows how to connect in a meaningful way with me or with the girls. And sometimes he's really closed off and we just orbit and exist around him.

Esther Perel ([24:15](#)):

What does it look like? He goes into silent mode?

Her ([24:19](#)):

It's like he's very quiet. It just comes off of him like, "Don't talk to me, don't engage me in any way whatsoever." And sometimes he's not like that. Sometimes you can talk to him, but you just never know. And so you have to be really careful like-

Esther Perel ([24:38](#)):

So I caught him on a good day?

Her ([24:40](#)):

It has been months. It has been months since he has ... We talk and even we'll laugh sometimes but I almost feel I don't know who this man is. He's just been more willing to touch me. He kissed me, and that hasn't happened in months. And so I don't know why you ... I mean I know why you do it.

Her ([25:09](#)):

I don't know why you're like this right now because nothing happened. I'm not different, the girls aren't different, but you are like you're open and available and I don't know why, and I don't know how long it's going to last.

Him ([25:29](#)):

I've just been feeling differently. I just have maybe the past three or four days, just feeling completely different. It makes me a little worried because it makes me feel like I'm not in control of myself or something. I don't know. I'd rather feel like this than the way I was feeling.

Esther Perel ([25:53](#)):

But your sense is that your mood changes. You don't know why it suddenly goes on full stop and why it suddenly gets energized again, and it comes and goes regardless of anything you are aware of.

Him ([26:14](#)):

You're the professional but I will say this. Sometimes I think that this part comes from the way my mother was when I was kid. Because when she would come home a lot of times, we dreaded her coming home because she was going to be in a bad mood. And I think that I had just conditioned myself to feel that way.

Him ([26:36](#)):

So there's really ... No one's done anything wrong. Yeah, sometimes the house is a mess. But who cares? It can be cleaned up. But I walk in and I'm like I'm just gone. I even talk to myself like, "Don't be a butthole when you come home." I'm not yelling or screaming or throwing stuff or anything like that.

Him ([26:54](#)):

But I'm just like ... Like she says, it comes off of me, and I'm shut down and one-word answers to every question, "how was your day?" "Fine," just-

Esther Perel ([27:05](#)):

When you described your mom coming home, you saw it.

Him ([27:09](#)):

Oh, yeah, for sure because we-

Esther Perel ([27:11](#)):

What did you see? What would [crosstalk 00:27:13]?

Him ([27:14](#)):

In our old house, we had this driveway that ... And you could hear my mom. She drove a Buick for a long time, and you could hear that car struggling to get up the driveway as she would come up, and that was the sound my sister and I heard and that was just the sound of dread. Get up, clean everything up, if you haven't cleaned up, last minute checks to look everything over, make sure it was all in place because we knew that ... And it almost didn't matter.

Him ([27:42](#)):

We knew she was going to come in in a bad mood, but we didn't want her to come in and yell or start fussing. As long as we avoided that, that was our ultimate goal. So that sort of situation, it was horrible. I hated for my mom to come home sometimes. This was more around our teenage years, not when we were much younger. But around that teenage time, it was terrible.

Esther Perel ([28:09](#)):

Did you feel like you could do something to change her mood?

Him ([28:13](#)):

Absolutely not. Other than just letting her go in her room and watch TV and just ... whatever she needed to do to dust the day off, and then maybe she would come out and be better later. Unfortunately, my relationship with my kids is similar to the relationship I had with my mom when I was a kid because I know that my oldest daughter is very expressive with her mom.

Him ([28:44](#)):

She tells her all these details, and I can ask her the same question and I get a totally different answer that's a lot shorter. They meet me where I am and they've grown accustomed to me just being a certain way. If I'm being completely honest here, I don't even know what to talk to them about a lot of times.

Him ([29:05](#)):

Even when I ask the questions and they tell me stuff, I don't even know what to follow up with. I don't know why. It's weird because I can carry on conversations with strangers at work, no issue. But my kids want to talk to me and tell me stuff, oh my god, it's like another language to me and it's embarrassing admitting this and even telling people this, but-

Esther Perel ([29:29](#)):

That's what we're trying to do, that you've said a lot and I just want to hear from you.

Her ([29:37](#)):

Yeah. I don't know. I wish he would try harder. I don't if that's an unreasonable request. I know that mom had a lot to do with how he is, 100% maybe. But I don't know-

Esther Perel ([29:55](#)):

In what way? I mean interestingly, you've known him for a very long time and you've watched him. What I understand is when mom would shut down or when mom would explode, it left him very alone, it left him feeling like there's nothing he can do except not have any demands, not have any needs.

Esther Perel ([30:21](#)):

Here's what just went through my mind. Some children, when they see their parents off, they try to do certain things to get them back, to impress them, to have good grades, to clean their room, to cheer them up. And then sometimes when they succeed, they become great performers of life.

Esther Perel ([30:48](#)):

Sometimes when they don't succeed, basically, they stop expecting anything from themselves because it won't make a difference.

Her ([31:02](#)):

If that's true ... I know that he didn't know that. I don't think he understood that about himself. Do you think that you have low expectations for your life?

Him ([31:16](#)):

I think when I look at my life, and maybe this is in hindsight, maybe it's coincidence, I have done just the minimum to get by. I really have just ... "How do I just to the next moment? How do I survive the next crisis?" I never really actually went after the things that I wanted to do in my life.

Him ([31:40](#)):

I just worked because working was the only way for me to make money and pay the bills.

Her ([31:49](#)):

So then I guess when we talk about how much your life change when you have kids, I just wondered do you ever think about the expectations that you have for the kind of family you'd want? Now, I'd asked you that before like, "What are we doing here? Even I, what am I doing here? What do you want from

me? If you ..." Because I think you know some of the things you're saying yourself and when we reconnected, you had a really grand vision for what our life together was going to be like.

Her ([32:24](#)):

It was just very seductive, it was really aligned with what I wanted for my life and my relationships, and we were working towards it for a couple of months and then it was done. As I was feeling the change, I started asking you, "What do you want from me?" And I don't know that you've really given it any serious thought.

Her ([32:50](#)):

I haven't been quiet about what I need from you, and I just wonder why you're not thinking about. Because when I ask you like, "Do you want me here? Do you want me to leave?" hearing you call me your girlfriend is shocking to me. When you refer to us as your family, it's like amazing. It's like I'm tearing up because I would have not known that you think of me and the girls ... I mean they are your family, they're your blood.

Her ([33:23](#)):

But as a unit, the four of us, I wouldn't have thought that you thought of us in that way. And then if we are your family, if I am your girlfriend, what do you want from me? What do you want from us?

Him ([33:42](#)):

Well-

Her ([33:42](#)):

Or what do you want to be for us maybe? Because I think you know what we want from you, but I just wonder what do you want to be for us as like a partner or a boyfriend or a father? How do you want to show up for us?

Him ([34:00](#)):

Well, as far as being a father, I want to-

Her ([34:05](#)):

I feel like you can't answer the question, but I feel like you always pivot to talking about what kind of a ... the relationship that you have with the girls and what you want from the girls and what you need from the girls. And I don't ever think that you think about what I need from you.

Him ([34:26](#)):

I think that the ultimate answer to the question is you may not know this, and I don't say it enough, and I do have to admit that yes, things have been different, but in this moment, where I am now, I feel like I want to be able to be more like you. I want to be more willing to give back what you have been willing to give.

Him ([34:54](#)):

How do I say it? I want to be brave. Does that make sense? I want to be able to feel brave enough to put myself out there and take the risk and not be so weak in my conviction. If we decide to do this, I want to do more than just be with you and we're just in this apartment together.

Him ([35:22](#)):

I want to be able to give those parts that you need. I think I said this in the beginning, I want to be able to open myself up.

Esther Perel ([35:32](#)):

Hold on one second. I want you to go into the other room.

Him ([35:38](#)):

Me?

Esther Perel ([35:38](#)):

Whichever one of you needs to move to the other room. When we do this on screen, you can't look into each other's eyes.

Esther Perel ([35:51](#)):

Normally, I do these sessions in my office where both partners sit on a couch facing me, but they can also face each other, look into each other's eyes, hold each other if need be. Right now, because of COVID-19, we are meeting on Zoom and that means everybody is looking straight ahead to the green dot.

Esther Perel ([36:13](#)):

He's in his bedroom, she's in the bathroom on the other side because it works better for the audio. But in this moment, when he's talking to her, I know he needs to connect with her and the green dot ain't going to cut it. So I asked her to go meet him and be next to him in the other room.

Him ([36:41](#)):

I probably don't say this enough, but I do look at you as an example of a lot of things in my life. I look at the way you interact with the girls and the way you have interacted with me, and I've even questioned myself why I can't be more willing to just accept what I'm trying to do.

Him ([37:05](#)):

I want to be more tempered in my conviction to move forward and to be here, be in your life, to be in the girl's life. I want to be better at that more than just my body just being here, the actions that are then needed to make sure that I'm showing it.

Her ([37:32](#)):

I want that too.

Esther Perel ([37:36](#)):

When she gives to you, can you receive or do you feel that receiving is weakness?

Him ([37:47](#)):

I feel like I have this thing where I almost desire that loneliness, the pain of being alone. It's almost like I get pleasure out of that just doing everything by myself and not relying on anyone for anything.

Esther Perel ([38:08](#)):

Let's rewrite this for a moment. It's not pleasure. It's how you learn to cope. We have in us essence and we have in us survival. We learn to survive by dimming your needs included the need to connect but you never fully disappear. And then you find this amazing woman who you see as a symbol of aliveness, how she perks up, how she talks to the girls, how much she brings energy.

Esther Perel ([38:51](#)):

She enters the house and there is joy that enters with her. I mean if you just wanted the pleasure of aloneness and darkness, you would never have picked her. But the part of you that is coping and surviving is trying to convince the other part of you that wants to enjoy life and touch and hold and connect and try to say it's better on this side.

Him ([39:27](#)):

True.

Esther Perel ([39:30](#)):

But these are parts of you. This is a dialogue inside of you. This is not just who you are. You would never have picked her and come back three, four times, or something like that over 20 years. You see, when you shut down and you think your fine alone, which of course, you're not, and you know that, it makes the other people feel very alone too.

Esther Perel ([39:59](#)):

Your mother went into her bedroom. She may have felt that she could not face the world. But the two kids that were on the other side of the door felt confused, bewildered and lost even though they understood so well that they cleaned the house in five minutes or less to make sure that this wouldn't happen.

Esther Perel ([40:29](#)):

On the other side of the door are other people who then start to feel as alone as you, and your mom didn't mean to do that, and you don't mean to do that. It's one thing to be alone when you're alone. It's another thing to feel alone when there's someone right next to you.

Her ([40:54](#)):

In my last relationship, I felt very alone and I didn't want that in this relationship. And I've known you since I was a kid and you didn't make me feel alone when we were together, when we were younger. I would talk to people like you're my best friend. We got back together, people were surprised, of course, but then they would also say, "You always did talk about him like he was your best friend."

Her ([41:22](#)):

Maybe what I didn't realize though is maybe you were feeling just as alone as I was, but we just have a different understanding of-

Esther Perel ([41:32](#)):

Put the pen down.

Her ([41:32](#)):

Oh, sorry, I do have fidgets. Sorry. I don't think that either one of us wanted to feel alone in the space. If you tell me what you need, you know I will. I'll do whatever we need so that we're not feeling alone. But I just need to be here and don't be so pissed off because we're here when you're here, because we live here.

Esther Perel ([42:10](#)):

What makes you go back to him again and again? You were married in between, right?

Her ([42:17](#)):

Yeah. I was married to someone else and that marriage ended. I just don't think that I was ... I was ready for family, I was ready to be married when I met her, and she was always willing to be that for me. I didn't feel like she was really the one that I should be doing it with but she was there and I was getting to a certain age.

Her ([42:45](#)):

I thought I was getting to a certain age where it needed to happen. And she's not a bad person. She's actually a lovely person but I knew that we didn't have a bond strong enough to do the work if it really wasn't something that I could see myself in.

Her ([43:01](#)):

I don't really leave people when I have invested that much of myself. I don't do that, and so it took a lot for me to be that honest. But it really just became an unlivable situation for me, and it just didn't seem fair to her to stay in it. I love being married.

Her ([43:26](#)):

I love being married and I like the idea of it, I like what it means, a certain level of stability, especially because we're black and we have been denied strong family bonds, strong generational, family bonds. None of my aunts are married, my grandmother died single, my great grandmother died single.

Her ([43:51](#)):

It would definitely be an act of love. I couldn't just marry anybody, but also, it's political. It's throwing in the face an entire system that says black men and women, they don't commit to each other. They don't create strong family bonds. And so being married, it's important, it's special.

Esther Perel ([44:18](#)):

Absolutely.

Her ([44:19](#)):

And there's some security there. There is an element of being claimed and somebody seeing something worthy in you, somebody loving you enough to want to commit themselves to you, to me in that way. I would say when I was younger, I did struggle with ideas of worth and my self-worth.

Her ([44:46](#)):

You have the world telling you that black women are not beautiful and black women are not intelligent, and I feel like I internalized a lot of that, and ...

Esther Perel ([45:00](#)):

And when he doesn't touch you, that comes up more?

Her ([45:05](#)):

We sleep in the same bed, it's a big bed so we have space. But there are some ... I would say every morning, when I feel him wake up, I wake up before him but I don't move because maybe he will just touch me on the back, something simple in the morning.

Her ([45:29](#)):

I like myself a lot. I think a lot about who I am and what I want to project to the world, and what I am, the kind of daughter I am, the kind of teacher I am, and the kind of mother I am. I try to be as authentic as possible, but there is a part of me that it's very important to be wanted.

Esther Perel ([45:51](#)):

Do you want him to hold you now?

Her ([45:54](#)):

I always want that.

Esther Perel ([45:57](#)):

Don't let me stop you.

Her ([45:58](#)):

I'm okay.

Esther Perel ([46:05](#)):

Don't talk, just let the bodies do the talking.

Him ([46:08](#)):

[inaudible 00:46:08] my stomach.

Her ([46:15](#)):

A lot of the times, all of the entire world feels like it's at a fever pitch for me. But I want this to be a place where we come to to get some peace and some joy, and we can take off all of that stuff. And just by being here, we defy a lot of what the world tells us we are capable of.

Her ([46:44](#)):

And for this to not always be going well, it's difficult. We have to make sure that all of that energy that you put into thinking about the world and the politics of it, that you have to give us some of that. We have to be the reason that you're doing it.

Esther Perel ([47:12](#)):

I kept feeling the longing, their longing for a home, for love, for closeness and for openness. His arms that were holding her and embracing her at the end offered such kind of a home. The voice in him that tries to convince him that he's better off alone with no needs and no expectations, so he can't fail, so he can't be disappointed, so he can't be thwarted had become softer.

Esther Perel ([47:53](#)):

And what he said was that he wanted to give to her that which he has learned from her that she so generously gives to him. What she asked him is, "If we can be a safe harbor. You can go in the world but remember where home is. Don't give the best of you to strangers and bring the leftovers home. Keep some for those who love you."

Announcer (Jesse) ([48:36](#)):

Esther Perel is the author of *Mating In Captivity* and *The State of Affairs* and also the host of the podcast *How's Work?* To apply with your partner for a session for the podcast or for show notes on each episode, go to whereshouldwebegin.estherperel.com.

Announcer (Jesse) ([48:54](#)):

Where Should We Begin? with Esther Perel is produced by Magnificent Noise for Gimlet and Esther Perel Productions. Our production staff includes Eric Nuzum, Eva Wolchover, Destry Sibley, Hiwote Getaneh and Olivia Natt, recorded by Noriko Okabe. Christine Muller is our engineer, original music and additional production by Paul Schneider.

Announcer (Jesse) ([49:18](#)):

And the executive producers of *Where Should We Begin?* are Esther Perel and Jesse Baker. We would also like to thank Nazanin Rafsanjani, Courtney Hamilton, Lisa Schnall, Nick Oxenhorn, Dr. Guy Winch and Jack Saul.