

## TRANSCRIPT: Love In War with Esther Perel

<Narrator>None of the voices in this episode are ongoing patients/clients of Esther Perel, each episode is an edited version of a one time three hour 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 [Narration]:** When we tell the stories of war, we often leave out what happens to couples, to their dynamics, to their intimate life. In this session, I wanted to look at what happens to love in war.

[00:00:16] **Alyona:** Our lifestyle has changed so drastically. He's going through air alerts five times per day. He has to go to bunker to save himself and our son.

[00:00:27] **Andrew:** It was very hard to separate. Separate our family.

[00:00:32] **Esther [Narration]:** He is in Ukraine with their 18 year old son waiting to be drafted — or more accurately, dreading to be drafted. And she in Western Europe as a refugee with their 16 year old son.

[00:00:46] **Alyona:** We have everyday meetings online, one day with children, one day just one on one. The first conversation was really tough because when I asked, “How are you?” And he said, “I don't even know. I'm afraid to ask myself this question because I'm afraid there is so much pain there that I don't even want to look there.”

[00:01:07] **Andrew:** My father [is an] officer, and he like discipline. He said every time to me, “You need to be strong. You need to be just defending your family and your feelings, no matter.

Your action matter.” And it's why I try to be Captain America [laughs] for my wife. [laughs]

[00:01:30] **Esther [Narration]:** They're trying to talk about their existential stress, but they're also trying to find a way to maintain their connection, which used to be such a powerful, cohesive force for both of them. They were a very intimate couple, a very romantic couple, a very sensual couple.

[00:01:48] **Alyona:** During 22 years of our marriage, we would have weekly dates with each other. We were really close. To me, this man is one and only, and we are one. Like flesh.

[00:02:02] **Andrew:** When we start our relationship, She is free? Yes. Said me. No. For me it's like treasure, this beautiful woman.

[00:02:11] **Esther [Narration]:** And a question we often have in acute stress is: how much are we allowed to still want the little jewels of life? And how much do we have to put all of that aside because of the great havoc? That internal tension exists also between the two of them and all of that is frayed at this moment.

[00:02:36] **Alyona:** My man of my life is not beside me, and I was feeling lonely and I need just to be loved. I want to be loved. I want to hear compliments. I want to be the same woman for him.

[00:02:49] **Andrew:** My first reaction was, “What are you talking about, compliment? We have war.”

[00:02:59] **Esther:** I have a feeling that whatever you're going to say, you are not the only one. By far. You will be speaking for millions of people who are experiencing what it means to live separated by war. Separated — with you in Ukraine with one son, and you in Western Europe with the other son. Just that image in front of me brings tears to my eyes.

[00:03:29] **Alyona:** Yeah. Thank you so much.

**Andrew:** Thank you, Esther.

[00:03:30] **Esther:** How many months have you been separated?

[00:03:35] **Alyona:** For five months since the end of February. I left on the third day of war. It was difficult to stay, it was difficult to leave. It was like an open wound. But anyway, the decision should have been made because there was no option. Also thinking about our children, just because the older son could not leave the country as well as Andrew could not leave the country. We had to make this decision and I had a hope in my heart that, okay, a few weeks, a month, okay, maybe two months. We can handle it somehow. And the war will be over. Now it's been five months, it's getting to six months now. And I literally cannot imagine another month coming. It's just, yeah, like a deep wound and it's getting worse and deeper. One flesh that was divided into parts. A surgery has been made and it's not done with the surgery. Just an open wound bleeding.

[00:04:36] **Esther:** Mm-hmm. I had this visceral, strange thought. When you have questions about life and death and you suddenly wonder, for whom is it more difficult, the one who leaves? Or for the one who stays?

[00:04:56] **Andrew:** It's both.

[00:04:57] **Esther:** A Faustian bargain. Right? But what do you think is the specific pieces for the parent who stayed and the child who stayed. And what do you think is unique to the experience to the parent who leaves?

[00:05:17] **Andrew:** After the war started I was looking for protect my family. It was my priority. And it was very hard to separate our family. But I know it's better for Alyona. Be in the safe country. And I know I have responsibility in my country. Every day you go to bed and think about, maybe in this night, I will die. Because you don't know what's going on in this night. Because every week we hear a special signal. Like when Russian rocket come to Ukraine, we have signal and we need to be in the safe place. And sometimes you can hear it. I try to be helpful for eldest son, Mark. Try to connect with him. Because I see here, inside now, he's not open. He's so focused on himself, not talk more.

[00:06:37] Just say, “Okay, I'm okay. I'm okay.” But it hurts because I understand he has struggle inside. And you want to help him, but you don't know how you can help him. You just start to spend time with him and just do something. Be a good dad. He’s a kid for me. He’s a kid. 18 years old, but he’s a kid for me. It’s so young to handle this situation. Because sometimes I can’t handle this situation.

[00:07:17] I know I'm the chief of my family and I need to be strong. I can't be like, “Okay guys, sorry. I have a problem.” I need to protect him, protect my wife, protect my youngest son, and every evening we talk on Skype and it's a better time for me. Because it's a little place of peace in our life.

[00:07:56] **Esther [Narration]:** I mean, I listen to him and I get the chills because it's so common to hear men or conversations about modern masculinity be about power and control and abuses of power. What I'm hearing him talk is “I have to be strong because that is how I protect my family.” And he brings back a certain essential view of his role as a man as he sees it, which is, “I must choke my tears. I cannot be too weak. I cannot be soft. I cannot let myself feel fear because I have to protect the others of the fear that they feel.”

[00:08:46] **Andrew:** I try to live one day. For me, it’s...

**Esther:** Day by day.

**Andrew:** Yes. Day by day. Because you think about one day you have schedule on this day you know what you need to do. You do it. And like in the evening time you speak with your family, you see each other, you can have little funny time, just share about what's going on this day, ups and down. just try to joke, try to support each other. It's like we are together.

[00:09:27] **Esther:** Mm-hmm. Does your son know some of what you are experiencing? Because if you don't tell him anything, and he may not have the language like you do, he may think that he's the only one, or he may think that he has to be okay because you keep telling him, “I'm okay.” And so that becomes the code of the house.

Everything's fine with you, so everything must be fine with him. But if you were able to say maybe, you know, "Today was a very hard day." And whatever the reason, then he can say "It was a hard day for me too."

[00:10:09] **Andrew:** Maybe some, maybe not big fears I share about.. Like something upset today. Like, like big question about life, about death, about killing. About bombing. Because I have fears. I can die. I can join military because I'm reserve officer in Ukraine army. I could take invitation and go to war, like my brothers.

**Esther:** All your brothers have been called?

**Andrew:** Yes. My own brother was a football coach for kids. He never was in the military. But some day, military department called to him and asked him to come. And say, "You need your country protect." And he say, "Yes, I'm ready." When he joined the military, his officer said, "Now it's your job. We don't know when it stop. Only when war stop you go back home."

You know, these fears about your life, you can share about maybe your close friends, because I try to protect. I know I'm not Superman, I'm not like Captain America. *[laughs]* But I know God have plan for my life and I just want to be right and do good decision when I need to do. Because I know my wife have another opinion about what I need to do.

**Esther:** Meaning?

**Andrew:** Meaning about join or not join.

[00:12:12] **Esther:** You say I should join if I'm called, I have no choice.

[00:12:17] **Andrew:** In Ukraine, you can't say no. But if you have your belief, that you can't take the gun, you can say, "Sorry, I can't kill people."

[00:12:35] **Esther:** You can be a conscientious objector.

[00:12:36] **Andrew:** But not my specialty. I'm officer to protect sky. Like for missile, I need to strike missile. My specialized officer is in reserve. But if Ukrainian Army call to me, I need to go to this department to protect sky. Protect our sky, protect our city from Russian bombing. I think it's okay. It's a good idea.

**Esther:** And your wife says?

[00:13:16] **Andrew:** She's afraid. She just tried to be "No, no. Just save yourself. Say you can't." I know it's hard. What do you think?

[00:13:31] **Alyona:** I just think that everyone has his mission in life and if you are talking about professional military, I understand that that's your choice that you make when you are young or not really, but this is not a regular situation. That's a war. Surely to me, I understand that there are ways how to serve when you are in the army, how to help people, but to me, this man is one and only. And surely from my side as a woman, I want to respect his decisions and I'm trying to, even though I don't agree. When we had conflict in 2014, the revolution in Ukraine, and all the people went out to the streets to protest. It was in Kiev, in capital. And I did not want Andrew to go, he wanted to go to the capital to just show a peaceful protest that he does not agree with what government thinks. But those were really terrifying times because many people were killed. So I did not want him to go, but he went. I had to find peace in our relationship where it's him as an individual, and that's his own choice.

[00:14:55] When it's about your conscience, I want him to be in peace with himself. Because he will be accountable to God in the end of his life. And I don't want him to sell his conscience for my ideas, even though it's really difficult to me.

[00:15:17] **Andrew:** I think everyone need to do what he believe.

[00:15:22] **Esther [Narration]:** In his worldview, he sees her leaving with their youngest son as the right thing to do. He doesn't question it, whereas she questions, even though she respects it. She also questions his decision to stay, his decision to serve, and his decision to put his conscience before his love for her. That's how she

frames it. But she understands the structure, but she also finds it's very challenging because she's afraid to lose him.

[00:16:05] **Andrew:** Every day I ask God, “What do you know? What do you want from me?” And in every situation I will find good solution.

[00:16:22] **Esther:** If you make a decision, do you feel that it would be your decision, or God's decision for you?

[00:16:32] **Andrew:** I think every one of us have destiny. And need to find what he leaves on this planet. And if I leave, I need to do and find my decision. Now, I work in logistics company and our mission is to deliver product to grocery store. Our work is very necessary for people because if people see the product in the grocery store, it's okay. But if no product in the grocery store, it's panic in the people. And I know now it's my place. I work in this company. We do good job. It's very important for society. And I do what I can do. If another day someone called to me and say “This work for you, you need.” I will pray. I will look in my heart and think, “Where is the best place for me where I can be helpful for people?”

Because now if you live in Ukraine, every people now try to find how we can help. What we need to do to be closer. Every people in Ukraine is one big family. This I can do is help people and you in the right place because you are here. You are like little hero. But I know people who not Ukraine now. They hero too because he tried to save life, try to support families, and he tried to protect children. And it's very important too because maybe we are distanced but we are united. We just together. Every mission outside, inside.

[00:18:40] **Esther:** Let me tell you what I heard and tell me if I heard it well. “I am in the Ukraine,” you say, “And I'm in the front line and I am here feeling the every day of what is going on. And my mission is to do for the good of everybody. My purpose is to make sure that there is food in the supermarket so that people have some sense of normalcy and eating. And I bring my logistics skills to the store. And my sense of family is that I can get through the day if I feel like I've done something helpful for others and for my country. And when I look at my wife and the other people who are outside

the country, sometimes it seems to me,” —I'm adding this part— “that they may not understand as much, that feeling of doing for everybody else because they went away.

[00:19:41] They also are doing for others, but they're not seeing the effect every day of the war, the way that those of us who stayed behind are doing. So, yes, they are helping us. They're sending money, they're taking care of the children, they're protecting the family that isn't home, but they are more into, ‘I want you to take care of yourself. I want you to protect yourself.’” And you are saying, “I can't protect myself if it doesn't protect the people around me.”

And so the circumstances and the vantage point that each of you has, you being in the country and you being out of the country is complementary and meets in this unity, but is also different because one of you is focusing on the comfort and the security and the safety. And the other one is focusing on the duty and the collective and the conscience, and defines security through that lens. Something like that?

**Alyona:** Yes.

**Andrew:** Yeah, absolutely..

**Track 20 Esther:** You've been listening a lot. I'm gonna invite you to say something.

[00:21:00] **Alyona:** Yeah. We share a lot. We have everyday meetings online one day with children one day, just one on one. Because at some point we realized that after having everyday meetings, just four of us, like a family, I realized that I have this big gap of, I don't know, intimacy on an emotional level, that I need one on one talks more often.

The first conversation was really tough because when I asked like, “So Andrew, how are you?” And he said, “I don't even know because I'm afraid to ask myself this question because I'm afraid there is so much pain there that I don't even want to look there.”



On the other hand, from what you have just shared, which is absolutely true, I was kind of feeling, you know, I'm in France somewhere, looking at the couples. I was feeling lonely. I was feeling not loved. My man of my life is not beside me. I don't hear anymore so many compliments. That is my need in relationships. I don't hear this, I don't hear that and understand from my perspective. So our needs were different. And then we decided, no, we need to talk even more, because we had this habit in our family during 22 years of our marriage, we would have weekly dates with each other. We were really close. But just because of the war and because our lifestyle has changed so drastically, we were kind of afraid to approach each other. I was afraid to hurt him because I knew that he's going through air alerts five times per day. He has to go to the bunker to save himself and our son. And I need just to be loved. I want to be loved. I want to hear compliments. I want to be the same woman for him.

[00:23:05] **Andrew:** My first reaction was, “What are you talking about, compliment? We have war. We have difficult situation. I try to do something helpful for my country, for my family. Compliment?” But then I just thought about it because I think she just go through difficult time now. She has needs. Like Bible said, it's my part, it's my body. It's like if my hand hurts, I want to protect. I want to just heal my hand. It's if my wife needs good words, like compliments, I say, “You are so beautiful today. I love you so much.” It's very important for her.

[00:23:56] **Esther:** Andrew. It's not just important for her.

**Andrew:** Why?

**Track 22 Esther:** Because you too feel this. But if you allow yourself to connect with those feelings, it's even more scary. If you remember how much you love her and how much you miss her, and how much you would love to touch her, and how much you would like her to hold you, you will connect with a different set of feelings. At this point, you respond from the heroic position of, ‘I'm fighting for my country and it's crucial.’ But there is also, ‘I'm deeply connected to you and I don't wanna lose you.’ And so if you make it that she wants to be loved, while you are expressing the love of the

nation, you're missing the point for yourself, not for her, for yourself.

But your fear — if I know something, Andrew, if I understood you well — is that if you allow yourself to connect with that part of you, it will increase the fears and it'll make you less strong.

[00:25:06] **Andrew:** Yes. It's like, you just save yourself for pain. And be like maybe, focus on the real action because I can stop the situation. I can't say to my wife “come to me and be with me” because it's not safe. And maybe, maybe, I dunno...

[00:25:39] **Esther:** Say it in Ukrainian. Say to her in Ukrainian, This is too deep to say it in English, and she will translate for me.

[00:26:21] **Andrew:** Okay. **[Speaks Ukrainian.]** Translate, please.

[00:26:23] **Alyona:** Andrew said that this pain is so deep and so hurtful, painful, that he doesn't even want to give it a thought. And all he can do is just act and do something to not go to that place because the pain is just overwhelming.

[00:26:44] **Esther:** I'm gonna let you respond to him.

[00:26:48] **Alyona:** I feel like it's really difficult to unblock this at this time. He's always vulnerable and he can easily cry, but at this time it seems like he's frozen. There are some days when Andrew can share a bit deeper. He's always ready to hear my crying, my pain because he was and he still is the closest person to me in life. I have many friends. That's fine, but it's different. But, I sometimes feel, I don't know how to approach what questions to ask because I am afraid that if I start unfolding this pain, then I will not know how to help him because he's far. I can't hug, embrace. In the moment I'm mostly numb and can't handle things.

[00:28:01] **Esther:** Numbness is not always that you can't handle things. Numbness is sometimes an adaptive response in the moment. Him saying to you, “It's too painful if I allow myself to feel how much I miss you.” That is not numbness, that's actually being in it. Even if he doesn't cry like you do. Though he did before. “Why

feel, because I can't do anything about my feelings. I can't bring my wife back, but I can get food on the shelf in the supermarket." So logistics is doable. Love is painful.

[00:28:52] **Esther [Narration]:** They both are in survival mode. They both are into fight, flight, and freeze. And when she describes how she goes numb, of course, the question is, is this numbness a problem or is this numbness in the moment actually adaptive? Because in hindsight, we often wonder why we reacted certain ways and we leave out the fact that in the moment those were adaptive responses.

[00:29:21] **Esther:** If I understood something, where you are in France, there are other refugees that are couples? Is that what you said, Alyona?

[00:29:32] **Alyona:** Yeah. I see some couples who are together, Ukrainians,

**Track 28 Esther:** And you get jealous.

**Alyona:** Yeah, I'm jealous.

[00:29:42] **Esther:** Why do *they* get to be together?

[00:29:45] **Alyona:** Yeah. And I try to find answers, mostly logical, because my heart does not want to accept this.

[00:29:52] **Esther:** And then you go into, "Why is this country more important than me? Or us."

**Alyona:** Absolutely.

**Track 31 Esther:** And then you get into a triangle where it's you, him, and the country.

**Alyona:** Absolutely. Yeah.

**Esther:** Do you talk to him about the jealousy?

[00:30:11] **Alyona:** I did not probably call it jealousy, but I talked to him sometimes when I heard some men saying, “But I’m here to protect my family. That’s why I left.” And I feel, “But doesn’t he protect our family?” I mean, I don’t believe he does not. But yeah, you are absolutely right from what you were saying, that those are heavy feelings. I share just now that there is no easy way out. I respect his decision. I mean, men cannot legally leave the country. Only if you have three children, you can leave the country.

[00:30:55] **Andrew:** So I said to my wife, if you come to Ukraine one day, and after nine months you, you’ll be pregnant. I’ll have legal chance to leave the country.

[00:31:13] **Esther:** Come to Ukraine, spend the weekend with me. Let’s make love, get pregnant and we can get out?

[00:31:21] **Andrew:** Yeah. [*laughing*]

**Alyona:** Sounds like a plan. [*laughing*]

**Andrew:** My dream was two boys, two girls. We have two boys. We need two girls. [*laughs*]

[00:31:34] **Esther:** When you say “I respect his decision.” Do you think he feels that?

[00:31:41] **Alyona:** Does he feel that I respect? Oof, how deep Esther your questions! Each question is like, whoa. Um...

[00:31:55] **Esther:** I can even be more honest with you.

[00:31:59] **Alyona:** Please.

**Esther:** I think you would *like* to respect his decision. But I’m not sure you really do. Because there’s a part of you that thinks differently. And these are not questions that can so nicely be aligned. You have had your disagreements, I’m sure, in the history of your marriage. But these are deep, existential, religious convictions that take you in different directions.

[00:32:27] And so you would like to say “He needs to be able to be at peace with his conscience. He needs to be able to be between him and God, and at the end of his life know that he did, you know.” You have the right words. You think well. But I'm not sure that your feelings are aligned with your thoughts.

[00:32:50] **Alyona:** Not really.

**Esther:** Do you agree?

[00:32:51] **Alyona:** I do. I agree. And when you ask this question, the first thought that came to my mind—I want to align my feelings to this respectful attitude. But sometimes it does not happen this way.

[00:33:13] **Andrew:** It for me is like two ways. One way, I need to be with my family. And another way, I need to help my country. And it's like, how can I connect these two good goals in my life? And I need to be honest with myself and hear my heart. But every time we have this situation, it's not easy for us to find peace because we have different opinions.

[00:33:49] **Esther:** Mm-hmm. But if I may, I think it's not just that you have different opinions from each other. So you're in 2014, there's a revolution. You decide to go to the demonstrations. And there's a part of Alyona that says, “I wished that you didn't go and that you stood by us.” But at the same time, I know what attracted her to you — your character, your strength, your integrity, your deep sense of commitment and devotion to the family and beyond. So I can only imagine. It's not just that she says, “Don't go.” It's that she is not just in a conflict with you. She's also having an internal conflict between the fear of losing you and the wish for you to stay. And at the same time, also the respect and the admiration for you that you go and that you do what you're doing. It's both-and. But that's inside of her. Do you understand? Does it feel right what I said, Alyona?

**Alyona:** To me, yes.

**Esther:** I think that sometimes if you could speak from both places like that, he also would feel like you get him. And if you were able sometimes more to talk even about the pain, about not being with her, she would feel less alone. That she's the only one who misses the compliments and the sensuality and the connection. Because you are busy with the country. There is a bridge and you're not walking across it enough.

**Alyona:** Yeah.

**Esther:** How do you say in Ukranian, “Do you understand me?”

**Alyona:** Ти розумієш?

**Esther:** Like in Polish! (laughs)

[00:36:00] **Andrew:** But I think mainly for Alyona, she lost her dad, her mom, and her brother's now in not good condition, like not healthy. And me, maybe our family for her is like, all. And she tried to save it. It's why for her it's painful.

[00:36:26] **Esther:** You are her family, in every sense of the word. She no longer has her mother or her father. Her brother is in ill health. And you are it. And the thought of you going to the army leaves her with a dreadful feeling that she could be all alone with the two boys.

[00:36:49] **Alyona:** Yeah, exactly. Last year when my mom passed away, I felt so uprooted in every sense of this word because I lost parents who gave me life. And I remember when Andrew came back home and he hugged me and said, “Mom is not with us anymore.” Because her neighbor called Andrew, not me, because she was afraid to call me. And I said, “You are the only person in this world. There's no more. No one who can be closer.” And sure, I'm a super communicative girl, have lots of friends and stuff, but it's very different.

[00:37:29] The closest person is Andrew. Unlike maybe for Andrew it's different because his parents are alive, his brother is okay —I mean, he's okay, I mean in good health and he's alive. I have a drug

addict brother. And plus my children who are turning almost 17 and 19. I'm kind of losing everything and feeling super lonely in the country where I am now. Yes I understand that he's going through his struggle. I'm going through my struggle. We are trying to be there for each other as much as we can.

[00:38:06] **Esther:** You're always clear that your place is with your younger son in Western Europe? Or you think sometimes, we could reunite, but we'd have to be in the village together?

[00:38:25] **Alyona:** This is the question I'm asking myself now these days. Can I handle another five months being in a situation like that? Maybe it's better just go back home and die together. And not struggle so painfully because it's huge. I can't bear it. And then, all the traumatic experiences appear at the moment when I'm thinking of coming back home. Because I've had many panic attacks and lots of things that I was going through — anxiety and depression — and then I can't picture myself sitting in bunker.

I can't picture myself having severe anxiety while going to bed because it took me about five years to recover. And I'm okay now, I mean, a year before the war, thanks to a lot different things, like breathing techniques and lots of stuff, I could bring myself back to a normal state where I can handle myself mentally. I'm okay. I'm just thinking now about coming for a date, for a week or two, just to see each other. And see how it feels.

[00:39:38] **Esther:** Do you work there? Do you have a life there? Or are you in temporary mode every day wondering, “Maybe I'll go back tomorrow.” And so you never really settle because you keep thinking, “I'm going home soon.”

[00:39:55] **Alyona:** Yeah. Thank you so much for asking this question. Because this is the biggest challenge for me nowadays. At this time, five months since the war has started, I see many families or even individuals, they start to settle. They start to live a new life at the place where they are. And I'm jealous, like you said — thanks for just giving a name — I'm jealous because I can't see myself settling somewhere without Andrew. Because to me, being a creative one, I am a creator. I create big projects. I love vision. And I

can't give myself permission to have this vision because once I have it, I need to start creating something by myself. But I cannot picture myself settling somewhere.

[00:40:46] So it was a temporary place for me to just wait. When the thunderstorm and the rain is over. But the rain is not over, it's a pouring rain. And I'm there standing in the middle of this pouring rain thinking, "Where can I go now?" If I go back to Ukraine, I can't work. I can't do my business there now because it's just closed. Something that I do, I can't do it now. I know what I want to do. I clearly know what I want to do. I clearly know who I am and how to be self-realized. But I can't give myself permission to settle. And so now what I see, I see many families and individuals trying to find jobs, finding some ways of how they can give education to their children.

[00:41:33] **Esther:** Your son goes to school?

[00:41:37] **Alyona:** My son goes to school here. He's okay. He's the younger one, it's much easier for him to adapt, so he's okay. He found his community. He goes to school here and he sees himself somehow staying here. So I kind of potentially can feel that I can settle somewhere, but I can't see myself settling without Andrew.

[00:42:01] **Andrew:** It's so interesting. When this year started, I thought, "We need to have vacation, whole family." This dream, this picture that we someday be together, whole family. We will spend vacation. Because I don't know when it will, but I know it will. I know someday we will be together and we will have vacation.

[00:42:36] **Esther:** That's beautiful.

**Andrew:** And you know, in our kitchen we have a calendar, a paper calendar, Every day new page. Every day new page. And this page stopped on February 23. It's the last peaceful day. And I said, "When my family will together in the kitchen, in our apartment, we change this date."

[00:43:02] **Esther:** Mm-hmm. It's a beautiful picture to hold as hope. That we will meet again, we will travel again. And it gives you,



I'm sure, a lot of strength to wake up in the morning and to go to bed at night. Do you want her to come home, or do you want her to stay?

[00:43:28] **Andrew:** I don't know. It's a difficult question. Because I know her feeling, I know her fears. But what's inside her is very important. I know's for her to be in Ukraine now is big suffering. And maybe it's not good for your health. I don't judge you and blame you. I want to just help you to find your decision. Because it's your decision. Yes, inside, I want her to be with me in Ukraine. But I know she feel not safe. But we try to find good decision .

[00:44:21] **Esther:** It may be pieces of a decision. She may come home for a week or two and hope that it gives her more clarity. There is also a part of you Alyona that if you start something where you are, that doesn't mean that you never go back. It just means that this takes much longer than you ever imagined, and you have no idea when the war will end.

[00:44:47] And in a way, you may be more helpful to the family by creating something where you are. And then you have a younger son who, if he stays in another year, may decide that by then he's almost finished high school, that that's where he wants to stay. So the whole destiny of the family is no longer clear the way you thought it was going to be. And that means being open to very different trajectories.

[00:45:25] **Alyona:** Yeah.

**Esther:** Maybe one option is you do go home for a couple of weeks and you may find clarity and you may not. And then the question will be, "Do I stay here or do I leave?" And then it'll be, "My health versus my relationship." And all these impossible binaries. These are impossible binaries.

You are a resourceful person that starts with visions. Usually you start with a big vision. Maybe this is an invitation to start with a smaller vision and a temporary vision. A vision for the moment. Not a vision for life. War makes everything become in the immediate.

Because if he lives day by day, you are gonna be living day by day too in some way. Your vision has to be a vision for the moment.

I mean, I am not saying this because I have certainty and I know. I'm trying to think out loud with you and see if there's a way to take you out of your victim-stuckness. "Everybody else seems to know where they're going, but me. Everybody else has their partners, but me." You're in that thing and you spend your day there, and that's separately from him.

[00:46:58] **Alyona:** That's true.

[00:47:00] **Esther:** When you say, "I'm that kind of person, and I start this way, and this is how I work." I would add at the end of the sentence: "in peaceful times." But in war times, all your definitions of yourself and all the ways that you have constructed the world and reality around you changes.

**Alyona:** Yeah

[00:47:27] **Esther:** It's about how you each help the other in the world that the other is in. And then once a week you have a date on a fantasy island or a fantasy place, where you do not touch any of these subjects because they're so big and difficult and painful. And they're filled with uncertainty.

Maybe you don't talk. Maybe you listen to music together. Maybe you watch a movie. Maybe you each dance in your own places, but with each other. Crazy stuff that people do when they are in forced separation. You like to dance? You both smiled when I said that.

**Alyona:** Yes.

**Andrew:** Yeah.

[00:48:23] **Alyona:** We danced together actually.

[00:48:24] **Andrew:** When I met Alyona, I just saw like she'd dance and she was beautiful dancing. I like dance. She liked dance.

[00:48:37] **Esther:** Beautiful.

[00:48:38] **Andrew:** We are crazy when dancing.

[00:48:41] **Esther:** So imagine you each make a playlist and you just put the music on and just dance for an hour instead of talking about this impossible, huge, existential quandaries. Just to give yourself hope and energy and poetry.

[00:49:02] It doesn't answer the big questions, but it keeps you connected at a different level. That is also very important. Freedom comes to our imagination, especially when you can't feel free in reality. Your mind and your body are the two means, vehicles, through which you can stay connected with the world of possibility. In a reality in which it feels that every possibility could be life and death, you also need places for joy and for celebration and for connection in the midst of the tragedy.

[00:49:53] **Esther [Narration]:** I sensed that there was a need for permission. It's the permission that allows us to stay connected to hope, to joy, to celebration. Because that's actually part of what allows us to face the war.

And at one moment I thought, like, “On what basis do I know anything about this? I'm not from there. I'm not living in a war. I never have.” But my parents did. And my parents each spent about four to five years in concentration camps, and so did their entire group of friends and community that I grew up in. So I spent many years asking people, “How did you do it? How did you wake up in the morning? How did you maintain hope? What kept you going? Did you ever laugh? Did you ever have fun?”

Those things that are irreverent, that seem to be taboo to talk about when people are in the midst of suffering. And yet, it is humor and playfulness and curiosity and joy and all the strategies that intensify joy. From the sense of awe when you look at the sky, to the gratitude for what you still have in front of you, to the people that you think about that you hope to reunite with.

Those are very precise strategies that are beyond mindfulness and beyond breathing. People have experienced existential stress forever, and have developed longstanding practices and traditions to counter that. Music, prayer, singing, poetry, composing in the midst of all of that creation, creativity, art. All of those things are the hardware for facing hardships.

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