

Product of an Affair

[00:00:00] **Jesse (Producer):** None of the voices in the 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.

[00:00:26] **Him:** Our relationship is great. The challenge is we left a little mess around us in how we created our relationship.

[00:00:40] **Her:** We started a relationship through an affair, ended up leaving our spouses. He's got four kids, I've got two kids. Coming from different religious backgrounds, different racial backgrounds.

[00:00:58] **Him:** We now live together. Our children are starting to meet each other. Her children live with us.

[00:01:06] **Her:** Knowing how this began, am I just kidding myself? Am I allowed to have this?

[00:01:16] **Him:** I carry a lot of guilt over it.

[00:01:21] **Esther Perel:** They met at the end of high school, then they moved on in their own lives. And one day they met again. Thank you, Facebook. And that meeting opened up a whole chest of longings. And here they are after six years. What happens when two people who knew each other as teenagers and meet again, 20 years later, find themselves first in an affair, then in a divorce, then in a recreation of a family and how all of this is affecting everyone around them, six children, two exes and new partners, all as a consequence of their pursuit of happiness.

[00:02:15] **Him:** I was a senior in high school. We dated towards the end of that school year, I went off to college. And then the relationship ended, probably just through lack of interaction.

[00:02:28] **Esther Perel:** And was she your first girlfriend?

[00:02:31] **Him:** Good question. So she was not my first girlfriend, but she was my first of a lot of things. In terms of, I lost my virginity to her and, you know, versus probably a pretty serious relationship. I think our conversations were at a depth that was very different from anybody I'd have a relationship with before, but you know, it ended and and we moved on.

[00:02:52] **Esther Perel:** But you remembered her?

[00:02:54] **Him:** Very much so. And so, the onset of social media, we ended up reconnecting as I did with 300 other people that I've passed in life. And I'm sure she did as well. And then saw, I'll let you take over from here so I'm not the only one talking.

[00:03:15] **Her:** Okay. So, we're both married at this point later on and in our lives. And he reached out, oh, I'm in town and it was just going to be fun to get together. And we met up one day, we parted ways and I dunno, I thought we had a nice neutral time, at least on my end. And then what happened after that?

[00:03:41] **Him:** Yeah. So we, and likewise, so I would definitely say that I did not have anything beyond for whatever reason I thought of you. And I think maybe I sent like a message, like, wow, it was really cool to connect with you, you're like the same person, which blew me away. So to me it was an innocent gesture and then we exchanged a couple of texts and then that was it. And then, a week and a half or two weeks went by and I got a text that was from her and it said, "Are you still in town? Have you left yet?" And I said, I haven't but I'm leaving tomorrow." And she said, I still remember that something along the lines of, "I probably shouldn't be saying this, but it's been really hard not to keep thinking about seeing you again." and I had felt similarly, but I wasn't going to be the one to do to go there because I just, I was married. She sounded like she was happily married. So

[00:04:39] **Her:** I definitely did things that were not normally me. But I'm sure that...

[00:04:46] **Esther Perel:** But the "normally you" was what? The "normally you" was who? The "normally you" was which marriage were you in, which life were you living?

[00:04:56] **Her:** I was doing what I was supposed to be doing all my life. It was time to get married. This was, best man that I'm probably going to meet.

[00:05:05] **Esther Perel:** Said who?

[00:05:06] **Her:** Said me in the climate that I was in. The person I was with checked off a lot of boxes, not every box, but you know, who am I to think that I'm going to be the one that is gonna get everything in life because nobody really does. Most of us kind of have to settle for something. That's what I was doing. I think given the place that I came from, like from my home life, they just weren't like the most emotionally available, well, at least my mother wasn't. Came from a very negative place and made all her daughters feel that way too. She was probably somebody that never should have had children just did it because that's what you do.

[00:05:52] **Esther Perel:** Did she have a few favorite sentences?

[00:05:55] **Her:** It didn't matter what it was. It was just any type of communication, whatever it was just not the right thing to do, it doesn't look good. She just was not a happy person. But then I never let her do it.

[00:06:10] **Esther Perel:** What was the background of your family?

[00:06:12] **Her:** So Eastern European Jewish immigrants, I look at myself in relation to my sisters and like their relationships too. And it makes my decisions even more clear as far as the types of people that we all got involved with. But when I met him, he filled so many things that were missing that I didn't even realize I could have everything that I was missing.

[00:06:45] **Esther Perel:** Which was what? You meet him, you haven't seen him in what, 20 something years?

[00:06:52] **Her:** Right.

[00:06:57] **Esther Perel:** You've spent, how many years are you married by then?

[00:07:00] **Her:** Maybe eight.

[00:07:02] **Esther Perel:** And during those eight years, a sizable number of them, you're busy telling yourself you can't have everything, everybody makes compromises, nobody lives in paradise. What happens? What made you both cross a line that you never thought you would cross, right? Risk losing everything you have. For what?

[00:07:35] **Him:** I'll fill in that gap. We exchanged a quick text or two, and we ended up speaking on the phone a few times. Like we just got a little bit honest about it's amazing the feelings that came rushing back that, like, where did this come from? And we ended up deciding to get together one more time, just the decision to do that, which was still relatively innocent, crossing the line for sure. But definitely not like, Hey, we're going to get together and rent a hotel room or something like that.

[00:08:06] **Her:** So that's where I definitely crossed the line and I was just like, oh my God, I can't believe I'm doing this. But basically it was because he was very kind, he really just like saw me for me. And he always really had. He made me feel great. He made me feel special. It made me want more because I didn't have all of that. Does that make sense?

[00:08:33] **Esther Perel:** Can I go a step further? I don't think that the crossing of the line is getting the hotel room. Crossing of the line is when you give yourself the permission to think beyond. Where you've allowed yourself to go.

[00:08:51] **Him:** I agree with that.

[00:08:52] **Esther Perel:** Alright. So talk to me, it's an internal question. What thoughts, longings, unmet needs, fantasies dreams accompanied you line by line?

[00:09:09] **Him:** Initially for me, it was tremendous curiosity within myself that I felt this way. I interact with all types of people and I've lived all over the country and I've traveled, right.

[00:09:23] **Esther Perel:** So can I ask you, what is your original background?

[00:09:27] **Him:** In terms of?

[00:09:28] **Esther Perel:** Where your parents from, where you grew up?

[00:09:31] **Him:** My parents are, were born in the Caribbean, and then they came to the U S and then I was born in the US. Hardworking parents and very strict environment, strict household, huge expectations on the children, as a lot of immigrant families have.

[00:09:45] **Esther Perel:** And the powerful parent was?

[00:09:49] **Him:** Father. Amazingly so, right? So they were two very different people. Mother was incredibly passive and father was incredibly dominant, in a loving way, but it was tough at times.

[00:10:04] **Esther Perel:** Religion?

[00:10:06] **Him:** Christian. Catholic growing up, and then I deviated post-college and really went really headstrong into Christianity. I became born again and don't regret it. I think I learned a lot about myself. I learned a lot about life and perspectives. But I think that also is part of the foundation for where I found myself when she and I connected, because I think that I was dissatisfied with my marriage, but I also felt like this is my marriage for life. This is what I made my vow towards, had children. Yes, the thought crossed my mind, but I never was like moving in the direction of divorce or something like that. I think that what was missing in that relationship, the warmth, the affection, and over time, it created a huge void in my life that really just turned into a relationship that was not very fulfilling at all for me. So I was going through the motions. It was very, I like to say it was the corporation of the family as opposed to a strong emotional bond. And so what I was incredibly curious about when we reconnected was why I felt the way I did. And so I wanted my motivation in, Hey, let's get together again was, I was probably... With that backdrop, I was more hopeful that I was going to see chinks in the armor of what I thought I saw. Another interaction, you're just like, okay it's more what I thought what I've expected about life is that nothing's perfect and nothing's an amazing, perfect fit. So I go back and just be satisfied that I've probably done better than most or something like that. And I think that in the pursuit of looking for flaws in what I felt was an amazing connection. I never found the flaws. And it got me to a place where I was like, this is going to be really hard to look away from. And it proved to be impossible for me.

[00:12:08] **Esther Perel:** Was this your first victory of desire over duty?

[00:12:12] **Him:** I would say I'm definitely somebody who always tried to do what was expected of him, absolutely.

[00:12:19] **Esther Perel:** You have that in common.

[00:12:21] **Him:** The sad thing about that is you buy the tale, right? The tale is, you work really hard, you get good grades, you got a good job, you live happily ever after, white picket fence, the American dream. And then, I did work really hard and I did get good grades and I did get a pretty good job, and I went to a great school. And then you wake up and it's 15, 20 years later and you're like, I'm not happy. I don't feel fulfilled. There's tons of gaps and voids, and I'm staring at Netflix on my iPad because I don't want to talk to my spouse. I feel trapped. I definitely came to a place in my life where I was like sacrificing what I desired, for what I thought was expected of me or what I should do, or what will give me a great outcome and ultimately make me feel very fulfilled left me very empty handed.

[00:13:18] **Esther Perel:** What's the background of your wife, your ex-wife?

[00:13:23] **Him:** African-American.

[00:13:25] **Esther Perel:** How much did this relationship resemble the one you had with your father?

[00:13:31] **Him:** Definitely somebody who was very controlling, as is my father. Very much thinks that what they think is the right way. And there's very little deviation from that. And I think that's what I married into, for sure. And it was, again, forced me to feel really trapped in the relationship.

[00:13:54] **Esther Perel:** So when you were in the midst of this discovery, that there is another life out there, and you know that this is forbidden, having an affair is forbidden, divorce is taboo, sex outside of marriage is a sin and you want to be a good Christian.

[00:14:19] **Him:** That's a very tense scenario.

[00:14:22] **Esther Perel:** That must've been a huge conflict.

[00:14:27] **Him:** Very much so.

[00:14:29] **Esther Perel:** I worked for 30 years, I'm about to throw away. That's what I'm asking you. What was the pull that felt like if I don't do this, I'm going to die inside.

[00:14:53] **Him:** I think it was the reality that I was not happy.

[00:15:01] **Esther Perel:** I keep probing, in the same direction. I understand that you felt not happy, but that doesn't tell us what allowed you to feel that your unhappiness could become the drive for your next decision. It's one thing to know we're not happy, but there are plenty of people all over the world that live with that, they do not feel that they have a right to do something about their own happiness. That's the question. The question is not, did you feel unhappy and what made you unhappy? The question is what was it inside of you that made becoming happy an acceptable goal for which you were going to take apart and dismantle an entire life that you had built? It's putting the self ahead of the relationships. And I'm not sure that we got to the end of that one.

[00:16:05] **Him:** Like I think if I was 15 or 20 years older and was met with the exact same dynamic, I probably would have said, I wish we'd met 15 to 20 years earlier. And, or even more than that, but at this point in time, it's just, but I felt like both for myself as well as for my former spouse, like neither one of us were happy. So we're both still young enough that we can have another life after this. And so I think I felt, I forced upon myself a sense of urgency that if I do something drastic in my life, there's time to pick up the pieces. There's time to end up living the rest of my life in a very important relationship that was fulfilling, that I felt like I added value to, that was mutually beneficial, and pleasant. And the thought of walking away from that, knowing it existed was I made it, I ultimately made the decision that I wasn't willing to do it.

[00:17:19] **Esther Perel:** This rhetoric of happiness and how much we have the right to pursue. It stands in sharp contrast with a different rhetoric that says, who cares if you're happy or not, your family's happy to be with you. You're not just there for yourself, you're there for others and you don't put your needs ahead of everybody else. So the fact that he says it, wasn't just good for me, it was good for my wife too. It's almost a little bit of a cognitive dissonance. I cannot believe that I would be behaving in a way that is not aligned with my values. So I have to align my values to the way that I behave. And since neither of them want to see themselves as selfish people uncaring people who are not loving of their children or can't think about others, then you need to reduce the gap between your values and your behavior to make them more aligned. So you tweak them on both sides.

[00:18:33] **Him:** I had to come to terms with, am I really going to be at the time, 40 some odd years old and be that worried about what people thought of me and choose to stay miserable, because I didn't want to deal with that.

[00:18:46] **Esther Perel:** You think that's what your father did?

[00:18:50] **Him:** Wow. For different reasons, but yes. I think his reason to stay in his relationship was he felt like it was really important for his children. And I think also in our particular dynamic, there was a lack of confidence that my mom would have really fared well.

[00:19:11] **Esther Perel:** I just had a thought, so I'm just gonna throw it out, you tell me. I wondered if. The real transgression is that at some point you had to make the decision that you were going to do that, which your father was unable to do, and that you were going to do that, which your mother wasn't able to do, meaning you were not going to be miserable. You broke with the negativity and the bitterness of your mother, and you broke apart from the resignation and the straight jacketing. Your father didn't just control the kids, he controlled himself too.

[00:20:03] **Him:** Absolutely.

[00:20:05] **Esther Perel:** And those were the legacies that had to be unlocked. And that you had to give yourself permission to. Not just each other.

[00:20:21] **Him:** That's interesting.

[00:20:28] **Esther Perel:** You know each other's parents?

[00:20:30] **Him:** Well, unfortunately weeks after she met my dad, he unfortunately passed away. It's interesting as tough and domineering as he was, he softened as he got older.

[00:20:43] **Esther Perel:** What was his opinion on both of you?

[00:20:45] **Him:** Look, I think my dad was somebody who could size up people really quickly. And his opinion of her was completely measured by what he saw in me. And he said, look, if you're doing what you're doing, I know you found something special and he's like, I want you to know I support you, and I love you no matter what. He asked a few questions, but I think ultimately he said someone who's going to move my son to do what he's done has gotta be pretty amazing. So he was very open-minded and very interested to get a chance to meet her.

[00:21:26] **Esther Perel:** Does that alleviate some of the guilt?

[00:21:30] **Him:** It certainly made me feel better. It was one less enemy that I felt I was creating in the process, if that makes sense. And it was an important one to not be an enemy.

[00:21:44] **Esther Perel:** In a way you meet with the subtext, which is the unlocking of the legacies of your powerful parents. And with a sense that for the first time, I won't just do what's expected. And how do we go about doing the thing we actually want, when that is not a part of our culture? Not in communism and not in born again Christianity. You get two cultures that really tell you that your individual needs are not at the heart of the universe.

[00:22:26] **Him:** Right, absolutely. So now I want to protect what we have, because I feel like it's still great. It's still amazing. But I also know that there are pressures around us that are challenging. Look we came with baggage. That's an understatement. Like there is a lot of baggage. So now the question is, are we going to be continuing to be accepting of each other's baggage or are we going to draw tired of it?

[00:22:53] **Esther Perel:** So then when you say baggage, you mean what?

[00:22:56] **Him:** An ex wife, who's incredibly angry. Children who are not yet, maybe some of them are starting to get really comfortable, "Hey, when are you getting married? When are you get married?" And the other ones are like, one, one is neutral, like, "yeah, whatever." And the other one's like, "Well, I'm still not really comfortable. Do I have to go there? Do I have to do this?"

[00:23:14] **Esther Perel:** And it's been three years that you have moved in together?

[00:23:18] **Him:** No one year.

[00:23:19] **Esther Perel:** One year. So this is fresh.

[00:23:22] **Him:** It's pretty fresh.

[00:23:23] **Her:** Now that we actually have lived together for some time. This is where you really get to see me behind the curtain with the kids and the screaming and the craziness, not like, oh, we're going out to dinner, we all get ourselves on our best behavior. And I'm calm, I'm mellow, I'm the way I want to be. With them, it's a completely different story. And now you get to see that on a daily basis. Cause he comes from a very disciplined environment where mine, I just kind of let them express themselves because of the way you raise your children. The way that I raised mine, very different and eyeopening. And I don't know that...

[00:24:09] **Esther Perel:** Say more.

[00:24:11] **Her:** I don't, I'm not a hundred percent sure that he's comfortable with it.

[00:24:15] **Esther Perel:** No, but say more in terms of what is the difference?

[00:24:18] **Her:** The difference is, being African-American, he needs to teach his children to be more on the compliant side too, for safety features in the world. Where I think something that he noticed too, like I, you know, white folks just say it like it is without fear of repercussions. It just may not sit well with him, initially.

[00:24:47] **Him:** Let me add to that because I came from a household and I subsequently raised my children in a household where they were taught to be thoughtful about how they communicated, respect your elders, don't talk back. If you have a disagreement, catch yourself under control and let's have a calm conversation.

[00:25:11] **Esther Perel:** Because?

[00:25:14] **Him:** Because now this is the part that I didn't even realize until watching her dynamic and watching the way the children express themselves. I started to realize that I felt like if my kids grew up speaking like this, what would happen when they walked outside the house? They'd get in trouble in school all

day, they'd be in trouble with the police. Like I had a fear and then it hit me. I was like, wow, like you don't have that fear. So then it helped me understand and it helped me be more accepting of how she raises her children, because I was like, well, you don't have the same concern I have. And maybe my concern isn't well founded, but I know I'm pretty concerned about it, which is that my children know how to behave themselves in society and are not going to get pulled over by a cop and start talking back and end up underneath the tire wheel. So our children by default have been raised to be, to really keep their inner thoughts to themselves, as was I. And the unfortunate consequence and reality of that is that I am now victim of it because I'm not there every day. I want to engage with them. I want to know what they really feel. And I'm trapped by the very way that I raised them, that it's hard to get it out of them, which is one of the reasons I have to be so deliberate about one-on-one time and reminding this repetition of what I'm saying before them. And I'm sure I could be even better at it just to get to a better place with them because there's a lot going on in their minds that I don't know.

[00:26:52] **Esther Perel:** There may be a lot going on in the minds of his children, but there is also a lot going on in his heart, especially when he laughs, while he's telling something that is anything but to be laughed at. And it is a very valid concern. It is not just his concern. It is rooted in the society and it is one of the initial ways that they experience their interracial couple. What may start as a conversation about the differences of their child rearing practices, is actually a conversation about the different experience of being Black or white in America, and how that directly affects the way one raises one's children. One sense of danger, of risk and of protection.

[00:27:53] **Him:** And she's very fortunate because I feel like she knows what's going on with her kids. Her kids, are like this is what I'm thinking, this is what. And it's amazing because now you know, you're equipped and you can do something about it.

[00:28:05] **Esther Perel:** Do you argue about the two of you or that's not what it is?

[00:28:09] **Him:** No. I think if, under a different world, a different dimension had we stayed together and ultimately had children together, this probably would have been a really challenging dynamic for the two of us to wrestle with. I feel like we're fortunate...

[00:28:24] **Esther Perel:** That you don't have to integrate your child rearing styles.

[00:28:26] **Him:** That's not, that's not the level of integration. Their father is very much engaged and very, very present.

[00:28:32] **Esther Perel:** That's super important, what you just said. If you had to integrate these two child rearing cultures, you would have had a tough time.

[00:28:42] **Him:** Yes.

[00:28:44] **Esther Perel:** Because a piece of it is your own families. A piece of it is Haitian versus Russian Jewish. The next piece of it is Black American versus white American. So there's layers here because when you grew up with the strictness, you didn't think of it as this is about being Black in America. This is, this was Black in Haiti as well, and this was hierarchical and this was the authority resides with the parents. The respect goes one way. Now you could even go back and say that Black culture in Haiti and child rearing practices there

come from colonization. It goes on and on. And basically one of the first things you witnessed is children who are not afraid of their parents.

[00:29:42] **Him:** That's probably well said.

[00:29:45] **Esther Perel:** If at all, I think sometimes the parents may be afraid of the kids. So you get the picture of what you always wanted, but to the extreme, of course.

[00:29:57] **Him:** But it doesn't scare me.

[00:30:01] **Esther Perel:** But do you feel the absence of your kids even more?

[00:30:04] **Him:** I, that is very intuitive statement, yes. And I sensed that as we were making the decision to move forward, I was like, wow, this is going to be tricky. I feel like I've gotten a little bit better, but initially it was difficult. It's really difficult.

[00:30:24] **Esther Perel:** This is a pivoting moment. If until now the emphasis was on the pursuit of happiness and personal fulfillment, now he's connecting to his sense of loss. And that's what that laughter was trying to hide, just a moment ago. Those children that are not with him, that he has to travel hours on a plane to go and see while he's in the house with her children. And the more he sees them and the more he misses his own. And he's beginning to add the layers to his experience and also to the things that they haven't really said to each other. It's easy to say to each other, I can't believe we finally reunited, I found you again, this is unbelievable. I never knew my life would go this way, but the other side of it is what each of them had to leave behind, for that to happen and their ability to acknowledge that and speak openly about that to the new partner is a very important piece of the transition and the building of the new relationship.

[00:31:34] **Him:** And then I was also very guarded because my kids call. And I wanted to be there, like present with them. I didn't want them to hear like kids playing in the background or something, cause then they'd be like, reminded that, oh, now he's with somebody else and somebody else's kids and they're going to choose to hang out with them all the time and which is the situation. But at the end of the day, I didn't want to constantly remind them but it definitely was is something that's a constant internal struggle.

[00:32:04] **Esther Perel:** That you know about?

[00:32:06] **Her:** And it bothers me too, actually, because I feel like I just want everybody to enjoy each other. And I think for the most part, the younger ones do, but I think it's just more challenging for the older ones. I don't want them to feel bad or having them think that, they're being replaced somehow.

[00:32:28] **Him:** Yeah.

[00:32:34] **Esther Perel:** When she mentions that she doesn't want the older children to feel replaced. It seems to me that there's more to do by actually acknowledging the feeling, validating it. Rather than, I don't want you to feel this way. The desire to have everybody be in a love fest, maybe a little premature here. There needs to be a certain tolerance for all the negative emotions and all the residual emotions or the tangential feelings that all the other people are having in reaction to them. And now we're entering into the heart of the matter.

I can give you a scenario. I'm not going to sugar coat it for you, but I want to give you a scenario that is a little bit more of a long-term perspective, right? In the immediate, you will try as much as you can to have deliberate relationships with each child as best you can. That means the calls, but not just to check in calls, that means finding something that you share together with them.

[00:33:55] **Him:** Right.

[00:33:57] **Esther Perel:** That means taking trips alone with each of them, don't try to imitate the daily presence that isn't. Take advantage of the fact that you don't have to do the daily, did you do your homework? Somebody else already asked us. So then talk about important things.

But I also have sat here with people who tell me there was a period of a 5, 6, 7 something years where I saw my father less. And then after this, I actually went back and I wanted to live closer to him. And I moved near in the town where he is. And so this period now is going to become part of a longer story. But there isn't yet the connection between what is now and how this will unfold.

[00:34:49] **Him:** The younger two are like I'm over it, you know, this is... not over it, but there's you know, it's a, non-issue, you know, this is cool. I get along with them, the older two, they're just less expressive about how they really feel about it. Or I get, random communication from my ex gives me her own version of how the kids are dealing with it.

[00:35:05] **Esther Perel:** Meaning?

[00:35:05] **Him:** Meaning, she always paints it in the worst possible light ever. Such as our oldest daughter is really upset about this. It's causing her problems. She's not sleeping well because of the decisions you've made, help you realize that I'm sure it's obvious to you as well. It's definitely not a very kind communication.

[00:35:22] **Esther Perel:** And how does this reach you?

[00:35:25] **Him:** My kids are, they're, they're incredibly important to me.

[00:35:28] **Esther Perel:** That's not what I asked.

[00:35:28] **Him:** So if you want to reach both saying, if you want to reach me that the way you reach for you is through the kids and what's going on in their life. So it hurts, but I don't blame her. I have to, I have to look inward. What can I do about that now? Because I've got to take this thing forward.

[00:35:47] **Esther Perel:** And where does it put you when you find him in that very place?

[00:35:52] **Her:** If I think that is the biggest piece of the baggage we were talking about, because she is a very distinct personality and I don't see any good coming out of it. And the way that she, I feel she manipulates the children against him and creates like a big rift to express her anger at what has happened.

[00:36:18] **Esther Perel:** How do the children react. Does it work?

[00:36:21] **Her:** Absolutely, it does work.

[00:36:23] **Him:** I think. And this has been expressed by my oldest which is the concern that if I'm having fun with dad's new girlfriend, searching for the right word, but basically it's an affront to...

[00:36:42] **Esther Perel:** It's a slap in the face.

[00:36:44] **Him:** Yeah. We were actually watching something together that was talking about the dynamics of family relationships after divorce. And she said, I can relate to that. Like she just spoke up, it's awkward. I think it's getting better, but I can't help. But feel like if I'm, if I like her, that I'm being, I'm doing something that would be disloyal to my mom. And I said, one I tried to say, I can understand that I think that we all have to get, we'll come to a place where we recognize that life has to go on and that your mom may not initially like it, but she's going to want you to be happy and we have to move forward.

[00:37:26] **Esther Perel:** And how did she receive that?

[00:37:30] **Him:** I think she nodded her head and she said, okay, I hear what you're saying.

[00:37:35] **Esther Perel:** I don't have things to add to what you're doing. The main thing is you validate what they're going through. You give them perspective and you don't try to rush them through it. Then it takes a few years, not a few months. You basically have to be able to separate the husband from the father. We ended our marriage. We reorganized our family. And I am even more of a present father, not in the amount of hours, in the daily time, no, no. That, that is over. That my role stays the same, but my involvement changes, and that involvement on some level gets negotiated with the children less than with your ex.

[00:38:35] **Him:** I a hundred percent agree with that.

[00:38:37] **Esther Perel:** It hurts when she says it and you with her help sometimes, but most of the time alone, we need to be able to breathe through this and not instantly feel like you no longer deserve to feel good for the rest of the evening. Because then she's going to come and try to tell you how you should be more outspoken to your ex. And that you don't want to do because you don't think it's the wise strategy, to go confrontational. And so now she's going to feel like you're almost defending the ex who is hurting you while she, this one here is trying to protect you by trying to say stand up and then you're going to be caught between the two women. So there's going to be triangles galore. You saw this one?

[00:39:34] **Her:** 1000%.

[00:39:37] **Him:** I guess she sees it more than I do, but...

[00:39:39] **Esther Perel:** A thousand percent you said? So you, the best thing you can do is be outside. Outside doesn't mean uninvolved, but not, not triangulate him where he is now between, because then he can't tell you when she's upset him, because then you get upset that he's upset. So now he wants to talk about it and then he will go back and do with you what he already did once with her. Which is not to tell you anything.

[00:40:06] **Him:** So I do think that's a risk.

[00:40:10] **Esther Perel:** That's a risk factor?

[00:40:11] **Him:** Absolutely.

[00:40:12] **Esther Perel:** Bing.

[00:40:13] **Him:** Yeah, there's two dynamics. There's two dynamics. There's what she just said. But then there's also the dynamic of, when I talk about the influence of my ex, it puts me in a bad mood, and I don't want to be in a bad mood. So I'd rather just not talk about it. Yes, you may have noticed like a look on my face for a few minutes, but if I start talking about it now, it's you know, it takes me to another place for longer, and sometimes, something's going on. Something's festering. And I may not mention it for a week. Cause then I feel like I'm separated from it enough that I can share it with you. Does that make sense?

[00:40:51] **Her:** It works for him. So, keep doing it, I guess.

[00:40:57] **Him:** Well, how do you feel when I, if you sense that I'm not telling you?

[00:41:02] **Her:** I mean, I think that I know when you're in a bad mood. I always kind of know where it's coming from. And, I don't know, I guess in my world, it's like, just get it out and be done with it and just move on, but your process things differently. And so do I.

[00:41:25] **Esther Perel:** What if you didn't process it verbally and cognitively, but you actually had a non-verbal way of acknowledging without having to tell the whole thing.

[00:41:43] **Him:** Like, for instance, for you, if you were to say something like, hey, I can tell something's going on. You always know I'm here. Just sit next to me. That would be a really powerful place to put me in where I just feel like, okay, I'm allowed to just take something out of it at my pace and not feel like there's immediate repercussions if I need to keep it inside for a little while longer. And you're not feeling like you're being shut out or there's some kind of a negative, hopefully not have a negative impact on our relationship.

[00:42:16] **Her:** I can do that.

[00:42:21] **Esther Perel:** They have addressed some pieces around the children. We have also addressed how to counter what he experiences as mom's influence on the children being overt about her resentment that he abandoned them. Now what we're talking is how all of this, that lives inside of him plays itself out with the new partner. When does he want to talk about it? What does he need from her? And when does he just want her to sit next to him?

Do you have an ask from him?

[00:43:02] **Her:** You know what? He gave me permission to like vomit up my feelings very early on, and I don't think I've ever stopped. Very good thing. Cause I was never able to do that before in my other relationships or in my home. And he seems to be okay with it. I hope you are.

[00:43:29] **Esther Perel:** Are you less in that kind of web, with your ex?

[00:43:37] **Her:** I think that there are moments where he's acknowledged that I kind of did the best thing for the both of us, that he would not have like the balls so to speak, to do what I did.

[00:43:52] **Esther Perel:** So that's very different. When you have one ex partner who says all in all, you probably did us a service. It's very different than when you have a partner who says you destroyed our family. You abandoned me, you broke the contract, you sinned all over the place and look what your kids look like. Something like that. Did that just choke you?

[00:44:22] **Him:** It's just, it's not easy to hear it all at once. I usually hear it in bits and pieces.

[00:44:29] **Esther Perel:** I'm sorry. I have to say that once. Cause I think you live with that weight inside of you and you try to be really elegant about it, but it's harder on you.

[00:44:41] **Her:** And I know his father mentioned this to him too, was that anything that the kids will do from now on, he was, he's going to be at fault for everything. You know, it's definitely...

[00:44:54] **Him:** Anything that happens to the kids that's negative will be my fault for the rest of the lives.

[00:44:59] **Esther Perel:** Because every therapist they will see, they will say my father divorced, cheated on my mother and left?

[00:45:06] **Him:** Well that my ex would blame me for anything that, like, I need to know that that's what I'm signing up for in moving forward with divorce. You need to know this, you'll be blamed for everything that goes wrong, whether it's your fault or not.

[00:45:20] **Esther Perel:** Now, I want to put your dad in that chair for a moment, because I've had this sense throughout this whole conversation that he's been a very important, very important figure. Both for you as a kid, for you in the transition, for the person who gave you the blessing actually to go and do this. And I don't know how often you talk to him, but maybe you can just send him a note. What would you want to say to him?

[00:45:55] **Him:** I miss you. I had a lot of stuff that went on this year that I wish I could have talked to you about. But I still carry you with me and I feel a sense that I, I know what you would've said. If I did a, if I did ask you if I did open up and I'm really appreciative of the legacy you've left. There have definitely been some tough situations already that I'm like, man, where are you, dad? I need you. I don't know what to do. So, you're missed. But your legacy is felt it'll be here for a long time. That's it.

[00:46:55] **Esther Perel:** Just take him in, not me. Cause you're seeing him I don't.

[00:47:18] **Him:** He was a good man.

[00:47:20] **Esther Perel:** It's interesting. I listened to you, and I think a love story is between two people, a marriage engages an entire community of people. The making of a marriage affects a whole group of people but the dissolution of a marriage affects an entire group of people.

[00:47:49] **Him:** You know, one time I read a story about a biracial couple or an interracial couple, it was the first interracial couple in like the state of Mississippi or something like that. And they had just celebrated their 63rd wedding anniversary. And they talked about what they endured in those early years as they were getting married, as they're announcing their marriage and fighting for the right to get married. And one of the things

they said in that article was that when you have something that's worth fighting through all of that opposition for you know you have something special. And that stuck with me when I read that.

[00:48:27] **Esther Perel:** That's very important.

[00:48:37] **Jesse (Producer):** Esther Perel is the author of *Mating in Captivity* and *The State of Affairs*, and also the host of the podcast and 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. 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 Julia Natt. Recorded by Noriko Okabe. Kristen Mueller is our engineer. Original music and additional production by Paul Schneider and the executive producers of Where Should We Begin? are Esther Perel and Jesse Baker. We would also like to thank Lydia Polgreen, Colin Campbell, Clara Sankey, Ian Kerner, Alma, Courtney Hamilton, Nick Oxenhorn and Jack Saul.