

LOVE IN A F*CKED UP WORLD PODCAST
EP09 WEYAM GHADBIAN

Dean: I am Dean Spade. Welcome back to Love in a F*cked Up World the podcast, where we talk about how to build strong relationships because our relationships are the basis of our movements.

Thanks to everybody who's already joined us over on Patreon, we've got some really interesting message boards going. I've met a lot of people and already learned a lot about how people are thinking about the ideas in the book and the podcast, and how they apply and don't apply in various people's lives and contexts. It's a very sweet community that's growing there, and I hope you'll join us. You can find us at patreon.com/DeanSpade.

Another way you can support the podcast is if you listen on Apple or Spotify, please go ahead and rate and review the podcast. It really helps other people find it. I'm so excited to be sharing today's episode, which is a conversation with my dear friend Weyam Ghadbian. Weyam is a Syrian healer, meditation instructor, comedian, and transformative facilitator. They're also the co-author of Turning Towards Each Other: a Conflict Workbook with Jovida Ross. [00:01:00]

I am so excited to have Weyam Ghadbian on the podcast. I first encountered Weyam's work when I read the guide that they co-wrote with Jovida Ross called Turning Towards Each Other: a Conflict Workbook, which is this like immensely useful guide that helps people think about what roles we fall into when we're in conflicts, what kinds of disconnecting behaviors we express during conflicts, and how to work with conflict in groups.

And this document has been like a huge resource to me. I've drawn from it in workshops that I've done about conflict for organizing groups and for a lot of mutual aid groups. And I've also taught this guide to law students for building skills to prepare for the inevitable conflict that comes up in student organizing and also in lawyer jobs.

Eventually, Weyam and I became friends and worked together on a workshop for the East Bay Meditation Center about conflict, and we've continued having conversations about sex, love, romance, friendship, movement organizing, and conflict that have really influenced me and influenced this book that I wrote. So Weyam is also a standup comedian, which I just think is [00:02:00] like the single bravest thing a human being can do, maybe, and a facilitator for groups, and a one-on-one coach.

Weyam, is there anything you wanna add about what you're about or what kinds of stuff you're up to that informs the kind of conversation that we're having today?

Weyam: Just that I am Arab, I'm Syrian. And what politicized me, even before I was born is the struggle for Palestinian freedom and also the struggle for Syrian freedom against dictatorship. And as a kid of folks who were exiled from Syria for dissent, that is the, the part of, a big part of the motivation for why I've committed my life and work to helping people to navigate the solvable conflicts before it gets really extractive and 'power-over' and all of that. So, yeah.

Dean: I love you saying that because I think a lot of the kind of things that we could identify as solvable conflicts many people feel are incredibly unsolvable right now. And it's really pragmatic and useful to be like, oh, actually [00:03:00] conflict in our organizing group or conflict with our lovers and friends may be more solvable than some of the broader conflicts that we are called to take part in addressing in the world. So thank you, for I think that 'right sizes' some of our very difficult and important, more intimate conflicts and helps us maybe feel energized to confront them in a loving and rigorous way.

To start out our conversation, I was thinking about, you know, you just looked at the final version of the book, having looked at some drafts before, and I was wondering if you wanna start by just sharing, like is there something that stood out to you that's potentially useful or something you might share with others this time around as a reader?

Weyam: Where to begin. It is truly like the best relationship support – I don't know if you're identifying it as a self-help book or not – book that you could ever read. I just was like, does any other book need to be written now? No, Dean did it all. I think it's so great because it's so comprehensive and nuanced and it's [00:04:00] like political, but also combines all of the best parts of other sort of like relationship navigation frameworks while pointing out the ways that they can be complicit in dominant culture and, and then weaving in things like just, it's so compassionate.

You have so many of these pendulum diagrams that kind of invite the reader to go beyond binaries. And also it's like compassionate but also like has a lot of rigor. And it's really inviting people to take accountability for what they do have autonomy and agency over in terms of their relationships.

It's so clear-eyed and sober or something in terms of how it allows us to understand the tangle, the web of like what is love, what is romance, and how is it imbricated and interwoven with dominant culture systems? And how is that not in alignment with our principles, and what are the common pitfalls that we get trapped in when we're pursuing love, whether that's obsession or blaming or making someone else responsible [00:05:00] for our own needs or projection or overly escalating a relationship.

And so if I had to boil it all down the, like one of the key pieces that I've found useful is just like the framing that I'm gonna quote you, that "I believe we can and must bring our most radical, visionary ideas of liberation into our practices of sex, love, and romance, and to all the relationships in our lives."

And why is it that we lose our principles in relationships? And how do we not? So I feel like it's helpful to read this book to just remember that you have choice and agency. And even though we collectively are withheld from having our needs met by these extractive, racist capitalist structures, we may not have what we need yet, but we can get it collectively, and along the way make choices to honor the ways we really envision [00:06:00] being in right relationship with each other and our bodies and earth. And I wanna quote one more quote that was like one of my favorites is "if we break the illusion of separateness, we can see that we already exist in a web of mutual care necessary for us to survive. We get everything we need from each other and the planet. It's just that this web is mediated by violence and coercion so that a few people can profit. Our job is to resist and destroy the systems that turn our lives into fuel for exploiting, planet-destroying industries. We must both invent new, and restore old ways of living with each other, ways that nurture life, connection, belonging, and liberation." Oh, it's so beautiful.

But specifically one of the like specific tools that I used, like this week in the book, there's so many just like great little, what are you calling them? Are they like tools or like...?

Dean: Exercises, practices.

Weyam: Exercises, practices.

...was this one called de-escalating a crush or obsession... 'Seven [00:07:00] Steps for De-escalating a Crush Or Obsession'. I feel like it encapsulates what you do in this book. So it begins with awareness. Like, why is it that I'm in a, in a situationship that potentially isn't aligned with my values? And you do a kind of like sober inventory of that, right?

What are some of the practices that I'm doing here and what's the ideal, what's the vision that I have for my life beyond this? Then you have folks basically identify the hotspots, which are like the particular situations that like happen right before the escalation that you're trying to move away from.

And then I love the piece that was like using summary sentences to kind of like be these grounding reminders of why this isn't what I want and what I do want. So like one of the ones that I loved was something like "the strong feelings I am having will pass. I don't

have to act on them. I can make choices to [00:08:00] fuel them or dampen them. I have a choice here."

I just want a tattoo like "I have a choice here" on my forearm.

Dean: In romance people don't feel like we do. Like it can be like, "I've been struck by Cupid's arrow", or "there's no one like this person in the world", or "I can't help it, I've been overcome". And I think a lot of the like strange things we end up doing to people in our communities are like justified by that.

Like, I have to mildly harass you or, I have to ditch all my friends and the work that we were doing or I, you know, "because love". And so I do think when we feel overcome like that, like finding any grounding and choice can be really difficult. Or I have to like go after and try to destroy the reputation of somebody who rejected me or you know, just these kind of like, yeah.

Anyway. Go on.

Weyam: No. Yeah, just how compelled we are by these intense sensations. And I just appreciated all of the ways throughout the book in which you clarified like, yeah, this is why that happens. There's the attachment theory aspect of it. There's the, you know, [00:09:00] unmet childhood needs aspect of it. There's the projections. Then there's the bigger picture of what we're sold by this racial capitalist system and what it tells us about how we get our needs met. Yeah, it's, oh, it's so good.

Dean: It means a lot to me that you like it, because I think you're so brilliant about these questions.

Weyam: Aw, yeah. It's the, it's truly like the last relationship self-help book that we need.

Dean: When you read an earlier draft, you challenged me because the book is really critical in some ways about love and romance. You know, I introduced the idea of the romance myth a bunch of times and say that we're kind of told, like you're saying, that we're supposed to get all our emotional needs met here and that this is where we can be happy and well and that this is what's fun and good.

And so people put all their eggs in that basket. And they often like under-resource other parts of their lives, or move far away because the lover is gonna be over there, or whatever, isolate themselves in like really intense relationships. Go to love island together, whatever. So the book is like doing a lot of cautioning us about this way that we kind of like misperceive reality about ourselves and [00:10:00] others, kind of under the influence of sex and romance sometimes, and how to like stay related to our values even when those

sensations come on.

And you encouraged me to include more about "the transformative power of love" (that was your phrase), which I did in two sections of the book because I was convinced by you. And I was wondering if you could talk a little bit more about how you relate to this tension between recognizing the transformative power of love and the dangers of love's intoxication, and how love can also make us like reactive and unkind and regressed and bananas towards each other.

Weyam: I think part of it came out of this sense of, wait a minute, love isn't all just like, you know, Valentine's Day corporations. You know, like the romance myth: absolutely – like I a hundred percent agree with you – is a total, you know, it's snake oil. It's just unhelpful. It gets us to like overly invest in this idea that like our sexual partner is responsible for all of our needs to the detriment of all of our other commitments. And it's just not helpful or it's so damaging. [00:11:00]

And you know, as an Arab and Muslim person, my ancestral lineage is one that is like full of all of these examples of different people and poets, and philosophers and mystics who, who see human love, sexual love, friendship love, et cetera, as a portal to divine love.

Like I think about the first century Muslim philosopher, Avicenna (Ibn Sina) who's Persian, and he says, "love created the universe". You know, it is that sort of prime mover. The first cause of why, why we exist. And there's ancient Egyptian love poems from like 1200 to 1500 BC full of flirtation and love sickness and all of these other things.

Or like, um, eighth century Arabic Udhri Bedouin poetry about how people will stay in love with this unattainable object of [00:12:00] love. And it doesn't matter if they're physically not present, they're just gonna continue loving them past the boundaries of death. And the lineage of like Rumi, and Shams-e the poet, Rumi and his like very gay love affair with his spiritual bestie, Shams-e. They'd locked each other in a room for 40 days and didn't come out. And that was this like ground of like so much poetry that was so transformative for so many people. In Muslim Hadith, there's a Hadith that counts having sex with your partner as a form of worship. So anyway, it's like there are other paradigms in which, I don't know if, if it's also a little "delulu". It's probably also not great, but it's like, it's not necessarily the same paradigm as this one that we experienced in sort of Eurocentric hegemony. So there's that piece that I just wanted to speak to. And then there is, for me, there's like romance, right, which can be in service to power systems and structures.

And it's about like how we relate [00:13:00] to love and the discourse around love. And then there's like the love, the quality itself, which I think transcends that. In my own sort of spiritual belief and

practice, I believe that there is divine qualities of love that can meet like every form of human need and bereftness or lack of love that we experience.

And sometimes we like inappropriately expect that from partners. But actually the despair in that gap of having our needs met by partners, friends, et cetera, other people we love, is often like for me, the portal to open to a particular flavor of love from the universe, from the divine, from the earth, that can offer me what I need.

But of course, we limit ourselves so much by turning to just that one form of very narrow human love in the form of like sexual and romantic love.

Dean: When you're talking about this kind of tradition, set of traditions, of seeing love as like this source of creativity and [00:14:00] creation and this kind of spiritual source, it makes me feel how a lot of the like capitalist, racist, romance myth, sexist romance myth is really like domesticating. It's keeping everyone in their places, get everybody to desire a certain kind of wedding and a certain kind of house and a certain kind of body. A certain kind of family structure that's tied to a certain kind of waged labor system and system of extraction.

And the kind of love you're describing to me is quite wild and feral and unpredictable. And so much of the romance myth and the marriage system is about trying to like put people in their places and keep them there. And then also trying to train us to want those things. But of course we want many other things and that gets us into all kinds of trouble because you know, people are sexually wild and are romantically wild and are wild in terms of all kinds of desire around connection with others and autonomy from others. And so it's just interesting to me to think about the kind of forced, assimilating, civilizing, controlling, (whatever those kinds of processes are) that put us into the romance myth as we experienced it through like, you know, Disney and, and such sources. [00:15:00]

Weyam: Totally. Yeah, that's, that's totally it. And even these examples of like deep transcendent passionate love in other historical paradigms, I'm sure they were, in some ways people probably used them in connection to different kinds of power systems, whether tribal or patriarchal or other, you know, whatever existed at the time, even if it was pre-capitalist.

I love this distinction between love that is about like feral erotic power and maybe just sort of like autonomy and self-expression versus control, coercion, domination.

Dean: Yeah, and the romance myth is also about isolating us all into little individualized family groups that will compete with one another

as opposed to having like collective action against harmful systems.

It's interesting too, when you talk about the transformative power of love, I think one of the things I feel (I wrote about this a bit in the book) is like, I have felt it and seen it, right. I have seen people, you know, it is magic. Like you can become really alive by like having a serious crush or falling in love with [00:16:00] someone or having really amazing sex and become like open to their political ideas, and like trying things you never tried before, and get out of various stuck places in yourself. Or like, work through really intense shame. And the other side of that is I have seen people fall into really compelling love affairs and become totally isolated from their friends or have terrible new politics or have their lover convince them that they need to become really straight and narrow. Or like, I've seen it go both ways.

Like it is a, I think in the book I talk about it as my sister once told me that caramel is like the most dangerous substance in the kitchen. It's so hot and it's liquid, and people like burn themselves terribly. And it's like, caramel is also like delicious and sweet and amazing, kinda makes anything you put with it better. And it, it feels like that. It's like, you know, I feel like falling in love is something I want people to get to do, or falling into crush, or being really extremely hot for somebody or whatever. Including falling in love with groups, falling in love with friends, whatever.

But I also want people to get a chance to be like, oh, this is like taking a really serious psychedelic. I should maybe make a plan and connect with my friends about how I can be safe during this, and keep a little like list in my pocket of things to [00:17:00] remember or whatever.

And there's not a lot of guidance about that, I think, in our society. There's kind of a, just like "find your one", go for it hardcore and then be terribly disappointed when they don't meet your every need, just as you imagined from TV.

Weyam: Yes, and I really appreciated that you had that example of like using a psychedelic, I feel like is so apt. And I appreciated that you had that section in your book about charged states. And I can't remember exactly what you called it, but the sort of 'high-affect' intense states. And like the questions that, like in, for example, that exercise about de-escalating a crush. Just like going into these situations with some amount of, I don't just lose myself and my principles. I'm still a responsible, accountable person to this broader web. And I think that connects to a shared practice that we have around mindfulness where it's like, just because there's intense craving or sensation doesn't mean there's not also like a ground of being [00:18:00] or awareness that can hold that, and create space for practice instead of compulsion.

Dean: One of the most powerful things you said to me early on in our friendship that I remember was we were talking about the really strong states that can happen in love affairs. And the feeling, you know, kind of losing your mind and feeling like desperate or jealous, or you must have this response from somebody or this thing is so painful. And you described being like tied to the ship's mast while the sirens are calling. And like that idea of being held in practice, like deciding to hear that and still stay with what you know to be true, or something you believe in. Or what you want from your life, even though the sirens are calling you to like call that person again, or to have that tantrum on somebody else or speak badly of that person or whatever the kind of compelling thing is. And I, I wanna kind of talk about that a bit.

We've talked a lot together about how people go off the rails when it comes to sex, love, and romance, including you and I. We've talked about attachment theory as one of the ways that we have both kind of [00:19:00] studied that. And I'm curious if you could just describe a bit about why you find the framing of attachment theory useful or how it has supported your growth and self understanding. And maybe including sharing for people who haven't read that much about attachment theory.

Weyam: Yeah, attachment theory I found so helpful because I, as you say, we all experience different aspects of avoidant attachment, anxious attachment. You're not like any one of these fixed sort of, it's not like a typing system. But what I find useful about it is, particularly in my experiences of anxious attachment in relationships, when I am in like an anxious attachment state of like hyper arousal, like it feels like I'm being like stabbed in the heart repeatedly or like I wanna throw up and there's like a death metal band playing on my stomach lining, telling me I'm gonna die if this person doesn't text me back in the next five minutes. And it's like my brain is convinced that the frequency of their [00:20:00] texts has to do something with my survival. In a lot of relationship contexts in the past where this has come up for me, both polyamorous and monogamous, there can be an experience of sort of like, something's wrong with me. Like, I, uh, need to fix this. I'm the problem. And it would spark a lot of shame and aversive, like aversively fueled self-work that's just like, how do I get better? How do I accommodate the other person, be less needy, dah dah dah. I can fix myself. Wait, don't leave me. You know?

And I felt like attachment theory helped to describe that that sensitivity isn't like a character defect. It's just a sensitive attachment system. And I remember in, I think Jessica Fern in Polysecure talks about how it's, sometimes it's not, jealousy isn't the right word.

It's actually like a primal panic that your system is experiencing and it's okay, it's neutral. And attachment theory invites a sort of (you [00:21:00] summarized this in your book) a kind of step away from the hyper individualist bootstrap approach, and there's just no...we need each other to co-regulate. It's okay.

You don't have to, you're not the only one responsible to soothe yourself. You're responsible for your own emotions, but you don't have to do that alone. You can ask for support and there's nothing wrong with you for feeling this way, essentially. It's like hardwired into us for our survival, you know? And as someone that veered towards the more (and you talk about this in your book) the side of the pendulum, that's like, "I can change everything about myself in 30 days", uh, it actually was really helpful to just lean into a little bit more acceptance and gentleness and say, no, it's okay. Like this particular system's gonna have this particular reaction to this set of conditions. And I'm still responsible for naming what those needs are, but there's nothing wrong with me.

It also helped to [00:22:00] depersonalize it when like I'm in the anxious role and someone's in the more avoidant role and they use distancing strategies to get their needs met. That used to like really trigger me, but just the framework of attachment theory helps me be like, oh yeah, yeah. I ran into this ex at a party and they were really aloof and brusque with me and it really hurt, but I know that that was an avoidant attachment deactivation response.

And it's like, you know, that's how they're wired to respond when they feel relational distress. And it's really old and I'm not gonna like be mad or punishing about that here. Just 'cause it's like they're doing their best, I'm doing my best. And it allows for some sort of like acceptance and ease and spaciousness around that.

Dean: Yeah. I think that, I mean, one of the things I hope people get out of this book is that it's really normal to go into strong states as a result of sex, love, romance, friendship stuff. It's not, you're not the worst if you do it. Actually [00:23:00] it's happening to a lot of people all the time, and the worst thing we can do is when it's happening to someone else, like judge them really strongly and isolate them or talk negatively about them to others. And then when it's happening to us, be in a shame spiral.

Or we could be like, wow, these are really common states. When people are in them kind of learning to be like, oh my god, right now I'm overcome with a fear of abandonment, or I'm overcome with a fear of engulfment, or I am overcome with the need to get away, or the need to get a response. And that like when I know that's happening, I can then be like, oh, that's happening.

And then potentially be like, what support do I need so that I don't

do like the strangest behavior about it or the harshest or cruelest behavior about it. That could include telling the person who's I'm having this projection on that it's happening, or could just include reaching to others to try to get some of those needs met.

Or using visualizations or spiritual support or like whatever works for whoever to get through a hard moment. But like I do think emotionally knowing one is in a hard moment is so big, 'cause a lot of times people are just like, "you are doing this to me" or whatever, "you're crowding [00:24:00] me" or "you are leaving me", or, or whatever.

And so I think so much of the book ultimately is just about basic emotional awareness of when we're in these states and ideally non-judgment about it. And when the other person is in a state like, oh, this person is in a state right now where they feel like if I take any space or step away, they're gonna die.

And they know that's not true, and I know it's not true, but maybe I could choose to support them and not take that personally. You know, this person right now feels really jealous about my new lover. And I know we're both committed to having this open relationship and our autonomy, but they're really feeling this jealousy.

So instead of getting really defensive, I could just be like, I'm here to just hold you while you feel that. And I'm really sorry you're feeling that, that that sounds really painful. 'Cause I know it's not about me. It's their thing that they're having and they know it's not about me. You know, stop, like throwing all of it at each other.

And also, I think what I see a lot is...part of, you know, a big motivation for writing the book is that in our social movement context people have a lot of big conflict about sex, love, and romance that destroys projects and organizations and relationships that we need for basic [00:25:00] survival work. And so part of my hope is that also when I see this happening amongst people who are in my community that I care about, I can be more compassionate.

Instead of being like that person's outta their mind and they're so terrible, I could be like, oh wow. They're in that kind of primal panic response that you just described. I get it. That's really typical. What might they need? And just like throwing any compassion towards people instead of just judgment and rejection and not trying to frame a narrative about who's good and bad.

One of my biggest fears is that people will weaponize what's in this book. I'm like, just use this book to think about yourself. Don't use it too much to think about others. 'Cause we, you know, that's one of the things that I think happens a lot with, actually with the attachment theory stuff. First, the thing you described where people

get too attached to like, I'm a type, I'm anxious, or I'm avoidant.

That can make you miss the other areas in your life where you're acting out the other part, which we all have some, and it can also make it so that now that I found out I'm anxious, you have to do whatever my anxious attachment needs. Or now that I found out I'm avoidant, you have to, you know, that's not, it's, these are things that are not for running other people. They're for, like trying not to have our strongest [00:26:00] responses be acted out in ways that are hurtful. Then also trying to have a lot of compassion for ourselves and others when we're in a strong feeling. And I think there's something about the current attachment theory, kind of quiz online approach that sometimes misses, I think, the highest and best use of this very true information about a certain kind of common pattern of feeling and acting.

Weyam: Yeah, that feels like it gets to the heart of it. And also just like a side note about this typing thing, or essentializing yourself as one or the other. I think that the way that you know, you name the fear of engulfment, and fear of abandonment, I think whoever is exhibiting whichever one of these behaviors and responses, whether it's avoidant or anxious, is just like whoever in this dynamic is responsible for protecting one of these needs over the other, for both of you in some ways.

I don't know if this makes sense. Feel free to cut this later, but like I've just found for myself often playing the role [00:27:00] of the anxious person, but actually I too fear engulfment. Like you fear both. And in some ways, like in the relational dynamic between the two, it's like each of you are choosing to be the guardian of one of these needs for both of you.

'Cause so when I'm in the anxious response, it's almost like I'm giving the need to protect engulfment to the other person. But I like, I also don't wanna be engulfed. And if, honestly, if they could meet me where like in all of the sort of like activated spaces of amplified needs that I'm expressing, I would probably actually become avoidant because like I would feel like too much intimacy or something.

Anyway, that was just the thought that I had. And then another sort of sideline attachment thought is that I find that when I dig under a lot of the attachment issues for myself, that [00:28:00] there's actually like an insecure attachment with the earth that's happening. And like an insecure attachment, particularly to my ancestral lands that's like activated. And I'm curious if that might be the case for other folks, many of us who are dispossessed from ancestral lands by force or against our wills or like the primal panic isn't just about like your inner toddler, but also like traumatically losing your homeland. You know what I mean? And then this year of the genocide and Palestine, I'm just like really feeling that amid, amongst my Palestinian and

Arab kin of just like, that severing is so violent that in some ways we can displace our need for secure attachment to the earth and to the land onto other relationships even more so. Like you're now not only mommy and daddy, but also my homeland. You are my home. And it's because our homes were violently taken away.

Dean: I have thought a lot about whether the kinds of [00:29:00] attachment wounding that are so common in racial capitalism and colonialism, what would this be like if we had more intact lives. Like if we weren't, you know, so many of us had, you know, our forced migrations in our own lifetimes or our immediate ancestors.

Forced into smaller family units, not living close to the land, not living in larger groups that many people have lived in for most of human history. What would security itself feel like if you lived close to the bones of all of your ancestors going way, way back. Or if you, you know, if your food ways were not tied to wage exploitation, if you, if you're part of a culture that had a way of holding like death and loss and that it wasn't like genocidal death and loss, it was other kinds of like more, you know, earth-based death and loss coming from aging, disease, cycles of agriculture, et cetera.

I guess I've just, I often wonder like whether we're all just so, like, we're just these raw nerves walking around who've lost context. And are supposed to get all of our context from consuming. And then also from consuming the romance myth and finding [00:30:00] that one amazing person who's gonna answer all of our needs.

And then being not very surprised when, of course nobody can do that. Nobody can like fill the, you know, yawning wound. The layers and layers of wounding that are in the parenting we got most immediately. But also for some people, generations of those, wherever those gaps happened and those losses and those really traumatic dispossessions.

I'm curious about what that other security would be like and I also, relatedly am like, how can we find deeper connection and security in our movements? Like I have had experiences of collective action and of being in groups with other people who believe in what I believe in, even if they're not like me in so many ways.

I have felt like these people truly have my back. I've even had it happen with strangers on the street during moments of, more insurrectionary moments. You know, like can we notice when we're able to actually feel like people have us and aren't like competitive or aren't like, you know, but actually are like out for us and with us.

And that can maybe gives us a taste of what it would be like. Then if I have sex with some of them, or have romance with some of them, it's not like everything's riding on that one [00:31:00] person, but instead we're in a context of love and care. And I think, you know,

for many of us deep friend circles, especially politicized friend circles, can be a place to get that greater security.

Weyam: That's so beautiful and just makes me think about like how we can really try to orient towards those moments of being met by the collective. Like I do feel like it's so easy to just focus on all the ways that our organizing homes have failed us or hurt us or haven't been places of security or support for us. But actually in so many ways they have.

And allowing ourselves to really like feel that when you're like in a real physical way, like when you're out on the streets or when you're in a meeting or whatever it is to really take that in feels like a really resourcing, resourcing thing. 'Cause I do believe, and I don't always have faith in this, but I really do believe, like you say in your book, there is enough to meet our needs collectively.

It's just these fucked up systems that make it seem like there's not, and keep us from each other.

Dean: Have produced scarcity and [00:32:00] isolation. I mean, I think one of the drives for me also of writing this book is that people are just more isolated than they've ever been. Like even before COVID increased isolation, people are just isolated.

People live further from their jobs. They work more hours, their rents are higher. They have to, you know, people end up having less time and space for various kinds of collectivity, for creativity, for play. It's just like, there's so much research about this, right? And most people in the U.S. apparently don't feel like they have a single confidant to share good or bad news with.

I have seen that in like my students, people I organize with who are just like, I don't really have any close friends or I don't have anyone I really can trust about my really hard thing I'm going through. Or I don't have anyone who I'm sure would visit me if I was in the hospital or things like that.

Really so scary. Right? And when we get in bad relationships, if we're that isolated, those relationships are so much more likely to be dangerous. And if we get into any relationships, it's more likely to be bad if we're isolated. And you know, so there's this kind of like, I have a lot of fear about what that's doing to us.

And I'm curious about, you know, I really wanna encourage people to meet people in the movement. I wanna encourage people to be like, you know what, there's a whole bunch of people who are waiting for you, who need you, who want you, with whom you can share [00:33:00] your special talents and wisdom and humor. And you gotta go join the movement in any way you can to meet them and date them and be friends

with them and cook for them and have them visit you in the hospital and have 'em help you with all the things that you're struggling with.

Like that's, I think it's a better, and it's not like a guaranteed safety net, obviously. We all know that all relationships have conflict in them and that we're all like kind of bad at relationships these days 'cause of things we're talking about. But like, it's better than anything else I've found for finding what I needed.

And I'm all, I'm like, if you just wanna join the movement in hopes that you'll meet cute people, go for it. Like whatever, whatever. It's while you're there, could you please like write to people in prison and like, you know, babysit people, you know, block traffic and whatever, you know, sabotage pipelines or whatever else.

Weyam: It's so funny that you, like we're saying all this, and also in my heart of hearts, there's still some like teenage part of me that's like "but maybe my non-binary Matthew McConaughey will come in on a white horse and sweep me off my feet, and I'll never have to do any of that hard work of [00:34:00] having like multiple sources for my needs to be met, and it'll just be easy." Like it's actually in insane how insidious and like deeply rooted that myth is, you know? And I also wanted to ask you, so like in response to "how do we get these needs met by the collective?" Like for me, honestly, my art practice, like standup comedy, it's like my way of diversifying my like girlfriend source.

It's like I'm on stage, I'm like, the audience is my harem. I don't -- that's the wrong word, but it's like they're, you know, they're like, I'm a hub on a wheel of people who I'm getting this feedback from and this lovely attention and laughter, and we're in this mutual relationship where there can be an exchange of like ideas and joy. And also it's relatively emotionally not complex, which is awesome. It's very casual. So I'm curious for you, like what is your version of that or what are examples of that?

Dean: Yeah, that's interesting. [00:35:00] I, friendship has been the center of my life and I've always had, whoever I date has had to be really accepting of that because so much of like, you know, a lot of what I need is like a lot of intellectual and political being met. And so I have these, like all these best friends. And I'm also constantly meeting new people, like you're relatively new in my life, who I go really deep with right away, who it's like I really wanna know deeply. Like I need a lot of autonomy to do that. To just get fed and be thinking with a lot of different people and be like, oh my god, this person's reading this stuff.

And so, I think in some ways that's helped me keep my relationships really spacious, my sex and love relationships really spacious, 'cause I just, I have to be able to do that. And that has to include like,

you and I have gotta go to away together for the weekend and read this thing and write this thing together.

A lot of people I've become close to, I make stuff with, you know, and we just, that is such a source of life in me. And I think another part of that is taking risks with people in the context of organizing. Like either taking risks about what we're saying or doing physically risky things together to resist.

That is so deeply bonding and makes me [00:36:00] feel like I can really count on people. And when I see people being trustworthy, when it comes to risky stuff, like standing up against something together or something physically risky, like whatever it is that depending on the context, that really renews my faith, and also makes me feel, yeah, just that feeling of like someone having my back. I mean, my own family history is like a lot of neglect and early life loss and being in foster care and stuff. And so I think it's like, is anyone really here for me? Is anyone really looking out for me? And that feeling has really come through my like politicized friendships and organizing with people. And I always think about this, some of whom I like, I wouldn't have liked if we just met, like we had nothing in common. You know what I mean? Like we wouldn't like the same music.

Weyam: You wouldn't have matched on an app.

Dean: No. Their personality would've actually rubbed me the wrong way.

I've had some jokes with some friends who like, talk so slowly. And I talk so fast. To be friends with someone who talks this slowly, and then I'm like, but I really need to hear what they're saying. I'm in love with what they're saying. And one of the things I worry about with like internet culture is people, you know, just really being boxed in [00:37:00] small to a very limited aesthetic.

You have to like all the things I like and look like me. And it just gets really narrow as opposed to like when you do in-person organizing and certain kinds of online organizing, you just meet all kinds of people because like they care about this thing and you do too. And so now you're just gonna give them a try.

That's been really good for me. That helps me reduce my own self-judgment and shame and other things that, if I'm in too small a box about what's like the right way to be or look, would be more present. You know, like just being friends with people who are just like, don't care at all about something that I've believed was super important that's like some aesthetic thing. Or something that's actually just coming from like capitalist self hatred. Ahh, what a relief. You know? I think that's helped me expand my world where I could be like rigid.

I wanted to ask you a little bit more, so we talked about, you talked

about this a little bit. I wanna talk about it a little bit more because I think it's juicy, about this part of the book where I asked the question, can people really change?

And in that part of the book, I talk about the tension between 'get well quick' promises of a lot of like wellness and health books and products that can feel really unrealistic and profit-oriented. And simultaneously the messages we [00:38:00] often have gotten, many of us get these messages like from medical discourses and other places, that we're like wired this way. We're unchangeable, we're broken by trauma like however you are right now is your personality. Like, I'm just a jealous person, or I'm just a petty person, or whatever. And so in the book, I'm trying to encourage people to hold some nuance. Like on the one hand to realize that doing work to notice our patterns of thinking and feeling and behavior can be liberating, and like you can experience that you do have more choices than you thought. And that actually like some of our worst thoughts might be programmed by dominant systems. They're not coming from us and we don't need to like hold them as ours.

At the same time changing stuff that we've been practicing feeling and doing our entire lives, especially things that have been coping mechanisms that we adapted to deal with, like really hard stuff that happened, or that our parents did, and then we copied them, it's not fast or easy. And we may realize that we have the same pattern over and over again. We get into the same crappy relationship with a lover, the same fights with friends or the same, have the same cycle of like, you know, burning down organizations or whatever. And we might feel like, oh my god, I can't change, I'm stuck. I [00:39:00] have the insight about the pattern, but nothing's changing.

Or we may like, feel like we've gotten through some old pattern and then it creeps up years later. We find ourselves back in the midst of it and it's so, you know, distressing. So I'm curious to hear your perspective about this question of like, how much can people really change?

Like what have you seen and experienced about that?

Weyam: It's so good. It's so juicy. I love this part of your book so much, and you do such a good job articulating the nuances here. Just that pendulum that you described between 'your problems are hardwired, you can't change', and then to the other extreme, 'you can change everything about yourself in 30 days'.

I do think. Okay. Maybe I can talk in terms of two examples. There's something to be said for me as someone that veered towards more of the 'you can change everything about yourself in 30 days' to my intervention being a lot more acceptance and gentleness. Like especially 'cause I'm prone to perfectionism and shame stuff.

So, there's something to be said on a spiritual level for just like complete acceptance of the whole picture, no matter how flawed it is. [00:40:00] That's a great place, honestly, from which to begin practice. Because if you're starting from a like, oh, I suck, I gotta change because I'm bad and no one's gonna love me, like it's not very sustainable to practice from that space. You can, but you create a lot of suffering along the way and it's slow. So for instance, I was trying to think about, there was like one particular relationship I was in where I just found myself, I kept dishonoring my own agreements with myself to pursue this person, and it was one of those more obsessive types of addictive relationships you described in the book.

And I continuously abandoned my own needs and didn't like how I was as a result, also not showing up for the other people that were a priority in my life. And I would just wake up like somatically feeling like I was trampled by wildebeests. And, you know, just like, so, like my body was like, this is not good for you.

And I went into a 30 day or a four week silent [00:41:00] meditation retreat when I was trying to decide whether or not to stay with this person. And so first I was like, lemme see if I can really expand my capacity to be with suffering in order to like make this work, and attend to my attachment system and all of the, like the inner infant that needs to be swaddled.

And I just sat, I had like the support and luxury to just be able to sit with that part of me and give it like honor and witness for days and days, and receive all of this grace from the earth and the divine, whatever. And then I left the retreat and I tried to like make things work with this person and it was like I would just get shredded again, and once again, lose sight of my commitments to myself and to other people.

And it was just like, okay. This is something I can't change. This is outside of my window of tolerance. I yield. This is that piece of like chocolate cake on the counter, that I can't just pass it without putting the whole thing in my mouth, in the fistfuls and then like losing track of time and space and everything else. And that I just need to like, [00:42:00] put that in a, in a little Tupperware and put it in the fridge. Or whatever it is that's gonna create more choice for me around it.

On the more like rigorous, like I can actually change this aspect of me, like recently I got feedback from a creative collaborative partner about how I behaved during a particularly stressful deadline where I snapped at her. And I was like, came in and was like, joked "let's get to work" even though she was like going through a health thing. I was acting under stress unconsciously in this kind of extractive way that's not in alignment with my own principles. And she gave me

feedback, which I'm really grateful for. Did I immediately have a defensive response? Yes. Was I ashamed about that and about how I harmed her? Yes.

But I do, I have to remember both this quote from your book and what my mantra is around conflict and feedback, which is like my colleague Jovida Ross often says, "this feedback is a gift. I will receive feedback as a gift, and conflict is [00:43:00] okay." This person is offering me this gift of holding up a mirror to a place where I've been out of alignment that's like kind of gross and yucky.

And even though I don't wanna see it and I don't want, I feel like there's nothing I could have done differently then, like I will receive it. And I, I recommit to trying to do it differently next time. And so I put into place some things for myself, like, oh, I'm gonna work on my like how I show up under stress in a deadline situation.

I'm gonna take an extra moment, like an extra breath when I'm working under pressure before I respond to someone. And I feel like there was, there I could access some practice even though I felt similarly hijacked in that situation.

Dean: Yeah, I appreciate you bringing up feedback. Probably one of the most common workshops I give to like mutual aid groups and chapters of different orgs that are doing really amazing Palestine solidarity work or whatever, is a workshop on feedback. Because I feel like, you know, just gotta be real, like we live in a prison based society in which the feeling is that if I mess [00:44:00] up, I'll be thrown away. And that we live in a society where tons of people are thrown away permanently in lots of different ways, you know, like left to die on the street, uh, put in cages, you know.

And also, I think we live in a more bridge burning society. I think more people like disown their families in a society like ours than in other places. Like when I go anywhere else and talk to people they are like, oh yeah, my mom's like wildly homophobic and transphobic, and we talk on the phone every day and she makes me alive. I really see that we live in like a, an isolating individual society. So the result is that most of us have not had any good experiences receiving critical feedback. We just receive it only top down, like it's from the parents or the principal or the teacher or the boss, where there's not actually a mutual feedback system. And so what we know how to do is try to keep our heads down and avoid getting feedback or be defensive. Or we have to just like completely collapse and do whatever they said because they're the boss or whatever.

And then we're afraid to give people feedback, 'cause we're also like, oh my god, I don't want them to be upset. I don't want them to think they're in trouble. I don't wanna start a fight. Like we're so afraid

of conflict. And the result is like, people just don't give the feedback until it's built up so high, you know, you don't do the dishes. You know, you leave your dishes in the kitchen for six months and then I'm like, ah, I can't live [00:45:00] with you anymore. Instead of just being like, oh, hey, this is how I like the house. What do you think? And like actually having a lighter chat along the way. And I think that's huge, like learning how to be willing to get feedback from others to wanna hear what others think instead of dreading it.

And I had this really interesting experience where for many years I facilitated an evaluation process inside a collective where once a month a person would get evaluated by everybody and they would turn in these little forms with feedback about the person, and then I would read them all and I'd co-facilitate a little meeting with that person.

And it was kind of an ideal situation where the person knows the meeting's coming, they know they're gonna get feedback. So they're not like, you know, I think it can be hard for people to be taken by surprise with feedback, since we're all pretty unexperienced at it. And then we would really do what people call a shit sandwich, which everyone says they don't want, but actually people love, which is first I would read, but like word for word, all the like amazing things people had said about them.

So then you're like, oh, these people really do love and care about me. And then I'd be like, it turns out there's two big themes: people wish you would listen better, and people wish you would be more timely, or say if you can't do these tasks. And then do more of the amazing celebration of the [00:46:00] great things they did.

And like I saw in that process, because I did it year after year and some people were part of the org year after year after year, I actually saw people change. Like it was so cool, because like, so I saw people be like, get better at things that they had not been that great at. And that was really satisfying because I think there is a pretty negative anti-change attitude in our society that backs up the promise of change in 30 days.

In the book, I tried to talk a little bit about what it's like to have a realistic idea about change. Like how can I notice that this time when the jealousy came, it didn't last quite as long, or I didn't feel quite as off base. Or I remembered to use one of my tools and call my friend, or I remembered to say this little phrase I like to say when I remember about stuff. Like I remembered to use something that I had decided works, or just noticing like more subtle kinds of change with hard feelings or strong states. Or like, oh yeah, I did end up staying out later than I said I would, or consuming substances I thought I wouldn't do anymore, or whatever, whatever the thing is that people are like trying to shift in themselves. And, but it wasn't [00:47:00]

as much, or it wasn't as long, or just like letting change be gradual. And also like that image of a spiral staircase, you know? "Yeah, I might actually run into that wound again." Actually, I'm going to, it's my wound. I'm probably gonna run into it again. If it's bothering me now, it's probably gonna bother me again. And maybe it'll be a little different then, or I'll learn something different from it. You know, like just how can we not be so upset with ourselves.

And you know, you mentioned like being under pressure and then snapping at your friend. Yeah, under pressure is when I'm gonna act out the old things I learned about how to deal with being under pressure. And those might be extreme individualism or anger or disappearing or not communicating my needs or becoming a doormat or whatever the things are that I learned to survive whenever things were hard in some earlier stage of my life. Or that I saw my parents or caregivers do as the way that they took care of hard moments. I'm like, yeah, under pressure you might see that conditioning again. And like just being more caring about that. And then also like I think if we're a little bit more compassionate with ourselves, where we're more likely to be able to authentically apologize for any impact.

And that makes such a difference to people if you're like, I [00:48:00] think I just was a little short with you, or, I'm sorry, I just rushed the meeting, instead of when we're like it wasn't me, I didn't do it. You know? It's like the disconnection is so severe. But I mean, I feel that. I definitely get in periods where I'm like, wow, for 25 years I focused so intensely on trying to work through some of this emotional and behavioral stuff, and then here I just did it again.

And I can feel very --

Weyam: So humbling.

Dean: Yeah. A lot of times I'm just like, this is my life. The acceptance piece you're talking about, this is my life. It includes these wounds, it includes these instincts, it includes these learned behaviors from society or my family or whatever. And I accept. I want to be alive and this is the life I'm in, and there's just some kind of need to be gentle with that, I think.

Weyam: And sort of back full circle around the transformative power of love. It's like the people who receive our -- (I think you might say our 4:AM thoughts or something) people that receive our 4:AM version of ourselves, in its un-ideal form, and are willing to give [00:49:00] us feedback about that and without punishing, cutting us off, et cetera: that is love. And then they motivate us to wanna do it differently. That's incredible. That I think is like just one of the best qualities of love, is that we only transform, I think my colleague Anasa Troutman says something like, we only change when

there's love there. You know, it's a spoonful of honey to make the medicine go down.

Dean: Yeah, I've spent time in various 12 step programs and there's definitely a strong message to, you know, not expect someone to change, right? Like, I shouldn't, if I'm dating someone and they're an alcoholic, I shouldn't be like, "but if they would stop drinking, it would be so amazing", and stay for that reason.

I don't know when they're gonna get sober or they may not. It's certainly not going to be on my timeline. It's really important not to expect people to change. And at the same time, giving people feedback on how their behavior impacts you does sometimes make the difference. And I think I've often had the feeling like, ah, it's not worth me telling this friend, this roommate, this lover, whatever, how they impacted me. There's no point they won't change.

And it's actually, I don't know, [00:50:00] maybe I'm the 17th person who said that to them and they actually heard it. Or maybe I'm the first and it's gonna be a long journey of 40 years, and I'm just like, actually, I don't think I wanna live with you about it or whatever. And I have had, in long-term friendships and relationships of all kinds, I have seen it where someone's feedback really landed on me and it really was a motivator. Like, wow, I do not wanna make someone feel that way, and it's worth whatever it takes to address my suffering so I don't do that thing again. Or, and I've seen it the other way where it's like the person has really been like "wow. That sobered me up hearing what it did to you, Dean. I got outta my thing that was all about me and I'm like, I don't wanna be making Dean feel that way. I value this relationship. I'm gonna take this a little more seriously." Bring a little more rigor. You know, I think it's possible. And also we all have to be discerning about noticing if it's not working, and knowing when people are not receiving our feedback and when you know, we may need to not be in the same level of intimacy in order to be well.

I love your story about the fact that you saw that you couldn't not be trampled by wildebeests if you stayed in this relationship. Because I'm guessing the relationship was very compelling because when [00:51:00] I feel trampled by wildebeests, I often am like, I need this. I love this. You know? So I love that you were able to be like, I'm not able to not feel wrecked by this. I have to go, you know?

Weyam: And then I forget and then I repeat it, and then I forget and then I repeat it. It's an ongoing journey. Somewhere in the pendulum between I can change and I can't change, there I am.

Dean: Yeah, and also this is how you spent your time and that was okay. You spent your time figuring that out.

When we spoke most recently, you said that you'd love to give this book to a lot of people as a present. And then you said that you remembered that I had once talked about giving someone a self-help book as a present, and it not being well received. And the person being like, this is basically unsolicited advice or kind of offensive. And I'm curious, do you think we should give self-help books as presents? Have you ever received one as a gift?

Weyam: I, as a Gemini, love a self-help book. I love any kind of, oh, new tool, new framework, add it to my list. And of course, like from people who I am aligned with. If I'm gonna get like a book [00:52:00] from my grandma that's gonna be like, how to live your life in accordance with Islamic law according to these men, I don't want that book. But from values aligned people, I love a self-help book. I probably shouldn't be gifting people self-help books as much as I do, but I also just wanted to uplift like reasons, like situations that I think this book is great for. I think this book is great for if you're in a situation where you're feeling obsessive about someone and you don't feel like you're in alignment with your values. As I said earlier, use the de-escalating a crush or obsession tool.

If you're feeling like uh, despair or let down by like a relationship in your life, and like your needs can never be met, this is a great book for that. If you're feeling like you're in that sort of crash conflict phase after the honeymoon phase of a relationship and you don't know what's going on and you need some tools, some frameworks for that, this is an amazing book for that. If you're having trouble [00:53:00] setting boundaries or you compulsively overextend, this is a great book for supporting you with that. And just generally, like if you just want to feel like reflected in your experience as like a complex, nuanced person trying to be dismantling systems in this stage of collapse and the end of late stage capitalism: highly recommend. Will be gifting it to many people.

That's my plug. Do you, how do you feel about that question?

Dean: I think I would definitely give you a self-help book as a present, and know that you would even, even if it had like weird things in it, but had a few good things in it, you'd be able to read between the lines. 'Cause you're like me. Like just, you know, endlessly, I mean, I will read like terrible self-help books also to find like the nugget or whatever.

But I don't expect most people to do that, which is why I thought it was worth writing one more aimed at people with our politics. But I think like my hope is that people will read this book with their friends and lovers. Like it can be really hot to be in a new connection and be like, "Ooh, what are our shared values?" And let's like bounce our shared values [00:54:00] off of this. Let's read something together. And maybe that's just like, I'm a nerd. I like

love to read things with lovers, like so much. It's like extremely erotic for me. But like that kind of, "oh wow, what do we think about the relationship escalator? What do we think about what fighting should be like? What do we think about how people act when they break up? What values would we wanna have if we were to go through a breakup?" Whatever.

And I think reading with our friends and so that we can also like kind of hold each other to it. "Hey dear, you're like really trying to push that person up that relationship escalator, and they don't seem like they wanna go." Or like, "oh hey, you know, I think that you are a little bit going to 'love island' with this person and we miss you out here." Or "I hear that you're really mad at the person who broke up with you, but I don't wanna join a campaign to make everyone hate them, but I do wanna support you endlessly, and I do wish that you were not in this pain." Or you know, whatever. Just like, I hope that this book can be a tool for some of us to just get a little more specific clarity about how our politics can be applied to how we treat each other in this realm, where we've been told "that's just your personal problem. That's not political." That's, you know, feminized questions or whatever. So I'm hoping people will read it collectively and give it to each [00:55:00] other as gifts. And I also tried to make the book skimmable, like I'm hoping people will be like, yeah, I don't know. I didn't read all of it, but I went just to the shaded boxes and did the exercises with my friend. Or like, you know, kind of, I wanted to have a 'Cosmo quiz' kind of feeling.

Weyam: Highly skimmable. Definitely. I will definitely be giving this to future lovers and friends to do a little book club moment.

Dean: I can't imagine how much fun it'd be to be your lover and get to read this book with you. I love talking to you about these ideas so much.

Weyam: I just have to be careful about the weaponizing it part. For sure.

Dean: We all do. We all do. Yes. Please don't use these ideas... don't hurt each other, everybody.

Weyam, thank you so much for being in this conversation with me for years and then especially today. I really appreciate it.

Weyam: Aw, it's so good to be here. Thanks for having me.

Dean: Thank you so much to Weyam for being part of this episode. I just love talking to them about my own relationships and my own learnings and dilemmas. They have a way of using imagery [00:56:00] to talk about the suffering and the ups and downs of relationships that leaves these very clear impressions in my mind, and really helps me

think deeply about how our systems work and how we respond to each other. I just get so much out of their way of thinking.

Thank you for joining me for the latest episode of Love in a Fucked Up World. This podcast is based on my book of the same name, which is out now from Algonquin Press. I hope you'll pick it up from an independent bookstore, not Amazon or Audible.

Love in a Fucked Up World is hosted by me, Dean Spade. It is produced and edited by Hope Dector. Thank you to Ciro, Eugene, Derekh, Kelsey, Lindsay, Jessica, Raindrop, Nicole and everyone else who helped with the podcast. Our theme music is 'I've Been Wondering' by The Ballet. If you're enjoying the show and you wanna get involved in deeper conversation about these themes or helping shape future episodes, I hope you'll join us on Patreon.

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