

LOVE IN A F*CKED UP WORLD PODCAST
EP22 ELI CLARE

Dean: I'm Dean Spade. Welcome to Love in a F*cked Up World, where we talk about how to build and sustain strong connections with each other, because our resistance movements are made of our relationships and are only as strong as they are.

It's publication week for the second edition of Mutual Aid. It's been wonderful working with Verso Press on this project and getting to think about all that I've learned about mutual aid since 2020, and getting to write about that for a new edition. It's such a rare treat to get to add to a book that's only been out for six years, but as you know, they were six years where like, a lot of things happened.

If you wanna see some excerpts from the new material in the book and some videos about what I added, I've posted some of those things to our Patreon. It's patreon.com/deanspade. And you can also order the book directly from me there, and all proceeds will go to the expenses of the podcast.

Membership on our Patreon is free, so I hope you'll join the community there. It's a lot of really cute conversations happening and fun stuff. And I also wanna give a huge thanks to people who are paid Patreon members. Our podcast has been out for almost a year, and it is a huge effort and it's so fun and satisfying, and I've enjoyed it so much. And Patreon members make it possible. We have no ads and no other income to cover our expenses, so the Patreon really makes a big difference.

I'm really thrilled to share today's episode, a conversation with my beloved friend, Eli Clare.

Eli weaves hope, critical analysis, and compassionate storytelling in his work on disability and queer and trans resistance. His work centers a commitment to racial justice and care for the earth. He's one of the most deliberate writers and speakers I've ever encountered, and I'm always like, just totally changed by reading his work or hearing his talks.

He's the author of four books, Exile and Pride, The Marrow's Telling, Brilliant Imperfection, and Unfurl, and I really feverishly recommend that you go out and read them right now.

Eli: Hi, Dean.

Dean: I'm so excited to welcome Eli Clare.

Eli: It's been a long time.

Dean: It's been a long time, and when I was thinking about getting to have this conversation with you, I was just thinking about how long you have been influencing my thinking and organizing and teaching and writing. And I was thinking about how many classes of students I have taught your work to, law students who I'm trying to help think through like really intersectional methods of understanding disability justice and anti-racism and ecological crisis. And how your work has been something that they always bring back up again and again throughout the rest of the semester after we've read it.

So. I was so excited to read your new book, Unfurl, and to get to have a conversation with you today. Thank you so much for coming on.

Eli: Whoa, Dean. It's, I turned 62 three or four months ago, which means I've been at movement work for 40 plus years. Now, I don't know how that happened. I don't know how that happened. And because you and I both live in these worlds, where foreshortened life is so much the reality of our worlds, like one of the dreams I have for the world I want to live in, that people grow old and we will have time as old people together. And I suspect that's not going to happen in my lifetime. And it's like, for me to be 62 still doing movement work is like, how did that happen?

Like I never expected to see this decade personally or actually politically. And the work is such long haul work, right? It's measured in decades and centuries and...yeah, I'm glad to be able to be here and doing the work and being here. The combination of privilege and luck and community and all the things.

Dean: Mm-hmm.

Yeah. I'm just thinking about how Miss Major used to say "I'm still fucking here". And how meaningful that is for so many people in our communities who face a lot of obstacles to staying alive.

Eli: Right.

Dean: Well this is relevant to the first question I am really wanting to ask you. I read your beautiful book Unfurl, and it really contends with loss and grief so deeply. And I've just been thinking a lot about the stigma and taboo around experiencing grief in dominant culture, that I think is inherent to white supremacy and patriarchy and ableism and capitalism and colonialism, that's like so important to all these forms of domination. And it's so painful and disorganizing to us personally and to our relationships and our movements to not be able to access grief, or to be denied access to grief. And I wondered if you would speak about grief and about what writing Unfurl helped you learn about grief, or what you're wanting all of us to be considering about grief during these really difficult

times.

Eli: So I started writing what became this new book the year or two before the COVID pandemic started. So I started writing the piece of the beginning of this book in late 2017, early 2018. And so a lot of the material in this book was started in the early pandemic time, which was a time when we were inundated with death of lots of kinds. Certainly COVID death, but other kinds of death.

And then in disability community was a time of like death after death after death after death. The early pandemic brought me right back to the early AIDS epidemic, 1980, '81, '82, '83. I was coming out as a young queer during those years. And those years too were drenched with death after death after death and, and more grief than we knew how to process.

Or maybe not more grief, but grief so fast that there were no way to get through one grief before the next grief came. So, so this way of grief stacking up over time. And it very much feels like that now for lots of us. That we're in a time of grief stacking up in a way that there's no way to process one grief all the way before the next grief is here.

And so I wrote partly as a way of expressing emotion, partly as a way of trying to figure out how do I live with this? Partly as a way to say, yes, this is happening. Partly a way to explore my experience of grief, which is: grief takes its own time. Grief lives on in this timeline that's not about productivity and is not about speed and is not about what we want. And grief has its own timeline. And that timeline, it's hard to predict because grief manifests in so many ways, depending on so much.

And through the writing of this and through the death of my friend PJ Two Ravens, who was a trans social worker sex outlaw in the '90s and 2000s, and ran this trans support group called Gender Explorers for 15 years. And how thousands and thousands of trans people come out in the '90s in Ann Arbor where there was a old school gender clinic that was gatekeeping every resource in the entire state. And he died in 2022.

And one of the things I learned through his death is that for me, one of the lessons is to learn how to live with a broken heart. For me not to feel like the goal was to get through my broken heart. The goal was to learn to live with a broken heart as the long haul condition of these times. And that's been quite the lesson over a number of years from him, both during his life and after his time here on Earth. And certainly writing about that, writing about how do we live with our hearts broken, knowing that our hearts are never going to not be broken somehow, at least not here and now.

Now again, the worlds I dream of, one day there'll be a time when our

hearts aren't all broken all the time. But for right now, those are the communities I live in. Our hearts are broken. I really do think it's a long haul condition.

Dean: In some ways, I feel like part of your eldership in our communities that I see coming through in this book is like a kind of in-touch-ness, you know? Like there's so much in this society that wants us to numb out to these experiences. And there's a level in which reading your work puts me into intimate contact with myself and with emotions, and also the daily sensations of being alive. Because so much of your work is also about contact with the natural world, and being inside your own life and body and cognition and community.

So I'm just kind of wondering like if you have something you wanna add from that position of eldership, how do we live with these broken hearts?

Eli: Well, I want to say one thing before I go into this question, which is being called an elder makes me twitchy.

You know, I come from a long tradition that says you never claim being an elder. Being an elder is something you're handed. Being an elder is different from your chronological age. And there's a way in which when other people claim me as an elder or claim my elder-ship, it's like, oh fuck. Like again, how did that happen?

You know? And I don't claim to have a lot of wisdom. That's not a claim I make. . The people who helped me write this book, Susan Burch and Joe Kadi -- Susan Burch is a brilliant disability historian, Joe Kadi, the well-known Arab Canadian writer and cultural activist -- the two of them read every draft I write. And the three of us at different stages in the book would say, but this is a book about emotion first and foremost.

And as someone who lived my teens and twenties and thirties into my forties completely numb, I did not know what emotion was. Disassociation was my favored and go-to survival strategy. I'm alive because of that survival strategy. But for me to be writing a book about emotion took my breath away over and over again because I struggled so hard to know what a feeling was. And then to know how to have a feeling and then to know how to tolerate multiple feelings and contradictory feelings and feelings over time, feelings that were not going away. Which gets us back to this idea of living with a broken heart. So what could I say about how to do that?

My time in the natural world is really a big, big piece of that. Being in the natural world teaches me so much about being open both to the grief, what it means that humans are plundering this incredible planet that has enough for every one of us if we collectively as humans would create right relationships with the planet. Even in the plundered

state of the climate right now, there's enough here for all of us. So my time in the more-than-human world with trees and rocks and water and sky and birds and fish and snakes and mushrooms. And believing that the line between sentient and non-sentient, and human and more-than-human...I barely believe in those lines anymore. But this grief about the plundering and this ability to still be connected to the beauty and the wonder and the grace teaches me so much about living long term with grief with a broken heart. That living with a broken heart doesn't mean that there will never be joy, that there will never be wonder, that there will never be beauty, that there will never be connections. But living with a broken heart simply means that grief will be one of the pieces. They'll be more foreground and less foreground. They'll take more space or less space.

So time in the natural world is one piece for me. Taking every opportunity I have to cry. I'm not someone who has a lot of access to tears - lots of reasons for that not unusual state of being. I just don't have a lot of access to tears, and certainly not many reliable ways to prime the pump of my tears. Like I know some people are like "I play this breakup song and I'm crying every time," right? I don't have that doorway. But when the tears come, it's like, take the doorway. It doesn't matter when. It doesn't matter why. It doesn't matter where. It doesn't matter if I understand it. It doesn't matter if I know what it's connected to. Take the doorway. Often not easy, often not convenient, often not what I want.

But it's like, welcome tears, this piece of what I know about my processes, take moments when I'm having feelings, right, because I'm numb still. I think numbness is another one of those long haul states of being, right? I'm not saying somehow I've, I've evolved out of numbness, oh my god, no. But when I'm not numb, when I'm having a feeling, have the feeling. Have the feeling.

And the last thing I want to say is that I worked for a long time with a queer non-binary body worker, a craniosacral therapist who says that our nervous systems aren't designed for this level of chaos, this level of rage, this level of terror, this level of fuckery, this level of very conditional survival that operates in differential ways across so many lines of power, privilege, and marginalization. They say that every day we need to be releasing some of it. And they, they encourage me to stomp. They encourage me to shake. They encourage me to growl, right? Really, it's like whatever works to release some of it.

What they're saying is not that it will make it all go away, that it'll all be good. They're not one of these body workers who wants to solve all this nervous system overload through personal self care. What they're saying is release just enough of it so I can live in the world not completely hypervigilant and numb.

Dean: Thank you. That's so, that's so useful. I wanted to ask you a

question related to some experiences that I've had. For about a year I've been doing a lot of book events, a lot of in-person events related to my most recent book coming out. And a big theme in the question and answer periods at pretty much every event, and also in my one-on-one conversations with people who I meet there or in like the workshops I've been giving, is people want to talk about their resentments. They are often sharing like ongoing frustration and resentment that people in their communities, of course, like, fail at solidarity.

It often comes up around COVID safety. But also other repeated disappointments with regard to solidarities and you know, just frustrations, like just the repeated experiences. And I think a lot about what it takes to stay in movement spaces and community spaces when we experience the ongoing pain of people excluding us, doing microaggressions, repeating these kinds of dominant culture scripts, and how there's this like experience of enduring the cumulative pain of these repeated things.

And your work really does not shy away from this pain, but instead turns us towards attending to the daily injuries of ableism and other vectors of mistreatment and misunderstanding. And I wondered if you could talk about how you hold on or how you stay in the work, keep going. Or how you've seen or been inspired by others keeping going, or kind of metabolizing or processing this like, disappointment when, you know, these things can feel really relentless and like they're not really ending anytime soon.

Like we kind of know we're just gonna keep experiencing them if we keep going out into our communities. And that they're present even in the most intimate spaces, and even in places where we hoped to find something different, and also certainly in just the day-to-day world. I just would love to hear like how you hold that.

Eli: Yeah. I think it's so important to be really real about movement work and community, like to not romanticize either place. And I want to suggest that it goes beyond disappointment. That it enters the realm of feeling betrayed.

Dean: Yeah.

Eli: And that, and that betrayal, that close, close, close betrayal. There's so much fucking pain and rage, right? How do we keep going?

In my life, the elders I have in my life, several of whom, it's like let me learn from these people who have just been here, decade after decade after decade, through backbiting, and call outs, and call ins, and messing up big, several of them. But as most of us who've been in movement work for more than like two minutes, have fucked up really bad. You know?

The goal of long haul work isn't to not make mistakes. The goal of long haul work is to recognize when we've made mistakes, not be defensive assholes about making those mistakes, learn from those mistakes, and learning how not to repeat them.

Um, so there's elders in my life that I want to emulate. People who have stayed really flexible over time. Who have processed the disappointments over and over again, some of whom have set some really incredible boundaries: "I don't work with TERFs" or "I don't work with anti-sex feminists." You know, setting boundaries as one of the ways of dealing with that sense of repeated disappointment that sometimes becomes betrayal.

Another piece of what I have learned from these folks is to have the feelings, but to recognize that most of that betrayal we experience in movement in community spaces also has a reflection in bigger systems, and that some of our grief and some of our rage belongs with those bigger systems. And at the same time, it's sometimes easier to target, particularly a rage, closer than farther away. Which is not to trivialize the tangles, the messes, the outright abuse, the continued micro and macro aggressions, the lack of accountability, the ways in which we're still experimenting with 'how does transformative justice happen when the messes rise to the level of violence and patterns of abuse? How does accountability look?' We are still wildly experimenting with that, and with very few unmitigated successes to point to. You know, sometimes it works, but it's really ambiguous.

So not to trivialize any of that, but I also see us being able and willing to lash out closer, and kind of leave the bigger systemic pieces largely out, you know? And you talk about hearing over and over again the sense of disappointment about COVID precautions. And god, that's so real. Like I'm, I'm living really close to people who are still mostly living in their houses because they can't safely be in community, in person.

I'm not one of those people. Masking is enough for me, and I'm masking all the time out in the world, and struggling all the time without good public health information. So that sense of betrayal is really real and has these material consequences, right? These very vivid material and social consequences, including the folks I know who have long COVID.

At the same time, that disappointment, that betrayal, what's not happening in queer and trans communities and progressive communities, how we're not protecting each other by doing things as simple as the masking in public actually don't start with us. It starts with this hyper politicization of public health. It starts with this Republican-led demonizing of collective care. It starts with the way our health systems are collapsing and in their collapse, the rationing of that

technology is even more intense than it was 10 years ago, and it was so freaking intense 10 years ago. It's even more intense now.

The betrayal we're experiencing in our communities starts with capitalism, and how capitalism and the capitalist drive for profit and the rich people's drive to become richer meant there was all this pressure to go back to some sort of capitalist normalcy (and I use "normal" very specifically I must say, I just want to crush "normal", crush it up into dust and let it blow away, like "normal" has to go). But really early 2022 capitalism was like, "we're going to get back to the business of making profit for billionaires." And that meant then, you know, there was a moment in 2020 where it was like, this is horrible, but capitalism is collapsing. This is the first time in my life that it was like capitalism is actually beginning to crumble. And I mean, it was horrible. It was a, it was a terrible period of time, and yet there was this kind of excitement for me, like we're finally recognizing that these are human-made rules, and that as human-made rules we can unmake them, and we can unmake them really quickly. That lasted only so long before late-stage capitalism in its complete flexibility, and then billionaires' drive, billionaires' greed, and the way greed had trickled down in this white, settler colonial world (calling out beliefs, not identities).

That knowledge went back underground. And yet the people closest to us are the people we see in the betrayal, most visibly. Does any of that make sense?

Dean: Yeah, that makes so much sense.

Eli: I'm asking partly because I want to be able to say all this in a way that does not trivialize the pain and disappointment and betrayal. Because once a week minimum, I'm feeling that, you know, there is so much "you're still doing _what_?!"

Dean: I think betrayal is the right word too, because we have a set of expectations for people who are in our actual communities or movements. We're like, oh yeah, maybe I found the other people who believe in what I believe in, or have been through what I've been through, or care about what I care about. And so it's much more painful when they make those errors in judgment, or repeat those scripts or those harmful messages, or whatever it is, exclusions, whatever.

I really appreciate what you're saying. Sometimes we go really hard against those people 'cause it's much more personal, and we're actually sometimes also feeling the cumulative pain of the entire systemic exclusion of our lives. But we're like gonna destroy this group of 10 people here in our town, or we're gonna, you know, make sure nobody ever is friends with this person again.

I think one of the reasons I'm ending up in these conversations a lot is because I am also trying to say some things about how resentment can really poison us. And so how to hold the fact that we are consistently betrayed by one another and disappointed by one another, and we make a lot of mistakes. How to hold those experiences and not feel like they lead us to behaviors that are outside of our principles. And finding some path to experience the grief and rage, and give the feedback and, you know, stand up for ourselves and for others that we love. Also continue to go on with collaborating.

It's a really personal journey and it's a really hard one, and it's like, I think we need more time talking about that. We're really good in our movements at talking about how to take someone down and how to 'read' them and tell them exactly what's wrong. But what do we do with living with this pain? And like still wanting to be part of stuff and knowing there's not a group we can find where none of this stuff will happen, or not a community we can be part of.

So that's the kind of thing I've been trying to hold with people.

Eli: It makes me think about how do we set boundaries, when they're about accountability, without tossing people out of movement and community space.

Dean: I have this question sometimes about it that relates to my next question for you, but I just like, one way I've been thinking a lot about it is, you said something earlier about how some of the elders you really admire have a kind of flexibility, and so I'm trying to become flexible and tolerant of more kinds of people in more kinds of states.

I want to build enough internal safety and sense of material support of people in my community that when I run into certain things, they don't hurt me as bad as they used to. And part of that is knowing that there's some things I will not tolerate, you know? So it's not about speeding that along or trying to bypass the experience of upset or rage, or "that's not tolerable" or whatever.

But I just think this has been an interesting inquiry for me. Like are there some things that I'm willing to be with people through, or some things I'm willing to say over, you know how it is being an organizer, you just say the...you just say the same...how many people have I had the same conversation with about "why abolition?" Or about my views on Palestine or whatever, things that people have a hard time understanding. And just being willing, like what am I...when can I still get the energy? Or when do I feel like not injured by somebody's shitty response because I feel so grounded and seen in my community? And can I cultivate that feeling at all? What kinds of spaces do I need that don't have those people in them? Or what kinds of relationships do I need?

So this relates to the question I wanted to ask you next, which is about how in a lot of your work, including in *_Unfurl_*, you write a lot about how ableist messages reverberate through your own mind. And I think a lot of us hope to overcome internalized, cruel ideas. Yet I know for myself that I'm never gonna like fully get over these ideas. And your work really shows like living with them long term, even though like, you know, of course some things change or I have some ways I respond to them differently inside myself than I used to, or redirect things or, you know, care that I give to the wounds that I carry.

I wondered if you wanted to talk about this, like how these messages stay with us and how we can change, but maybe not change entirely or like how we cope with having those ideas in our head, knowing we're gonna run into them in the world. Like I just think your work has a lot of guidance around this for us.

Eli: So I want to back up for a moment and get to that really good question. But to say that when you are trying to get to this more grounded, flexible, bigger space than when I'm there and feel expansive this way, it means being really well internally resourced and externally resourced. The more isolated we are, the more we're struggling with basic survival stuff -- food, water, housing -- the harder it is to find those expansive places. So then part of our work is both like, what do each of us need internally in terms of resources? And then how do we collectively resource each other to make finding those grounded, more expansive spaces that, for me, fluctuate over time. They're not static, they're not places I find once and then I'm like, "oh, I've found it, now I'm fine." It's process, it's practice. It's this ongoing practice. I think it's a practice that needs a lot of resources to be successful, even in its smallest manifestations, you know? And before I get directly to your question, when you talk about working to be more flexible with more kinds of people, I think about what anti-fascist rebellion and resistance looks like right now, and how big that tent needs to be. And how many different strategies we need, and how that means being really able to hold contradictory strategies at the same time. I'm remembering a street protest I was at last spring maybe, but there were a lot of American flags at the protest and at some point someone started singing "The Star Spangled Banner" as a protest song, right? And I had to turn my back and walk 10 steps away, but I didn't leave. I came back. It's like "I can't engage, but I'm not going to disrupt, and I'm not going to leave and not come back. But it was an example of like, let me tolerate this as much as I can, as someone who believes that nation state is part of the problem. And "The Star Spangled Banner" is a war song, it's a white settler colonial war song, right? And that day I was able to turn my back, walk 10 steps away, and then come back. Another day that happened, I might have gone stomping away and never gone to protest again sponsored by that group of people. It,

it's that variable in my life.

So now to this really good question about internalized oppression. In my life, I have taken so many of the messages in. Both the messages that privilege me, the messages about whiteness, and whiteness as perfection and whiteness as "I know best", and whiteness as "hear me" and whiteness as assuming that my reality is everyone's reality.

I've taken those message of, of white supremacy and colonialism in really strongly. I come from farmers who were occupying Indigenous stolen land in the first generation of that land being stolen. And so I feel all of that still in me, as I do the messages of the ways in which I'm marginalized, the ableism and the transphobia and sexism from the years when I was living in the world being read as a woman, rather than now in the years where I'm being read as a white guy mostly.

And so I'm privileged, but in this very contingent way. But privileged in this way that doesn't go back to childhood. I don't have those messages and privileges all the way back. And now I'm convinced that I can change my relationship to those messages. But I can't actually get rid of them, partly because they're still happening right now. They're not dressed in the artifacts of my past, they're present day occurrences.

So I can change and have changed my relationship to them. I think that the work of changing the relationship to those messages does happen at very different scales. Sometimes they happen at these incredible macro scales, and sometimes they're at the smallest, smallest scales.

And those scales matter. Those differential experiences matter. This isn't about playing 'Oppression Olympics', this is about acknowledging the reality, the scale, and differential impact. We have to spend more time in community and in movement work acknowledging that this is part of our collective work too, that this isn't just individual work, that this is collective work.

I have spent a lot of time on writing about shame and systemic reasons that a lot of us live with shame. And this idea that shame is a collective community issue as well as a personal issue is something I deeply, deeply believe. And I think that changing our relationships to all of that old stuff, whether it's stuff that privileges us or marginalizes us (or sometimes a little of both depending on what it is), those changes are much more likely to happen if they're happening on a lot of different scales, all at the same time. If it's internal work and external work, and stuff in our closest relationships and in our communities, and when it's stuff that's integrated into the agendas of our organizations. And when we can ask each other, that betrayal we're feeling in community, how is that connected to our internal sense of being a burden, for instance.

I'm not saying that that's the only reason for the betrayal, but so often my sense of being betrayed by something in community is also connected somehow to my internalization of some of the lies. It's really helpful for me to think about them as lies, even when I'm believing them, even when they don't feel like lies, even when they feel like bone deep truths, because I don't think these messages are just in our minds. I think they enter our bodies. I think they enter our cells, they enter our organs. They're part of inflammation and they're part of our bodies. And for me, one of the tools I use is to call them lies even when they don't feel like it. I say "here I go again, here the lie is, speaking to me. Sometimes when I'm really bored, I call them garbage. "Here's the garbage again." You know, and the garbage is often really boring. The garbage is often saying the same things over and over again: We're not worthy. We're going to be discovered. We're not deserving. We're to blame for all the crappy things that have ever happened to us.

And the messages at the bottom of them are really frigging boring. And to call them garbage when I can get there, is that a cause for celebration? "All the garbage is here again."

Dean: Yeah. Thank you for that. I think there's also shame around not being "over it" amongst radicals a lot. You know, shame that we still have this stuff reverberating. Shame that it still limits some of our activities. Shame that it fuels some reactions. And so just even...I find so much relief in your writing, just being like, this person has such an accurate, honest account of living with this.

Eli: So I want to say if there's one thing from this conversation and from this book full of emotion that people leave with, it's this idea that of course we're still struggling with the crap. Because the crap is still descending upon us every day. And right now the crap is everywhere. So the activation into our pasts around this crap, around this sense of not being safe -- and so many of the people I know are triggered by Trump because Trump reminds us of every perpetrator we've ever been close to. I mean, there are a million reasons to be activated by him. But for me and other survivors, the activation around him as a perp is so high. And if I'm just sounding like I'm one of those people pulling systemic trouble into pop psychology, and that's not my intention. But it can function on both levels. This incredible systemic level, and this like very personal nervous system, emotion based, mixing of the past and present. Again, does that make sense?

Dean: It makes perfect sense and it's so tied into so many themes that we've been discussing. Uh, there's so many things you said that have reminded me of other recent interviews, and it's so helpful, I think. Especially because I think a central thing for us all to hear is like, of course we're all having a really hard time. And everyone else we

know is having a really hard time, and what kinds of gentleness can we bring? And what kinds of acceptance of ourselves, and others' hard times? I, I just, I think everything you said just now is helpful in that way because it puts us all in this shared really painful context.

I wanna pose this last question to you. I'm sad for this interview to ever end, but, um, I'm also really excited about this question. So, as you know, this podcast is about relationships of many kinds. And of course I am aware that you have been in a very long term, in my opinion, very hot relationship with another hot trans person who I adore, for decades.

And I'm wondering if you're willing to share anything about your experience from being in such a long relationship? Or from being in a relationship like that at the age you are now? Like what's it like now? Or any insights that might be of use to all the other radical, queer, trans, feminist, disability justice oriented people listening. Very open-ended, but I just, I've really gotten a lot over the years out of speaking to you and your partner about your relationship, and felt like a vicarious sweetness and reverence and awe about your connection. And also I feel that about each of you as people who have been teachers of mine in various ways, and friends. And so I'm, I would just love to hear anything you wanna share about that.

Eli: Well, the first thing I want to share is that I'm surprised every day by that relationship. We've been lovers for 26 years, and it's like, how did that happen? Like I was 36 when I met him, and I had been in a couple short romantic things that had never lasted. I had never been able to sustain them. I'm not someone who's lonely very much. I wasn't looking for a romantic relationship. I had assumed that I was going to be mostly single for the duration. It's not unusual for disabled people to be without romantic and sexual relationships. It's not unusual for us to arrive at consensual sexual connection later than most non-disabled people.

And then Samuel appeared. We had a conference fling and that fling, a second day happened from that fling, and we were long distance for two and a half years. He was very patient because he was ready for more than I was.

Still 26 years later, I'm like, how did this happen? This relationship that provides so much love, so much comfort, so much stability, so much room to grow. So much hotness. Frankly, part of what works for us is that we're very different people and we let those differences flourish. We let our different interests develop. We give each other space. We are not joined at the hip. Often Samuel is asked by people, "does Eli actually really exist?" because they've never seen us. When I'm not doing public facing work, I'm quite an introvert and half of a recluse. And so people are often like "I've not actually seen Eli, does Eli exist?" And the answer always is "Yes".

And I don't know a lot us who are in long term things. Having said that, I do not want to prioritize long term as the thing that makes relationships important. Like I've been in really important relationships of many kinds over the decades that haven't been entirely long term. I've also had a small handful of long-term friendships that are really centrally important, so it's both. Let's not prioritize long-term romantic relationships as the most important, and let's not prioritize romantic relationships over other kinds of relationships.

So much of what I know about doing this long-term romantic thing, this long-term sexual thing, I've learned through long-term friendship. This like commitment to long term friendship of let's work through differences. Let's work through conflict. Let's work through differing choices. How do we sustain relationship through choices that we don't necessarily agree with? In my communities, we talk a lot about creating chosen family, and for me, chosen family are the people who I've been through conflict with, who I've been through like "I don't agree with these choices, but damn, I love you nonetheless."

And part of what makes this long term romantic and sexual partnership work for me is that I also have these other really important long term friendships that take energy, take time, take space. Some of them are friendships that are joint and some of them are not.

But it's been really important culturally, systemically, in capitalism and white supremacy, in patriarchy, in ableism and on and on and on, we're told that our romantic relationships are supposed to be long, and supposed to be the most important thing in our world. Samuel's and my relationship is bedrock important to me. But so are like five or six friendships, all of whom feel like chosen family to me, are bedrock also in my life.

The last thing I want to say is that I think love of all sorts, not easy love, not always romantic love, not love we're going to find in Hallmark cards ever, love that's fierce, love that's sometimes uncomfortable, love that sometimes has gaps and glitches and question marks, love is part of what's going to get us through this fucked up world. And I mean that. That's not a platitude. Love is part of how we're going to keep each other alive.

Dean: Yeah, these are the stakes at this time.

Eli: Yeah.

Dean: So true. I love your diehard commitment to connections of all lengths and all types that make up our worlds. And the worst thing about romance in our society is that it's all about isolation. It's about getting isolated with one other person, and that is the most

dangerous thing that we can do to our relationships, and causes so much violence and loss and pain. So I, I love what you shared. I think the root to connections that can hold us in these awful times is having a lot of different kinds of relationships with people who can meet different parts of us, and with whom we can do different kinds of activities that we need. And letting each other do that, not controlling one another, trying to limit others' relationships.

You know, this stuff is so hard.

Eli: Right. So, Dean, can I end this part of the conversation with a poem?

Dean: I would love that. Let's do it.

Eli: You know that I described this book as a pretty, disabled love song. So there are a number of love poems in the book, and this is called "How to Love for the Long Haul".

Remember: love is a muscle the size of our hearts

open hands, wild open sky.

Practice every day.

Love fiddleheads, coyotes, white pines

love red foxes and barn cats

our own round bellies.

Love the first ripe cherry tomatoes

the last bite of pesto.

Raucous call of crows and deep quiet of snow.

Love bone, and gristle

and tendon and nerve

each other's tender hearts.

Do not succumb

to ownership or jealousy.

Love through long rain, intense drought

love in bookstores, in kitchens, alleyways, and traffic jams

at countless protests and pride parades.

Love even when angry, ashamed, heartbroken.

Become a sunflower leaning into the sun.

Dean: Mm. Thank you so much, Eli. I'm so glad that you included a poem. I'm grateful to you and so grateful for this conversation.

Eli: Yeah, same.

Dean: I hope everyone will pick up a copy of _Unfurl_. It really is something that can support us through the times that we're enduring.

Eli: Thank you for all your work and for this conversation. So much gratitude.

Dean: Thanks to Eli for having this conversation with me. So much to chew on. I'm very grateful.

Thank you for joining me for the latest episode of "Love in a F*cked 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 in your community, not from Amazon or Audible.

"Love in a F*cked Up World" is hosted by me, Dean Spade. It is produced and edited by Hope Dector. Our creative director is Ciro Carillo. Thank you to Eugene, Derekh, Kelsey, Lindsay, Jessica, Raindrop, Nicole, and everyone else who helped with this podcast. Our theme music is "I've Been Wondering" by The Ballet.

We need each other now more than ever, and I hope this podcast offers tools and ideas that can help us to build and sustain strong relationships and strong resistance movements.

I hope you'll keep listening, subscribe, and share this episode with the people in your life.