

Caller: Hello, Esther. My question is centered on a previous friendship of mine with a best friend who's no longer in my life. I fell in love with my best friend who shared unrequited feelings for me, and our friendship became so intimate that it got to a point where it hurt too much to just be friends with him. So I told him we needed to take an undetermined amount of time apart from seeing each other. My question for you is twofold. How do I navigate this heartbreak and confusion for someone who truly felt like home to me and experienced a transcendent love with? And secondly, how can I learn to let go and open myself up to new potential romantic partners? I really struggle with comparing potential partners to him.

Esther Perel: I was listening to you and I thought, I'm hearing this for the first time, but you're hearing yourself again. What's it like?

Caller: I think one thing that might have shifted a little bit is maybe not necessarily navigating the heartbreak but just the confusion for how can I feel this way where someone feels like home to me and you know moments with him can feel like touching the heavens. How can this be unrequited? But then most importantly too, I've been trying to go dating and no one measures up. And I know what love should feel like and I don't want a watered down version of it.

Esther Perel: I hear two questions. One is, tell me if I hear you well. If I felt that we were touching the heavens together, how can it be that he didn't feel it, right? Is that, is that, yeah?

Caller: Yes.

Esther Perel: The second one is about how do I grieve the loss of my best friend? And the third one is how do I allow myself to fall in love again when I have the sense that I was so off and that I thought we had a shared reality and it doesn't seem like we did. How would I trust myself now when I meet someone new?

Caller: Mmm. Yeah, that speaks loud, that last perspective.

Esther Perel: Tell me a little bit more what happened.

Caller: Yeah.

Esther Perel: Give me actually, what's the story? What happened here? Who are you, what happened, who was he, how long did this go on? You know, before we tackle the difficult questions, give me a little bit of the history of this relationship, this friendship, this falling in love with him, I don't know when, you know, the

whole thing.

Caller: So about three years ago, we matched on a dating app and we decided to meet up on a date, went cross-country skiing. And it was just this immediate connection and effortless connection for me. Um, and I know I wanted to explore what was there. And when I had shared wanting to go on a second date, he was not interested. But we did agree to keep hanging out as friends. And so for a couple of years, I would do this really challenging choreography of straddling between friendship and keeping those feelings at bay. They only got stronger with time and I don't want to say it was an unusual friendship because that's just my cultural understanding of it, of how I was born and raised, but we did spend...

Esther Perel: What do you mean? What do you mean by that?

Caller: Most weekends we'd be with each other. We'd speak throughout the week. I would be involved in both the small and big moments with him and it was reciprocated and some of his friends have joked that we're codependent on each other, not in a negative way, but just that we spend a lot of time with each other for people that are not dating.

Esther Perel: And what did you mean when you talked about that it was different from your cultural understanding?

Caller: I think we all have ideas of what is and isn't a normal friendship. So how I see friendship is like, you know, I hang out with that person. We spend time with each other, but it's not like a consistent everyday interaction where with this friendship it was. So, for me, um, to be so involved with someone else's life, on that everyday level, is not something I have with other friendships, if that makes sense.

Esther Perel: And you both called each other best friends?

Caller: Yes.

Esther Perel: So part of the understanding is friendship, I don't know where one finds the accurate measurement of how many times a week people need to meet that is called friendship versus that is called a platonic relationship versus that is called a codependent relationship. Why pathologize this to begin with? But what was clear is that in his mind you were a very close friend, and for you, you were wanting it to be a very close friend, but you knew all along that from the first date, you were hoping that he would change his mind and that he would realize that

you share something so special together and that he too would begin to call this romantic love and not just friendship.

Caller: Possibly that could be in the background. But I felt like I always knew we were just going to be friends, and part of the reason that I told him we needed to take a pause was at one point in our friendship he had shared that he still had feelings for an ex and myself and my friend had encouraged him to reach back out and see what could still be there if he felt so certain about this past relationship he was in. And they did, and they got back together. And that was really painful for me, but also I want the best for him. And so I think I always knew we were just friends, which is why I would have done an action like that, proposed that he reach back out to his ex and... Ever since they got back together, I just... It was painful, but I knew intuitively we couldn't be friends anymore. So as long as you're with someone else, it hurts too much to just be friends with you with how our relationship is right now.

Esther Perel: And he said?

Caller: When I had that conversation with him, um, I shared that I had feelings that have never gone away since we first met. And, of course, there was some pause when I said that. I didn't know how he would respond. And his first question was, had I spoken with my friends about it already? Like, does it feel like the right decision? Um, but then too he said, how can I help out in this situation? What can I do? Which those responses, you know, let me know. Always friendship. Nothing more, but he cares for me and holds me in high regard and wants to, you know, help out where he can. But I told him really just the separation, the time apart, and just a pause so I can figure out can we make this friendship work. That was about half a year ago and we haven't spoken since. Other than that, I did tell him, you know, God forbid anything bad happens in each other's lives. I don't want us to not share any of those updates. I still want to be there for him. So I did reach out when a family emergency happened. But other than that, we haven't spoken since. And I don't anticipate, I probably will ever will reach out to him again because I can't imagine just friendship with him without it hurting, if that makes sense.

Esther Perel: And you helped him reconnect with this ex as if I introduced him to someone else, then I won't be so rejected by him, because I will have been the one to send him out.

Caller: Possibly. I haven't thought about that.

Esther Perel: You're shaking your head.

Caller: Did I unknowingly do that? Yeah, perhaps. Perhaps.

Esther Perel: I can't tolerate you're being so close to me and not with me that I'm going to send you off to be with someone else, but I will have been the one to create the distance and not you.

Caller: That could be, well, what happened, I, um, at one point in our friendship, he had started seeing someone and that was huge heartache, heartbreak for me. That was him finding that person on their own. It didn't go anywhere after a while, but maybe, maybe that's what I did when I reconnected him with his ex. Maybe.

Esther Perel: And what does that bring up for you, as you say? Maybe, and as you blow the air out, and as you shake your head.

Caller: I'm feeling that maybe intuitively I knew something had to change and by maybe by me taking that action, things would shift in a way unknowingly, not knowing how it would. But I can tell you it hurts less now, even the separation than being with him. So maybe I did that action for myself at the end of the day.

Esther Perel: It gave you clarity. It helped you create a closure. Or at least a comma in the sentence, or a semicolon, maybe. Um, it helped you punctuate the relationship. And as you say, once he said, how can I help you? You understood that you are not in the same place. You don't share the same feelings. You deeply care for each other, both of you. But at this moment, you need to create a place and a space where you can fall in love with someone else if you so choose.

Caller: Thinking about you saying the pause or the comma, maybe not necessarily complete resolution...

Esther Perel: The period.

Caller: But that was the period. Yeah, that was one thing that I wish I would have pushed in that conversation, which felt impossible in the moment to have. I just wish I could hear what was going on in his head. And not that I deserve that and not that I... Maybe that wouldn't have made a difference, but there's still, I don't know, part of me feels like if I could have heard an honest, candid response as to every, like what he was feeling and thinking, that would have helped me a little bit more, as opposed to just saying, how can I help out? Have you thought about this through? What are the boundaries when we take this pause? Um, part of me wishes I would have asked for him to share, not that he would have had any

formulated thoughts, because I know I definitely took him off guard 100% with that conversation.

Esther Perel: Which part of it? The fact that you had feelings for him all along that you had not been able to reveal? Or that you knew that once you would reveal them, there was a chance that he may not reciprocate? Or that you were going to cut off after that to protect yourself?

Caller: I think a little bit of a couple of the scenarios you gave. I think there definitely was ever since we went on that first date, I never once ever again expressed interest, I knew it was always just going to be friendship. And I did my best to friendzone myself in many ways. Um...

Esther Perel: How did you do it?

Caller: Yeah, I think just talking about my dating life. In my mind, if I'm talking about my dating life, that's going to make him feel more like a friend. Because who talks about that with someone that you care about?

Esther Perel: Clever.

Caller: That was one thing.

Esther Perel: Did he too?

Caller: Yes. Yes, it went both ways. And there would be times where I thought, yep, I was successful in friend-zoning myself, I only see him as a friend. And then there could just be a sudden, sudden change where they just came back and made me realize it was, um, feelings are probably never going to completely go away. They'll still be there in the background. Um, and then to your question too, I think, I think he was also caught off guard of just completely like the excommunication, like we're not gonna see each other. And I know that was difficult for him because we both considered each other best friends. We spent so much of our time with each other. Um, so that was changing his world upside down too.

Esther Perel: I was wondering, because you mentioned your friends and how they viewed your relationship with him. Where are your friends in this story?

Caller: My friends have been cautious of the friendship. From day one when I met this friend on a date, I immediately had to call several friends. I said, you'll never

guess what my day has turned into. I'm feeling over the moon. Like I didn't know I could meet someone like this and, but once I told them that we were just gonna be friends, I think they all had reservations, like if you feel this strongly, is that a good idea? But I had shared that I would just treat it as a friendship. But they definitely...

Esther Perel: They know you well?

Caller: They know me very well.

Esther Perel: Have they known you to be someone who gets hurt by love?

Caller: It's hard to answer that. I didn't come out till later in my adult life, in my early 20s, and so I, and to this day haven't been in a long-term relationship, so I don't think they've ever seen me hurt by love romantically, if that's the question.

Esther Perel: Are you out to the world or just to a few people?

Caller: I am, yep, I'm out to family, friends, um, 100% open, yeah.

Esther Perel: Had you been in other long-term relationships before? Or other relationships before?

Caller: Short term, nothing exclusive. I always seem to find a reason to pull away. Um, with the limited people that I have expressed interest in. And I think that part of that might just be by not having that regular dating life from a young age, I place a lot of seriousness now as an adult into dating someone.

Esther Perel: Is there anything I should know about your experience of coming out?

Caller: So, for me growing up, I was um, I grew up in a small conservative area with a parent that worked for the church and just with the teachings that my church has, lots of internalized shame from being gay, from being queer. And unfortunately for me, that manifested that internalized shame into social anxiety. So opening up to others had at that time been really, really difficult for me. But fortunately during COVID, I made the decision to start therapy, which really reorganized my whole life and where social anxiety is not a factor that inhibits me from living a life aligned with my values but I'm not sure what else I could say that might be helpful for the context of my story coming out. Supportive friends, family,

um, some family doesn't. Still believes being queer is sinful, but they still love me and are still in my life.

Esther Perel: What's the... I can imagine what you're laughing at and about, but I want to make sure that we're laughing about the same thing, or smiling about the same thing. Which is it for you? They still love me, but as long as...

Caller: Yeah, I'm laughing at the same thing as you. Just how can... love shouldn't be conditional on certain items.

Esther Perel: So when I listen to you, what I'm wondering is, well actually maybe I ask you first, tell me a little bit more about the social anxiety. Because what I'm understanding is that when you met him, you experienced with him a kind of closeness and a sharing of the everyday that in effect you had never experienced before.

Caller: Yes, it's true. We met prior to me starting therapy. And he was with me during a lot of pivotal moments of my life with radical self-love and self-compassion and really letting go of internalized shame in many ways. He was there as a support system in many of those things. We also, we had done a book club on *Gifts of Imperfection* by Brené Brown, where he got to really see the landscape of what my social anxiety looked like and how it affected my life. He has been the deepest, most profound friendship I've ever had. Yeah, he's been that person that I haven't been open with other people in the same way.

Esther Perel: And what allowed you to do it? Because you see sometimes we are tempted to think, I could do all of this because of who he was. But sometimes we begin to realize that I could do all of this because of who I was becoming.

Caller: Yeah, that's the word becoming. I think it was so easy to... I mean, I'm sure I definitely tested the waters first with what I was going to share early on in our friendship, but no matter what I would share, it never made him walk away or see me differently or, um, he still cared and loved me despite all those challenges that I had. So I'm sure with time when I started to reveal and open myself up more, I was never met with someone walking away or viewing me differently or not wanting to have that relationship with me anymore.

Esther Perel: What did you just think about? Something just came into you.

Caller: Yeah, I'm still thinking about the word becoming with him. I like to say that he inspired me to be the best version of myself. And so when I hear the word

becoming, like he's made me who he's part of the reason of who I am and where I've gotten to today.

Esther Perel: And that is one beautiful way that he lives inside of you. One of those witnesses that you met along the way in your life, who saw you coming out and who saw you becoming more bold, more assertive, more authentic, more forthcoming, more honest with yourself, with others, more radically compassionate, if you want. Um, but he watched you, or he accompanied you, in this mega transition in your life. He and the other friends. But he was the one who was on the other side of the conservative community, the church, maybe your parents, or these other family members. And so he became the welcoming, accepting family that you so beautifully called in the beginning of our conversation, my home.

Caller: That's been one thing that I find that's been helpful. Um, because when we first stopped seeing each other, that's all I could think about was him and him not being in my life and, and in attempts to make it not hurt as bad, I would just say things that I was thankful for that he brought into my life for things that he changed about me or experiences that we had. And that's been helpful. So just to hear you say all of that list of things that he's accompanied me with. It's been something that's been helpful for me to say that out loud.

Esther Perel: He is in your life. He's not physically present at this moment. And you kind of know that when you are ready to re-engage, he will be there.

Caller: Yes.

Esther Perel: So he is a part of you and he is a part of your life. But he's not actively involved because now, from what I understand, now you want to learn how you can experience this with other people. See, sometimes when you experience something for the first time with someone, you attribute it all to them. They're the ones who opened me up. They're the ones who gave me the sense of acceptance. They're the ones who allowed me to become kinder with myself. They're the ones who loosened me up. They're the ones who allowed me to be funny. You know, they, they, they. And rather than they and me. It's not just them, it's not just you, but it's certainly you in a big part. And so now it's, can I experience this with others? And for that, you have to imagine that it wasn't just him. Because if it's all him, then it disappears when you don't see him. If it's also inside of you, then it's there when you meet others and you won't be crippled by comparison.

Caller: This is really important for me to hear.

Esther Perel: Say it in your own words.

Caller: Let's see, um, I can open myself up to others and to new romantic partners when I know that the love that I felt with this friend while he shared a lot of moments with me and helped me grow, he was the first person in my life to let me encounter that, and that I can experience that again.

Esther Perel: Hold on a second. He was not the first person who let me encounter that. He was the first person with whom I *chose* to encounter that.

Caller: First person I chose. It's true. Love is a choice. I'm having lots of, lots of ideas flying in my head so trying to articulate myself to your responses, proving to be difficult. You're giving me a lot to sit on Esther. This friend was the first person that I chose to open myself up to. And I can experience that again when I choose to let that happen again and allow that to happen and that what I felt with him wasn't a singular experience based off him. It was also based off me being, choosing to let myself be deeply seen and understood.

Esther Perel: Yeah, take a deep breath. Take it in.

Caller: I'm thinking right now with dates that I have gone on after, I feel like I'm trying to be open, but maybe I'm not. And what does that look like to be, to choosing to be open to others? If I'm not doing it right now, if I think that I am though doing it.

Esther Perel: So imagine. How do you date?

Caller: My dates? I choose to do experiences.

Esther Perel: How do you meet them?

Caller: Unfortunately always through dating apps, which I don't want to do, but that's just how it is with the queer community. It's difficult to meet people in the wild. I have started trying to meet more queer people organically. Um, we have a queer volunteer group where I live, so I have been going to that to try to meet people. Um, but that's how, that's what it's looked like most recently, meeting people romantically I've been through dating apps. And I choose to go on experiences with them. I'm not a fan of just going to get drinks and just talking, not that it's bad, but I don't feel like I see another person through that experience.

Esther Perel: I agree. So give me one.

Caller: One that I've done in the past?

Esther Perel: Yeah.

Caller: Okay. We went to an educational farm and we worked on making coasters out of sheep fiber, sheep wool. And it was so much fun getting to connect with that person over an activity, getting to see his personality shine through. Unfortunately, he didn't want to keep seeing each other, but um, that was, that was one.

Esther Perel: But that one is not one where you're asking yourself, did I hold back?

Caller: No, I didn't feel like I held back. I felt like it was open. Dating has always been really hard for me. It always feels really difficult to find matches in the first place, and if I do go on dates, it can be unrequited. So I definitely, I feel like it's really dry here in terms of dating. It's difficult. But I feel like in the past experiences, I have been opening myself up. Choosing to open myself up to others letting them see me.

Esther Perel: Beautiful. Do your friends introduce each other?

Caller: Um, I have had a friend introduce me to someone to go on a date with but it doesn't happen frequently. That was probably the only time that I've been set up with a friend. Otherwise, no, but I would love that scenario. I would like to, for them to create that algorithm instead of the dating app.

Esther Perel: You can imagine that two or three of you come together and each one brings four or five people.

Caller: I'm gonna propose this to my friend group.

Esther Perel: You turn it into a potluck or whatever, barbecue, whatever. But imagine three people come together, each one brings four people they like. At best, you make new friends. And at better, you find someone you wanna see again.

Caller: I really like this idea.

Esther Perel: There's a way to amplify on the app. The app does what the app does, but there's lots of other ways we can create our own, you know, man-made algorithm to amplify, to create a ripple effect, to have more people. And everyone probably has three, four people among the people you see that they like and that they say, each one brings a few people we like and we know would connect with the others. And we create a bigger circle. Can be all queer, yeah, can be all queer, can be mixed, but, but there is a way to actually bring people who are not living close by these days. Everybody's talking about how isolated or too isolated we are, about how we could have more friends, about how difficult it is sometimes to have friendship between men. But on the other end, how queer men actually often have more friends actually than straight men do with each other. How we help people, meet new people if you work remote and if you don't go on the street and you don't go to supermarket by yourself and you don't go to work in person and where exactly are we supposed to meet? So you create an event. It doesn't just have to be a two hour dinner, it could be an overnight, but basically people can drive in from a distance. It doesn't just have to be who's in the hood.

Caller: I agree.

Esther Perel: And when you do it, it gives you energy. It's the opposite of social anxiety, by the way. And so far from looking at you, from the moment I threw that idea, I've seen joy and anticipation and imagination. I haven't seen much anxiety at the idea. Am I picking that up correctly?

Caller: You're correct. I'm excited about the idea. Not anxious, which is good for me.

Esther Perel: Great. We don't even have to think about it, but I didn't see any. I see, you like it, your wheels are spinning, you're thinking. Who, when, where, what, how. And it's fun.

Caller: I've been thinking things have had to change with dating. Like why do I keep expecting a different outcome when I keep doing the same thing? So this is, I have to do this. Yes, thank you for the idea. This will be good, something new.

Esther Perel: Do you travel?

Caller: I, I do, yes.

Esther Perel: And when you travel, do you reach out to people in the queer community?

Caller: I don't. I don't.

Esther Perel: As they say in my language, pourquoi pas? Why not?

Caller: I'm not. You're right. Why not?

Esther Perel: There are volunteer organizations everywhere, queer organizations. There are groups of all sorts. Reach out before you travel and just say, I'm coming to town. Anyone would like to meet?

Caller: Yeah, I really like this idea. When I do travel, that's always a big part of travel for me, is the connections and the meeting the people. Two years ago, I walked the Camino de Santiago in Spain, and that's just about community and people. But I've never considered prioritizing prior to a trip, like finding those avenues and meeting other queer people. So I will, I will remember that because connection is a huge part of travel for me.

Esther Perel: So this is just a little bit more deliberate. I mean, it's a combination between the happenstance, the serendipity, and then the more deliberate. The more deliberate is, who are the queer communities in the places where I go? What are they doing? How do I join them? Among people who have often not found a home or a community, there is often more likelihood that they will welcome the traveler.

Caller: Yes. You're giving me so much to think about right now, Esther. I'm much more introverted, so I have to like, when I hear these new ideas, I always don't have an immediate response. But please know that I am hearing you. Yes.

Esther Perel: Good. So, it's okay. Take it in. Do it your way. Do it the introverted way, the slow way, the whichever way that is yours. And then let me know what you do.

Caller: Okay.

Esther Perel: So I'll let you sit with this and we'll recap, you know, what are some of the main things you take with you from this conversation.

Caller: First is going to be recognizing that while this friend was very, is important to me, that experience of transcendence wasn't 100% based on him, it was me choosing to open up to someone else, which I have never done before in that

way. So if I want to come across love again like that, it's gonna be dependent on me being open, choosing to be open to others.

Esther Perel: Yeah.

Caller: When it comes to connecting, being deliberate to meet people outside of dating apps. I can create that space. Yeah, I will have more thoughts, I'm sure after I think about it more Esther, but those are some immediate, immediate thoughts that are coming to my mind.

Esther Perel: I see that you have a guitar behind you.

Caller: I do. Yes, I do.

Esther Perel: Do you compose songs as well?

Caller: I do, yep. That was actually when I first met this friend, I made this love ballad. So I do like to put my experience and feelings into music.

Esther Perel: Beautiful.

Caller: I like to do that alchemy, transform. Yeah.

Esther Perel: May I suggest that you, as part of the transition that you're in, that you compose a song for the next phase. For where you're going.

Caller: For where I'm going.

Esther Perel: For what you're taking with you and what you're leaving behind. And that you have fun doing it.

Caller: Yes. That's an incredible idea. I've kind of abandoned music a little bit recently, so this is gonna be... Yeah, I'm gonna do this.

Esther Perel: Music is an important part of your life, and music should accompany you into the next chapter of your life.

Caller: Every time I hear you say something, Esther, I just need the pause to take it in. Yes, that's... yes, I will do this.

Esther Perel: You're welcome. And we'll be in touch. Thank you so much.

Caller: Thank you, Esther.

Jesse (Producer): This was an *Esther Calling*, a one-time intervention phone call recorded remotely from two points somewhere in the world. If you have a question you'd like to explore with Esther, could be answered in a 40 or a 50 minute phone call, send her a voice message, and Esther might just call you. Send your question to producer@estherperel.com.

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