



**Wild & Sublime® Podcast, Season 2 Episode 49**  
**“Eavesdropping: Is suffering optional?”**  
**November 18, 2021**

**Do you avoid difficult conversations with partners, or leap right into the sticky stuff? In the second episode in our Eavesdropping series — unplanned, no-holds-barred conversations, beginning with a guest’s question for Karen — Brandon Hunter-Haydon asks, “What does it mean to choose pain over suffering?”**

**Host: Karen Yates**

**Guests: Brandon Hunter-Haydon**

[Wild & Sublime theme music]

Brandon Hunter-Haydon

Everybody's waiting for us to talk about how this relates to sex. [laughter] No — I would be too, right? I'm with you all.

Karen Yates

I always say this at the end of like the Sermon — like, 'I know what you're all thinking: How does this relate to sex?' Well, it does! [laughs]

Brandon Hunter-Haydon

It does.

Karen Yates

Welcome to Wild & Sublime, a sexy spin on infotainment®, no matter your preferences, orientation, or relationship style, based on the popular live Chicago show. Each week, I'll chat about sex and relationships with citizens from the world of sex positivity. You'll hear meaningful conversation, dialogues that go deeper, and information that can help you become more free in your sexual expression. I'm sex educator Karen Yates.

This week, we continue our 'Eavesdropping' series: extemporaneous, no holds barred conversation about sex and intimacy. Today, a deep conversation about the choices we make in relationships, with recurring guest Brandon Hunter-Haydon. Keep listening.

If you are a fan of Wild & Sublime, consider directly supporting the show by becoming a member of The Afterglow, a community on Patreon. Each membership level gives you cool benefits like access to Q&A panels with sexperts, my creator notes, and now, merch discounts. And through the end of November 2021, all folks signing up for the \$10 a month level or above get a Wild & Sublime sticker immediately. Apolline, our black cat mascot, will remind you daily that you are a sex-positive beast. Me-ow. This sticker is not available on the website, so get it while it lasts. The link to Patreon and our one-time tip jar is in the show notes. And, don't feel like contributing moolah? You can contribute in other ways. Forward this episode, write a review, or follow us on Instagram or Facebook. Thank you so much for your support.

Hey, folks. If you listened to the last Eavesdropping episode with Mksthingshappin a few weeks ago, you might recall that I said that today's episode, with intimacy coach and therapist Brandon Hunter-Haydon, was actually the first Eavesdropping episode that I recorded, but that it was so powerful for me that I wanted to hold off a bit before dropping the episode. Part of that is due to the state I was in the day we recorded. I had just come back from an intense event that I talk about today in our conversation. And that, coupled with the question Brandon asked, made for a really deep dialogue. I saw Brandon last week while I was traveling in the Northeast, and we agreed, this is not the sort of episode to listen to while you're running errands. It does require some focus. And, if you'll recall, the point of the eavesdropping framework is that the guest asks me a question that I don't know in advance, and we take the chat wherever it goes. So sit back and enjoy.

Brandon Hunter-Haydon, welcome.

Brandon Hunter-Haydon

Thank you. It's a pleasure to be back.

Karen Yates

It's always good to see you. So, where shall we begin?

Brandon Hunter-Haydon

I think where I always live, which is: What does it mean to choose pain over suffering? In a variety of contexts. But as a disposition, what does that mean? What does it mean to have an attitude or an approach, either to problems or to opportunities, or to interactions, as choosing pain over suffering? Especially when there is a challenge or conflict, or desire?

Karen Yates

[long pause] You know, it's interesting, when you say that — when you first said it, I immediately went to kink, right? I immediately went there and then I was like—

Brandon Hunter-Haydon

I saw that on your face.

Karen Yates

I'm like, [voice quivering] 'Oh, we're going there...' And then I thought, well, wait, wait a second. Because I started thinking about awareness and beliefs, and operating from an unconscious place — which to me is suffering. And you know, we've just begun this conversation, so I haven't had any time to really sit with, do I always think suffering is about unconsciousness, or not choosing, the act of non-choice? You know, there's a phrase that just gets bandied around to the point where it is meaningless, which is, "Suffering is optional." But going to this place of — so let me go to pain. Maybe I'll come back to suffering.

Brandon Hunter-Haydon

Yeah.

Karen Yates

I know something will be really painful, I shy away from it, and then sit in suffering. And maybe that is — I feel like that could be a little bit of what you're talking about, which is, I've been there several times in my life, around relationships, where it's, I would rather suffer than go through the pain of leaving, addressing, having a conversation of any sort, being vulnerable. It really comes down to — not always, but a lot of times — being vulnerable. What do you have to say to that?

Brandon Hunter-Haydon

Yeah, I think that's part of the essence of what I mean when I say it. And I think that — I mean, just to just to touch back on your first little, like, pointing at that suffering, and what was the phrase? "Suffering is optional." How that might be kind of... I think I have heard that. And that's not a phrase that I would use necessarily. I think it's different, I think it is different to say, choose pain or suffering, rather than suffering is optional. And I think that it extends to all different levels of our experience. And choosing pain over suffering can be about the hard conversation you need to have with your partner about an unmet need, or an emerging desire, or even just a perturbation, an annoyance between the two of you. Or a big change, a new opportunity, or something that will

constitute change and growth. I think most change requires some level of openness, and therefore vulnerability, a letting go of a certain kind of attachment to outcomes, so that you can move with the dynamics of life. And when we don't do that, and more so when we avoid, and shut down and turn away at those moments, that pain gets transmuted into suffering, which is generally more prolonged and more isolating. Right? Pain doesn't necessarily have to be isolating. Suffering usually does. It separates us. The feeling can be very similar to isolation, separating us not only from others, but from ourselves, separating us from the parts of ourselves that are our values, our sense of integrity.

Karen Yates

I would agree. But let me push against that.

Brandon Hunter-Haydon

Sure.

Karen Yates

So, we're very big, on the show, of talking about communicating, you know, and how important it is, and the tough conversations. But there have been many times when these conversations have come up. I think this is a beautiful, a beautiful conversation we're having about this exact thing, where I think to myself back in the day when I was in a long term relationship. And I'm not gonna say hapless, because I wasn't hapless — I had done some hardcore work on myself. Like, intense. And I thought I was on top of my communication game. But I found myself turning away a lot, because it was just too frightening to be that vulnerable. Like, I just, I mean, I was almost paralyzed. Or, I will say, even if I could get to that place of just squeaking out some sort of need, or concern, I would sort of retreat if the conversation didn't develop. And so I think about folks — I think about me. I mean, I'm not even gonna give it over to people listening to this. It's more like, I think about me, and that when I heard people, or even my therapist, talking about this sort of engagement, vulnerable engagement, I was like, you've fucking got to be kidding me. Like, I know, it's the answer. I know it's the answer. But inevitably, it's going to get me to a place that I don't want to go to, which could potentially mean leaving, you know? Now, back to your, you know, the pain part, it really came down to, "No, thank you. I'd rather suffer."

Brandon Hunter-Haydon

Totally. Yeah.

Karen Yates

And it started becoming really clear — like, no, I'd rather just sit here, because I just can't.

Brandon Hunter-Haydon

Totally. And that's a valid answer. I think the more one... When I work with clients, too, I don't I don't try to frame things as, "What is the right or the good choice?"

Karen Yates

Sure, sure.

Brandon Hunter-Haydon

It's, "How aware of you of the choices you're making?" And it is totally valid to say, "I am choosing suffering. I'm choosing to not do this thing that elicits a lot of fear and reticence. So I am going to choose to sit in silence, and to suffer."

Karen Yates

But I got to tell you, it was not — I mean, I knew eventually that I was making a very active choice to suffer, and it was not pleasant.

Brandon Hunter-Haydon

Yes.

Karen Yates

And I sat there a really long time.

Brandon Hunter-Haydon

Totally. What does that offer? That offers a glimpse into one thing, right? That to some degree, we have a relationship with ourselves. And that relationship can be participatory, right? That suffering is not—

Karen Yates

Okay, what do you mean by that? What do you mean?

Brandon Hunter-Haydon

That it doesn't just happen to us. Obviously, bad things happen to us. There are a lot of things built into structures, into just being human beings; we can talk about how those things bear out, right? We can talk about random, unfortunate events; we can talk about how people are victimized by others and by systems. Including all of that, there

is also an element of relating to pain in such a way that we might make choices that actually prolong our suffering. And pointing to that example you just shared is that there are moments where instead of taking an action that would have been painful, maybe even unimaginably so, you knew consciously that you were going to choose a more suffering action for that time period. And in that way, you were making a choice. So you were colluding in that. You had a participatory role in that. There are things in that dynamic that you are not responsible for. However, in that moment, you are having a relationship with suffering that is, you know, participatory.

Karen Yates

I would 100% agree. And you're also kind of shining a light on my memory, of — and this is my inner voice — and, you know, maybe I'll just somehow fall asleep. Like, maybe the suffering, maybe I'll fall asleep, the suffering will fall asleep. Maybe we'll just go into this narcoleptic state. And, yeah, that's not optimal. [laughs] Narcoleptic states aren't optimal. But maybe that's what will happen. And the suffering will get transmuted into this hazy, "This is good enough." This is good enough.

Brandon Hunter-Haydon

Yeah. And maybe for that time period, that was good enough.

Karen Yates

Well, it was. And, you know, what I came to was, I will know. This is the only thing I hung my hat on: I will know when to make a different choice. You know, I will know when I need to — I mean, you're framing it and pain and suffering. I framed it in, I will know when — it will become acutely, or it will be so apparent, when I need to now make a major change, or do something completely different. And it did. It took a couple of years. But it happened. So my question to you as a therapist — you know, and I understand there is no right and wrong... Let's say you're seeing someone who — and you've had this conversation, and they're like, "No, man, I'm gonna choose suffering." And every week they come in, or every couple weeks they come in, and they are suffering. What do you say?

Brandon Hunter-Haydon

Most of the time, I think I just try to get in a way that where, if that's the choice that's being made, and let's really be with it. What's it like to really be with it? Now, having made that choice, what's the physical experience of that? How does it touch and impact the rest of your life when you make that choice? Just to acknowledge, where does it live then? If that's what we're going to move into. And not in a way where I'm giving advice, not in a way where I'm admonishing. I don't think that's my role. And I

don't think that's actually helpful for people. Sometimes, you know, with a close friend, it's different, you know, because we call each other on our shit. And I think it's important for people in your life who will be pretty stark in that way. But I don't see my role most of the time as being that I kind of figure. Because give yourself permission then to be fully with your choice, whichever one it is.

Karen Yates

I think back on this phase in my life, and of course it impacted every single facet of my life. But I did not realize — I mean, I was not yet in a place where I saw the interconnection of every action, every action's impact across the board in all aspects of life. You know, I hadn't made that leap yet. It would have been valuable at that time to really say, how is this choice, the suffering choice, impacting, say, your career? How is the suffering choice impacting your relationships with your friends? How is this suffering choice impacting your general well-being on a day to day basis? Which, of course, it was enormous. I didn't need anyone to tell me that. How is it impacting you somatically? How do you speak to it in your own life? I mean, how is it active for you?

Brandon Hunter-Haydon

For me, one of the biggest things that I come back to is that I don't want to live a life of cowardice. That's probably my biggest thing. So when I think of my values — this is another thing too that suffering can create: clarity around values. You know, again, this is why I never say it's necessarily the wrong choice. It will have different consequences than making the painful choice. But sometimes we have to. We have to let ourselves keep choosing the suffering, and maybe even go to sleep, maybe even get drowsy. And I know that feeling very well. As a nine on the enneagram, which I am not an expert in, but I know enough about my archetype to know that when I can't find the immediate, peaceable solution, when I can't just mediate smoothly everything, I get real sleepy, because I have a conflict threshold. And if I feel myself nearing that, then — it's naptime. [laughs]

Karen Yates

I'm wondering if I'm the same type, because I tend to just go you know, like... Yeah,

Brandon Hunter-Haydon

That makes increasingly more sense to me as a way of my body — also, and my brain — dealing with overwhelm. Dealing with the possibility that seems so terrifying, that it didn't even terrify me in a mortal way, right? Because we still, we can perceive emotional threats the same way we perceive physical threats. Our nervous system is going to try to protect us. And that may mean shutting down. Dissociating, getting

drowsy. Going down. So, yeah, I try to bring it back to my values, because that's something I can kind of hold on to. I can reach for them. I think that's why values work is very important in the work that I do, because it gives people something to reach out for, to hold on to. Something that's a concept, but it's a concept that also is connected to action. Right? And so, if a value of mine is integrity, or is vulnerability, those are values of mine. And also, I can link those to, what does it feel like when I do feel like I'm living in integrity? When I say a hard thing that needs to be said? When I feel myself being vulnerable and taking a risk? It's terrifying. But also, when I know that I've done it, and it has been in alignment with my desires and my values, I know what that feels like. I can connect a physical state to a concept, to a value.

Karen Yates

Yeah, I think that's really important, the physical connection to the value, because I think if you don't connect the two, the value can seem sort of airy, it can not seem grounded. It becomes painful when you've identified a value, and you're living against that value. You're not living in that value. It can be very, very painful, in a suffering sort of way.

Brandon Hunter-Haydon

Yeah. Yeah. I think one way to distinguish that painful feeling — because pain sucks to feel, and suffering sucks to feel — but I can usually tell the difference between the two because suffering is usually linked more to shame. Because shame might be connected to me living very contrary, making a decision that's very contrary to what I know, what I feel is authentic or in alignment with the kind of person that I want to be, or the values that I want to step into in society. The way I frame it is being a coward. I feel shame, when I feel like I've been a coward.

Karen Yates

I'll return to our conversation in a moment. Did you know we have sex-positive resources on our website? If you want to find events, professional support and more, go to [wildandsublime.com](http://wildandsublime.com). Wild & Sublime is supported in part by our Sublime Supporter, Full Color Life Therapy. Therapy for all of you at [fullcolorlifetherapy.com](http://fullcolorlifetherapy.com).

We now return to my dialogue with intimacy coach and therapist Brandon Hunter-Haydon, where we discuss what I did earlier in the day, relationship expectations, and "The Matrix."

You know, something you said on the show, and I think I've reminded you of it on the podcast, is, people have two separate fears. One is the fear of being destroyed, and

the other is the fear of being abandoned. I think that struck me at the time because I could relate. And, for me, part of this idea of destruction, or getting beyond the fear of destruction, is really having a sense, an inviolate sense of self, that is not going to be destroyed. Like, being so present with self, so full with self, that no matter what happens, you are okay. And I'm coming to a deeper place with that lately in my life, to the point where I'm deeply satisfied with the relationship I'm having with myself. And that changes everything. It changes how I interact with people, it changes the depth of my conversation and my ability to be vulnerable. And so I'd like to bring that idea into this conversation we're having around being vulnerable, or the fear of being vulnerable, when you actually really think a piece of you, if not all of you, is going to be destroyed. How does one work with that?

Brandon Hunter-Haydon

Well, I think you touched on it. It's identifying, in whatever ways, looking for the parts of self that are irreducible, that are indestructible. But also, maybe, finding not only a tolerance, but maybe in time a celebration, for how much is destructible, how much is therefore changeable. And when we look at those things, we can identify what we're clinging to. Clinging is the word that I would use. Look for the things that we're attached to. Now we can be attached to people, we can be attached to what they represent in our lives, we can be attached to a desire, we can be attached to values. And it's natural, to be attached to things, in order to form a characterization of self. Especially in our Western context. But to look at what we're actually clinging to — and like I said before, a value can be something that's really almost abstruse, can be really heady and cerebral — but if we don't have a real connection to that, it's almost we can ideologically cling to things rigidly, despite its impact on us. And despite the impact that it's having, the way that it's living out through us on other people. And that can become toxic or stale. So I think it is introducing the permissible idea that there are going to be parts of us that are inviolate, like you say — indestructible, irreducible. And there are going to be parts of us that, even if we thought they were permanent, you know, core facets of ourselves, are actually soluble.

Karen Yates

You know, it's really interesting, you're bringing this up. And I'm smiling because, you know, my life is such that I noticed there's really no chance conversations anywhere in my life. Everything is woven together. And this might be a TMI moment, but I'm going to forge ahead. Today I did some very intense work. Today would have been my mother's 90th birthday. I've had some conversations with a spiritual mentor around looking at — I had a difficult relationship with her. And so, looking at, like, what have I chucked out the window? Of the gifts that she gave me. You know, in opposition and

oppositional energy? No, no. You know, my mother and I had a terrible relationship. I am going to reject all of her. Okay, maybe I can accept a part. But all of this opposition, what is it doing to me? Well, I embarked on this whole thing because I knew her birthday was coming up. And I thought, you know, this feels like a ritual, and I've never done one of these kinds of things. Even though I'm very involved in the world of energy, and rituals are kind of stock in trade, and I believe in them, I've never done one at this level for myself — like, done the work. And her grave is not so very far from my place. It's about a 45 minute drive. So I went out there today. And basically, I had, in preparation, written out all of the gifts that she had given me. And, you know, aspects of self that had firmly become a part of me. And in the middle of all of this, I realized that by opposing her, I was opposing myself, because there was such a large, large piece of her in me. And yet at the same time, in conversation with this mentor of mine, later, I realized — and he rightfully put it this way — he's like, you know, you're actually having a bit of a funeral for yourself. Because these aspects that you've held on to thinking, there's many aspects too that you've held on thinking are your aspects. And they're actually her aspects that you took on, because you were in this wrestling match with her. And the whole arc of identifying, writing, choosing, figuring out how I was going to do the ritual, everything, it was intense and it was powerful. And at the end of the day, I felt lighter. Not like I feel like I'm a tabula rasa right now, but I do feel like there's intense possibilities that have not existed before. And I also see them in newer relationships I'm having with people, and older relationships that have now fallen by the wayside. And it's all part of this action of, what am I choosing? Because it gets back to this choosing piece. And it's like, how much awareness can you live in? Because I'm aware of every day, when I walk through my day, if I'm feeling uncomfortable, I'm actually wrestling with myself. I'm not wrestling with you, or you, or you. I'm wrestling with myself, and concepts that I'm holding onto. And sometimes I can even laugh at myself. Like, I was having lunch today, because they actually had a funeral lunch after the funeral.

Brandon Hunter-Haydon

Nice.

Karen Yates

Yeah, it was pretty fun. And there was a group of people, and I was sitting there, outside, just judging the fuck out of them. And it made me laugh. Because I'm like, "Look at you, you're just sitting here judging them." And why? Why? Because of X, Y, and Z. You know, these aspects. So, yeah, I'm not even sure how I got to relaying this story, but I think it's around the destruction of aspects of self, or identity. You know, how do we put our identity together? Are we a mosaic? Is it woven? What's going on?

Brandon Hunter-Haydon

Well, I love what you brought up about laughing at ourselves, because it reminds me of what Alan Watts, the philosopher, the lay philosopher, described — he was a controversial figure, but I really like a lot of his material — as the 'cosmic giggle.' And that is a part of self, or even something before self, that is always able to laugh at what you take seriously, or what's going on. And I don't say this to be flippant about structural oppression, about real life harms and atrocities that play out. It's not about locating all experience into, you know, what you choose to make of it, right? Things do happen to us. And we do need to be able to indict oppression; we do need to be able to locate how systems fail, and how structures that we're attached, to that we cling to, are sorely outdated and only continue to cause suffering. And at the same time, coexisting within ourselves, a part of ourselves is always able to look at our experience and our reactions to our experience. It's kind of funny, it's kind of ridiculous. And I think part of that is the shift between — as Alan Watts says — the shift between taking life seriously, or being sincere. And those are two different things. Those are two different feeling states, those are two different approaches. Often, taking things very seriously can lead to suffering, can lead to clinging. Doing things sincerely is still an emotional investment. We still hurt, we still feel, we still crave and love. We still get to feel the full range, but there's a part of ourselves that knows that part of this is a play. That there's a giggle behind all of this, and that we exist in a blip in time. In space-time. And we can do what we do — we have to be human. Right? But there's a part of ourselves that we can touch upon, or at least maybe even hear, in the back of our consciousness at any given moment. Especially when we're being petty. [laughs] Especially when we're, you know, when we are judging others, or you know, throwing a fit about certain things, which is fine. But as long as there's a part of ourselves that can stop taking ourselves too seriously. And sometimes that can actually be really helpful in moments of great suffering around, like, ah, you know, I keep shying away from that hard conversation, even though I know that there's this thing I really need to say, and every day that I don't say it, I feel like a coward. And I feel shame for not saying it. And then I know that if someone were doing that to me, I would find that untrustworthy — oh my god! I can just keep piling onto myself. I can just neutron star, you know, just gravity crushing in on myself and imploding. But if I can find that part that's like, you know, yeah, this is a blip in eternity, right? I'm a particle on a particle in a sea of particles in, like, an insignificant part of the galaxy. I'm like, the universe is okay as a star, you know, that I'm orbiting. So if there's a part of me that's like, yeah, I don't take this seriously. Because on an existential level, obviously, even just a realistic physical level, this doesn't last forever. There's no way this will last forever. The thing that I fear the most will not last forever. Maybe I can laugh at this. What room now does that afford me

between me and the problem? Whether it's a sliver, right, that wedges itself — of humor, or of breath. How does that change my relationship with my experience of suffering?

Karen Yates

For sure. Yeah, you're reminding me that, like, years ago, I don't know, somewhere where there were a lot of Christmas Christmas lights inside, and they were blinking on and off at various points, and I was like, yeah, this is like... life. People are dying. They're blinking out. Other lights are blinking in. This is what's going on right now. And it was actually really beautiful. Because it just made me realize there's a concert, there's a symphony of life surging into the planet, and life leaving, at every single moment. People are dying, and people are being born. And it's a great comfort, actually. I found it super comforting. It really helped me.

There's something else you were saying that I was thinking about another conversation I was having today, that — oh, you were talking about the super-hard conversations, where you're like, oh, no, I really need to be doing that conversation. And I haven't done that conversation yet. And I really need to. I have a friend, and she's actually, for whatever reason — she's a newer friend in my life. I've known her a couple years, and she is that person that I get to... We're really good at having these hard conversations with each other. I don't know how it happened. I think it's just our chemistry, and where we are in our lives. But we can navigate pretty quickly the shit that happens between us. And, wow, what a gift. It's a real gift. Because it's gotten to the point where it's just not even... Well, it's still a little painful. I mean, I don't think those conversations are ever super easy. Maybe they will be, someday, for me — but it's just very nice having her in my life. As well as, I've noticed, sometimes I will practice vulnerability with acquaintances, and then I build a muscle, you know, build a muscle of being able to do this kind of work. You know, it's like concentric circles working in until you get to, like, great friends and lovers.

Brandon Hunter-Haydon

Sometimes it's easier with a stranger. Sometimes it's easier to say something you've been holding on to for years in casual conversation with a stranger, because they're not attached to you in any other way. And it happens. You can have these moments of pretty intimate sharing, maybe they don't even realize how meaningful it is to you. You find yourself — I know I have done it. I have definitely shared things that I've never said to anyone else to a stranger, as a way of like, just hearing myself speak it. Now I know it's possible. Just to tie this into the juicier parts of, you know, where this conversation

— everybody's waiting for us to talk about how this relates to sex. No, no, I'm with you too. I'm with you all.

Karen Yates

I always say this at the end of the sermon — like, "I know what you're thinking: how does this relate to sex? Well, it does!" [laughs]

Brandon Hunter-Haydon

It does. I mean, it doesn't take a lot to extend this into scenarios where people are trying to express themselves erratically, right? Sexually or relationship-wise, things that they are curious about, or that they know that they need, or that they know that they desire, and how there's so many prohibitions culturally, you know, psychologically, around our ability to even want what we want or have fantasies, even if they're things we don't want in real life. There's so many prohibitions and so much stigma around that, barriers to us expressing ourselves. And that all that colludes on top of our own complexes around who we're allowed to be, and what kind of moral judgment there is around even saying something that could be hard for another person to hear. We don't have a lot of permission sometimes, to say, "You know what? I feel close to you, and it's a value of mine to be honest and I would always want you to feel like you could share hard things with me. This is a fantasy I've always had. And it's just a fantasy. It's just something that I've used for my own self pleasure, or that has even involuntarily come into my mind. And I'm not even saying right now this is a thing that I have to have, it's just the thing that is a part of me. And I want you to know me. So maybe I don't even know what it's all about. But can you hear me say this to you?" And sometimes that can be — we've talked about this before in previous episodes, that that can be the birth of intimacy between people: simply witnessing and giving permission for an unknown part of your partner to emerge, right? If we can hold the space long enough to not react in fear of that, because that can challenge our concept of who that person is, that we're attached to, so that we feel safe, so that we know what's going on. But if we can make a little room for possibility, a sense of possibility, to come forward, that can be actually nearly intimating, and really healing for a lot of people.

Karen Yates

Wow, there are so many things you said just now that are just hitting me at 60 miles an hour. And so I want to go back. [laughs] So the first is, I loved what you said, that just speaking it without expectation. Because I think so often it's like, if one brings it up to a partner, there's potentially an expectation — I would like this to happen. Either for, you know, the partner is afraid, or you desperately want it to happen. But to just name it and with no — just put it on the table, to say, "This is me. This is part of me. Know

me." That's fantastic. The other thing you said, and you said it really quickly, I think what I heard you say was, you know, as the partner receiving this potential fantasy that might be a game changer in whatever way, at the very least how you see your partner, the more we're looking to other people to be our bulwark, or anchor, or thing that fills the hole inside — that is not a recipe for disaster, but this is what these moments of like, where the mask gets removed, and you see maybe more of the person, these can be very upsetting moments. You know, a partner being very vulnerable and being like, "This is me, I'm bisexual," Or, "This is me, I want you to beat me."

Brandon Hunter-Haydon

Mmhmm.

Karen Yates

It can be very disorienting, right?

Brandon Hunter-Haydon

Yeah, absolutely. And seeing couples, that's also, it's so important to validate that — how hard it is for however many people involved in the unveiling of truth, in the expression of vulnerability. It's going to challenge everybody to some degree or another. And that's normal. That's part of what makes the vulnerability so valuable to everybody who's involved in it. Why? Because when a person is allowed to be a dynamic and changing entity — because we all inherently are — in front of us, and they choose to share that with us in a way that is as respectful and as tender as they know how to do, it also gives us a chance to become aware of the fact that, oh, the things that made me feel safe about, you know, whatever was attached to this expression, there are things that I, this character of a person that I had formed in my mind, and that's what made me feel that sense of predictability, that sense of stability that I need in a relationship, that I want to feel in a relationship so I feel safe, and that I know what's going to happen. The real thing that we get to hold on to is that integrity that's underneath the expression, is that desire to be known. And that we're committed to each other enough that we want to be seen, that we want to expand in front of each other. That's the actual thing to attach to — not whatever the detail is, not the value that is changed, not the idea that I never knew you were — I thought you were straight, or I didn't know you liked butt stuff. Whatever that is, right? That stuff is gonna change on the surface, right? The doing stuff, the interest. But the underneath thread, the real thing to attach to, to acknowledge the security and stability, the investment in a relationship is, wow, the desire to be known. This person is choosing me to do that with me, and that's incredibly vulnerable. Right? I think as long as people are doing this in a way that is respectful and, you know, has some adherence to boundaries and

things like that, I think that's a real opportunity to find out what the actual anchors of the connection are. And I think kink can offer a lot of people both the skills and the embodied experience of what it's like to live into those aspects of self that are otherwise forbidden or hidden, too taboo for the world.

Karen Yates

I would agree. And I would also throw in a rousing endorsement for the Wheel of Consent, Betty Martin's work, in the fact that if you potentially don't — you might not be kinky, but you want a very structured, extremely structured way of trying new things, getting to know yourself in your relational dynamic, or your transactional dynamic. That's pretty golden stuff, too.

Brandon Hunter-Haydon

It is. I love "May I? Will you?" Just that exercise alone is so powerful around practicing yes and no. And seeing and feeling what it feels like in your body to form the word, "No," and "Yes." Through that exercise in real time.

Karen Yates

Right. Right. It's important to — yes, to feel the Yes, to feel the No, because all of these powerful words have, you know, physical resonance in our body when our mouth forms, and the sounds come out. And we have to feel it. You know...

Brandon Hunter-Haydon

Receive it!

Karen Yates

Oh, my gosh, yeah. Yeah. Yeah. And work with these moments really slowly. Don't gloss over them. Take it in, in however much time you need to take in... I'm sort of thinking of The Matrix and the slow-mo bullet coming at you, you know, take it into the point where you can pluck the bullet out of the air. [laughs]

Brandon Hunter-Haydon

Yeah, totally!

Karen Yates

Look at it and be like, "This is a bullet. And I've just plucked it out of the air." [laughs]

Brandon Hunter-Haydon

It's uncanny you said that. I was just watching a ton of "Matrix" clips on YouTube last night.

Karen Yates

Really?? Oh my... !

Brandon Hunter-Haydon

Yeah, I mean, that was such a coming-of-age like era for me. First of all, the whole aesthetic definitely was an expression of my sexual orientation. [laughs] If I could just have people watch the original trilogy, that would really answer a lot of questions. Or at least give a lot of clues. It would give a lot of clues you can follow up on.

Karen Yates

Oh, my God, it's great. It's great. "Here. This is all you need to know about me." [laughs]

Brandon Hunter-Haydon

Here's your starter kit, watch these. [laughter] Yeah, totally. And I don't know about you, but I, you know, part of my baggage is, if I ask a question, or I express an interest, or a desire that is met with a no, then I was wrong for asking that in the first place. Because I should have known better. And I know a lot of people have that. That the actual hearing "No" is wrapped up with a moral implication that you already fucked up by expressing yourself, that you ought to have known better, and that asking the thing was painful or disruptive or wrong enough that that person has to tell you "No." And that can really — I know that used to send me on the spiral roller coaster, hardcore. And it used to be really hard to hear a "No."

Karen Yates

[whispering] Yeah, yeah...

Brandon Hunter-Haydon

It took a lot of work to learn the value of receiving "No," and now I love it. It makes another person so trustworthy. And it gives us an opportunity then to stay curious about the No, about my reaction to the No, and still have the conversation. It doesn't have to be the end.

Karen Yates

Right!

Brandon Hunter-Haydon

It's actually the beginning to a more honest — like where you were actually at in that conversation. And "No," just puts you on the right platform of where you're at now, in that conversation. That's hard. It's hard. But it's so powerful.

Karen Yates

It's so interesting. I'm thinking about where we began the conversation, and where we are now. And I'm thinking — because like, at the beginning of the conversation, I was really coming back to myself years ago, before I had had sort of an alchemical transformation, right? And now, listening as we kind of are coming closer to the end, I'm like, oh, yeah, this is why I do it. This is why I am always trying to go for more vulnerability. Because there is so much freedom. There's so much freedom in just being oneself. Everything falls away. I mean, really, everything falls away. And I think about, in the past couple of weeks and the conversations I've had lately, with various people, it feels like, oh, wow, there was a drag on my motor and I didn't even realize it. And then an important conversation happens, and it's like something gets released. And I'm like, ah, yeah. Yeah, that was good. Glad that conversation took place! You know? So...

Brandon Hunter-Haydon

Yeah. And I want to make room that, of course there are situations where it is not safe to be honest. There is real threat to life and livelihood, and access to resources — because again, we do live in a series of systems and structures that are not oriented to equity. And we have only barely begun to even acknowledge the suffering that is continuing to to be sown, before we can even acknowledge the painful choices we have to make about what kind of changes we want to make before it's too late. So I want to, of course, make room for that. But obviously, we are talking about, aside from situations where there's an immediate and credible threat, you know, that yes, it is worth it. It is worth maybe shifting away from taking things too seriously, to being sincere — to finding the cosmic giggle behind the moment, to laugh at yourself and your situation. And to ask yourself, especially when we are feeling in our suffering, when we're in our shame: you know, the more I think about it, is this feeling worse? This is probably worse than how it would feel to make the painful choice. Maybe I'm more used to this. So suffering can be much more familiar.

Karen Yates

Oh, bingo. [cicadas buzzing outside] I mean, I think that's it. I think it's the fact that suffering is, if you — I shouldn't say you — if I, and I have, had long, much longer

stretches of suffering in my life than pain. And so — it's so funny, these cicadas are just rocking the house—

Brandon Hunter-Haydon  
Yeah, they are.

Karen Yates  
You know, if you can hear me...

Brandon Hunter-Haydon  
Oh, I can.

Karen Yates  
But it's like, suffering just became the operating system. Or I thought that — this is the way it is, you know. And so, to wake up to a different choice can be shocking. Because then sometimes I think anger comes up. I knew someone years ago who said, "A starving person only becomes angry when they start becoming fed." And I always take it as you know, if we make deprivation choices for ourselves, when we finally do start feeding ourselves, we realize, wow... We, or I, have been choosing a deprivational life. I've been choosing suffering all along, and I didn't have to do that. But, you know, I'm also aware — the other piece that I had wanted to say earlier, but it got away from me, is, I don't regret anymore those years where I was like, I would rather be living in a narcoleptic haze than make the painful choice. Because what I did learn was compassion.

Brandon Hunter-Haydon  
Yes.

Karen Yates  
For others. I learned, hey, that was the best I could do. If I could have done differently, I would have. I would have! We all do the best — we choose the best option we can at the time. I just wasn't able to make a different choice, you know?

Brandon Hunter-Haydon  
Yes. I love that. Yeah. And that equips you to both be more compassionate with yourself and others and at the same time, set firmer boundaries, set more clear boundaries that are rooted in what you have lived through, through your lived, embodied experience of knowing what it's like to choose that over and over, to be on

the other side of it. And to be compassionate towards others. Also, being able to speak directly and clearly to it when that's not going to work for you in a relationship.

Karen Yates

For sure. Yes.

Brandon Hunter-Haydon

So it goes together, that compassion and that clarity of boundary actually goes — they go together. [laughs] I feel like... I feel like I should say "boobs." I should just say "boobs" a few times, just to add kind of like a spice. Because I mean, I love going deep. I mean, to me, this is perfectly luscious, to have these types of conversations, to get existential. But it's not everybody's cup of tea, I think.

Karen Yates

[laughing] I know, I know! I'm sitting here thinking — I'm like, "Wow." I feel like we're just in this, like, black velvet cosmic... Like, we're spelunking. And it's just like, [snorkeling noise]... It's like, what's happening... what's happening to people who are listening!?? [prolonged laughter]

Brandon Hunter-Haydon

I think this one was for you and me.

Karen Yates

Oh my god, I have to go back and listen to it...

Brandon Hunter-Haydon

If it's not the most popular one, uh, I'm sorry!

Karen Yates

[laughing] I'm already putting the title together. [serious voice] "Pain versus suffering in sex and relationships."

Brandon Hunter-Haydon

Yeah. Uh, oh man. Folks are gonna be pissed.

Karen Yates

Well, we did it. I mean, you know... we'll do it again.

Brandon Hunter-Haydon

We will.

Karen Yates

For more information on Brandon Hunter-Haydon, go to our show notes. Well, that's it, folks. Have a very pleasurable week. Thank you for listening. If you know someone who might be interested in this episode, send it to them. Do you like what you heard? Then give us a nice review on your podcast app. You can follow us on social media @wildandsublime and sign up for newsletters at [wildandsublime.com](http://wildandsublime.com). I'd like to thank associate producer Julia Williams and design guru Jean-Francois Gervais. Theme Music by David Ben-Porat. This episode was edited by The Creative Imposter studios. Our media sponsor is Rebellious Magazine, feminist media, at [rebelliousmagazine.com](http://rebelliousmagazine.com).