

Done with Dieting Podcast #93: Understanding Pronouns with Michelle Johnston



Full Episode Transcript

With your Host
Elizabeth Sherman

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So, I have compassion for even the Christians that hate who I am. I don't want to other them. I don't want to hate them in the same way that they hate me. I don't want to bring myself down to violating the command. I don't want to accept what they're doing in terms of oh, he passed the law, and I can't get married. Okay.

No. I'm still going to fight for the rights of everyone to be treated with equality and dignity. And I'm not going to dehumanize you or degrade you in the process because you are a product of your own upbringing and the church that you grew up with and the parents that you grew up with. And there have been people who once they know better, they do, do better.

If you're open to having a conversation, that's where the change can happen.

You are listening to the done with dieting podcast. The podcast for women in midlife, who are done with dieting, but still want to lose weight and feel good in your clothes.

You know that diets don't work long term. But you feel like there's this secret that everyone else knows that you just haven't figured it out yet.

I am your host, Elizabeth Sherman. And I've helped hundreds of women get off the diet roller coaster, change their relationship with food, exercise, and their bodies.

Through this podcast, my goal is to help you too.

Welcome. Let's get started.

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I remember as a kid making fun of my mom because she would do quote unquote old people things. Like, get the name of a movie just slightly wrong, or not use slang in the right way, or just not understand pop culture, or a new way of doing things.

Now, as a woman in my mid-fifties, I find myself in that same position. I was recently on a podcast and the host told me that I had just accidentally outed myself and my age by saying "the inter-webs".

I invited my guest today, Michelle Johnston, onto the podcast because I know that many folks our age struggle with keeping up with the language and the concepts surrounding the L G B T Q I A plus community.

What does it mean when your granddaughter asks to be called "they" or that they come out as transgendered?

And the problem that so many of us face is being confused, but then at the same time, not wanting to ask questions and feeling shame or judgment about not understanding. But then not knowing where else to turn because it seems like overnight everyone received a memo about what was happening in the world except for you.

I invited Michelle or MJ on the podcast to help you understand all of the different letters in L G B T Q I A plus and what they mean. And help you to navigate the changing landscape when it comes to gender and sexuality. Our conversation went in directions that I totally didn't expect.

MJ is an ordained priest and worked as a prison chaplain. And so, of course we got into spirituality and the Christian Church, which makes total sense since many of the views that we've adopted in reference to gender, sexuality, and even what it means to have a traditional marriage looks like, it's all rooted in the lens of Christian value.

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So, without further ado, I present Michelle Johnston.

Elizabeth: All right, everyone, welcome MJ to the show. MJ, I am so glad that you are here. Welcome to the Done with Dieting podcast.

MJ: Thank you. I'm very excited to be here.

Elizabeth: Okay. So, let's start out with the first question. Who are you? Who do you help? What do you do?

MJ: Who am I? I often ask myself that. I am a human, first of all, who happens to be a life coach and an ordained priest. I also happen to be queer, non-binary, and fun, joyful. Those are like my values, and I like to help other queer questioning and trans people live their best life. And for each person, obviously, that's going to look a little bit different depending on how you grew up, in what part of the country you grew up. Did you grow up in religion or with no religion?

And so, unpacking the things that are getting in the way of you, like fully accepting who you are, loving who you are, knowing that you are beautiful and wonderful and a hundred percent like whole and perfect just how you are. That journey is different for everyone. And I love to go along with people on that journey.

Elizabeth: I love that. I mean, everything that you said was just so amazing and beautiful.

MJ: Yeah. It's like people just living and that's what all of us want, right? Whether you're queer or not queer, like you want to live your best life. If you want to take full advantage of life, live your passion, whatever that looks like, have the freedom to be who you are.

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And as queer people, we often either feel like we don't have the freedom to be who we are. We're afraid to be who we are. We're actively being, you know, repressed in some way. So, there's like that little extra that we have to deal with.

Elizabeth: Yeah. Well, and I'm sure that so many women listening right now can totally understand that from the place of being a woman and having societal expectations of what you should do and how life is supposed to act or be. And so, I can only imagine that as a queer person that it's tenfold.

MJ: Yeah. We're under whoever you are, the expectations of gender norms which are all constructed and made up. We're also under the little boxes, I guess you could say that our sexual orientation, so if you're outside the norms of cisgender and heterosexual, then you have that added layer.

And even if you're just a cisgender woman who is outside of the norms in terms of maybe you like to wear more masculine looking clothing, but you're still attracted to men, you don't feel like you want to be a man, so you're cisgender. But if you're outside of that norm in some way, then what we fear is like we're going to get the side eye from society for what the way that we're not acting in conformity to expected norms, which are made up. I mean, it's not like God came down and said, girls must wear pink and boys must wear blue.

Elizabeth: Well, yeah. I mean, gosh, there are so many ways that I want to take this conversation.

MJ: Yes.

Elizabeth: And so, we can use that same way of talking about it when we're talking about body size and body shape, right? That what it means to dress like a woman or look like a woman, right? And who decided that?

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MJ: Yes, exactly. Diet culture, the patriarchy, men, women are in service of men in a patriarchal society. And so, of course, our bodies should conform to what they find attractive or appealing or whatnot. And yes, it affects. There's like levels, right? So like, as a female, you're oppressed in certain ways in a patriarchal society. Then as a queer person, there's a layer of that.

But these boxes that we're putting people in, they have a negative impact on heterosexual and cisgender people as well, because they're also required to conform to the norms. And yes, they have the privilege for the most part, they do conform. But what about the straight guy who likes dresses, but he is not queer, he's not transgender. He just happens to like wear a dress. Not acceptable in our society. Right?

Elizabeth: Yeah. Okay. So yeah. You've just said so many amazing things, but I think that we should back up.

MJ: Yes.

Elizabeth: Because you've used a lot of terms that may be unfamiliar with some of the listeners. And so, let's start with the very beginning. So, L G B Q I A plus. It's a mouthful.

MJ: Yes.

Elizabeth: What does that all mean?

MJ: Okay. So, the letters themselves, lesbian, gay, bisexual, those are sexual orientations. And then T transgender, Q could be queer or questioning, I, is intersex. And now, I've even seen two S for two spirited, that's like a Native American. A nod to Native American intersex or gender fluid people. And then, the plus is because there's more to it, like A sexual, for example, or A romantic. Or in the bucket of attraction, are you

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attracted to just cisgender males and females, transgender, any gender, gender doesn't play a role.

So, it's a big pot so that's where the plus is. And the confusion comes in because T is a gender identity thing, whereas the L G B is sexual orientation. So, sexual orientation and gender identity get confused. Sexual orientation is who you're attracted to and your gender identity is how you identify in terms of male, female, non-binary. And whether or not that matches what you were assigned at birth.

So, I was assigned female at birth based on my external genitalia. And I was socialized as female, but I identify as non-binary because I don't strongly identify as masculine, or feminine, or male, or female. I feel for myself, like I'm somewhere in the middle, if I was going to lean in one direction. It would probably be leaning towards the masculine.

And then, so there's that whole spectrum of where somebody falls on that like how I identify gender. I heard somebody recently say, your sexual orientation is who you go to bed with, and your gender identity is who you go to bed as. Like, I go to bed as a non-binary person or a transgender person, or a male, or female.

Elizabeth: Okay.

MJ: Makes sense.

Elizabeth: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

MJ: It's an attraction between two identity.

Elizabeth: Y'all, 100%. Let's also talk about non-binary. Can you define that?

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MJ: Yeah. So, there's lots of terms that are kind of in that bucket gender neutral, gender queer, non-binary. It's outside of the binary of male and female. And for each person some would say, I don't identify with any aspect of gender. Some would say like me, I do feel like I'm somewhere in the middle. So, I would say, gender neutral like I'm not strongly one way or the other. And non-binary is just a way of saying, I don't fit in the binary of male and female.

Elizabeth: Okay. Got it. Okay, so then there's another term that we want to introduce, which is cis.

MJ: Yes. Cisgender versus transgender, so gender is the commonality there. Cisgender means the way that you feel on the inside matches the sex that you were assigned at birth. So, if I feel like a female and I happen to be assigned female at birth, then that is a match, and I would be cisgender.

And then, trans is the opposite of that. If your assigned sex at birth doesn't match how you feel inside your gender identity. So, there's not trans non-binary, that's what I would be. And then, there's trans binary. So, people who were assigned female at birth, but identify as the binary male. And people who were assigned male at birth but identify as the binary female.

Elizabeth: Okay. So, what we're talking about is really a continuum. On one side of the continuum, we have cisgendered, which is male and female traditional roles. On the other side, we have transgendered, which is people who are born women and through whatever identify as male or the opposite born male, identify as female.

And then, within that we have the non- binary category which someone could be anywhere within that.

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MJ: Anywhere on the gradient. So, you can kind of think as cis as there's a match between the biological sex you're assigned and what you feel to be true for you. And trans, there's a mismatch between what you feel true to be you versus the biological sex that you were born with.

Elizabeth: Okay, great. Thank you for cleaning that up, cause I'm sure that that was really confusing for a lot of people, right?

MJ: It is confusing. Yeah, absolutely.

Elizabeth: And so, then that brings up another question, which is something that has been more popular today than when I was growing up. I don't think it even existed. And right now, I see on your Zoom that you have your name and then you have they/ she. And we see, she, her, and they. Can you talk more about pronouns? Cause I think that that fits into this whole discussion as well.

MJ: Yeah, absolutely. So, the pronouns are related to your gender identity. And just to add another little nuance to it, right? My gender identity is how I feel inside my gender expression is what you see. And just because you look at me and you might say, Oh, that's a female. She probably uses she pronouns. That is not necessarily the case.

So, the way I'm presenting doesn't necessarily, you can't assume that I am a she or he, based on that. They and them is in the same way, that there's the spectrum for, that your gender identity and your sexual orientation. They fit more of how I feel of not strongly in the male camp, not strongly in the female camp. They, is a very neutral, it's like a non-gendered pronoun. And that's the best description of who I am.

Now, you see on my screen they/ she, for a very good reason because I was socialized female. I used the pronouns, she, her almost my entire life. I'm 55 now. And so, even though, they described me very accurately because I wasn't used to using it, it felt kind

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of weird internally. So, I say, my pronouns are in transition because I'm getting used to what more accurately feels true to who I am.

So, someday I may be very comfortable with just they, them. So, it's kind of a transition period for me but the pronoun is just identifying. It's kind of you're acknowledging the gender identity that you have. So, what's confusing for a lot of people we'll say, but that's not grammatically correct to say they and the singular. And the easiest to understand example is when I ask my partner, hey, did the mail carrier come yet? She might respond to me, no, they have not come.

She's referring to a singular human that's coming to deliver our mail and we use, they. So, we've used they has been around a long time. It's just that in our western culture, we haven't used it as much. And my theory, I don't know if there's data to back this up is a lot of times that is because it's not safe to venture outside of the gender or sexual norms. There's a safety issue there. And because we don't use it, I grew up. I had no idea that there was an option to use another pronoun that more accurately describes who I am. So, when I found out that that was an option, I'm like, yes, sign me up.

Elizabeth: But yeah, that was really helpful because I had read on the internet that like she/ them could also be that sometimes you feel feminine and other times you don't.

MJ: Yes. And that can also be true, absolutely. Absolutely. That's why it's always best. So, there's generalities, right? Just like, hormones that's something that you deal with, right? We all have estrogen, testosterone, insulin. However, we all have them in varying degrees and levels, so you can't say, oh, this thing worked for me because I had whatever low insulin or high insulin.

It's not necessarily going to work for the next person because not only is the insulin an issue, but it's the whole body, right? It's all of the hormones. As you would say, it's the sleep and the cravings and all of those things combined that make a unique cocktail. And

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it's true as human beings, not all queer people are the same, not all transgender people are the same.

So, how we identify and what it means to us might be slightly different. So, two people even using the “they, them” pronouns might give you a different definition of what it means for them and why they use it. So, I think it's a fun rainbow of possibilities. So, to ask someone, oh, what are your pronouns? Or not assume that their pronouns are he and she. And then, when in doubt, you can just always use their name.

Elizabeth: Well, I love that. And I love that answer because I think that so many people are afraid to ask. And we're afraid to ask when I learned this from another coach that when we ask questions, we expose where we are. And if I don't know, I don't want to alienate someone or expose like that I don't know. And so, for you to say that it's totally safe for you to ask someone, what are your pronouns, what do you prefer to go by is permission that I think a lot of people need.

MJ: Yeah. And I even have on my intake form for my connection calls, what are your preferred pronouns. Because I don't want to make an assumption when you show up on my screen, just because you're presenting as a female, I don't want to make the assumption that she or her are your preferred pronouns.

Elizabeth: Okay. I love it. Thank you for clearing that up. So, let's move on to then sexuality. So, we have straight, which is someone traditionally a woman being attracted to mostly men and men being attracted to women. And then, we have lesbian and gay. We also have bi and poly. Are there more?

MJ: Yeah. So, that is a very good question. That's kind of a spectrum too, right? Like I think bisexual might be the easiest to understand if you consider that sexuality is on like a continuum. I don't know if you or your listeners remember, but many moons ago there was research done by this guy named Kinsey. And he created the Kinsey scale from one

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to six. One being a hundred percent heterosexual, no attraction to the same sex at all. And then, six being a hundred percent homosexual, no attraction to the opposite gender at all.

When I was in college, I had a shirt that said, "Kinsey Six." Which I felt safe wearing it because I thought most people are going to assume like that must be a band or something.

Elizabeth: Nobody knew about it yet.

MJ: No. Right, exactly. So, then if you think about the continuum in between, maybe you are predominantly heterosexual, but you could be attracted to somebody of the same sex. I dated somebody like that many years ago where she had spent her whole life attracted to men, loved men. We met, she fell in love with me, and after we broke up, she's like with men. So, you could say, well, that's weird, like, kind of an anomaly. But it's that she fell in love with the person. And so, her as a human being, the gender of that person wasn't as important as the person themselves.

So, there's like so many nuances all along that continuum that I would say like the possibilities of how someone would describe themselves. She used to say she was hetero flexible. So, she had that one off. And so, clearly, you know, like she's open to it. And then, there's bisexuals, I think that's the easy one. They can go as they say, either way, right? They can be with a man or a woman, whether that's cis, male, trans, male, cis, you know what I mean? So, yes.

And here's the polyamorous, I don't know if I would consider it a sexual orientation, but it just means polyamorous is more to monogamy. So, monogamous relationship is I'm in a relationship with just one person that's me and my partner.

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I have a friend, a few friends who are in polyamorous relationships, meaning they have more than one romantic partner. And the difference between polyamory and cheating on your spouse is that everyone knows what's going on and there's mutual consent among all parties. So, there's no secrecy or doing things behind people's back. Polyamorous people are comfortable being in multiple romantic relationships.

Elizabeth: Yeah. And so, as you were talking, I just keep thinking about going back to the word patriarchy. And also, thinking about the Christian values that go along with this and how they have really dictated what we believe is right in terms of relationship and sexuality, and how we express ourselves, and all of that great stuff.

MJ: Mm-hmm. Yes.

Elizabeth: I'm looking the clock right now and I'm like, how are we possibly going to get through all of this amazing content in a short amount of time? I may have to have you back.

MJ: I'm going to talk really fast.

Elizabeth: Take your time.

MJ: And I'm also happy to come back. That is a great question. And some people might say, how can you be a priest and be queer at the same time? Other people would also say, how can you be a priest and be a woman like women can't be priests. So, I want to say, let's start high level view is I do identify as Christian, that is the faith tradition that I am a part of and that I know the most about. And we read the Bible, the Hebrew scriptures, and the New Testament. Those are our scriptures.

And so, people will often pluck out a few of those scriptures. If you think about the thousands of scriptures that are in the Bible, there's a few that people use that as queer

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people, we call them the clobber passages or the texts of terror. And they use those to say, you queer person are headed to hell. You are violating what it says in the scripture. God does not like you and you are on the fast track to a very hot future.

Well, there's lots of books that you could read that address each of those scriptures. So, I don't want to go into that kind of detail because we will be here all day. But I will say, and on a high level, when you read the Bible and when I read the Bible and when everybody else reads the Bible, we are interpreting what we are reading.

And sometimes because we're taking something out of context or we don't have enough information, we're misinterpreting what we're reading. And also, even something very simple, I love to use this example, Exodus 20:13, "you shall not murder." Four words, there's a period at the end. There are no exceptions. That's very straightforward.

However, there are hardcore Christians who think it's perfectly okay to murder if you are a soldier in war. Or it's perfectly okay to murder if you are a police officer and you have to kill somebody in the line of duty. I can't. I'm not going to pass a judgment on which way is the truth with the capital T or not. I know what's true for me, but we're all reading those exact four words and we're having a different interpretation.

So, a Baptist would say, murder any kind of murder. War, police officer, somebody breaks into your house and you're defending yourself. It's all under that Exodus 20:13 command and you just broke it.

So, that's what I mean about you're interpreting what you're reading. And my philosophy is as a Christian, I have the life of Jesus to kind of be my guide, right? And when he was asked, what's the most important command, it was to love God. And there's two versions, you love God or love your neighbor as yourself or love everyone as I have loved you. Which is a pretty high bar that we're striving for.

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So, I say, hold your doctrine lightly. Yes, I have my beliefs and convictions that I wholeheartedly believe to be true, and I hold all of that lightly because I also know I'm not God, what I'm reading, I'm interpreting to the best of my ability based on my education, my upbringing, my socialization, all kinds of things, right? All the lenses that I see life through.

So, I'm never going to even when it appears to be saying, ooh, you know what? I'm going to other you, because right here I have permission in the scriptures. I'm going to say, if it doesn't jive with love God, love yourself, and love everybody else, then maybe we're missing something and let's leave the condemnation up to God, perfectly capable of handling it. Right? And then, you are being loving human being.

Elizabeth: Well, and I love that because what's happening then is that other people are inserting themselves into other people's relationship with God. Right?

MJ: Right. Right. And I say, let's have the conversations for sure. I love to talk theology. And also, at the end of the day, my job is to love you as a fellow human being. Even if I think your theological interpretation of a particular piece of scripture is incorrect in my view of the interpretation of it. Right? So, how would the world look if we're all acknowledging that we're all just trying to figure it out, we're all doing the best that we can. And when it comes down to it, the foundation of everything is just to love each other, try to love each other, and treat each other with dignity.

Elizabeth: Yeah. Yeah. And I think that there was a time that I was confused as far as viewing my friends who were gay and lesbian. And seeing them be a part of their church and being confused, like, why do you want to be a part of a church that doesn't necessarily want you. But in learning more, there's a difference between spirituality and following the church.

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MJ: Yes. So, the church is dogma. It's human made. It's human's attempt to try to get into relationship with God. But the church and God are very separate. The Bible and God are separate. We kind of sometimes put them all together. And I'll tell you, I didn't grow up in religion. My parents didn't go to church. We didn't have conversations about God. It wasn't until the end of high school that I went to church with a friend of mine.

I didn't know that the church that I went to that identified as Christian, I had no idea that there were different Christian denominations out there that believe differently. So, even within the Christian tradition, fundamentalism is like a creation of the last 100 years or so. The way that fundamentalists look at the Bible is not how Christians looked at the Bible for all of eternity. But that's the only thing that I was exposed to when I was younger.

And so, after a while I was like, I'm out because this feels very oppressive and exclusionary. And to me, it seemed like a lot of harm had been done and the name of Christianity. And then, it wasn't until 20 years later that I found the Episcopal Church and I was like, they have a very, you know, overall, a welcoming and inclusive stance that everyone's welcome at the communion table. God loves everyone, even our queer brothers and sisters.

And I was confused in the beginning I was like, wait a minute, what's happening? So, we just never have all the information of all of the pieces and things that are happening. So, I'm going to add another little thing. When I served as a jail chaplain, I used to be an Episcopal monk for three and a half years. I was discerning to be an Episcopal monk.

And during that three and a half years, I worked as a jail chaplain in the jail. And I learned all kinds of things about people that didn't look like me who weren't white, middle class, and necessarily Christian and I learned about the criminal justice system and started reading books like *The New Jim Crow* and I was like, Oh my God, All these things I

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didn't know. I used to have an attitude of well, if you do the crime, then you should do the time. And I had no idea how inaccurate that is once this deck is stacked against you if you're a person of color, for example, or how the war on drugs mostly targeted, you know, black people.

And everybody in jail, as I was sitting, chaplaincy is about sitting and listening mostly. Everybody had a back story of why they ended up, where they ended up. And so, for me to condemn an 18 year old who was born into a family, whose brother was in a gang, and who saw her mother get killed in front of her, and then is on the streets. I'm not going to judge that poor; I don't want to say poor as in like demeaning but through circumstances and trauma. Of course, she ended up in jail.

But why aren't we then saying, alright, let's figure out how do we help you heal from the trauma and then help you become a productive member of society instead of putting you behind bars and just throwing away the keys. So, I can go on about the criminal justice system, but that's like for another topic.

But I have a huge heart now for I don't care if you've committed murder or what, like you are still a human, worthy of being treated with respect and dignity. Which isn't to say you shouldn't be punished for the crime that you commit. But you can have the consequences for committing the crime without dehumanization being part of the punishment, because that just makes the situation worse.

You dehumanize somebody and then you let them back out on the street, and then you say, well, you can't get a job because you're a felon. You can be discriminated in housing because you're a felon. You can't vote. What do you have left to go back to crime, for goodness sake. So, there's just so many ways we're not following the command to love each other. It's just heartbreaking.

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And that's why I love being a coach and helping people see, how we're dehumanizing each other or how our thinking is getting in the way of like having a relationship with someone or teasing apart the theology that you thought was truth with the capital T. It happened to be truth with the lowercase T and also somebody else's like their theology that they gave to you. And especially, if you're young, you just kind of soak that in as the truth and then you kind of have to tease that out as an adult in the same way that females have to tease out all the sexism and misogyny that we grow up swimming in in the patriarchy.

Elizabeth: Yeah. Well, and this ties in beautifully a few episodes ago, I had an interview with Marissa McKool, and we talked about voting and how even though, like right now, we're talking about the abortion debate, the overturning of Roe versus Wade. And even though, most of the women that are listening right now have aged out of having to have an abortion. Like it doesn't necessarily impact them directly.

All of these laws that we have allow us to say, not my problem, it's their problem. And so, when you're talking about othering, that's what we're talking about. We're saying, well, it's not my problem, it's this other group over there, and it's their problem and I don't have to deal with it. But what I hear you saying is that when we other other people that it really is a reflection of our relationship with God and our relationship with ourself.

MJ: Absolutely. You cannot love someone else if you don't love yourself. Not fully. So, if I as a queer person, that's why I love to help people through their own self-hatred. Because if you grow up in a society that tells you queer people are bad and then you discover, oh my gosh, I'm queer, I must be bad. It's hard to have a loving relationship with someone else where that doesn't get in the way of you guys having, or gals, or non-binary people having a loving relationship with each other. Right?

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So, it all starts to me, I think that's the Jesus knew that when he said, love God, that's the first thing. But love your neighbor as yourself implies that you have to love yourself and it's a reflection of how much you love yourself. So, when you're out on the corner with a big sign that says, God hates faggots. That's a reflection of the lack of love that you have for yourself. And then, you're projecting that out into the world.

So, I have compassion for even the Christians that hate who I am. I don't want to other them. I don't want to hate them in the same way that they hate me. I don't want to bring myself down to violating the command. I don't want to accept what they're doing in terms of oh, he passed the law, and I can't get married. Okay.

No. I'm still going to fight for the rights of everyone to be treated with equality and dignity. And I'm not going to dehumanize you or degrade you in the process because you are a product of your own upbringing and the church that you grew up with and the parents that you grew up with. And there have been people who once they know better, they do, do better.

If you're open to having a conversation, that's where the change can happen. Oh, I didn't. Yeah, who was the black guy who went and had conversations with KKK members? And change the hearts one KKK member at a time, and they turned over their robes to him. He had every right to be angry at white supremacy and white supremacists as a black person. But the only way that you can make change, I think is through love, passion, which is not easy to do. But that is the way that change ultimately happens.

Elizabeth: Yeah. Well, and I think that this actually goes back to something that you talked about at the very beginning of the episode, which was you made a very simple statement that got caught up in everything else, which was patriarchy hurts men too.

MJ: Yeah.

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Elizabeth: And because when we have such rigid rules around what roles men can and cannot have, what jobs they can have, how they can express themselves. If they wear jewelry, it's too "femmy" or whatever. Then, what that does is it comes out as rage. Right? Because of the attacking.

MJ: Yeah. A guy who has to keep all of his emotions bottled up because it's not okay for a guy to cry, like man up. Right? So, if a guy's crying, that's what he's told. Man up, stop being a sissy, stop being a wimp. Like the worst insult to a guy is to feminize him in some way which is horrible for guys who are sensitive or that's why men go to war and then they come back with all kinds of problems because it's not manly to go get therapy and admit that you need help. That you've been through trauma, and you need a way to process that trauma.

So, yeah. It hurts the patriarchy, hurts men just as much as maybe not just as much. But it hurts men in addition to women in the same way that hetero sexist norms affect heterosexuals as much as they do queer people. Like, we're all in this same boat together. I remember reading a book called, "The Sum of Us," I can't remember who the author is. But when black people got their freedom and started to get their right to vote.

In the South, White people didn't want black people to swim in the same swimming pools, to the point that they hurt themselves by filling up the swimming pools and shutting down the rec centers. So, yes, it was racism and that hurts black people, but they were also hurting themselves with their racist views. And I don't think we realize how much we're also drinking the poison that we're putting out into the world when we're hating on somebody.

Elizabeth: Yeah. There's a really good book that Marissa talked about, which was White Rage. Have you read that?

MJ: Hmm. I haven't read that one.

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Elizabeth: Well, and I did. And in the book, they talk about Sputnik and how in the 1960s, the biggest threat that we had to the United States was Russia. And so, what the United States did was they started beefing up the STEM groups or education for STEM science and technology. But the South was so racist that they could not allow blacks to participate in school. But ultimately, hurting our own nation.

MJ: Right.

Elizabeth: And it's just crazy. And which is why today, the South is always ranked so low on schooling. Yeah.

MJ: Yeah. Yeah. Sad.

Elizabeth: Yeah. But anyway.

MJ: But we digress.

Elizabeth: I know. This episode is not what I was expecting. But it's been great, it's been fascinating. I love it. I love every second of it.

MJ: Oh, awesome.

Elizabeth: So, let's get back on track. So, you mentioned a couple other things when we were talking about sexuality and the L G B T Q I A acronym. And that was intersex and asexual and aromantic, which I had never heard of aromantic before. So, can you talk about those three?

MJ: Yes. So, intersex, the broad definition is you are born with both sex characteristics. Unfortunately, or I should say, sadly, often when that happens. A doctor will make a

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determination that we're going to turn you into a boy or we're going to turn you into a girl. So, you conform to the gender binary.

Elizabeth: Let's go back to that for just a second.

MJ: Okay. Yeah.

Elizabeth: Are the chromosomes of that child male or female is that how they make the determination?

MJ: No, they do it by just looking at the external gender characteristics. And you might have both maybe have I don't know what the most common is but maybe you appear to have a penis and a vagina, let's say. So, a doctor will make a determination, okay, we're gone turn you into a boy or turn you into a girl. And then, the problem with that is they may be guessing incorrectly, like what the gender identity of that person is.

It is my opinion, unless there's a medical necessity, why not let the intersex person be intersex, like native cultures do that. They don't have a problem with that, they honor that. If it's not like life threatening or something, or it's going to cause problems like, oh, you're going to have some kind of functional problem that we need to fix. Let people be who they are.

The chromosomes is an interesting question because I recently found out and I didn't know because we're not taught this in school, we're taught right. Males have the X, Y. Females have X X. But there are females with one X, there's X X Y, there's X, X, X, Y, there's four Xs, like double chromosomes, double X Y. So, we use one characteristic for our biological sex, and they look between your legs and see what's there and they make a determination.

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But that doesn't say anything necessarily about whether or not you have one of these other chromosomal setups. Like there's more than that. You're hormones, maybe have different levels of hormones, testosterone, and estrogen. So, maybe assigned female at birth, but a higher level of testosterone than the average female person.

So, the intersex is like in our Western culture, that's what we do. We look between your legs and that's how we're making the determination, not based on anything else, sadly. So, you could live in other countries where I would say in developing countries, maybe they don't have the technology or the medical infrastructure. You would grow up as however you grew up and not necessarily be an outcast in the community.

But in Western we're like, we just love the binary so much.

Elizabeth: Well, it's even funny like walking my dog, someone will say, oh, he's so cute or they'll ask, what gender? And I'll say it, she. And they'll be like, oh, I'm sorry. Like it's my dog, she doesn't care. Why are we worried about this?

MJ: Exactly. So, my gender neutral term for dogs is boo-boo. So, you can't go wrong, it's kind of like they, them. Boo-boo fits for all of the dogs, whether they're male or female.

Elizabeth: It's awesome.

MJ: Okay, so asexual not really attracted to any sex. Aromantic is like, I don't really have romantic feelings towards any sex most often. So, again, not like hard set. So, if you're asexual, you're never, ever going to be attracted to anybody of any sex. You may occasionally, but for the most part, that's just you don't have that like within you to be attracted to sex.

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So, that would be maybe a good case for somebody who discovers their asexual later in life but is married and has children. Then they might work out a polyamorous relationship where the person who is does want to have sex. Can have sex with somebody and the partner that doesn't want to have sex, but they don't have to necessarily get a divorce and give up the relationship if they want to let's say, still finish raising the kids together with each other. So, that's another thing, like in terms of binary, it's like you're either in it or you're out. Like there's no gray areas of well, how can we make this work for us and our family?

Elizabeth: Right. Well, and it's so interesting because yeah, like when we think of traditional marriage, traditional in quotes.

MJ: Yeah.

Elizabeth: You have to be with the same person, and it has to look a certain way. But who decided that?

MJ: Yeah. Who did decide that? Because what's funny is a lot of things that some people consider as traditional, like marriages between a man and a woman. Well, hello, have you read the Old Testament? Because there were lots of things happening in the Old Testament that were not one man and one woman.

So, all throughout history, there's been this fluidity of types of relationships, and sexual orientations, and men sleeping with men but not considering themselves homosexual. But you know what? The tipping point was where purity culture came in and the strict rules of okay, not only do you need to be with a man because you're a woman, but the missionary position is the only acceptable way to have sex. And like some people want to tell you, you can't have birth control because that could prevent a pregnancy, and that's why you should be in your marriage for goodness sake is to procreate and keep the species going.

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I mean, there's all these rules that are just like weighing down so many of us that we don't even realize. You may think that something doesn't apply to you. Like for example, with the abortion issue, people don't realize that affect transgender men who are maybe they've had top surgery but not bottom surgery. Maybe they're taking hormones or not taking hormones. But still could get pregnant if they were raped. It affects people like me who are in the same sex relationship. Like if I were to get raped, yeah, my relationship itself, there's no danger of me getting pregnant. But that's not to say that I don't get attacked somewhere and then have to deal with that.

So, to me, the way that we approach abortion is just we're not approaching it in the right way. So, for example, I am pro-life. I believe that life starts at conception and I'm pro-choice because I think that every woman should have the right to privacy and the right to control her own body and not be forced to carry a pregnancy to term if they don't feel that that's right for them, or there's some medical issue, or whatever.

And then, the way that that's not cognitive dissonance for me is instead of punishing you for getting an abortion, how do I make it so that fewer people have to make that decision? Giving you healthcare, giving you birth control, education, addressing rape in our culture. I mean, approaching it from a loving standpoint instead of a punitive standpoint is how I would do it. Would set you up for success, so you don't have to make that choice.

Because it's not like people are most people anyway are not flippant about having to make that choice. And it has a lasting effect on women who do make that choice for whatever reason. Maybe they feel forced into it because of circumstances or whatnot. It can have a lasting impact on you. So, why not treat you as a human and help you set your life up so that there's a smaller possibility that you are than put in that hard position of having to make that choice.

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Elizabeth: Yeah. Because the states that are really strict on abortion are also the ones that are strict on education.

MJ: Yeah.

Elizabeth: Which doesn't make any sense.

MJ: Right? It doesn't make any sense. No. And this go back to what I said earlier. I believe that life starts at conception, but I don't have any like hard proof. That's just a belief that I have based on my experiences, what I've read my education, whatever. But I'm not going to hold you to that standard if that's not what you believe. Like, why am I making a law based on a belief that is just a belief?

Elizabeth: Yeah. Yeah. Okay. So, let's talk about allyship. So, for the folks who are out here or who are listening, and they want to be a better ally. To just the community in general, or maybe they have a brother, or a friend, or a coworker who is gay or queer. Queer is the term that we would use to cover the entire umbrella, right?

MJ: Yeah. I kind of use it as an umbrella. Queer, I even shorten that sometimes to Q plus. So, that's like the L G B T Q I A, two S plus, Q plus.

Elizabeth: Okay. So, Q plus. So, how does someone become a better ally?

MJ: Okay, so that's a big question, but I think the easiest. Here's the easiest thing that you can do is step number one is think about the fact that you, as a human being, you want to have autonomy, and choice, and freedom in your life to live life the way you want to. And that's what other people want as well.

So, if you approach your queer friends or family from a place of curiosity just wanting to know more. Being open to okay, maybe I don't understand this whole they/ them

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thing. So, instead of criticizing it and getting upset and saying, this doesn't make any sense. Being ally by being curious and saying, I don't understand it, but I want to understand it. So, like, what does it mean to you? Also, not making assumptions.

So, maybe your nephew came out as transgender. The way that your nephew experiences that process of transitioning or identifying as transgender is very personal to your nephew. So, being curious and asking questions like, if you want to talk about it, I would love to know more like how you're feeling. How can I support you? Because how you support somebody is going to be very individual based on where they are. Do they want to be out? Do they not want to be out? Do they want to be out to some people, but not other people do?

Like I have a friend whose son came out as transgender but doesn't want the parent to tell anybody. But at home wants to be addressed by a certain name in pronouns. But in public a different name in pronouns.

So, Okay. Honor that because that's where that person is in their journey. So, there's no hard and fast rules. So, no assumptions and curiosity is the easiest way. And doing some research of your own and not relying totally on your queer friend or relative to educate you. It's great to ask about their personal experience and how you can support them. But it's also nice if you do some reading and research on your own.

And then, if you want to do something bigger, there's so many ways to help with the Supreme Court, I think is reviewing legislation related to L G B T Q I A issues. And there's your local pride parade, you can go out and show pride. I mean, it's also individual. So, you don't have to be out on the street marching. You can sign petitions; you can go to your local council meeting. That is also a very individual thing.

So, it can be tempting to have some shame because you don't feel like you're doing enough, but you are where you are. If you try, start with education, start with questioning

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and not assuming. Little by little you'll figure out what your piece is to do. Because none of us can solve the whole of all the craziness that's going around. But figuring out, what's my piece to do what feels right for where I am in my life, and what my passions are, and what I do, and how much time I have. And realize it, you're going to make mistakes and it's okay to make mistakes.

So, not take action because you're afraid to make a mistake, like you're afraid to use the wrong pronoun or whatever. Just apologize and move on. Everybody's on a learning journey. And by everybody, I mean everybody, me, you, all, all straight people, queer people. We're all at various stages on the journey of learning all the things about our great big rainbow world.

Elizabeth: Right. Well, and you know, I just finished Kara Lowentheil's Advanced Certification in Feminist Coaching. And what I've learned through there is I grew up with the feminist, the ERA movement. And watching feminism change over the years and what we thought was the right way to be a feminist, like back in the seventies and eighties has completely changed today.

And so, what that means is like even when you look at the Q plus movement. And the anti-racism movement, like no one has the right answer. It's just we're all kind of shooting in the dark right now. And so, for anyone to shame you for trying to do well, it's unproductive. Right?

MJ: Yeah, absolutely. Yes. And depending on your context. So, I'm a white queer person. If I'm doing some activism with black people on let's say, I'm going to a Black Lives Matter protest. I'm going to follow and listen. I'm not going to lead. And so, it's the same for straight people coming in and being allies for the queer movement. Follow and listen and see how you can support. You don't come in and like take over and lead the whole shebang. So, depending on where we're at, what we're supporting, what we're

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doing. Then that kind of helps you to see what your role is in the movement, whatever movement that you happen to be part of.

Elizabeth: Yeah. And I also want to suggest that for the women who are listening right now, who are straight, who are learning about this. When you have friends who might not be as receptive to not shame them to do it in a way that's like, hey, did you know X, Y, Z rather than, that's not the right way to do it. And so, what we can do is we can also become an ally through bringing other people along as well.

MJ: Mm-hmm. Yeah. You can use curiosity with them too, right? Like, oh, tell me more about why you think that, or why you're saying that, and kind of get them to tease out cause sometimes we're just repeating things that we've heard. Like sell, right? And we're like, ugh, I don't know. I never stopped to think about the details of that. But curiosity and not assuming is like so helpful and no shaming even when somebody is really messing up.

I love and totally agree with what Brene Brown says, that at any given moment, everyone is doing the best that they can. Even the guy who is killing someone is doing the best he can give the resources that he has, meaning internally. And that doesn't mean that we shouldn't get him and lock him up for the safety of society. But there's a backstory. There's a backstory there. And so, being curious about, I wonder what the backstory is that would lead somebody to think that, or say that, or do that.

Elizabeth: Yeah. Well, I mean it's the same with that all of everyone listening right now has with overeating. They're like, why do I overeat under stress? Right? Because that's what you learned.

MJ: Right, Exactly. And to a degree, it's effective. Right? I mean, that's food is my go-to when I get anxiety and stress. And I joke that when I became a coach and I learned like about the model and how things, my emotions, and my thinking works, and I started

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putting it into practice. I was like, Oh my gosh, I have anxiety and stress, but I never knew it because the minute my body would feel it, I would go to food and I would just numb it right out. So, I would always tell people I don't have any stress in my life. That's because I was eating it.

Elizabeth: So awesome. All right. I do not thank you enough. Do you have any parting words, or advice, or anything else you want to talk about today?

MJ: Yes. So, my parting words are. As we're doing this interview, we're in the fall, we're headed towards Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas, which can be stressful for everybody. And your queer family and friends often have an added layer of anxiety because they might be going to spend time with family who are non-affirming, either in a kind of microaggression kind of way or an overt kind of way. And or maybe you're out to certain family members.

But uncle Larry, who's super conservative is coming this year to Thanksgiving, and he doesn't know that you're queer and he's prone to saying things that are going to trigger you. And now you got to decide, am I opting out? Do I like not want to spend the holidays with my family because Uncle Larry is going to be there? Or am I going to just be so stressed out that I'm going to eat all of the pumpkin pie at the Thanksgiving dinner so that I can just make it through without blowing a little vein off of my head.

That is what I'm focusing right now with queer people. So, if your audience has queer friends or family who might be heading into that type of a situation, I am offering of reduced price, six week coaching to help set people up for success in having those family gatherings. So that they're not having to turn to food, or alcohol to soothe themselves and just make it through.

So, you can find me at QT Coach MJ and that's the letter Q and the letter T. But if you say it fast, it's cutie. QT Coach MJ on Instagram, Facebook. And I would love to help

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your queer friends and family live their best life. Especially, during the holiday which an added layer to of stress to our lives.

Elizabeth: Yeah. Yeah. Well, I cannot thank you enough for being here. You have been just an absolute delight. This has been just an amazing interview. Thank you.

MJ: I've had a lot of fun talking to you. I feel like we could talk for a couple of more hours.

Elizabeth: We might have to have you back on because there's so things that I have questions about, still.

MJ: Awesome.

Elizabeth: Like, I want to hear the stories about the being a prison minister.

MJ: Oh, a jail chaplain and an Episcopal monk. Like, how did that happen?

Elizabeth: Exactly. Exactly. Especially, since you didn't go to church until you were like, what? Isn't that great?

MJ: I know. I know. It's the craziest story. Let me tell you.

Elizabeth: Okay. Well, you have to come back for that one.

MJ: All right. Thank you so much, Elizabeth, I really appreciate it.

Elizabeth: Yeah. Thank you.

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After recording that episode. I was telling everyone who would listen about our conversation. And what I found fascinating is that many of my friends who identify as queer had so many questions. Which I think just speaks to the idea that you're not alone in your questions.

So, I reached out to MJ, and we want to hold a listener QA where you ask all of your questions, and we'll answer them. No judgment assigned. Just email me at hello@elizabethsherman.com and there's no shame in asking the questions.

All right. That's all I have for you today. Have a great week, everyone. I'll see you next time. Bye-bye.

Hey, Thanks for listening.

If you're done with dieting and would like to work with me as your coach, I'd like to invite you to reach out to myself and my team to ask about programs and pricing. Go to elizabethsherman.com/contact to get started today. I can't wait to hear from you. See you next week.