

## Episode 2.9 Knowing Your Limits

March 16, 2018

Hannah (Host): [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans] Hi, I'm Hannah McGregor and this is *Secret Feminist Agenda*. Welcome back. Are you enjoying our "play" series so far? Is it making you feel playful? Is the episode about poker didn't get you, we've got a few more forms of play on their way. I say this all the time. I know I say this all the time. I'm really excited for next week's episode. I had a really good time recording it, but in the meantime, why don't I tell you what my secret feminist agenda is this week. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans] Let's talk about, about knowing your limits. So there's a few different ways I want to think about this topic today. One of the first is around the importance of figuring out boundaries and figuring out how to say no to things. This has been, this has been particularly important to me professionally over the past year and a half. When I got my tenure track job my immediate reaction was just deep relief and gratitude. Gratitude at the fact that I got to, that I get to spend my career doing something that I really love, that I really value and that I had spent a few years there pretty reconciled to the possibility that I wouldn't get to do it. You know, the job market is really, really bad. It's extra bad in my discipline. And so I had spent a fair amount of time in a different kind of way knowing my limits, which is to say, recognizing, really working to recognize that you can be super talented and super smart and still not get to be what you want to be.

So let's start off with some just some harsh truths. I mean for one thing. We don't live in a meritocracy. That's not how the world works, but for another thing, even if it were, that wouldn't automatically guarantee opportunities for everybody who is super talented because that's not how scarcity under late capitalism works. So, so I got a job and I felt like I said, overwhelmed with gratitude, and three months later Trump was elected to president, and all of a sudden my feeling of gratitude transformed into a feeling of deep and urgent responsibility. It's like my brain clicked over into crisis mode and then didn't click back. And all my brain was telling me was "Everything is on fire. Everything is an emergency. You need to do something, you need to do everything you can right now. There is no time to wait." And I don't necessarily think that my brain was totally wrong about that.

But, but over the past year and a half, I've been figuring out in some difficult ways that my energy is not inexhaustible, that my resources, my personal resources are not boundless. You know, my emotional resources, my intellectual resources. I am a lucky person and I am a privileged person and that means I am in, in a position to leverage a lot of resources, you know? And it's, it's converse, a conversation for another day just to talk about figuring out the best way to do that and the ongoing challenge that that is. But I'm maybe not as inexhaustible as I thought I was. And a combination of good intentions and the privilege of being in the job position that I'm in still doesn't mean that I can just say yes to everything and do everything that I think ought to be done. So the past few

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months in particular have been an exercise for me in starting to feel out what my limits are, the limits of my energy, the limits of my wellness, the limits of my capacity to do work, to see other people to do emotional labor in my community, and...I was going to say "and, and then when I hit those limits, you know, here's what I do."

But I actually haven't reached the point yet of knowing what to do when I hit those limits, cuz I'm still trying to figure out how to find them. So there, that's step one. Step one is knowing my limits. Step one is trying to find the point before exhaustion where I can say no, I have to say no to this. The thing is that knowing that limit doesn't automatically mean that you get to respect it or that the world is going to respect it. I'm sure there are a lot of people who know their limits pretty well and are pushed past them all the time. I'm sure as I get better at knowing what my limits are, I'm going to be in situations where I come up to them and say, "God, I can't do any more work today. Well, too bad. That's a damn shame." Or "I can't take any more. I can't take any more bad news today. I can't take another family tragedy or, or another terrible thing happening to a loved one," and that's too bad because knowing that, knowing that you've hit a limit doesn't actually change the world unfortunately. But knowing that you've hit limit means you can then make some decisions around, you know, if it is possible for you to retreat, for you, to say no, for you to conserve some energy at that point. That's an amazing thing to know in an amazing thing to be able to do. And if it's not possible, then maybe that's a moment where you really draw on your community, when you really draw on other resources. When you reach out to people and say, "I've hit my limit with this and I really need help now." But again, remember how I talked, talked in an earlier episode about how bad I am asking for help?

I suspect these things are related. I suspect that being able to feel out my limits will, will free me into asking for help. So that's one way of thinking about knowing your limits, but I want to think about another, another way we might understand the idea of, of knowing, of coming up against limits and, and being okay with them and figuring out what to do when, when you have encountered them. And those are the limits of, of understanding the limits of knowledge about other people, other people's experience and other people's view of the world that come with who you are, particularly if you are somebody who moves through the world with a substantial amount of privilege. So I want to give a couple of examples, a couple of concrete examples that I have encountered in the past couple of weeks and that have really got me thinking. So one of those examples is, is that I was at a panel at the Growing Room Festival here in Vancouver. The Growing Room Festival is a feminist literary festival put on by *Room Magazine*, and this year I was lucky to go to a panel called "White Feminists, Stop Right Now, Thank You Very Much." That was chaired by Ijeoma Oluo, who is a total hero of mine, and it was really exciting to get to see her speak and get to learn from how she moderates panels, which was incredible. The panel also had Gwen Benaway, Jillian Christmas, Chelene Knight, and Silvia Moreno-Garcia on it. All Black, Indigenous, or women of color, and all talking about their understanding of white feminism and how they've encountered

white feminism in their work and in their lives. Defining "white feminism" here not exclusively as the feminism practiced by white women, but as a feminism that insists on not recognizing race as an intersection of oppression. And so there's a lot of really, really brilliant stuff said on this panel, but there's one moment in particular that really stood out to me. And that was when Gwen Benaway was talking about white people needing to learn their limits. And in particular, and this is specific notes that we took from the panel, so I think I quote, "whiteness can only go so far. It cannot ultimately hold or heal us." And when I followed up on Twitter to clarify that I was attributing this correctly to Gwen because I didn't take notes, Gwen responded and said, and this is her tweet, "It definitely was me, one of my main criticisms, assuming whiteness can be and do everything for us." And in that case I believe the "us" she's speaking of is, is Indigenous women, or Indigenous people. And the point that she's making here is, in some ways a really straightforward one, which is that white women cannot assume that our friendship will somehow automatically become capacious enough to fully incorporate and understand the experiences of our friends who are Black, Indigenous, or people of color and to insist on our capacity to hold everything, every experience including experiences that are not ours is an extension of the logic of whiteness, which is that whiteness wants to subsume and own and control everything. And that, I think that understanding of limitation, which is, for many of us who are white women, we have been taught that our empathy is such that we can heal the whole goddamn world with it, and we can't and not every experience is ours to understand. I think that understanding of, of knowing your limits is an incredibly important one, particularly for white feminists who want to be involved in anti-oppression and in organizing, and who, if you're anything like me, is going to overstep your limits over and over and over again because of the way that I have been socialized as a white woman to automatically assume my right to speak for others, my right to, to know about others' experiences, just so, just sort of my right, my right to everything. And coming up against those limits, having one of those moments, one of those to quote Doris Summer again, one of those "slaps of refusal" that tell you that not everything is yours to colonize or to conquer. Those are, for me personally, really challenging moments because I want so badly for my good intentions to be able to carry me all the way through to a place of doing no harm to others, and that's just not how the world works. I can't undo the violence of the world through good intentions and that is a hard limit. I was already sort of mulling this over and thinking in particular about sort of the limitations in intimate relationships that you have with people when you are both deeply close to them and divide it by a non shared experience.

When I came across this really amazing Twitter thread from Nicole Cliffe. Now I follow Nicole Cliffe nigh-on obsessively, and have since she cofounded The Toast, the now defunct website that I love so, so deeply with her friend Mallory Ortberg. And Mal has, just in the past month or so, publicly transitioned and so in this Twitter thread you'll hear Nicole Cliffe use his name, Daniel or Danny Ortberg. And one of the most beautiful, there's been a lot of really joyful things about watching Danny's transition, about just the privilege of getting to, to share in that experience, but one of those really beautiful things has been

watching Nicole and Danny's friendship through it. And so there's this really wonderful thread that Nicole wrote. This is on March 13th and it starts, "Danny has been constantly, 'I know our friendship is all about me this year because of trans stuff, so tell me your things' and it's just the reality of friendship that it doesn't have to be 50/50 in any given year. In a lifetime, sure. But you can have a whole year if you need." And then a couple of tweets later in the thread she says, "and then me and dealing with being weirdly jealous of Danny's trans friends who can access parts of him that I can't get to and who can support him in a way that helps more than I can. And that part is extremely humbling. How very dare they. Those helpful, wonderful jerks." And there's something about this that clicked another part of this whole question of limits in my brain, which is that Nicole is approaching this not from a place of scarcity, not from a place of, "oh, it's terrible that I don't get to access this in my friend," but from a place of joy that other people can and that other people will. And thinking about the loving friendship that says, "I'm totally okay with the fact that there are parts of you that I can't access and experiences that you have that other people will be able to support you in more than I ever can," and that is humbling. That reminds me of my limitations. That forces me to remember that not everything is for me, but it's also, it's also really great. It's also wonderful. The word wonderful is also in there. You know the logics, the logics of whiteness are also logics of scarcity. They say there isn't enough for everybody and so I need to make sure you don't have as much so that I can have more. And refusing the logic of scarcity I think can really help, you know, those of us who are white folks to also start to refuse some of those logics of whiteness as well that say "if there's something that isn't for me, that's a problem and I'm losing out." If we were fused that logic and say "limits are just fine. There's enough, there can be enough for everyone. There could be enough for everyone. If we stopped thinking like this." This is still something I'm, I have to roll around in my head a lot day after day. When I have moments when I'm doing something, when I'm organizing something or, or have put together something that I really thought was going to be helpful and great, and then somebody says, "actually, no, you're not helping. We don't want you to do this. We want you to step back" and a lot of the time, my, my initial reaction is still that that clenching reaction of "Oh, but I want to help so badly!" and hearing no is important and hearing limits is important. And I don't know what the chicken and the egg relationship is here, but I think at some point learning how to listen to my own internal limits and respect them is gonna make me better at listening to other people's limits and respecting them and listening to other people and learning to be caring and loving and humble about hearing no is gonna help me direct all of that inwards as well. And that's a thing, that's a thing to work on. That's a thing to work on outwards and inwards. That's the thing to work on in myself and it's a thing to work on in my interpersonal relationships, also known as friendships. That's what normal people call them. And it's a thing to work on in my professional life, as I constantly feel out and renegotiate the points at which I am overstepping what is helpful or useful for me to do. And the trickiest part of it is that it's not like drawing a line in the sand because they're shifting all the time, because our limits are constantly changing and so we've just got to constantly listen to them and renegotiate them and figure them out anew. And for me that's hard work, but I think that's okay.

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[Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans] You know it's limitless though? How much I enjoy listening to Kaarina. [Music: "I Will" by Mitski]

Kaarina:

Hello and welcome to Kaarina's Cozy Self Care Corner. I just want to remind you that there is a space between selfish and selfless and you can live your life there. I often find myself interpreting my actions and the actions of those around me and my feelings and the feelings of those around me in these extremes. Either I feel very put upon or judged or mistreated or taken for granted by those around me, so I feel so selfless, or I feel like I'm failing everybody around me all the time. Failing to meet their expectations, failing to take care of them, feeling to put their needs first and I feel super selfish. But most of the time the reality is somewhere in between and that's where I feel a lot more comfortable. So a reminder to myself and you that there is a huge space between selfish and selfless and you're okay to be there. Have a great weekend. [Music: "I Will" by Mitski]

Hannah (Host):

All right, babes that is it for this week. You can go check out some show notes and all the episodes of *Secret Feminist Agenda* on [secretfeministagenda.com](http://secretfeministagenda.com). You can follow me on Twitter @hkpmcgregor. You can follow Kaarina @Kaarinasaurus, and you can tweet about the podcast using the hashtag #secretfeministagenda. Never forget rating, reviewing, recommending are all super important parts of helping to spread the word. So keep doing that thing. Thank you. The podcast theme song is "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans off their album *Chub Rub*. You can download the entire album on [freemusicarchive.org](http://freemusicarchive.org), or follow them on Facebook. Kaarina's theme song is "I Will" by Mitski. That is it for this week. This has been *Secret Feminist Agenda*. Pass it on. ["Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans]