

Ashley C. Ford and the Ethics of Love

Christiane Wisehart, host and producer: I'm Christiane Wisehart. And this is Examining Ethics, brought to you by The Janet Prindle Institute for Ethics at DePauw University.

[music: Blue Dot Sessions, Partly Sage]

Christiane: Today I'm bringing you an interview I did with the writer Ashley C. Ford in the fall of 2019. We talked about the ethics of relationships and love, and the importance of loving oneself.

Ashley Ford: I was in a marching band in middle school and high school and my band director, Mr. Todd Cathy used to say, "Whatever you accept, that's what you'll have." ... he not only meant that about what we accepted from ourselves, but also what we accepted from other people. And it was the first time in my life that an adult really expressed to me that I did not have to accept certain behavior from certain people...

Christiane: Stay tuned for more from Ashley C. Ford on today's episode of Examining Ethics.

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Christiane: Before I play my interview with Ashley Ford, I wanted to have a just little talk with you all, just a little check in. As you will no doubt have noticed, I'm struggling to produce episodes all by myself. And I'm putting episodes out way too infrequently for my own comfort. So I've been thinking through ways that I can put out more Examining Ethics content. So for the next few months I'm going to be experimenting with putting out interviews, instead of the heavily-produced, heavily-written episodes that I've put out in the past. I hope I can still maintain the essence of Examining Ethics, which is to talk about experts or interesting people about the fascinating, frustrating and wonderful field of ethics. Okay, let's get on with the show.

Ashley C. Ford is a prolific writer, and covers a lot of subjects. While she's not an ethicist, some of her most compelling writing is about the ethics of love. Here's my conversation with her from the fall of 2019.

[interview begins]

Christiane: One of the things that I noticed as I was reading your writing and listening to some of your work is that you really act out your values.

Ashley C. Ford: I try.

Christiane: And I feel like that is especially true in your writing about relationships. And so I just wanted to ask you, first of all, so one of the things that we talk a lot about in the field of ethics is oughts. Ought you do this? Or ought not you do that? But it's basically a fancy way of saying should, right?. And so what are some of the big oughts that you see in building a relationship?

Ashley: Some of the big oughts I see are probably related to how we allow ourselves to be treated more so than how we treat others. I think that people in general, especially in relationship want to be good and kind to other people. And I think that when they're not, it's often because of things that have happened to them or a warped view of how the world works or should work. And I think that those people who aren't necessarily good at first at treating other people really well in relationships also don't expect that from the other person, you know? And I think that we kind of allow people to treat us as poorly as we treat ourselves.

Christiane: A lot of rules seem to be floating around about, yeah, how you should treat another person, but it's not so clear how you should let yourself be treated.

Ashley: Yes.

Christiane: Has that led to any kind of, how did you figure that out, I guess?

Ashley: My band director. I was in marching band in middle school and high school and my band director, Mr. Todd Cathy used to say, "Whatever you accept, that's what you'll have." And he not only meant that about what we accepted from ourselves, but also what we accepted from other people. And it was the first time in my life that an adult really expressed to me that I did not have to accept certain behavior from certain people or being treated a certain way in order to have relationships, especially romantic ones. Because I think as young cis het women, we definitely grow up thinking that we kind of have to take what we can get. And that we kind of have to take what we can catch. And I think we aren't necessarily encouraged to look out for signs that a person may not value us as much as we value ourselves because we're not really taught to value ourselves. We're taught to value what we can give someone else.

Christiane: I wish that there was somebody telling me that when I was in my twenties because my friend and I always talk about how because we're the same age and we always talk about how we just want to shake ourselves and say, "You deserve so much better." Does that so much better sometimes mean being alone?

Ashley: Yes. Sometimes it does because alone is how we figure ourselves out. It's how we figure out what we want, what we don't want, what we're scared of, what makes us feel courageous, how we feel love, how we give love to ourselves. I think that until I was alone, not dating or seeing anyone and sort of living in a space where I had a lot of alone time, until that point, I didn't even consider what I wanted, you know? It was always sort of like, well this is what I would prefer, but this is what's right for everybody involved. Especially in terms of romantic relationships, I would do that. There were a lot of things I wanted to be that I stopped in the process because I was dating someone who made a decision or who wanted to make a decision that did not gel with my desires.

And it was just so easy to decide that my desires were not the most important ones here or that my greatest desire was just to love and be loved. And if that required giving up things that were interesting to me or that were even passionate in me, that it was a worthy sacrifice, a worthy price to pay to be worthy of love. And that's because I didn't see myself as worthy of love. But the minute I got to be by myself and get to that point of contentment, love, self satisfaction, meaning, all, when I really, really started to understand those things for myself, that's when I was able to date in a way that felt emotionally safe. And go out and talk to strangers and make friends in a way that felt emotionally safe. Because I knew that how I felt about myself wasn't going to be reliant on their reaction to me.

Christiane: You mentioned friendship and romantic relationships and I wonder, do these shoulds, do these oughts change dependent on the relationship?

Ashley: Oh yeah. I mean, I--every relationship exists within context and every relationship is built on many moments of shared time, of interaction, of intimacy, you know. Unless you're talking about our relationship to the world, you know, which isn't based on those things. That's our only inherent relationship is our relationship to each other in the world. Everything else is a series of decisions and choices and moments together. I do think it changes. You know, I am definitely more vulnerable with some people than others. And that's because, as Brené Brown would say, "Not everybody has earned the right to my vulnerability." And that doesn't mean, oh, you're not good enough to hear me talk about these things or to be close to me in that way. It just means we're not there yet. And I think you have to be respectful of that journey and you're going to have a million tiny journeys with people over the course of your life.

They all matter, they all count, they're all valid, and they're all being weaved into the tapestry of a relationship, every piece of thread, every moment. And when you look at that tapestry, sometimes what you see is something safe and a place where you can be yourself, a place where you belong. And sometimes what you see is something darker that you don't actually want to be involved with. Or maybe you can't help being involved, but you certainly don't want to make yourself vulnerable in that situation. And I think it's okay. I think it's okay to think about things that way and to really protect yourself because boundaries are part of love.

Christiane: I don't have a question about that, but I wonder if you could expand on that thought that boundaries are a part of love.

Ashley: I think that one of the things that scares people about being vulnerable is the fear that you will set a boundary around that vulnerability or behind that vulnerability and it will be violated. That's the big fear. That's why people don't want to share things that they are seemingly ashamed of. It's because they just think, if I make myself vulnerable, it's going to hurt me. The world is going to hurt me. That person is going to hurt me, my community is going to hurt me. But if you can set a boundary in front of that vulnerability, if you can say, "Hey, I'm going to share this, but I need you to not react this way." You know what I mean?

"I need you to really hear me." Or maybe it's that, "I'm going to share this, but then I need some space." Whatever it is, that's part of loving another person, giving another person clear boundaries and showing them how to love you is part of loving yourself and loving them. Because the really scary thing is what if I step on this person's emotional toes? You know? What if I accidentally hurt somebody that I don't want to hurt? How do I prevent that? How do I prevent your fear that you're accidentally going to hurt me? By being very clear with my

boundaries and by saying, "You know, hey, we can talk about anything in the world, but you can't yell at me." "Hey, we can argue about this. We can disagree about this, but you can't call me a name because you don't agree with me."

You know? Those kinds of things are not things I think that we want to say to another person. But when we set the boundary and give them the opportunity to honor it, we're entering a space of intimacy that could grow into a really, truly beautiful closeness because you don't have to hide anything from each other. And you also know where the other person's boundaries are and where your own boundaries are. And so that safety, oh, there's nothing like it. There's nothing like looking at a person, another human being and knowing, I could tell you anything, and I know that you won't use it against me. I know you won't try to hurt me with it. It's beautiful.

Christiane: How does being loved change your behavior?

Ashley: I think being loved changes my risk tolerance. I am much more likely to try to do the thing I really want to do even if it's hard if I feel like I have a soft place to land. And I think everybody's like that, I think we're all more likely to try something a little bit bigger, a little bit outside of our traditional reach when we have someone saying, "Give it a shot and if you fall, I'm right behind you. I'm not going to let you fall. I will catch you." You know? I know that if I try to write something that is outside of my purview, that my husband will say to me, "Baby, you're a genius and you can do this. And if you miss the mark, we're just going to try again."

And he just makes it sound so, not even easy, but really just like before--like, safe. It just sounds safer when I'm not alone in that risk and when somebody is willing to take that leap with me. And that can come in the form of romantic relationships. It can come in the form of friendships, it can come in the form of familial relationships. It can come from so many places, but just knowing that you have that unconditional love in your corner, please.

It's like walking a tight rope with the net under you. It's still scary and you still might fall, but you're not going to die. It's not going to kill you. And even better, there's going to be a warm hand there to help you out of the net and say, "Climb back up on the ladder. I think I figured out why you fell or maybe, do you know why you fell? Can you think about that? Can you figure it out? Let's try it again. Let's see if that was the problem and if you fall again, we'll know it's not and we can see if you learn something new up there. If you brought something back down with you that can help us get across that wire when we get back up."

I know that the last five years, what has happened in my career, the success and the failures, all of it. I know that I don't regret any of it because I felt good about doing it every time. I felt good about doing it and feeling good about doing your work and having someone tell you that you're great at it and also keep going and keep striving and keep trying and having that person know you not just at your best, but also your worst. There's nothing like it in the world, nothing.

Christiane: What's the role of care in a relationship?

Ashley: Care. I think care might be the most important. That's sort of why you do it. Like, that's why we're in relationship is to care for each other and to see each other and to hear each other because nobody does it alone. There's no such thing as care without relationships and there is no such thing as relationships without care. Anybody who tells you that they've done everything on their own is lying. They're either lying or they don't see their lives clearly. Those are the only

two options. Care allows us to become superhuman in all the ways we wish we were on our own but it's not possible on our own.

The only superhero that makes sense to me are the superheroes where a bunch of people come together and then make the superhero. That's the only one that actually makes sense because that's the only one that is truly reflective of how superhuman things get accomplished in this world. And I love superheroes, love them. Marvel is extremely my stuff. I am not kidding. My husband and I have seen and own every Marvel movie. He proposed with rings that were made out of, that had the imprint of the gamma ray symbol because of the Hulk, who is our favorite. Absolutely. But the superhero in real life is not the Hulk and it's not Ironman and it's not Thor or anything. The real hero is the human effort to care for one another and to care for our world.

Christiane: I want to kind of switch gears and talk more about familial relationships, although I'm sure that the romantic stuff is still there too. Do you think children have obligations when it comes to their relationships in terms of the relationship?

Ashley: No.

Christiane: Very curious to see what you said.

Ashley: No, I think that the reason we call kids kids is because they're in learn mode and we are in instructor mode whether we want to be or not. And I think that there are ways to talk to children about the impact of what they do and say on other people, which everybody should be doing. We should all be talking to our kids about how their actions affect other people, but there has to be so much grace for them being in the beginning of that practice. They're newbies. They're still figuring it out. And as adults, the thing that we should have picked up at some point in our childhood and throughout our life is the virtue of patience. At least enough patience to stop and consider the context of the situation. When a child is figuring something out for themselves emotionally, like our work in that situation is not to shame them or to hurt them or to even really sometimes it's not our job to make them feel any kind of way about their feelings.

It's our job to help them with the tools to manage those feelings. I'm an adult who has a really hard time with emotional regulation. It's something I've had to work on the past couple years more than anything else I ever had in my life because I did not grow up in an environment that taught me anything about emotional regulation. It was all just about shutting things down and shutting yourself down, not processing, not moving through things, not healing from things. And trying to learn how to do that as a 32 year old woman is wonderful in some respects because I really am seeing how it changes my interactions with people and my interactions with the world.

But in other ways it is really sad. It makes me really sad about the 32 years before now when I could have really used that help and it would have saved me so much distress. Not just bad feelings or anything like that, but it would have saved me distress because not knowing how to regulate your emotions is to put yourself in distress quite often. And having the tool to get yourself out of that is so freeing, but almost impossible to realize you're missing it on your own, especially in this country.

Christiane: You gave a talk called "Wounds are Where the Light Enter." A lot of it's about anger, specifically about your mother's anger and then your anger as well. I feel so conflicted about anger because I've only recently allowed myself to admit that I'm even angry. And man, when I

admitted I was angry, I realized, wow, I'm really mad. Oh, I really don't like it when you do that to me in a meeting. Like, oh man. And so I wonder how like, do you, have you found a balance between not being stepped on or not being taken advantage of? And then like you said, the kind of peace that comes through emotional regulation.

Ashley: Yeah, I know what you're saying. First of all, I have a question. Have you ever done the Enneagram thing?

Christiane: No. No. I've done so many personality tests.

Ashley: I always wonder about that because I'm an Enneagram two. And not that that, for some people it'll mean something, for some people it won't. It might not mean anything in real life. But I do recognize certain things about my personality in it. And one of those things is that I don't want to admit hostility and anger. And a big part of that comes from growing up in a home where anger was on full display and also was the primary emotion to express more than any other. More than love, more than sadness. Some of those things I feel weren't even allowed in my house. Sadness wasn't really allowed in my house. You weren't allowed to be sad, but anger was absolutely allowed in a certain sense. And often felt like the only way to get people to respond to you.

As an adult, I struggled obviously with that and with not wanting to think of myself as a quote-unquote, angry person. But I've realized that anger, like all emotions, when you try to temper one, you temper them all. If you can't let yourself be angry, you can't let yourself be excited. If you can't let yourself be sad, you miss out on the really, really highs, the big highs of happiness. It's like the more you try to make your emotion small, any one emotion, you make all small. You can't make one small without making them all small. And so I realized that anger was this thing that I was going to have to reckon with and deal with and be honest about so that I could be honest about the rest of me and the rest of what I feel.

People think that anger only means a few things and one of them is hysteria, which gets lobbied at women who are angry a lot. Another one, the big one is that anger indicates being out of control. I always thought growing up that my mom's anger was the problem because she would then do or say things that it was clear she regretted even if she wouldn't let herself say sorry for them. And I just thought, wow, like that's what happens when you give in to anger. These are the kinds of things you say and do when you're angry. So I'm just not going to do it. I'm just not going to be angry. I even at that point, I'm the oldest of four kids as well and you know, when you're the oldest of four kids, nothing is yours. Everything gets broken. Everything gets taken.

And I'd gotten to a point in my very young life, probably around...13 or 14 when I just decided I'm not going to get angry about this anymore. I'm just not going to do it because I think if I start getting angry about this, I'm always going to be angry and I can't do that. I just, I can't even afford that. So I just decided to not care. And I spent years not caring, like decidedly not caring about things that actually did matter to me. But I had done a really good job of convincing myself not to care about them anymore because I didn't want to be angry about what I couldn't have or didn't have access to or any of those things. And I've learned that anger, like every other emotion, is like every other emotion is trying to tell you something about what you want.

And it's really, really hard to face getting into the positions you wanted to get in life, in terms of having the freedom to do what you want to do and then realizing that you don't know what you want to do with that freedom because you've spent decades of your life trying not to want and

actively denying your desire. So now, somebody sits in front of you and says, "What do you want to do? What's the dream? Put it on the table. Let's make it happen." And you don't have anything to say. You don't know what the dream is anymore. You lost the plot because you haven't been paying attention to the messages your mind and heart have been sending you about your true desire. And when you turn off that speaker, you lose the path. Whatever the path.

I lost the path, I think for a really long time. Not in terms of my career. Not in terms of writing and making things, but I certainly lost the path in terms of what kind of person I was trying to be. And it's not that I had become a bad person. Nobody wants to be a bad person, but I had become in some sense, and in some ways, a person who actively and vehemently denied her own wants to herself as if that made me better or more noble. You know? I remember thinking, the most beautiful thing about me was my ability to give my life over to someone else's desire. I really thought that. That was my greatest, biggest use. And I think that's what happens when you turn off anger, when you turn off the message of what you like and don't like. And I don't ever want to go back there. I don't ever want to be a person who thinks my life is better served by not caring about myself.

Christiane: I'm going to keep that with me too. Well thank you so much. Do you have anything that you'd like to promote or let people know about?

Ashley: I would like to promote the idea of being kind. Let's all do that. And that'll make me happier than any link you could click on.

Christiane: I feel like clapping. That's so appropriate...

[music: Blue Dot Sessions, Silk and Silver]

Christiane: If you want to know more about Ashley C. Ford's other work, check out our show notes page at examiningethics.org. And don't forget!! The Prindle Institute for Ethics has another podcast called Getting Ethics to Work. Check it out on Apple podcasts or wherever you get your podcasts.

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