

## Rationally Speaking #244: Stephanie Lepp and Buster Benson, on “Seeing other perspectives, with compassion”

Julia Galef: Welcome to Rationally Speaking, the podcast where we explore the borderlands between reason and nonsense.

I'm your host, Julia Galef, and I'm trying something a little different for this episode. Instead of one conversation, I have two separate guests on a similar topic. I got the idea from the fact that I like to read two or three books at the same time on the same topic to get kind of a 3D look at it, like binocular vision.

So our topic today is "changing your mind," or "shifting your perspective," and both of my guests approach the topic from a position of unusual compassion and empathy.

I'm delighted to introduce Stephanie Lepp. She is the creator and host of The Reckonings Podcast, which I suspect listeners of Rationally Speaking will greatly enjoy. It's about reckonings, which is Stephanie's great word for really significant changes of mind, the kind of changes that force you to reckon with your life, your identity, maybe your sense of right and wrong.

Her guests include a former Neo-Nazi, a former climate change skeptic turned climate change activist, a Facebook executive who came to see social media as harmful. So it's a really wide range, but every interview is really thoughtful and in-depth, and approached with compassion and empathy.

So Stephanie, welcome to Rationally Speaking. It's so great to have you.

Stephanie Lepp: Thank you Julia. It's great to be here.

Julia Galef: I always like to look for patterns in data. And I was wondering, in the examples of the reckonings that you have explored so far, have you noticed any patterns in the kind of

trajectory that people go through in a reckoning? Is it like a gradual evolution? Are they sudden changes? Do they tend to be sparked by anything in particular like meeting new people, or hitting rock bottom?

What have you noticed?

Stephanie Lepp: Yeah, so I went into this podcast in the first place to answer this exact question, right? So how do people actually change their hearts and minds in really fundamental ways? And before starting the show I had this highly unscientific running list of things that I thought radically transformed people. So, falling in love, near death experiences, psychedelics. Rarely, but sometimes, but extremely rarely, information -- because as you well-know, we usually only trust information that confirms what we already believe.

And from what I've seen now, let's say 300 hours of interviews later, it's not that those things make us change. What those things have in common, or what they do, from what I've seen is that they reveal to us the difference between who we think we are and who we actually are. Or, the difference between the impact that we think we're having on the world and the impact we're actually having on the world.

And it's really seeing that difference or seeing that gap, that is what initiates the process of transformation.

Julia Galef: Could you give an example?

Stephanie Lepp: Oh yeah. So you mentioned the Neo-Nazi. Frank's transformation process actually started in jail when he started playing sports with black inmates, and really he just started to get to know black people for the first time in his life. And it was coming from that experience that he then had this... So he gets out of jail, he's looking for a job, he can't get a job. He's got swastika tattoos all over him. And he ends up getting a gig at a trade show with a Jewish antique dealer. And the antique dealer knows that Frank is a Neo-

Nazi. But he says, "I don't care what you believe as long as you don't break my furniture."

And at the end of this gig, because of his stereotypes about Jewish people, he thought that this Jewish antique dealer was going to not pay him the full amount that he owed him. And instead, this Jewish antique dealer offered him a full time job. And so it was coming from this confusion in jail, that he had this experience with a Jewish person, and that revealed to him the difference between who he thought he was -- he thought he was kind of this righteous defender of the white race... And the person he actually was, which was just this extraordinarily bigoted and violent individual.

And it was, yeah, it was seeing that gap that revealed to him the bankruptcy of his ideology, and prompted his transformation.

Julia Galef: But do you have any sense... I mean, other Neo-Nazis have presumably met nice Jewish people and nice black people, and they've probably written those off as exceptions. Or maybe they've interpreted their experiences in a way that makes the black and Jewish people actually not nice. Or there's some way they've *not* changed as a result of that data.

Stephanie Lepp: Yeah. And that's how it usually begins. It usually begins with, "Okay, fine, black people are fine, but Jewish people are the problem." And after doing that enough, after going through this process or this pattern enough times of saying, "Oh wait, well actually, this little part of the ideology, maybe it was wrong but the rest of it is still intact" ... After doing that enough times, you start to wonder, "Wait a second, I'm noticing a pattern here. Maybe the entire ideology itself is broken."

And I don't know if there's like a secret number of times you have to go through that. I do think though that time for critical self-reflection -- like time and space to reflect on who you are and how you affect other people, or these

anomalies, quote-unquote, that keep showing up -- and oftentimes you have a lot of time to reflect in jail.

But it's enough examples of that, combined with really critical self-reflection that I would say gives rise to a reckoning.

Julia Galef: I know this is a tough question to answer without a comparison group, but does there seem to be anything about the people themselves, your guests who you've talked to who have had these reckonings? Any personality traits you see that might explain why they're the exception to the rule of people not changing their mind?

Are they unusually self-reflective? Are they unusually... Do they care about consistency a lot? Like, "So if this is true, then I can't logically believe this other thing..." And whoa! Like, house of cards tumbling down.

Stephanie Lepp: Yeah. And I think there's an amazing scientific investigation to be done here. But the specific trait I look for, really more for the purposes of storytelling, is someone who has the capacity to be critically self-reflective, to look inwards and be fluent about what is going on, be able to articulate that. So someone who can say, "I did this thing and to the best of my knowledge, here's why I did it. Here's what I was wanting. Here's what was motive motivating me."

Because in a lot of these cases the burning question before "How did you change?" is, "Why did you do that thing to begin with?"

And so someone who can actually look inwards and say, "Here's why. Here's what was driving me."

Some of my guests have gone through processes with therapists or counselors who have helped them put language around their transformation. So, for example, one of my episodes features a perpetrator and survivor of sexual

assault who managed to work through it using restorative justice, and through the-

Julia Galef: And when you say a perpetrator and a survivor, that's two separate people, both the perpetrator and the survivor?

Stephanie Lepp: Yes. The perpetrator and the survivor of the same sexual assault.

Julia Galef: Both sides.

Stephanie Lepp: Both sides, yeah. And because they went through this restorative justice process, the perpetrator has really developed language. He really understands what he did and why he did it and he's fluent in that.

Whereas, for a lot of people they are verbalizing this journey for the first time with me. So the Facebook executive that you were just mentioning, he built Facebook's business model and then had a reckoning, and you can listen to the episode to find out what happened. But it's not like he was necessarily, I don't think, seeing a therapist to talk through what he did at Facebook. I think it was kind of like maybe here and there, like in his mind or maybe in conversations with his wife. I actually don't know, but I get the sense that he was actually articulating this, like understanding it, seeing it and articulating it for the first time in his interview with me.

So what I'm looking for, for the purposes of storytelling is just someone who has the capacity to do that, whether they've done it before with a therapist or whether they're doing it for the first time, but who can take a look in the mirror and speak fluently about what they see.

Julia Galef: Do you ever doubt your guest's story about why they did what they did, or why they believed what they believed? Or are you just inhabiting the role of the "midwife" of this reckoning?

Stephanie Lepp: All of the above. And there have been many interviews that I have not aired, partly because I just I couldn't feel what was going on in there. Now whether that's because it wasn't there or because I just couldn't feel it is up for debate.

But in some cases -- the perpetrator and survivor is a perfect example -- as long as I have her, the survivor, on board, then it's not about whether I... it is not so much about whether I believe him or believe he really changed. The point is he did enough for her. The point is he is working to repair the harm he did to her. And she -- I don't know what the word is, approves of that, or is onboard with that, or can get down with that.

And so it's not so much about whether I, you know... I do what I can with myself, with my heart, but in many of these cases it's also about the people who they hurt or the people who they affected, and have those people forgiven this person or acknowledged that this person has made enough of a change? So it's, yeah, it's not only up to me, I guess.

Julia Galef: Do you ever have difficulty being empathetic towards your guests, given their past views or past deeds?

Stephanie Lepp: I have assumed that before talking to the person that I'm not going to be able to hear them and hear their story, and have been surprised almost every time. I mean, the episode that, I would've never in a million years, I would have never even thought to look for an ex-offender priest. To me it's like-

Julia Galef: And when you say "offender," do you mean child sex abuse?

Stephanie Lepp: A perpetrator priest. Yes. I would have never thought to even look for that person because how could I possibly empathize? I mean that person, there's no way that that can be...

Julia Galef: It's hard to make that into a heartwarming story.

Stephanie Lepp: Exactly. And yet this, it kind of fell in my lap.

Julia Galef: How?

Stephanie Lepp: How did I find them?

Julia Galef: Yeah.

Stephanie Lepp: It was because I was... I have this wishlist of guests who I would love to be on the show, like the Pope, but the Pope never called me and so I thought, "Well, if the Pope isn't going to come on Reckonings why not write his reckoning for him?"

And so I wrote an imaginary Reckoning with Pope Francis and I had it performed by a voice actor. And I was looking for someone to give me feedback on this imaginary reckoning. And it was like, okay, this person has to be a survivor of clergy sex abuse -- but also someone who, I don't know, just has the capacity to think in a more expanded way about... This is going to sound extremely blasphemous, but about, under the right circumstances, letting perpetrators become allies.

Or... at least someone who's a survivor but also can get down with an imaginary reckoning with Pope Francis, was what I'm trying to do there.

And I found a woman who is a survivor of clergy sex abuse and she collaborates with a perpetrator of clergy sex abuse. And what they are doing is working together to bring restorative justice to the church, to the Catholic Church. And so I first found her thinking, "Oh, you can give me feedback on this piece."

And I was like, "Wait a minute -- yeah, maybe we should actually do an episode together."

And that is a perfect example. I would have never, I was scared to talk to him for the first time.

Julia Galef: Were you scared because -- just for the reason that talking to a villain is scary? Or scared that you might --

Stephanie Lepp: No. Scared that I won't be able to hear him -- and scared that I *will* be able to hear him.

Julia Galef: Yeah yeah. Both scenarios are a little bit unnerving for different reasons.

Stephanie Lepp: Yeah. And there's definitely some blow-back from that. I mean there are probably people that just based on the title of the piece would refuse to listen to it.

Julia Galef: Yeah, or think that you're doing a bad thing by airing it, or something.

Stephanie Lepp: Yeah. I'm not here to create a soapbox for perpetrators of bad... but if we are interested in changing public opinion, if we are interested in culture shifting, behooves us to understand how people actually change.

This is not about whether it's justified to give a voice to perpetrators. Is it justified to give perpetrators a voice? There's no yes or no answer to that question. The question is: under what circumstances is it helpful, I would say, to hear the story of perpetrators?

And the circumstances, I would say, are when the survivor is involved, or has okayed it. There are a set of circumstances that I have for myself.

I call myself a "promiscuous, pragmatic pluralist." I say I'm so open minded, I'm even open to being closed-minded sometimes. And restorative justice and traditional criminal justice are not mutually exclusive. Just because you're sitting in jail doesn't mean you can't work to repair the harm you caused. So, I don't think it's necessarily consequences or compassion. It's all of the above, depending on the circumstance. In service of what it is we're trying to achieve here.



Julia Galef: Could you say a little more about this particular ex offender priest, what made you more sympathetic... or just more, I don't know how to say it, open to him than you had expected to be?

Stephanie Lepp: Well, it was actually just hearing his story, because I had this idea in my mind. I imagine most of us have ideas in our minds of what a perpetrator priest is like. He's this perverted, older man. It was really just hearing the story, and it shocked me.

I did not have this corroborated -- all I have is the woman he collaborates with, who's a fierce activist against clergy sex abuse, and had her own experiences when she was young, and they have developed a very strong bond. I just want to put out there I did not have this corroborated.

Julia Galef: Sure, yeah.

Stephanie Lepp: There was no violence. There was no physical force involved. And this does not excuse it, but it does challenge my ideas about it. Complicate my ideas about it.

Julia Galef: Did it seem like it was easier for him to view it as "not bad," or rationalize it to himself, because there was no force?

Stephanie Lepp: Yeah, although I guess I should mention another thing. He turned himself in.

Julia Galef: Oh, that also makes it a little easier to-

Stephanie Lepp: That's the other factor. Yeah, he was found out and he was brought in to meet with his, I guess it was the bishop of his area, and they just asked him. They showed him a letter that the parents of the young boy he had abused had sent in. It actually was a letter that the boy had written and the parents found it, and sent it in.

They said to him -- I don't remember exactly how they phrased the question, but it was open ended. It was

basically, "Did you do this or not?" He could have easily said no. He could have so easily said no. The church would have been ready to protect him.

It's his word against some young 13 year old boy. He could have easily said no. But he was ready to be done with it and he just said, "You know what? Whatever the consequences are, I need to face them. So, yes. This is true."

Yeah, that obviously makes it a lot easier too. But these kinds of details, in all of these episodes I find, I go in with some idea. Even after having done this for a while, I go in with some idea of some stereotype or some whatever I have, and every time I am surprised.

Julia Galef: Are all of the Reckonings that you've covered so far, are they all in the "right direction"? Are there any where you don't agree with the end view of the guest?

Stephanie Lepp: Yes. Yeah, so the kinds of change I'm interested aren't necessarily from right to left, or wrong to right; a direction I agree with, to one I don't.

I'm interested in certainty to uncertainty, or from dogma to ideological liberty. From being really attached to my views and the way that I think about the world, to feeling more free to reflect on my views and be critical of my views, and consciously change them to adapt to the reality around me.

Most of the conservatives I have featured on the show, which -- I am certainly on the more progressive side of the spectrum, although I find the spectrum itself problematic, but we can get into that later... Most of the conservatives I featured on the show did not become less conservative. They just happened to change their views on some issue, climate change, gun control, abortion, whatever it was, and are now pursuing a conservative approach to that issue.

So, yeah. What's exciting to me isn't just a change in views but really a change in the way that we relate to our views -- a meta change, or what I would call a reckoning.

I guess I would give two caveats to that. One is that these kinds of changes do tend to move in a more progressive direction... or a more liberal direction, in the traditional sense of liberal. The word liberal literally means open. Open to newness and change. So, if you're becoming less fearfully attached to your views and more capable of reflecting on them and changing them, then there's a leftward movement to that in and of itself.

I guess the second caveat though, is -- of course I have my own limits in terms of what I'm able to even recognize as an authentic reckoning, because of my own views. I have interviewed people who have shifted from pro-choice to anti-abortion, but I was unable to recognize the reckoning in there. And whether that's because it wasn't there, or because I just couldn't see it myself-

Julia Galef: Yeah, that's interesting.

Stephanie Lepp: -- is up for debate, and kind of a moving target.

Julia Galef: Stephanie, thank you so much for coming on the show. It's been a pleasure having you.

Stephanie Lepp: Thank you, Julia.

Julia Galef: Just to remind our listeners, that's "Reckonings.show," to follow Stephanie's work going forward.

[interlude]

Welcome to Rationally Speaking, the podcast where we explore the borderlands between reason and nonsense. I'm your host, Julia Galef, and my guest today is Buster Benson.

Buster has been a product manager at companies including Amazon, Twitter, and Slack for 20 years now. He's probably most famous for being the creator of the Cognitive Bias Codex, which is this beautifully laid out wheel cataloging, taxonifying over 150 cognitive biases in different categories, that went viral a few years ago.

He's just come out with his first book titled *Why Are We Yelling? The Art of Productive Disagreement*, which is full of thoughts on how to make disagreements go well, how to learn from them and grow, along with a lot of very charming illustrations. So, that's what we're going to talk about today. Buster, welcome to Rationally Speaking.

Buster Benson: Thank you. I'm really happy to be here.

Julia Galef: So, the idea of a productive disagreement -- as you know, because we follow each other on Twitter and we talked a little bit about this before... this is also a topic I'm very interested in, and I've talked to a lot of people about it.

One thing that has come up a lot for me in conversations with people is that people have different ideas of what it means to have a productive disagreement, what makes a disagreement productive.

So, just for example some people are thinking in terms of *epistemically*, a disagreement is productive if you come away having updated your model of some issue. You've learned something you were mistaken about, or something you were misunderstanding, et cetera. Your view of the world is more accurate than it was.

And then other people are interpreting productive disagreement more socially than epistemically, and they're thinking in terms of -- it was productive if we went away feeling in harmony with each other. We've resolved the conflict, we've reached some compromise, we feel aligned.

Those two things can go together, but they also can not go together.

And I guess some people think of a productive disagreement in terms of, "Did I win the argument?"

So, I just wanted to start off by asking what you mean when you talk about making disagreements "productive."

Buster Benson: Yeah, yeah. That's definitely the first sticking point that we tend to get into when we think about, what is the purpose of arguing? If we don't have the same purpose, then clearly it's not going to work out. I go back to just the intuitive feeling of productive. I think of productive in the sense of a tree is productive. A fruit tree is productive. It's producing fruit. And less in the outcomes of it. In order for a tree to produce fruit, it has to be healthy, it has to be in the right place, it has to be thriving.

So for a productive disagreement, I think in an ideal world it can produce lots of things.

One of them is alignment. Alignment is a thing that can come out of it. But also insight, or knowledge, or wisdom can come out of it. A better relationship can come out of a productive disagreement.

And the first one, it's just enjoyment, and fun, and excitement, and awe or wonder can also come out of it.

All four of those things I think are different fruits of disagreement, and they interplay. Sometimes they conflict, sometimes they work together... but overall the end goal of all that productive conversation, I think ultimately, is that you as a human become a little bit more alive, a little bit more human. A little bit more thriving, because you've learned something, you've enjoyed something, you've connected with someone. Something has gotten a little bit better. You've grown, and that's how I think of it.

Julia Galef: So in the book you describe this argument you got into with your wife, when you discovered that one of you had to take care of your son because the place you were going to take him for the day -- was it school? -- was closed that day.

Buster Benson: Yeah, school. Yeah.

Julia Galef: School was closed, yeah. So you got into an argument that was literally over, "Is it legal to leave our son home alone?" Your wife was saying it's not legal, and you were saying it is.

What you realized, you say in the book, is that for your wife the disagreement was never about, is it legal? It was about, is Buster --

Buster Benson: Willing to pick up the slack.

Julia Galef: Willing to pick up the slack. In this case by staying home and taking care of our son. And just in general -- is he the kind of partner who's willing to pick up the slack?

And you chided yourself, at least implicitly, in describing this instance -- like, "I should have realized that discussing the literal fact of, 'Is it legal or not?' was not really the important thing."

In one sense, it's commendable, I think, that you're willing to realize that you should try to really get at the heart of the issue for someone, instead of just arguing about facts.

But in another sense... it does seem not great to me if someone is arguing something that's literally false, and they don't care that it's literally false. Your wife was wrong about the legal fact of the matter, right? It seems not great for someone to be saying, "It's illegal," when what they really mean is, "I wish you would pick up more of the slack."

Buster Benson: Right. I mean, I think if it was something that none of us did or only some of us did, we could say it's bad. But I think we all do this... I forced her into that corner. I brought up the

legal aspect, because in my attempt to win, or my attempt to resolve the argument, I introduced this new argument that I could win.

Then she fell for it, and then I won, but by winning I only proved more so that I was not a good husband.

So, I think it's my responsibility as well to not necessarily force people to have arguments that I'm advantaged at winning. After the fact we can resolve that, because it wasn't really critical to our lives. Even if it was legal or not legal, it wouldn't really change whether or not we should leave him at home.

But I have to take responsibility for the fact that I collapsed into something that I was better at winning. I think that's what was hard for me to see until I saw it -- and then I saw it everywhere, that we do this all the time.

Julia Galef:

You don't have to make it about your wife in particular, in this particular argument, but -- you think that in general, people will argue something that's literally false, without necessarily admitting to themselves or even thinking about whether it's literally false or not, because they're trying to make a bigger point? Do you think your wife on some level felt that if she conceded that it was legal, then she would be obliged to say, "Okay, fine. We have to do that"? And she didn't realize that she had the option of saying, "I don't care if it's legal or not. You're right that it's legal, but that doesn't mean that I'm comfortable with it"?

Buster Benson:

She might have had some piece of information in her head that made her think that it might be true. We know that motivated reasoning is really good at pulling evidence up that supports our argument. Especially in the moment when our heart [rate] is up, and our blood pressure is up, and we're trying to win. We're just going to, "Okay. I vaguely remember hearing something about this." She's from Delaware, a completely different state, so it might have been

from Delaware. It might not have been California. Then you can get entrenched in that and fight from there.

So, I don't know if she... It's not a conscious thing. I think it's something that we all do, when we're losing, we're going to either pull up some confirmation bias to make us right and confident, or we're going to pull in a new argument that we know we can win. There's all these strategies that we use to sort of support ourselves.

I wouldn't say it's evidence of bad arguing, it's just what our brains do.

Julia Galef: Couldn't it be both?

Buster Benson: It can be both. And we do have responsibility to sort of improve those skills.

I think that's what the art of productive disagreement is. It's like noticing when that spark of anxiety starts influencing you and making you want to pull in all these other things to win.

I remember in college, my college roommate Chris, he was a terrible driver. Well, he's a really good driver, but he was a really dangerous driver, and he got in an accidents all the time. The other driver's always to blame, because he's always doing just the right thing to cause the accidents to happen.

I think there's a way to argue that's similar, where you're recklessly driving within the law, within rationality's rules, and causing everyone else to make mistakes, making them look foolish, and winning. I don't think that's a great way to go about it.

Julia Galef: You described in the book how difficult it was to cope with Trump's victory in 2016, and how part of the difficulty for you was feeling kind of alienated from some of your close friends who may have voted differently, or didn't vote, and



feeling kind of frustrated and not knowing what to do with that. Where did you end up landing on that issue?

Buster Benson: Well, we're friends again.

Julia Galef: That's great. That's good.

Buster Benson: Yeah, but I think we're still building up for the next round of this.

Julia Galef: You mean 2020?

Buster Benson: Yeah, and really this whole book is like, "How can I be more prepared than I was last time for this?" Because these are some of my closest friends, people that... I know them as well as I know myself and my family.

I indexed too much on the being polite and nice and considerate angle, and not on the, "How do I get to the bottom of what their real perspective is?" Because I didn't do that, and I didn't ... In hindsight, I realized how big of a mistake that was for me to do.

Julia Galef: How come?

Buster Benson: Because they ended up being right about a lot of stuff and I was wrong. And so I needed to know, what did I not do? What did I miss? I thought it was going to be much smoother than it was.

Julia Galef: What? Can you share --

Buster Benson: The election. But just how the world was feeling, how different parts of the country were feeling.

Julia Galef: Oh, I see.

Buster Benson: And that everything wasn't fine, and things weren't getting better for a lot of people, and all that stuff that they experienced way more firsthand than I do. And I didn't

really dive into that with them, even though I had them right there in front of me... I didn't ask the right questions.

Julia Galef: Interesting. I guess to me it seems like it would be especially hard to deal with disagreements over how things *should be*. Like, if you had a friend who wanted the country to go in a very different direction than you did, that seemed like it would be an especially challenging disagreement.

A disagreement about just descriptive facts, about "are things getting better or not for people in these demographics, or these parts of the country?" -- that seems like it would be easier to navigate emotionally.

Did it feel challenging because it was bound up with the normative question?

Buster Benson: Right, yeah. Because most of the conversation was a few levels above that, about what to do about the problems and not about the problems themselves. I just never dug deep enough to really see it from that perspective. I don't think ... They weren't trying to offer it to me, necessarily. It was my fault for not asking, and not trying to figure it out from them.

At the surface we were talking about like, "Wow, can you believe Ted Cruz just said that?" Or, "Did this really happen? What did Alex Jones, what's his evidence?" All that stuff.

That stuff was 90% of the conversation, when it could have been flipped. It could've been like, "Let's talk about what your community is like and what people are feeling and how they're responding to it, and what kinds of things they need for help," and all these other things.

In hindsight, I think that would have been a more enjoyable conversation, and it might've led to, it might even have led to changing actions and voting patterns amongst that tiny little group, more than talking about the evidence and all that stuff.

Julia Galef: I think, again, a recurring theme in my conversation with you today, is that I keep asking questions with the assumption that we're talking about, like, epistemic reasons for believing something.

I'm trying to think if I have any argument against approaching these disagreements socially, emotionally -- or if it's just not the thing that I'm most drawn to...

I guess one potential concern that has come up for me is I worry that it's kind of patronizing, or something. The person gives an argument, and I'm like, "What in your life caused you to feel that this was important?" or something.

If someone does that to me, I get annoyed. Because I'm like, "Look, I just want to tell you what I think, and why I think it's true. Stop trying to psychoanalyze me."

Buster Benson: Right, right. I guess I am sort of in the middle, because I am obsessed with belief, I think. Belief has always been ... I was an atheist growing up and then I very briefly became a Christian in high school.

Julia Galef: For how long?

Buster Benson: A couple of years, and I converted a lot of my friends and my mom.

Julia Galef: No way! Oh my God. Wait, I'm sorry, I'm just curious -- how did you convert your friends and your mom to Christianity?

Buster Benson: I think because I'm just a skeptic and they thought, "If a skeptic is moving over, I don't have to do the thinking myself. I can do it, I can jump in."

Julia Galef: No way. Did you make arguments to them? Or did you just say like, "Hey, I've decided this is true," and they're like, "Cool, we're with you."

Buster Benson: I don't know, it was a weird time. I mean, it was also a time my father passed away, and [I was] graduating college, or high school, and moving away. A lot of things were happening, and that could've sort of generated this... but it was like, it was a movement of my friends.

But ultimately I came back to belief. It's like, "Okay, well does this hinge on belief? Because I don't even know what belief is... When I look at it, there's nothing there. I don't have a choice about what I believe. I can't point it to a thing that I think exists, and how can an entire universe be hinging on this kind of thing?"

And so, I feel like I tend to be okay with ... And I've been tracking my beliefs. I track it in GitHub, so I can see the changes over time.

Oftentimes I start vague and get more fleshed out, but the amount of effort it takes to go from a vague feeling to a fleshed out belief is huge, which makes me think that these aren't there until ... Doing the work of fleshing them out is useful, but I'm a fairly abstract and rational person generally. If I don't have this, I don't know how I can expect other people to have it as much.

So, I don't think it's patronizing in the sense of, like, I have this thing that you don't have.

Julia Galef: But do you think *they* think they have it?

Buster Benson: I think we all think we have it.

Julia Galef: But then why wouldn't it be patronizing, for them to make a claim, and then --

Buster Benson: We all think we're right about everything too, so ... But we might be right. We might have-

Julia Galef: Well yeah. No, I'm just curious and slightly surprised that if the people who are giving you their opinion are saying what

*they think* is true, if they're then met with what I would call "psychoanalysis," or something... how are you doing that process, such that they don't feel patronized?

Buster Benson: I've never gotten that. I mean I think --

Julia Galef: Maybe I'm just overreacting to the risk of patronizing someone.

Buster Benson: I'm sure I do. I think there is a risk, and maybe it comes... I can come across as smug, I think. Because if I don't get angry at the right times, then it can be like, "Oh, you don't have to get angry? You think you're better than me?" You know, that kind of thing.

Julia Galef: Oh, interesting. Do you mean like, in an argument where the person's angry at you, or they're angry about an issue in the world, they want you to be angry about too?

Buster Benson: Yeah, both.

Julia Galef: Both?

Buster Benson: Yeah.

Julia Galef: Oh man. That seems really difficult, if a person interprets lack of anger as a sign that you think they're better than them...

Buster Benson: Yeah. I mean, you've never experienced that?

Julia Galef: I think I just choose people for my life that... I just have various picky, idiosyncratic criteria for the kind of people who I would be close enough to, to get in an argument with.

Buster Benson: Yeah. So I think that I'm definitely surrounded by people that are not, would not identify as being rational, logical people. And so, for me to hold them to that standard is sort of like saying like I'm going to go into a basketball court and be like, "Hey, who wants to play chess?" That's sort of patronizing. It's forcing them to play my game, versus

playing their game. I think it's a lot easier for me to switch games than to get people to switch to my game.

Julia Galef: I just realized we never heard the end of the story of what happened when you converted to Christianity and took your friends and mom with you, and then deconverted. Did they deconvert with you again? Or were they annoyed? Was it awkward to tell them, "Hey, never mind"?

Buster Benson: Half of them slowly faded out and half of them are still Christians, I think.

Julia Galef: Wow. How did they process your deconversion?

Buster Benson: I think a lot of things can be explained as just writing me off as a weird person. Sort of my reputation...

Julia Galef: Even though you had been an important part of their conversion in the first place?

Buster Benson: Yeah. I was a catalyst, I guess, versus the boat.

Julia Galef: I see. You got them thinking about it, but their decision felt like their own, and not caused by you. I see.

Buster Benson: Now, we argue about it all the time, and we can sort of poke fun at it.

Julia Galef: You mean, how it all happened?

Buster Benson: How it all happened, and how our lives have all just gone into different directions. And we all still can be very sort of critical of each other while respecting each other. I think that's a great place to keep a friendship. If we resolved all of our differences, we would have less of a friendship, in some cases.

Julia Galef: Fascinating. Well Buster, thank you so much for coming on Rationally Speaking. We'll link to *Why Are We Yelling? The Art Of Having Productive Disagreements*.

Buster Benson: Awesome.

Julia Galef: Do you have any call to action you want to encourage people to do? Are there websites they should go to?

Buster Benson: Yeah, busterbenson.com is where the book is. If you find me on Twitter, @Buster, I'm still trying to build best-case arguments for things that I don't agree with, and so anyone that wants to help, I would love that.

Julia Galef: Best case, like a “steel man,” the strongest version of the opposing perspective? Great.

Buster Benson: I think that's a fun thing to do. Like we can steel man Flat [Earth], and postmodernism, and all these other fun things.

Julia Galef: Excellent. That does sound like a time. All right, thanks again.

This concludes another episode of Rationally Speaking. Join us next time for more explorations on the borderlands between reason and nonsense.