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Josh Barro:

This is Josh Barro, and this is Very Serious, the podcast. As you know from reading the Very Serious newsletter... And if by chance you're not reading the Very Serious newsletter, you should really go to [joshbarro.com](http://joshbarro.com). It comes out several times a week. This is not merely a podcast product. But in any case, as you know from reading the newsletter, I give advice. Every Wednesday in the Mayonnaise Clinic, people send in letters and sometimes they ask what tech policy should be, or they ask about inflation or abortion politics or those sorts of things. But sometimes they write in and they want to know, "Where should I live? Or what should I make for dinner tonight? Or what should I do about the fact that my friends are tiresome bores when they talk about politics?" I enjoy answering those sorts of questions.

Josh Barro:

But I also read Ben Dreyfuss. Ben, you've probably seen on Twitter. He's a force of nature there; he was a longtime journalist at Mother Jones. He writes the newsletter until recently known as Good Faith, now it's called Calm Down. He's been rewriting advice columns, which is to say he picks up Dear Prudence in Slate, or he picks up the New York Times' Ethicist or other advice columns out there and replaces the advice with better advice from himself. Clearer advice, funnier advice, more on point advice.

Josh Barro:

And so I really wanted to bring Ben here today because you listeners to Very Serious have a demonstrated interest in advice and I wanted to talk through what he thinks is wrong with the way that advice is being given in the advice column industrial complex, and to talk through some specific letters, some of which were sent in by listeners and readers. And I really appreciate you sending those in. And then also some of the letters that I've answered over the last few months in the Very Serious Newsletter or some letters that he has been answering recently. So Ben, first of all, thank you so much for joining me here today.

Ben Dreyfuss:

Thanks for having me, Josh.

Josh Barro:

Ben, first of all, let's talk about... how do we even know each other. I mean, you were with Mother Jones for a long time here in New York and we knew each other, I guess, originally from Twitter and from being journalists.

Ben Dreyfuss:

Yeah, I think that's how we first connected. And then we got along and at some point me in real life. And then you invited me to a Christmas party.

Josh Barro:

Yes, with a Yankee swap.

Ben Dreyfuss:

It was fantastic. I was one of the two straight people there. And the other straight person was your high school friend. She and I fell in love and dated for a few years. And we got much closer, you and I.

Josh Barro:

A few years?

Ben Dreyfuss:

Maybe it was months. This was before Trump. It's hard to tell time anymore.

Josh Barro:

And so we also were the two white Democrats in New York who were for Joe Biden all along.

Ben Dreyfuss:

Right.

Josh Barro:

Which I think is another key point of bonding between the two of us.

Ben Dreyfuss:

I mean, I remember in I guess it was 2019, getting a message from a political show on XM that was asking, "Hey, you might be the only Democrat who was willing to defend Joe Biden on the air." And I was like, "Well, is Josh a Democrat yet?" Because he will.

Josh Barro:

I was a Democrat by then. Yeah.

Ben Dreyfuss:

But yeah, you and I were the only two people who were able to read polls in New York media.

Josh Barro:

Yeah. No, it's amazing how people don't trust the media these days. So your Substack had been called Good Faith and you've renamed it and now it's Calm Down. Why Calm Down?

Ben Dreyfuss:

All right. Well, the Substack is about the sort of internet nightmare of politics and social media. I think that what Twitter and social media does is it sort of incentivizes this

conspiratorial thinking where everyone assumes that people are acting with malice when they're really just acting stupid or ignorant, or they're busy picking up their kids or whatever the hell.

Josh Barro:

Or they have sincerely different values from you and want different things.

Ben Dreyfuss:

Totally. And they're acting in good faith about them.

Josh Barro:

Right.

Ben Dreyfuss:

They're not trying to screw with me or hurt me. They're just acting in good faith.

Josh Barro:

Right.

Ben Dreyfuss:

But good faith is this thing that people don't believe on the internet. I always think that social media is a place where if Occam doesn't have a razor, but if he did, he'd cut someone with it. But anyways, over the course of the last year, one, there's a very good David French podcast called Good Faith. It was a wonderful problem.

Josh Barro:

Right.

Ben Dreyfuss:

The other thing was that I realized over the course of writing it over the last year that I kept coming back to this joke that I had always made with you about how one of your shticks as a columnist is “calm down”. Once that was sort of inception in my brain and I found myself constantly being sort of annoyed by the internet and the political media's tendency to make everyone freak out about everything all the time, that it just kept coming back to me. Calming down is something that I personally struggle with. I don't want myself to be someone who freaks out about too much stuff. And so once that was sort of inception in my brain and you didn't use it, I figured I might as well not just leave it out on the table, and so went for the rebrand.

Josh Barro:

It's funny. I mean, because you mentioned in your newsletter announcing the rebrand about how this is an idea that you ascribe to me. And so Sara Fay and I went back and we looked at the list of names that we considered before we decided to call this Very Serious. And it was this sort of weird whiteboarding exercise. I mean, a lot of people just name their Substack after themselves, which I think is a good practice in part because you don't have to go through this, like naming things is one of the hardest things in business. And so we were trying to figure out if we thought about calling it Calm Down, which it was not on our list of names. We did think about calling it “Cold Water.” And that was something I liked — Sara never liked that name, she was right. But that was one that we kicked around for a while. Another one was Tough But Fair. And another one that I liked in part because I thought we'd be able to have good visual branding was Crank. But we ended up deciding that was excessively self deprecating.

Ben Dreyfuss:

I mean, I think that Sara is right. Cold Water, it's the headline in the magazine print story that you would have to change when it goes online because it doesn't make any fucking sense. You have to change it to Calm Down to get anyone to click.

Josh Barro:

But then is it correct to use that headline in the magazine? I mean, because you're like an audience development expert. When you were at Mother Jones, you would write, but your main job is that you know how to get people to read things on the internet professionally.

Ben Dreyfuss:

Right. I trick gullible people by playing on their own stories they tell themselves into clicking on things about politics that speak to their identity.

Josh Barro:

Right.

Ben Dreyfuss:

One of the things that you would do that, like Cold Water is something that you would have to change online because it just wouldn't make any sense. If you scrolled past it as elderly woman on Facebook, they would be like, "Oh this is about buying water." I've always thought it was funny that if you actually like... One thing that happened with data analytics on the internet is there's so much data that you can always see what people click on. And it did change headlines. I mean, sometimes it's terrible and it's like BuzzFeed ones that are like, 'The Internet is Clapping Back at Queen Yes' or something. But it still hasn't hit books, like proper books. So if you go into a Barnes & Noble, you'll often look at books and be like, "these people are wasting some of this real estate on — *A Tale of Two Cities*?! This should be a story about the rich and poor that speaks to your self interest."

Josh Barro:

So speaking of publication features that don't work as they should, your latest shtick and something that's been getting a fair amount of traction has been basically rewriting advice columns. Advice comes into columns, you provide better advice than Dear Prudence or the New York Times' Ethicist or whoever provides in response to the advice columns. And so I guess, first of all, what's wrong with advice columns right now? Why does the advice need to be improved on? What are you bringing here that the incumbents don't have?

Ben Dreyfuss:

I think that advice columns in the age of the internet, as we just described with data being so helpful, has led to them blossoming. There's more of them than ever before. Slate, it used to have one advice column. Now it's just an advice column machine.

Josh Barro:

Right.

Ben Dreyfuss:

There's like, the New York Times has The Ethicist, but it has Social Q's. It has 17 other ones because people apparently just gobble them up. I think that one of the problems with them is that all of the advice columnists try to treat them in various different ways. Like, what is the utility here? You have to tell yourself a story about what type of utility you're providing. Are you literally just answering these questions for this person and assuming that they're acting in good faith and wanting to know how do I get to Mountain home from Boise? Those people can Google that, right? Google is the easiest thing to answer most of these questions. But a lot of them then recognize that they need to use them as opportunities to write columns that will be fed up by other people. They're using them as opportunities just to write whatever they want and they've always been waiting for someone to ask this idiot question and they say, "Oh yeah, da, da, da."

Ben Dreyfuss:

The New York Times, the thing that got me started on it was that someone asked the New York Times about their son. They caught their son, their 18 year old son, with condoms. And they said, "Oh my God, my son knows I'm religious and I don't agree with premarital sex." And the New York Times, man, I assume it's man because the New York Times is sexist. No, but the New York Times columnist said, "Thank you for your question. I think that it's good to practice safe sex and you should be supportive of it." And the New York Times columnist must have been so excited getting that email because he found an opportunity to tell all the liberal readers of the New York Times that, "Actually, don't forget there's people with really retrograde conservative views and here's my chance to evergreen remind you you're not one of them."

Josh Barro:

The other thing was, as you point out, that letter was fake.

Ben Dreyfuss:

Right.

Josh Barro:

Yeah. This conservative guy who's saying my son has this unopened box of condoms and he claimed that he was holding them for someone else like I'm an idiot. And my house, my rules," if that guy's in that situation, he's not writing into the New York Times to figure out what he ought to do about it.

Ben Dreyfuss:

Right. I mean, presumably, that person would be speaking to his pastor or something.

Josh Barro:

Right.

Ben Dreyfuss:

But the thing about it is, the New York Times also does have millions and millions of subscribers and people are weird and like to have some small measure of attention. Maybe that they do find that there's a reason why they want to send these wacky questions to it. And also, I mean, maybe just to assume that this man does exist and that his child did buy some unopened condoms, is that maybe he wanted to brag to his wife about how, "Look, the New York Times agreed with me. We should have stopped Jeff from having condoms."

Josh Barro:

Wait, I'm sorry. Can you just tell everyone what was your advice to the father who found the box of condoms under his 19 year old son's bed and wanted to throw him out of the house?



Ben Dreyfuss:

I mean, my advice to the person was that, like when you find your child smoking and then force them to smoke a whole carton of cigarettes is that he should take his child to a whorehouse. But I don't think he was really going to do that, you know? I mean-

Josh Barro:

Right. You wrote this jokey response because the letter is fake. I mean, in other instances you've given-

Ben Dreyfuss:

Yeah, exactly.

Josh Barro:

You're funny about it, but you give real advice to these other people. You don't actually want him to take his son to have unprotected sex with a whole bunch of prostitutes.

Ben Dreyfuss:

No, of course not. I mean the child clearly doesn't want to have unprotected sex.

Josh Barro:

Right.

Ben Dreyfuss:

He's purchased condoms.

Josh Barro:

Well, the box was unopened.

Ben Dreyfuss:

Well, that's a good point.

Josh Barro:

Yeah. But I mean, that's about the letter being fake really, is, you're making this joke because the letter is fake.

Ben Dreyfuss:

Right. Exactly. I mean, you're putting it in a much better way than I did, which is that a lot of these letters you can take seriously and then you can take seriously and mock them because they're not serious. A lot of these are just ridiculous questions. You would never ask that question if you were really looking for an answer from the New York Times. And what I'm really trying to do with that is to do what the New York Times was doing to this fake father of a child who doesn't have condoms and they're using it to make a very straightforward play towards their liberal readers saying, "Hey, by the way, it's okay to have condoms" and they're using him as a prop and an opportunity. And making a joke about that is using that column as a prop.

Josh Barro:

It's funny because about a year ago, Bennett Madison wrote a piece for Gawker called, "Help, I couldn't stop writing fake Dear Prudence letters that got published." And he outed himself as the author of at least a dozen letters that had been answered in Slate's Dear Prudence column, largely during Danny Lavery's tenure as Dear Prudence. And he says that he stopped doing this because one of his letters, the title of which was "Help, my husband won't remove his mask even for sex" went extremely viral and ended up the subject of a segment on Tucker Carlson Tonight about crazy liberals who are so attached to their masks that they can't even take them off during sex. And he was like, "Well, while that's on one level flattering that this letter became such a sensation, he didn't really want to feed the Tucker Carlson Fox News machine."

Josh Barro:

And so he added himself as the author of a bunch of these letters that basically the theme was he's writing some crazy liberal from Brooklyn with this sort of periodic problem of the social mores of the weird Twitter brain poisoned left of New York and Los Angeles. And he says that for a fake letter to get published in there, it had to do two things at once. It had to be plausible and ridiculous at the same time.

Josh Barro:

But it always seemed to me that Slate had to know that these letters were fake. And furthermore, that these letters were being written as a put on, basically aimed at their own reader and employee base of these weirdo liberals, like, "Can you believe people say this shit?" And then they give responses that treat it seriously and treat the insane ideas behind them as serious ideas. And then conservatives do hate sharing of them to be like, "Look at all these crazy liberals and they're crazy problems they're writing into Slate about and the crazy answers that it produces." And the whole thing is just fake. It's like the letter is fake. Slate believing the letter is real is also fake. And then the response, the advice is also kind of fake. The whole thing is just fraudulent and makes it impossible to enjoy the advice columns in Slate, at least from where I sit.

Ben Dreyfuss:

Right. I mean, think that the key part of that dynamic you just described is that when the people at... I don't work at Slate. But presumably when they at Slate got that letter, someone laughed and was like, "Oh nice." And they knew exactly how to open Chartbeat, which is the site that shows you how many readers will click on it and they were like, "This is [inaudible 00:15:06]. I'm going to watch this spike.' And it's fun. It's thrilling to do that. And so then they were like, "Well, the best way to do it is I'm going to treat this seriously." Even though in reality, I imagine that if I was with that Slate person and I personally was their friend and I actually told them some of those things, they would have a much different response.

Josh Barro:

In fairness, it was not Danny Lavery. It was some other person responding that week. They did take the position that you should not wear a mask during sex. And in fact, you should find a way to convince your husband that he ought not to wear a mask during sex. So at least Slate did come down on the correct side of that one.

Ben Dreyfuss:

Right. But it's also somewhat funny because of course in 2020, I mean, I was still at Mother Jones then, and one of our first explainers about-

Josh Barro:

The letter in Slate was in 2021. This was not like-

Ben Dreyfuss:

Oh, oh right. So it was not when people actually were saying, "Actually, you should go glory hole diving if you're in Wuhan."

Josh Barro:

Right.

Ben Dreyfuss:

That was a while when there was sort of weird, weird-

Josh Barro:

That was official guidance from various health departments including New York and British Columbia that you should use partitions in order to have safer sex without exposure to people's respiratory secretions.

Ben Dreyfuss:

Right. And then the conservative Jews all spread it. And they were like, "Well, I guess that didn't work." I'm Jewish. I'm allowed to do it.

Josh Barro:

Yes. Yeah, of course.

I was a big fan of Dear Prudence back when Emily Yoffe was writing it, in part because I think like a good advice columnist needs to be a little bit prim. Because you're supposed to be writing to someone who has better judgment than you. That's why that person is the advice columnist.

Ben Dreyfuss:

Right.

Josh Barro:

They should sort of have their together more than average and maybe a little bit less loosey goosey. A lot of these people just need to be smacked around a little bit and be told, "What are you doing?" Or sometimes the subject of the letter needs to have that told to them. You're not prim.

Ben Dreyfuss:

No.

Josh Barro:

Are you well positioned to be advising people? What are your credentials here?

Ben Dreyfuss:

Far better. I mean, I've been in therapy on and off since I was about five years old.

Josh Barro:

This is when Michael Avenatti said that what qualified him to represent himself in his criminal trial was that he had criminal trial experience because he had previously been a criminal defendant.

Ben Dreyfuss:

Well, I mean the thing about going to therapy, I've had lots of different therapists. And one thing that you learn is that there's two different types of them, right? There's basic ones that you'll find and that they'll answer your questions. And if you don't ask them the right questions, they won't do anything else. They'll help you with the thing straightforward in front of them. But good therapists don't do that. Good therapists are the forensic psychologists that you'll see on Law & Order, who if the criminal doesn't want to admit why they killed, they're still going to find out why.

Ben Dreyfuss:

I've gone to therapists many for many years and said the problems that I have and they've said, "This is what you should do." And then I've gone to therapists and I've said, "Look, you've already explained to me that I push people who love me away. I know I'm in this relationship and I'm pushing them away. I know I shouldn't do that, but..." And they'll say, "Well, here's what we should do about it. Da, da, da, da, da, da." And the fact is that it's difficult to take your own advice, even when you know it is. I mean, there's the metaphor that people always talk about in therapy about how, "I know I shouldn't be doing this. I know I should stop smoking and thinking about the greener grass, but I can't stop."

Josh Barro:

They're English in this case.

Ben Dreyfuss:

Yeah. They became English towards the end. Very green grass there. It's that it's sometimes easier to step outside of yourself because it's easier to forgive in others what you can't forgive in yourself. And so actually, I think that though, I, sometimes have trouble following my own advice, I do have a lot of history of how these things work and what you should do if you get the good advice.

Josh Barro:

Okay. So your own errors are basically your relevant experience here?

Ben Dreyfuss:

Of course. I mean my entire shtick as a journalist is that I genuinely do believe, despite what the internet thinks, that most people are actually quite like me. We're all very similar. And that if you actually just... We all have different preferences and stuff like that, but in general you can assume like, "I don't like setting my hand on fire. Fire hurts. I can't breathe underwater." It's easy to be like, "Well, let's look at this as a human being and see how we would all react. And if I can't get it or I'm not right at it, or I've screwed up with it, then let's assume that the other person is as flawed, but as good faith and human as I."

[music]

Josh Barro:

Thank you for listening to this podcast. I again want to encourage you. If you're not someone who's actually getting the Very Serious Newsletter in your email inbox, if you're just a podcast listener, go check us out at [joshbarro.com](http://joshbarro.com). I've written recently about struggles at the Washington Post, why the Washington Post really isn't like the New York Times as a much more narrowly focused business model that isn't as robust to the fading of the Donald Trump phenomenon. I've been writing about abortion politics and how that's shaping up to be one of the most effective political issues for Democrats in this election campaign, how the politics of abortion look actually a lot different than Republicans may have expected them to be in a post-Roe era.

I'm also writing about inflation and even the political interaction between these two issues. It's not simply that abortion has risen in salience in this election. The sharp drop in gasoline prices has been making it possible for people to look a little bit away from inflation as they devote their attention to other issues. Abortion is something that is available and extremely salient right now and an issue that is much more politically favorable to Democrats than inflation. So I encourage you to go take a look at [joshbarro.com](http://joshbarro.com). You can see those recent issues and more. And it reflects, I think, the variety of interests that drive both this podcast and the newsletter. So go check that out. Thank you.

[music]

Josh Barro:

Can we take some specific reader questions here? I have a mix of some people sent in questions specifically for this podcast. We also have some questions that either you answered in your newsletter or I answered in my newsletter over the last few months, and I'm interested to get your input especially on some of the ones that I've answered previously.

Ben Dreyfuss:

Totally.

Josh Barro:

So first, this is a question we got way back, I believe in January, when we first started running the newsletter. Cody wrote in, "It seems like a lot of people in my social circle, white, college educated, young, liberal millennials in a big city, can't have a conversation about mundane things without quickly relating it negatively to a social issue or some depressing thought about this being a dystopian end of days. It's anecdotal, but it does feel like this demographics is being cynical and miserable as fashionable and being generally happy or enjoying something as problematic. Do you have any advice for navigating this dynamic? I mostly agree with their politics, if not their approach, but it's just a shitty way to socialize." So what should Cody do about his friends being kind of downers in all these conversations?

Ben Dreyfuss:

I mean, his friends being downers is his friend's problem. It is very annoying to... I know a lot of people like that who are just, they're doomsayers, that's their love language is talking about how the Ice Age is coming, and like it's really not mine. And to be honest, a lot of that I think is popularized because of the internet and the media. It's popular to talk about how the end of days and everything is terrible. But after a couple of drinks, people will go, "All right, it's okay to have a laugh about this. It's funny to joke about that." And the people who won't do that? Oh God, run. Just run. It's awful.

Josh Barro:

I think he gets at something correct in here when it's this idea that it's virtuous to be miserable about things and there's something morally disreputable about being happy.

Ben Dreyfuss:

Right.

Josh Barro:



It's like it communicates that you don't care about the problems in the world if you are able to enjoy yourself. It's sort of Catholic.

Ben Dreyfuss:

It is.

Josh Barro:

Like I'm sure none of these people believe in God, but they sure as hell behave like they believe in God.

Ben Dreyfuss:

No. I mean, there's definitely a straight edge morality to it. One of my favorite quotes from one of those books about World War I that was written by someone who's probably dead now is that there was one of the English generals said, "Oh, all the nationalities came to France when we were all in the shit and the heap. What I learned was that the Australians, they were the most amazing people. They would literally be laughing as their heads got shot off." And it was just like, well, I know a lot of Australians and they do have a gallows sense of humor. And even this English person was like, "The Americans, they were very upset when they died." But there is something charming about just being able to deal with even if you do believe that the world is ending tomorrow, just like having a tonality about it that helps you get by, because the whole point of life is to have some sort of comfort and joy. There's no point in being terribly upset about everything all the time, because there's no point.

Josh Barro:

We have a new question for this podcast sent in from Danny. He says, "I recently moved to Tysons Corner in Virginia, which is 20 minutes west of Washington, DC. My work commute is blissfully easy. It's a 10 minute walk door to desk. My apartment is great. And overall I love where I chose to live. But my distance in the district in Northern Virginia makes going out on a whim and making people difficult. I've tried to mitigate this through getting involved in my local college alumni network and other groups, but it's still a pain. Any advice for a single 25 year old guy on how to navigate the compromise between convenience for work and my social life?" So Ben, first of all, are you familiar with Tysons Corner?

Ben Dreyfuss:

I Googled it. It's a suburb where there's some banks.

Josh Barro:

It's a fucking hellscape. Tysons Corner is an edge city, right on the beltway outside Washington DC. There are two enormous malls right next to each other. Capital One Bank is headquartered there. I believe Hilton Hotels is headquartered there. But it's a really sad place that's basically, it's a giant office park. If you live there, you have made a choice not to be happy. So my advice to Danny is that he needs to move to Clarendon. That's assuming that Danny is straight. If Danny is gay, he needs to move all the way to the district of Columbia. But if he's straight, there's a part of Northern Virginia and Arlington County that's along the orange line subway and it's sort of all of the places that 20 something single people go to that I would rather shoot myself in the face than go to these bars. But for Danny's purposes, they're probably exactly the right bars to be in.

Josh Barro:

But sort of more broadly, if you have goals in your life, you need to make choices in your life that are structured around achieving those goals. And if you want to have friends and find a girlfriend and get laid and all of those sorts of things, then moving to Tysons Corner right by your office is a choice that you've made not to prioritize that. And so then getting involved in your college alumni network is a very sad Washington DC kind of choice trying to fix that sort of thing. But he doesn't even live in Washington, DC. He lives in Tysons.

Josh Barro:

And so that's my primary advice there. Specifically, he should move. But also more generally, it sounds like he has a young professional job where he has some choice. Tysons is not inexpensive because there are all these offices there. It is on certain metrics a desirable place to be. Maybe if he was already married, he might be happy to be at or around there. But if he's single and trying to mingle, he just really needs to be somewhere else.

Ben Dreyfuss:

Well, unless he wants to sleep with married women in their middle age. But regardless, I mean, I think that that's very good advice and you're taking it all at face value. I guess my thing reading this, not knowing the geography of this layout at all, is that he seems to be implying that if he were in DC, that he's such a good conversationalist sort of, that he could just go into a bar without any friends and chat people up, which is a great skill to have. And a lot of skill that not enough people have anymore.

Ben Dreyfuss:

But if that's true and you have then made the choice to value your income, which I assume is what he's done as for happiness to move to this shithole suburb, is that then he should also just be able to... 20 minutes, take an Uber, dude. Go out. Go look at these neighborhoods. If you have the ability to not freak out walking into a bar alone, then you should go and put a couple hundred dollars in the monthly budget to take Ubers to these places. And then if you connect with any of them and you decide you any of these things more, then move. Then move to Clarendon or wherever the hell it is. But if you are overthinking your own ability to do that and that what you really want is to walk into a bar with friends because you're not comfortable and that's why you might want to join your local college alumni network, then that's something else. Then you want to furnish those friendships first so that you can go someplace with a group.

Josh Barro:

Yeah. I mean, that's also true. If you are just a social disaster who is not going to make friends and find a girlfriend in any case, then yes, you might as well live right by the office.

Ben Dreyfuss:

Yeah, I mean-

Josh Barro:

I don't want to make that assumption about Danny. I don't infer that directly from this letter. And you're right also that Tysons is not that far from Clarendon. You can even take the subway because they ran the new silver line subway out to Tysons. The DC

subway is a complete mess since COVID and have the trains are out of service because they're incapable of running a subway system so it's not as great as it would be. But he's not actually that far away. But it's also one of these things where people will look at you funny when you tell them you live in Tysons Corner and you're 25.

Ben Dreyfuss:

Right.

Josh Barro:

And so I think that it's still a little bit of a social bear. It's like when you have an Android and your text messages come in green. People wonder what's going wrong in your life.

Ben Dreyfuss:

But no one has ever not slept with someone because they have an Android.

Josh Barro:

I don't think that's true. I think that people have... I mean, I don't think that anyone was about to sleep with someone and then saw that they had an Android and stopped. But I think that there were people who were along the way toward a situation where you might sleep with someone and they saw the green text messages and they were like, "Ooh." And then didn't proceed.

Ben Dreyfuss:

I mean in that situation, they were never going to get it up at all.

Josh Barro:

I don't know. I think it can matter at the margin. I think all of these things can matter at the margin. People like-

Ben Dreyfuss:

If you think someone is beautiful and you genuinely want to sleep with them, they can have a fucking [inaudible 00:29:38].

Josh Barro:

Yeah, but what if you think they're like a 7?

Ben Dreyfuss:

Well, I mean, 7, that's a pass. That's a passing grade.

Josh Barro:

Right. But then maybe the Android takes them down to 6.5 and that's what changes [inaudible 00:29:48] and fail.

Ben Dreyfuss:

Okay. But then they have a drink and they go up to 8.5.

Josh Barro:

Right. But you're not having a drink with them at the bar if they live in Tysons Corner.

Ben Dreyfuss:

Well, that's true. I do definitely think reading this letter because I had to look up Tysons Corner and I thought it was a chicken wing Costco or something, that this person should just say that they live in a suburb of DC.

Josh Barro:

No, no.

Ben Dreyfuss:

Look, think about Los Angeles. Everyone lives 20 minutes [inaudible 00:30:10].

Josh Barro:

I'm trying to think what the equivalent is in LA to living in Tysons Corner. Is it like-

Sara Fay:

I can tell you who this is because I married him.

[laughter]

Josh Barro:

Okay, Sara.

Sara Fay:

I met my husband online in 2014 OkCupid, still a desktop application, not a phone app. At the time, Chris was living... He's an engineer at JPL.

Josh Barro:

That's the Jet Propulsion Laboratory. It's a NASA facility.

Sara Fay:

Yeah, rocket scientist. There were pluses. But he lived literally right around the corner from JPL, which is sort of in the crack between Pasadena — fine place to live when you're in your 20s — and La Cañada, which is where you live if you want to send your kids to a really good school and pay a lot of money for a house.

Ben Dreyfuss:

It's a nice golf course.

Sara Fay:

Yeah, very... Well you know, nice everything. But yeah, he was 100% prioritizing convenience to work.

Ben Dreyfuss:

I think we've brought up two important things for this letter writer. One of which is the internet, which is, this person should be on Tinder. And you should probably pay for that Tinder that lets you meet people who are in the next town over so that he can maybe make some headway into DC before diving into the deep end.

Josh Barro:

Yeah. Although I would note looking back at his letter, he mentions that he's single, but it sounds like he's mostly talking about trying to make friends more than he's talking about trying to date. I mean, I'm sure he would like to do both, but...

Sara Fay:

I think either way you need to use the internet and you need to absolutely commit yourself to making an effort. You have to show up. It can't just be, "Oh, I have a 10 minute walk to my office," which is great for when you need to roll in to work borderline late. But that does not say to me that this is the kind of person that's going to sit on the DC Metro for 40 minutes to go out for a drink after work. If you live in the suburbs and you're trying to commit, if you're trying to meet peers and you're living in a place where peers do not live... I should also note and say that I was a suburban reporter in my early 20s, and so I was not living among 20-somethings and I had to really make an effort to get out and be social. But you really have to commit. If you're going to take the super easy commute, you have to really put in the effort everywhere else.

Ben Dreyfuss:

Then move! Break the lease!

Josh Barro:

Yeah.

Sara Fay:

Then move!

Josh Barro:

Let's move on to another question. This is from L. Brown. He says, "Asking for my friend Joe from Delaware. I recently got promoted," this is Joe's question. He says, "I recently got promoted to the position my boss used to hold. But I've always had the feeling that he didn't think I was the right person for it. He said he's my friend, but he hasn't really publicly supported me that much. Maybe he's trying not to overshadow me as he was quite popular as a leader, but I'm not so sure. Do you think I should confront him about this?"

Ben Dreyfuss:

All right. So for Joe, from another shithole place people shouldn't live, Delaware, the easiest answer here is that he shouldn't care if his former boss isn't supportive of him. Of course the boss is stuck in his own life. The boss of course is going to look at his former job and think, "I could have done it better, but now I'm doing X." That's just what life is like. And you can't worry yourself about it. You have to think about your own movie. And in your own movie, you've just gotten this promotion and you need to prove him wrong.

Ben Dreyfuss:

In some ways, if this person isn't going to be your highlight, they're somewhat of someone like a ghost you need to vest. And he definitely should not bring it up to him because that is insane. But what he might want to do is find a moment where his manager or boss has an opinion about how he should do his job and he is very confident that he is right and that the boss is wrong and he should make the case for it. It's a gamble because if he's wrong, he's going to get beaten a bunch. But if he's right, it's going to have his boss stop [inaudible 00:34:14] him.



Josh Barro:

Ben, I apologize. You've fallen for a fake letter. You're supposed to be a professional here. This letter is about the president, Joe from Delaware.

Ben Dreyfuss:

Oh, you're fucking right.

Josh Barro:

It's about-

Ben Dreyfuss:

But also the advice still stands! If Obama is telling Biden that he shouldn't do something and he thinks that he's right, Joe should do it. Joe should say, "Barack, I'm going to do it right!"

[music]

Josh Barro:

Again. I want to thank those of you who have sent in questions over the last nine months to the Mayonnaise Clinic. And I always want to encourage you please send in more questions. You can write to us at [mayo@joshbarro.com](mailto:mayo@joshbarro.com). That's mayo like mayonnaise. And maybe we'll use the question in an issue with the newsletter. Maybe we'll use it on a future edition of this podcast. So please, I encourage you to send those in. You can also look through the archive, recent editions of the Mayonnaise Clinic and we'll post links to this in the newsletter issue that goes along with this podcast at [joshbarro.com](http://joshbarro.com).

A couple of weeks ago, I answered a number of readers' questions about food. What's a good healthy week weeknight meal to eat? Are there any particular products that I keep on hand in my kitchen that might not show up in most people's kitchens? Where do I find recipes? And how do I set out about if I'm having a dinner party for some number of people figuring out what exactly the right thing would be to make for them? Those are all questions that I answered recently.

I also responded to a reader who asked whether I make any food that's not white people food, which was actually a more on point question than it sounds like it might be. And I explained the nature of my preference for certain cooking methods that are most associated with French cooking, but they can be used in a wide variety of world cuisines and there are tagines and curries and various things that I make that are procedurally like certain French dishes, but obviously very different in flavor. So anyway, I encourage you: go check that out at [joshbarro.com](http://joshbarro.com). See those questions. And if you have those of your own, send them in to [mayo@joshbarro.com](mailto:mayo@joshbarro.com).

[music]

Josh Barro:

Why don't we talk about one of the questions in your most recent issue, Ben. Your first letter and I'll read this as from a man who was invited to a wedding and he says, "My spouse and I were invited to a wedding, or actually, I was invited. The invitation was addressed to Mr. John Doe and guest. But the bridal couple has known my spouse and me only as a couple. And they've been guests in our home many times. My spouse, having been erased from the invitation, views this as a friendship ender, and I do not. What are your thoughts?" And so Ben, your advice basically was that his spouse needs to get over this.

Ben Dreyfuss:

Yes. I mean, of course. I mean the overwhelming likelihood here is that this is just a clerical error, right? That this was handed off to a wedding planner and the wedding planner saw the first name and not the other one and just said guest. And you should have generously interpret that if your wife really values this friendship, because friendship is about generously interpreting your friends when it comes to your friendship. However, the friendship ender thing is a crazy statement. Ending a friendship because of this means that they were never your friends in the first place. In which case, maybe the other people don't value her as a friend either and they really genuinely do like the husband more.

Josh Barro:

Yeah. No, I mean, I think that's on point, that if you receive this invitation and your first instinct is, "They did this to slight me," you didn't like them that much. You had previous reasons that you were expecting them to try to slight you in this way. Whereas if you actually had a deep and close friendship with these people, you would look at that and

say, "This was obviously just a mistake." I mean, I've been married for about five and a half years at this point. The later stage of the wedding planning was a huge crush. And I am really anal about these sorts of things and I had my whole spreadsheet with all the invitations and exactly how we were going to address them, including also figuring out who out ranked whom on the invitation. If the wife is a doctor or professor, then it's "professor and Mr." kind of thing.

Josh Barro:

But one thing the letter writer doesn't make clear like, are they purporting to have been really close friends with these people or not. I mean, obviously close enough to be invited to the wedding, which unless it's a truly enormous wedding that usually would indicate some level of closeness. But I would not have made the mistake with any of my actual friends of sending out an invitation in this manner.

Ben Dreyfuss:

I mean, I should just think that getting upset about this would be an honestly crazy thing to do, even if they're just a casual acquaintance. Even if you only see them three times a year, you just go, "Well, probably the wedding planner didn't know. We'll give them the benefit of the doubt. I'm sitting at table 17" or whatever. I, at your wedding, was sitting next to Chris Hayes, so I took that. I was like, "Well, at least he likes me as much as Chris."

Josh Barro:

That's actually exactly who I was thinking of in terms of Professor and Mr. The next question you answer is under, "Why won't my boyfriend skip family vacations to travel with me? My boyfriend comes from a wealthy family. Every year his parents take him and his siblings on an extravagant vacation. As his girlfriend of six years, I'm invited with the caveat that I pay my own way. But my boyfriend and I are graduate students, so that's unrealistic. I can't even afford to split the cost with my boyfriend, which he's offered to do. These are long trips. They're booked in advance, like cruises and tours so he can't leave early. And they use up most of his vacation time. I don't want to ask him to give up his once in a lifetime trips, but I would like to vacation with him occasionally. Do you have any thoughts? Signed, girlfriend." And so you really cut to the heart with this in a way that the original advice columnist did not cut to the heart of it. What is this letter really about?

Ben Dreyfuss:

I mean, this letter is about the fact that they've been together for six years and they aren't married and they aren't even close enough so that the rich boyfriend's family considers her as a permanent life partner. Because in that case, they're not going to bother, this nonsense about paying who's paying more, right? Then it's just that, "You're emotionally committed to this person and you're a part of the family. You'll come with us on this cruise to Antarctica." But they clearly don't think that. And they think it's just that their rich little Playboy grad student son has another fling. And you don't have flings after six years. The real problem here is not about the vacation time.

Ben Dreyfuss:

And I think that honestly this gets to, I think, one of the things about advice letters in general, is that you can take them in even... When they're true, like I have no doubt. This one sounds true. It doesn't sound fake and I take it in good faith, is that the person is asking one question, which is, "Should I get mad at my boyfriend for going and hanging out with his brother in France?" or whatever. And maybe that is what they're asking. But in general, what you should really do is what are they not asking? You should become that Law & Order therapist who's going to get the killer to explain why they did it and fill in the blanks of, if this was a story and you were writing a screenplay, because God is a screenplay writer, and you were like, "I want the audience to be convinced. What are the motivations here?" And what's really going on here is that there is some problem in their relationship that after six years they are still having this sort of distance.

Josh Barro:

I think it is rude in any circumstance to invite somebody on a family vacation and say that they have to pay their way. I think that if your son was in a really casual relationship that was early, I wouldn't necessarily be rude to not invite them at all. But once it's at a point where they are sufficiently within the family, that you would include them in the family vacation and especially when you are wealthy as this family clearly is, they're your guest, you need to actually pay for them to come along. And if it's been six years, to your point, and they're not at that point, it's that she's just not being taken seriously. The letter is weirdly timid. She's not even asking, "Should I insist that I'm part of the family now and that I ought to go?" Let alone is she asking, "Where is my engagement ring?"

Ben Dreyfuss:

Right. I mean, also I remember I actually quoted... I linked to you in that answer because you have a post about you and Zach and about how one of the benefits of marriage is that it should simplify your life.

Josh Barro:

Right.

Ben Dreyfuss:

There should be more benefits to it. One benefit of marriage is that you no longer have to worry about shared finances and things like that.

Josh Barro:

Absolutely. But they're not married.

Ben Dreyfuss:

Right. Which is why people should get married.

Josh Barro:

I find it really weird when people have relationships that long without getting married.

Ben Dreyfuss:

Six years is a long time.

Josh Barro:

I find two things weird. One is really long relationships. If you're together for six years, you should know that you want to be married. And if you don't know that, then you probably shouldn't still be together. The other thing I find really weird is when people get engaged, but then make no actual movement toward marriage. They get engaged and they do not promptly set a date. They stay engaged for more than two years.

Ben Dreyfuss:

I mean, I think that two years is the right upper limit, right? That's you decide... There's the next season that maybe you can't get the booking.

Josh Barro:

Right.

Ben Dreyfuss:

After that, it is just sort of a joke. The other thing is just that there's a lot of people who, for reasons, at least in my experience mostly with the left, people who just don't want to get married because they don't like the word or they think that they're somehow holding up some sort of evil system. But then at the end of the days, if you look at their Netflix history, they've watched the Bride Wars a lot. And people just do getting married. It's a wonderful time. People should admit it. They shouldn't feel some sort of weird, ridiculous shame about it. So you want to marry your boyfriend. It's cute and adorable.

Josh Barro:

No, I mean, I try not to argue with people's preferences. I love my marriage and I love being married. I love my husband. It's a real source of happiness and foundation in my life to be married, and the expression of permanence that comes with that. I think not everybody, but most people I think are looking for that. They're looking for a partner for life. And I think that marriage is a useful way of expressing the intention that that is what you have. And so if that's not what people want out of life, I understand that. What I don't understand as well is people who clearly do want that and form partnerships of that nature, but do not wish to get married and call them a marriage for reasons that I don't fully understand. I think that if you object to that institution but you're living out the institution and all but name, you're not really resisting the institution. So that part [inaudible 00:44:46].

Ben Dreyfuss:

Right. Also, I mean, there's a lot of people who, again on the left, who like to use the word "partner" for their heterosexual long term partner.

Josh Barro:

Do those people have sex?

Ben Dreyfuss:

I mean, I don't know. For a long time, I thought that was them solidarity with gay people who weren't allowed to get married so they said, "We'll never use the word husband or wife." But you guys are allowed to get married now.

Josh Barro:

Yes.

Ben Dreyfuss:

So they don't need to say partner anymore.

Josh Barro:

We never needed that solidarity.

Ben Dreyfuss:

Fuck, no. Of course not. But look, heterosexual people let you guys get married. And we are allowed in some ways to feel nice about ourselves. We are patting ourselves on the back, but it's ridiculous.

Josh Barro:

It's just like the least sexy term ever like, "Ooh, my partner." It's so unsexy and yet it also reminds me of that Saturday Night Live sketch with Will Ferrell going, "My lover! My lover!" It's pretentious in an opposite way. It's like, get married, call them your husband or your wife, you're not that different from everybody else. You don't need special terminology. It drives me a little crazy.

Ben Dreyfuss:

Right. You don't need special terminology. You are just like everyone else.

Josh Barro:

Okay. And on that note of sameness, I think that's a good place for us to leave it with Ben Dreyfuss. Ben, thank you so much for joining us here and for giving us your advice. Tell people where they can find Calm Down.

Ben Dreyfuss:

You can find it at [http...](http://www.calmdownben.com) No, not [http](http://www.calmdownben.com). I don't know. It's colon... Nevermind. [www.calmdownben.com](http://www.calmdownben.com), or just Google it.

Josh Barro:

You're not using [bendreyfuss.substack](http://bendreyfuss.substack.com) anymore?

Ben Dreyfuss:

Well, you can go to that too. [Bendreyfuss.substack.com](http://Bendreyfuss.substack.com).

Josh Barro:

Okay.

Ben Dreyfuss:

But I decided to get a vanity URL.



Josh Barro:

Ooh.

Ben Dreyfuss:

I just decided to move on up to the east side, and it's calmdownben.com.

Josh Barro:

calmdownben.com And so then when you launch your line of homeopathic sleep aids, you can use the same terminology. That's great. Okay, Ben, thank you so much for being here.

Ben Dreyfuss:

Thank you.

Josh Barro:

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Josh Barro:

Very Serious is created by me, Josh Barro, and by Sara Fay.

Jennifer Swiatek mixed this episode. Our music is by Joshua Moshier. I'm Josh Barro. This is Very Serious and I'll be back next week.