

Episode 5. Can We Be Friends If We Disagree Politically?

Michelle MiJung Kim (00:05)

2024 was a rough year for many reasons, but the genocide in Palestine turned my world upside down. Watching video after video of children and people being bombed and murdered had me constantly devastated, enraged, and desperate to change. So I did everything I could think of. I spoke out on social media, protested, marched, fundraised, donated, you name it, I did it. I even got arrested for the first time in my life for protesting at the Israeli consulate. But as I was doing all these things, I noticed there were lots of people who weren't doing these things. In fact, it seemed to me they weren't doing anything.

And amongst them were my peers, my family, my friends. I thought, why aren't more of them talking about this? Surely they care about what's going on in Palestine. How could they not? So I waited. Still, nothing. My confusion turned to anger. Anger turned to hurt. And before I knew it,

A seed of resentment began lodging itself in my heart, and I started keeping a mental tally. Those I trusted, and those I didn't. Those I respected, and those I didn't.

Among the people I was mentally tracking was one of my closest friends of 15 years. One of my favorite people on the planet. The person who married me and my partner. My dear friend, Kenny.

Welcome to I Feel That Way Too, a podcast where we ask some of life's trickiest questions and together find the courage to unpack them one story at a time. If you've ever wondered how life could be different but didn't know where to turn, I'm here to tell you you're not alone. I feel that way too.

Michelle MiJung Kim (02:37)

I met with Kenny at our favorite taco shop, and after some light catching up, I finally spilled the uncomfortable truth I'd been hiding. I shared with Kenny how disappointed I felt about him not being more emotionally impacted by the genocide in Gaza, and how even though I knew he supported my work in DEI and social justice, it just didn't feel like it's enough to keep us close. I said,

Sometimes I feel like our worlds are so different and I don't know if we're on the same page anymore. I want to know that our values are aligned and that we care about the same things.

Caught off guard, Kenny tried to explain how he'd been practicing his values in his own way, in his own life. Having conversations about Palestine in private and focusing on other social issues too. He said, and going to protests just isn't my thing. I snapped. Well, it's not my thing either, but it's just what you do when there's a genocide. The conversation was hard, awkward,

and definitely a little passive aggressive. As we said our goodbyes, I felt simultaneously relieved and awful. Relieved that I got to say what was on my mind. Awful about how the conversation turned out.

Over the years, I've seen my inner most circle of trusted friends shrink. I don't do brunch friends, I'd say, as I quietly pruned relationships that I felt weren't deep enough, emotionally and politically aligned, or simply not nourishing enough. I thought, I don't have the capacity to be friends with people who I need to convince. It all seemed perfectly justifiable.

Michelle MiJung Kim (04:33)

But at what point do we stop the pruning? How much difference are we supposed to tolerate before we start to feel compromised? In moments of conflict, how do we know when to hold on and when to let go?

Kai Cheng Thom (04:50)

I just want to say thank you for sharing so authentically from personal experience.

Michelle MiJung Kim (04:55)

That's Kai Chang Tom, writer, performer, and cultural worker. Her work is vulnerable and honest and her ability to love, even in the most difficult of situations, is downright radical. I've been thinking about her work a lot lately.

Kai Cheng Thom (05:14)

I think particularly because we live in this really weird time where the level of injustice in society is growing and growing. And I think even just on a really simplistic level, even before we start to tap into the analysis of racism and homophobia and transphobia and all that kind of identity-based oppression that is happening, the truth is tensions are running high and political polarization is big. So I think with all this polarization, it makes it feel like if a friend or a loved one isn't aligned with our values, then they're against us or they're against the other people that we love. And it very quickly becomes this feeling of if there is disagreement or there is a difference in the embodiment of our values, it means that the other person is threatening us. And so I think that's where a lot of the intensity comes from.

Michelle MiJung Kim (06:04)

After a week of not talking to each other, Kenny and I finally got on the phone. I don't know what I was expecting him to say, but he told me he wasn't sure if we could still be friends. He said he felt judged, like there was a set of requirements for my friendship and that if he wasn't able to meet them, he was somehow unworthy of me. He said, I can't do this if you're judging me and the way I live.

I could hear the tremble in his voice. My head started spinning. Is he breaking up with me? Are we done being friends?

Well, if this is how he's choosing to react, then maybe we really aren't meant to be friends, I told myself. Okay, but was I too harsh? It's true, I did judge him. Another part of me chimed in. Okay, but it's genocide. Hello, how could I be friends with anyone who's not completely enraged by it? Then a different voice said, there's not just one way to be angry though, you know he's on the same side.

While my brain was searching for answers, who was in the right, what was justified, what I should do next, my heart started welling up with sadness.

Kai Cheng Thom (07:29)

So I guess, you know, a question I've been thinking about a lot is like, when I have these kind of fractures or ruptures with friends, like we have the same values, but we embody them differently, or we are part of the same politics that we disagree with interpretation. I'm like, why does that bother me so much? And actually, what am I not hearing inside myself?

Michelle MiJung Kim (07:52)

I preach about the importance of community all the time in my work life and personal life. I truly believe all of us are needed to make the kind of change we want to see in the world. And yet, I was staring face to face at the harsh reality that my circle of friends, my community, was shrinking. Is it me?

Have I become so self-righteous that I can't keep a friend in my life unless they live up to my standards of political perfection? All of this as if I'm somehow perfect or more principled than the rest of the world?

Kai Cheng Thom (08:30)

~ I mean, okay, thank you for everything you just said. I'm like on fire. I'm like, yes, that's so real. And I hear you also being hard on yourself, right? Which in many ways, I feel like that might be like an Asian thing, it's thing for all people in many ways. But I guess I would say too, there's like a profound lack of listening, I think, that is endemic to the cultures that we live in, like to the dominant culture, where

I think it's easy to judge and to be judged or to feel judged because we are not being heard by others and we are really also not hearing ourselves very clearly. But the reason for all of that and for me, it's truly like, I believe that everyone has like ~ a part of themselves that they do not love or maybe many parts that they don't love, that they hate or actually like repulsed by.

And that's for many reasons. A big part of it, of course, is systemic. If we're trans, we're taught to hate ourselves for gendered reasons. If we're racialized, we are taught by white supremacy to hate ourselves. If we are disabled, we are taught by ableism to hate ourselves, etc., etc. And beyond that, there is also just the human condition of existing as imperfect beings who leak, who harm one another, who hurt one another, who...

dream of being one way but then like actually struggle to embody the dream. Alright, as you were saying

Michelle MiJung Kim (09:58)

Sometimes, being part of the social justice community feels like being in an unforgiving playground where I constantly have to prove that I'm deserving of belonging and respect. I see people in these spaces who are doing so much. They're risking their lives, sailing on a ship to Gaza carrying aid, losing their hard-earned degrees to speak truth to power, and I compare myself to them. What am I doing?

It feels like I'm constantly judging myself for not doing more. Then, I'm quick to turn around and judge those who are doing even less. With Kenny, judgment wasn't the only thing I was feeling. I felt anger, betrayal, and it was personal. The truth is,

Watching my friends live their lives as if the world wasn't coming undone in front of our eyes made me feel so so alone Their silence dragged me right back to all the moments in my life where I felt alone in the fire Screaming into the void abandoned by those I trusted It brought me right back to my childhood where I had to fight for my own dignity on the first day of school in America with no one backing me up

It brought me right back to that last tech job where I rage quit after my friend was assaulted, but everyone else looked the other way and went about their lives. Except now, in this moment, I wasn't just gonna judge on the sidelines. I wanted Kenny to know, yeah, actually, I was judging him for not doing more. And I wanted him to feel just as bad as I was feeling. I was simmering with anger and sadness directed at him.

But I think I was also spilling my own shame and self-criticism for not being brave enough to do more.

Kai Cheng Thom (12:00)

It feels to me like there's kind of like layers to the process of feeling shame and judgment in conflict with others, right? Like on one level, there's what you spoke about in terms of how the trigger of disagreement can take us right back to that place of vulnerability in usually like early life, right? Where all we want is to not be alone or to be loved for who we are, except and then the truth is that most of us do not get that experience.

of being loved for exactly who we are in early development. so someone else's, especially a close friend or loved one's political disagreement is like, reminds us of that feeling and maybe actually like a belief that we have inside ourselves that we can't be loved or won't be loved. And then so we try to punish.

And of course, punishment feels good. Like, it feels like justice. Punishment has the power to make us feel like our pain matters. And that is something that punishment can do. But for the most part, punishment as like a cultural practice is very tragic because it is rooted in the belief

that if we harm other people in the same way that they harm us, then they will stop doing that and they will love us better.

And like, so most of the punishment is coming from this like, I want you to love me. I want you to love me. Even when I think about the ways that my parents used to punish me as a child, like it was always this like very weird thing about like they were trying to get me to become a better person, but you don't. Of course, I mean, what's tragic is generally people don't become better people because we are hurting them and they don't love us more because we hurt them. But it feels like that might be true.

inside of us. And I think that's very, powerful. And then the last thing I'll say about this is something haunting about punishment and shame is I think that sometimes another layer deeper is when we are punishing others for like transgressions or political actions or inactions that kind of remind us of ourselves, right? Like in some way we're punishing other people to punish the part of ourselves that we don't really love.

Michelle MiJung Kim (14:15)

A few years ago, I broke up with a friend who made me feel judged and with whom I felt constantly punished for not being good enough. I felt like I was always letting her down, constantly being lectured about how I wasn't living up to my values if I made a mistake or did something she thought was careless. In our relationship, she was somehow always right and I was somehow always wrong. It was a dynamic that started to feel unhealthy.

It felt like there was little room for both of our truths to coexist. It was either I admit I was wrong and acquiesce to her version of the truth, or I became the villain. So despite my deep love for her and her love for me, we parted ways. The rupture of that love still stings to this day, and I feel a lot of shame about it. I spent years thinking,

Maybe I could have done better. Maybe she was right and I was just being fragile. Maybe so many things.

I think a lot about how relationships get used as a lever for punishment. We threaten to sever our connection with others as punishment for them crossing a boundary or sometimes for causing harm. We love under the specter of fear. And sometimes that fear comes true. I've been there.

I know I'm not perfect and that we're all allowed to make mistakes. And yet, the fear of one day being found out that I am deeply flawed and messy and complicated feels palpable. As a chronically online person who also happens to talk a lot about hot button social issues, I'm always fearful of one day being canceled. How, in a world where we're all just trying our best, can we possibly handle all of it?

How do we stop disposing of each other at the first sign of conflict and instead turn to each other as our only real solution to the pain we all feel? Whatever happened to embracing differences? Is it possible that we've become too sensitive?

Kai Cheng Thom (16:44)

I actually think the answer of our current predicament is not to be less sensitive, but to be more sensitive. Like to be sensitive past the point of being like, okay, well, my friend has triggered me and therefore I'm going to cut off contact even though we've loved each other for 20 years or whatever. You know, I think the answer is to become more sensitive, to really notice like what that person is triggering, like that feeling of, you know,

My whole life I've been this awkward gay kid and I didn't think that anyone would ever really support me or love me and now this friend deciding not to speak up about an unrelated issue is triggering that for me. Can I be sensitive enough to know that and share it with my friend in an appropriate, vulnerable way and look for the wounded child in my friend? Also, that might be coming up. This is probably because I'm a millennial and very into

therapeutic culture for all of its drawbacks, but I do believe that the answer is not like, well, we should all just toughen up. I don't think that is the answer. I think the answer is like to increase the emotional intelligence that we have. The silver lining to that, think is that something I know as a former couple therapist is the more we love somebody and the more they love us, the more possible it is for us to harm each other. It's one of the weird ironies of being a human too. think it's like

Actually, it is proof that we are in love, know, whatever kind of love. We're talking about that, like, the small actions feel so big and that the words mean so much.

Michelle MiJung Kim (18:21)

It's proof that we are in love.

I go back to that taco shop with Kenny and all the pain I was feeling. The sense of disappointment that felt so big. I wonder if I was asking him to show me that he deserves my love. And at the same time, if I was projecting onto him some of my own struggles of needing to deserve love. Maybe that's why it hurts so much to break up with a friend. Because when we sever our relationships,

Maybe we're also just trying to break up with the parts of ourselves that we hate, but that we can never actually get rid of. Because the truth is, those parts, like it or not, are part of who we are. They're part of what makes us human. But I get it. Sometimes it feels easier to discard them than to sit with all of the complexities and contradictions. So we choose the pain of disconnection over the long-term effort it takes to understand.

It hurts because it feels like we're saying we are not worth the fight. This is why I think friendship is our most immediate, important practice ground for creating the world that we want to see. A

world that values humanity, connection, love, and redemption for everyone, including ourselves. A world where we get to be honest about our disappointment and hurt without it necessarily resulting in

punishment, disconnection, or shame. Where we can hold our values around integrity and accountability, while simultaneously making room for imperfection and grace, knowing one doesn't exist without the other. A world where we pull each other in closer, when it feels easier to let go.

In the midst of feeling disappointed and flashes of memories from me and Kenny's friendship played in my mind. The times he'd randomly swing by my house to drop off treats with a sweet note. The countless times he soothed me as I rambled on and on about my corporate job and how I felt like a sellout. All the times he hung out with my mom so I'd feel less alone supporting her transition to living in America.

Michelle MiJung Kim (20:43)

The time he organized my book launch party and celebrated my success like it was his own, the way he always does.

We've been through so much together. Putting any moral judgments aside, I love our history, our bearing witness to each other's ups and downs. And I didn't want this rupture to be the end of our story. I didn't want to reduce our friendship to this moment alone. Yes, this moment mattered deeply to me. And something in me said our bond and history also mattered too.

I didn't want our story to end this way. I didn't want our story to end like the way it did with my other friend. I didn't know how, but I wanted to see us get to the other side together.

Do you have a friend or someone that you're no longer in relationship with that you think about often? And if there is someone, what would you want to say to them or is there something that you wish they would know?

Kai Cheng Thom (21:51)

Yeah, such a good question. Yeah, I do. I had a very close friend in my late twenties who, yeah, like we were so aligned and we made so much magic together and we did a lot of art together. And, you know, I would say that objectively, who this person also caused a lot of harm, you know, in our shared community. think what I would say to this friend now is like, somewhere out there, she's living her life and ~

I want her to know that I see the harm that she did. there was a horrible, violent harm that this person did. And also, still, I love her. It doesn't make the harm her way, and it doesn't make the way that she handled things correct, but also don't think that I did everything correctly. And I don't want to be in relationship, but I still do love this person. And I hope that whatever she's doing, wherever she is,

healing is coming to her because I do think she deserves that. And yeah, still in my heart, I wish that I could have been better for her and I wish that we could have been better for each other and that I'm happy that in a different version of the universe, there's still a pair of us that are friends.

Michelle MiJung Kim (23:17)

Sometimes I think about the friend that I broke up with and wonder if the distance between us was ever really that far.

Did we really have to break up?

As for Kenny and me, since our big rupture and many tearful conversations later, we renewed our commitment to our friendship and were both putting in different efforts to meet each other where we need. I often joke about how I want to grow old in a lively commune with a bunch of my friends, many of us queer and trans and childless by choice, being each other's safety net and caregivers like the chosen family we've become over the years.

And in that fantasy, Kenny is always there, making his signature breakfast porridge and chuckling at my never-ending grumbling about the state of the world. Our friendship isn't perfect, but our connection feels sacred and so special. I shudder at the thought of almost losing him.

We so desperately need each other to survive in this world. I'm so grateful for the people I have in my life. They've saved me in more ways than one. So, who do you want to share your vision of the world with? Who do you feel safe to practice being messy with?

Michelle MiJung Kim (24:49)

Do they know how much you love them? I hope you take a moment today to tell them that you're thinking about them.

Listener 1 (25:03)

I'm Remya, I'm calling in from San Francisco. I grew up in an immigrant household, so I love you is never something that we said to one another. And so when it came to me showing love to my friends, I find it hard to tell friends that I love them. And so that's what I wanna say. I love my friends, I'm so incredibly grateful for them, and I hope they know how much they've mean to me.

Michelle MiJung Kim (25:34)

Something from today's episode strike a chord? Well, there's more! Go check out the full interview video with Kai on the I Feel That Way 2 YouTube channel.

Listener 2 (25:45)

Hi Michelle, this is May calling from New Jersey. I want to say I'm just grateful that all of my friends carve out the precious time that they have in their schedules to even send a text message or you know, like a post or FaceTime me because you know as you get older you kind of just start to isolate yourself a little bit more or you're just spending most of your time with your

significant partner or your pet or something. So just hearing someone else's voice, really does a lot for your mental health.

Michelle MiJung Kim (26:24)

And while you're at it, share this episode with a friend and leave us a review. And don't forget to subscribe to our newsletter for upcoming online debrief sessions and more exciting updates.

Listener 3 (26:37)

My name is Jeff Ghinwa Pono Kanaka Chang, calling from unceded Ohlone territory, now referred to as Berkeley, California. And I'm also claiming Ku'u Pa'e'aina o Hawaii, my beloved Hawaiian islands, where I'm from. I know that...every day we wake up and it seems like there's no hope. It seems like it's relentless, that it will never get better. But I want to tell you that you're loved. That we love you. That we need you. And that we'll get through this together.

Michelle MiJung Kim (27:19)

A big thank you to Kai Cheng Thom. You remind me that our ability to love is the foundation of our humanity. And that will always be worth fighting for. If you want to learn more about Kai's work, check out kaichengthom.com and be sure to read her book, *Falling Back in Love with Being Human*.

Listener 4 (27:43)

Kia Ora, I'm Stella calling in from Aotearoa, New Zealand. I'd say I see you even when you're trying to disappear. You don't owe anyone perfection, performance, or pretending you're okay when you're not. You get to be a mess and still be worthy. You get to take up space even when you're not useful to anyone. Also, you're not hard to love. The world just taught you to expect crumbs and claps.

I'm not the world. I will bring the full damn meal and a bottle of wine. And if anyone makes you feel small, I'll handle it. Quietly or loudly, depends on the day.

Michelle MiJung Kim (28:24)

This episode was produced by Geraldine Ah-Sue, Eunice Kwon, and me, Michelle MiJung Kim. Written by Michelle MiJung Kim and Geraldine Ah-Sue. The sound designer is Katie McMurran. Music by Katie McMurran and Ji-Yeon Park. This podcast is brought to you by Asian American Futures. Thanks for tuning in and I'll see you next time on *I Feel That Way Too*.