

Transcription

Exploring how we can master ourselves by looking at how experts say it is possible with your host Suswati Basu.

Intro music

Welcome to season 2 episode 56 of How To Be...with me Suswati as your timid presenter, guiding you through life's tricky topics and skills by reading through the best books out there.

Protest plays an essential role in giving voice to people and issues. The definition of being disobedient on the other hand has more negative connotations. According to the dictionary it is refusing to obey rules or someone in authority. Yet the idea of civil disobedience is a tradition that reaches back to Socrates.

Martin Luther King for example established a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws, making it impossible to deny civil disobedience as an important freedom. So why is it important and how can we be disobedient with purpose?

Here is cybersecurity analyst Felix Odeli on his thoughts.

FELIX ODELI: In every society, things are organised in a hierarchy. People tend to obey rules, laws, instructions that have been given. Personally, I tend to be disobedient when social rules, laws or instructions will cost me undue harm. And spiritual, mental, psychological, or financial, or so, especially if they're inconsistent with life or what is obtainable in the civil society. Take for instance, um, people are meant to obey traffic laws or rules or regulations, but then we have all this flouting, social rules of people, flouting social rules without any system in place that checks against that or punishes when offenders then, then you find that more persons will engage in such so it becomes a case of, um, being unlawful, uh, in that situation, of course, it becomes unlawful to be lawful in a lawless society. So when such conditions have been met, then I will be disobedient.

(Back to host)

Our first book is from Piyali Bhattacharya who is a writer, editor, and professor of Creative Writing at the University of Pennsylvania. Her short stories and essays have appeared in Literary Hub, The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, National Geographic and many other places. She is editor of the anthology Good Girls Marry Doctors: South Asian American Daughters on Obedience and Rebellion. The book was awarded gold medals from the Independent Publisher Book Award and the Next Generation Indie Book Award, in addition to receiving a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, and being named an "Asian American Literary Achievement of 2016" by NBC. Bhattacharya holds an M.F.A. from the University of Wisconsin—Madison, where she was winner of the Peter Straub Award for Fiction.

I was lucky to speak to her so catch the full interview on www.howtobe247.com or on the YouTube channel. Here is a part of our conversation.

PIYALI BHATTACHARYA: I will answer your question, uh, with a very frustrating answer, which is that I don't believe that that term exists. I don't believe in that term. I don't believe in south Asian-American goodness. There is no such thing. And to, to try and fit ourselves into something that would be considered south Asian-American goodness, um, is in itself a failed experiment.

Um, because to, to ask somebody to be good, everybody's definition of good has to be their own. And the whole point of the book is to say that the kind of cultural norms of goodness that have been pressed onto us, um, we've rejected those definitions. You know, we reject the definitions of what is goodness for women.

We reject the definition of what is goodness for south Asians. We reject the definition of what is goodness for brown women. Um, And we are making our own definitions of that. Um, you know, I think that, uh, more than striking a chord with me, the most incredible thing has been to see what has struck a chord with readers in the years that the book has been out.

Um, and it's really so many of the things I should say that like, um, when I first started doing this project, uh, many people, um, assumed that the kinds of essays I would receive and personal narratives I would receive for this project would be of two kinds. One, my parents dislike my partner based on their race or gender. Two, my parents just like my career based on how successful or not I am in it.

Those are the two kinds of stories that everybody assumed were going to show up in these essays and what truly, and I'm, I'm embarrassed to say that what truly shocked even me was that when we got the submissions in, they were so varied. I mean, they were just across the board and I, I shamed myself because I was thinking right, we are as varied a community as any other community, we deserve to have as a rainbow of stories, just like any other community would have. And there, there are stories in here about financial distress. There are stories in here about sort of generational trauma. There are stories in here about generational joy.

There are stories in here that are funny, there are stories in here that are wacky. Like, you know, I think that's the part that has been so extraordinary is to see. Uh, us as a very vibrant, very diverse community on the page and to watch readers, uh, relate to all the essays in totally different ways. So are the essays I related to were not essays that other readers related to were not essays that other readers related to.

It was really this kind of amazing, you know, foray into, wow, what a, what a tremendously complicated and large diaspora we really are. I mean, if you're asking me personally, I think disobedience is necessary for all women. Like that is there is just no women or femme or, or a non-binary person on the planet who can, who can live freely and not be somewhat disobedient.

Um, because the, the obedience that the goodness that we have created around the structure of quote unquote woman is so unbearably rigid that, um, that I don't know of a single person who identifies as a woman who feels that they can be free in that structure. So, yes, I would say that if you are looking for freedom, then disobedience is a requirement if you live in a female body. I think that for me, the much greater truth of my life. And the great sort of triumph of my life. And I can say this now in my sort of later thirties, um, in a way that I couldn't have said it in my earlier twenties, which is when I started the book, um, I think has just been to find joy.

I think that as a female person, I have trained myself to find joy. And that is I'm not very good at it, and I can't always do it. And I can't promise I can do it every day, but, um, but to find joy, uh, living in a brown female body in a white supremacist society, means I have had to train myself to look for it.

And sometimes I have had to train myself to be disobedient in order to have it. Now that goes every grain in my body, it goes against everything I was raised with. It goes against everything that, that the media has told me that I should be. But I think that I, if even if not on a daily basis than on a regular basis, I thwart those expectations to try to find a joy.

(Back to host)

What is a "good" South Asian girl? A good South Asian girl is light-skinned, even though light skin is rare in South Asia. A good South Asian girl doesn't date in high school or college—instead, she goes straight into marriage at an appropriate age to, of course, a (male) South Asian doctor. A good South Asian girl is naturally slim, but knows how to cook the best recipes from her heritage. A good South Asian girl isn't a writer or an actor or a musician. A good South Asian girl loves children and longs to have her own. A good South Asian girl is obedient to her parents, subsuming her own will to their parental benevolence.

This collection of essays, each authored by someone who is decidedly not a good South Asian girl, brilliantly articulates issues of intersectional feminism through the lens of being a South Asian daughter in America. It's a brilliant peek into the cultural struggles so many South Asian daughters must face.

Bhattacharya introduces the book saying most of us have been schooled by our parents and communities since we were children not only to strive for but also to desire a certain kind of life: academic rigor, followed by a well-respected job, but within a career which might allow us to stay at home and raise our children once we marry a hard-working, respectful, and high-earning Desi man. And it is on the shoulders of Good Girls to carry forward cultural legacies. A huge weight to bear.

Desi is a term that South Asians use to refer to people or objects from the South Asian countries, which include: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.

Parents from a lot of these areas were apparently trying to induct us into their tribe, a safety net, which largely consists of immigrants who have spent the last several decades looking out for each other in a country that still, after so many years, is foreign to them. Except we are no longer part of that specific tribe, more like a new one, created as an amalgam of experiences.

The women who have written for the anthology, Bhattacharya says, represents the breaking of a long and deep silence. It is the book we wished we'd had when we were going through our darkest moments.

The efforts taken by families and entire communities to contain their daughters' bodies is impressive. Here's a partial list: out and out violence; incandescent rage against boys, proms and tank tops; emotional blackmail ("I learned real young that my mother wouldn't just die for me, but that she could die because of me" — Hema Sarang-Sieminski); joke-style threats ("The only dates in this house will be the ones you eat" — Nayomi Munaweera).

In essay after essay, no matter where the origins of migration — Calcutta, Islamabad, Colombo, Dhaka — there's a pressure to keep these bodies in the new world free from contamination. Whether the women in this anthology deal directly with issues of sexuality (queerness, bisexuality, "exploring non-monogamy"), or whether the path to autonomy is more indirect, vis-à-vis finding a political voice ("vocal is not a word one associates with a Good Girl"), there's an understanding, as Roksana Badruddoja puts it, that the South Asian woman's body is "sexed, gendered, raced, and classed in particular ways that fulfil the myth of the Model Minority."

There is an impressive range of women. There are grandmothers who used to be revolutionaries in India — who rode bicycles, and even (gasp) got divorced. Heroic mothers, who are activists and feminists. One mother, barely five feet tall, remains unfazed when a KKK clan member calls her a wetback, and counters with, "What the hell is a wetback?" But even if there are those South Asian mothers who enrol their daughters in Karate courses and can have "non-skittish conversations about sex," there's always the ever-present circle of aunties who have the "bully's eye for physical flaws"; who have no qualms coming up to you and saying, "Your tummy scratches are showing." Madiha Bhatti writes, "Aunty critique comes in four flavours: direct, indirect, retroactive, and comparative" (an example of indirect, being, "Is your hair naturally that thin?"). But let us not isolate wickedness solely to aunties. Let us not forget the circle of uncles who are going chi chi chi and taking stabs at your moral character."

There's an array of stories, from living in the LGBTQIA community to those who've lost their faith in patriarchal religions, those who battle colourism and those who tackle very serious matriarchal abuse such as Amma Hema Sarang. There's something for everyone to identify with.

I'm not sure if you've ever watched or read *Fight Club*, directed by David Fincher and written by master of macabre Chuck Palahniuk, but 20 years on since the film's release, we're still talking about the crisis of masculinity. Without giving too many spoilers away, the narrator played by

Edward Norton suffers from chronic mental health problems, that is exacerbated by the consumerist society he lives in. He meets Brad Pitt who plays Tyler Durden, who represents the subconscious desire of all men to break free from capitalist logic. Here is a speech he makes ahead of the anarchic ending. And just to add I don't condone any of the violence or general chaos featured.

Brad Pitt as "Tyler Durden": I see all this potential, and I see it squandered. God damn it, an entire generation pumping gas, waiting tables - slaves with white collars. Advertising has us chasing cars and clothes, working jobs we hate so we can buy shit we don't need. We're the middle children of history, man. No purpose or place. We have no Great War. No Great Depression. Our great war is a spiritual war... Our great depression is our lives. We've all been raised on television to believe that one day we'd all be millionaires, and movie gods, and rock stars, but we won't. We're slowly learning that fact. And we're very, very pissed off.

(Back to host)

Our final book is from author, executive coach and consultant Ira Chaleff, who has been named one of the 100 "Best Minds on Leadership". His 2015 book is *Intelligent Disobedience: Doing Right When What You're Told to Do Is Wrong*. Here he is at the Centre for Army Leadership, Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst in the UK.

IRA CHALEFF: So what is intelligent disobedience? One of the elements I'm going to go back to the guide dog model for a moment, but you see how it maps to the human model. Observe the risk, pause the action. Don't instantly obey, resist obeying if until you can judge for yourself, is this safe to do? In other words, Is it putting ourselves into unnecessary harm in order to achieve the objective?

And what guide dogs are taught is not only to disobey, but let's say that the blind person goes to the train station every day to commute into London and usually the train lines up here. So he starts to walk towards where the door should be. And for that day, the train is not lined up right, the dog is trained to counter pull to actually pull the leader in the opposite direction.

That may be something you may need to have to do. Also the guide dog can't just leave the blind person stranded. So again, if they're walking to the train station every day, but yesterday there was a big storm and there are trees down and power lines down, the guide dog must not obey, but he can't leave the person standing there.

He's got to find an alternative if possible, to reach the goal of getting to the train, but at least to keep the leader safe, the dog can go under the barrier. The dog can jump over. It has to know the leader can't and it has to find a path. In other words, it now assumes the leadership role, finds the safe path, executes it, and then returns the lead.

(Back to host)

The book offers insight into why we're so quick to follow orders - even when we know we shouldn't. In order to facilitate its smooth running, we are encouraged to do what people, especially those in positions of authority, tell us. But should we?

Chaleff says we should only follow orders when they are reasonable, constructive, and based on legitimate authority. Systems that require obedience should have rules and orders which are "reasonably fair," meaning both that the system is based on moral principles and that it can function properly. In contrast, systems whose rules are arbitrary or lead to negative outcomes (such as the suffering of others) should not be obeyed.

Second, the person who gives the orders must hold their position of authority over others legitimately, and act competently. For example, a senior doctor who gives a junior colleague an instruction during a brain operation has both competence and legitimate authority.

Finally, the order should be constructive. If obeying an order would cause more harm than good, then it shouldn't be followed. Complying with immoral orders is wrong, and the person acting upon them can be held responsible for any harm caused by their actions.

You have the right to disobey orders that will lead to disaster. Obedience to laws, orders and regulations is a cornerstone of our society. However, there are situations in which obedience is dangerous, or even immoral. While most cultures operate under the assumption that obedience is good and disobedience is bad, there are plenty of occasions when this kind of binary thinking is insufficient.

Imagine, for example, that a nurse receives an order from a doctor to give a drug to a cardiac patient, but the nurse knows that the drug will cause the patient to die. The nurse informs the doctor about his concerns, but the doctor stubbornly insists. Is the nurse obligated to administer the drug anyway?

Of course not. It would kill the patient! This sensible refusal to comply with an instruction is called Intelligent Disobedience. But the nature of our social organization causes many of us not to exercise this right. Instead, most people find it simpler to obey bad orders than to face the wrath of an authority figure.

Intelligent Disobedience is about evaluating the source, aim and consequences of an order before obeying it. If you want to know whether applying Intelligent Disobedience is justified, ask yourself: Does the order come from a legitimate source? Or is the legitimate source missing important information that is relevant to the rule or order?

Is the aim of the order itself wrong? Or if the goal is just, will the order actually achieve that goal? If, for instance, your friend tells you that you should turn off your TV to make it stop raining, you can safely apply Intelligent Disobedience. Finally, will the order have severe moral consequences? Is it likely to cause serious harm?

As you can see, Intelligent Disobedience is very narrow, and is not the same as civil disobedience. Civil disobedience involves the intentional disruption of the system as a whole and aims to incite similar acts of disobedience. Intelligent Disobedience challenges only the particular order in question.

However, in cases of truly unfair systems, civil disobedience may actually constitute Intelligent Disobedience. For example, in pre-civil rights America, when it was against the law for some doctors to treat black patients, those who ignored the order were committing civil disobedience that was also Intelligent Disobedience.

Therefore, leaders should value Intelligent Disobedience and encourage others to express themselves. Teams with no opportunity to disagree intelligently are very unhealthy. Intelligent Disobedience helps the team as a whole perform to the best of their ability. Consider the nurse who refused the doctor's orders to give a potentially harmful drug to a patient. If he hadn't refused or at least questioned the order, there is a chance that the patient would have died, and it is the doctor who would have been held responsible for medical malpractice.

But in order for Intelligent Disobedience to work in a way that means the whole team benefits, it must be communicated in a constructive way.

The authority figure has to understand why you're disobeying and trust that you are acting in everyone's best interests. If you can't get this across, then you'll only breed distrust, which weakens the team. In order to keep your relationship with your leader healthy, you need to effectively communicate why you are questioning or disobeying the order that you have been given.

If you have to apply Intelligent Disobedience, always make it clear that you won't be carrying out the order and explain the reasons why. It's the only way your superiors will understand that something is amiss.

before you start, you should build up your situational awareness so that you know when to be intelligently disobedient. The more you know about your situation and your surroundings, the better you can assess whether the order you have been given is worthy of being followed or not.

Imagine that a soldier has been ordered to fire on a specific target. However, because of his keen awareness of his situation, he knows that the "enemy" is in fact one of his fellow soldiers! Naturally, he applies Intelligent Disobedience and disobeys the order.

There are two ways of communicating this to your superior. If the situation isn't urgent, then you should use mitigating language, which is "soft" or "mild," when communicating your disobedience. This communication style is helpful in managing social and professional relations.

Assertive language, on the other hand, is useful when the situation is potentially or immediately harmful. In these cases, you have to be much more clear and take decisive action to avert disaster.

However, we should learn Intelligent Disobedience at an early age. Unfortunately, the institutions where children spend a lot of their time (like school) require strict obedience and deference to authority figures.

Society will be much better off when people are able to think critically and enact Intelligent Disobedience when presented with orders that are harmful or make no sense. Asking children questions like “Why do you think I’m telling you to do that?” or “Can you think of another way for us to do X?” will replace subjection with understanding.

So to sum up:

Bhattacharya says in *Good Girls Marry Doctors* that we are their offspring. And we are, no matter what they might think, apparently indebted to them, grateful to them, and guilty when we think about how impossible it is for us to ever repay them. Because in the basket they packed for us full of the ingredients necessary to have a successful life, they sometimes forgot to include the ingredients necessary to live a fulfilled life. Success is a funny thing for us Good Girls. And it very rarely actually includes us. Hence she recommends finding your tribe, someone who accepts you for who you are.

Chaleff says in *Intelligent Disobedience* that while we have been socially programmed to respect authority and follow orders, not all orders should be obeyed. Sometimes you have to apply Intelligent Disobedience in order to help leaders stay consistent with everyone’s goals and values.

I think disobedience is inherent in my blood. Whether it’s my granddad not complying to party politics during conflict in Kolkata, and protecting his students from being killed in the 1970’s, to our generation fighting against sexism and misogyny on the streets with Reclaim The Night And Million Women Rise. Not putting up with a terrible status quo is important. How about you, how are you disobedient? Please join in on the conversation by following @howtobe247 on Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook, and subscribe on the podcast, which can be found via www.howtobe247.com.

Please do leave a review if you found this helpful! Thank you to Abstract PR Media & Communications Assistant Sharan Dhillon for your lovely comments calling it a "Must listen".

I'll leave you with electrical engineer Sid on disobedience. See you in two week's time!

SID MOHAN: I grew up in India and then I moved to United States and in both places I faced discrimination. In India, it was about the caste and here, uh, it's about the race. Uh, being an

introvert, I always kept silent and being silent helped me avoid the problem, but I never felt okay about it.

And also being silent makes the other people think that it's okay to joke around certain topics or it's okay to push you over. Then at some point of my life, I found my voice and then I started speaking against any kind of oppression, be it race, or a caste or a gender. I always started speaking up for me.

And also speaking up for people around us. And yeah, I agree. Silence is oppression. The more you stay silent, um, more people are going to bully you or belittle you. So yeah, speak up, always speak up. Speaking up helps. And it does empower you for sure.