

The Religion of Wellness Culture with Anne Helen Petersen – Insatiable Season 13, Episode 3

[INTRO]

[0:00:05] AS: You went vegetarian, then paleo. You stopped restricting. You're trying to love yourself more, but nothing seems to be working fully. You might feel hopeless about ever feeling good in your body. Every time you fail, you trust yourself less. As the larger world feels increasingly in peril, caring about how you feel in your body may feel frivolous, and even more hopeless.

We are at a time when our individual and collective stories about what to do for our bodies, health and the world are crumbling. Because these stories we have, they aren't working for how our bodies, or our world actually works. I believe, centering our bodies, all bodies, not just thin, white, or “good bodies,” and what all of our bodies need to thrive will help orient us in a better direction.

There is no one size fits all diet, exercise, or way to biohack. Good health is much less about willpower, or discipline and more complex interweb of our societal structures, food choices, emotional history, environmental exposures and privilege. There is a great loss of certainty and safety when we initially have to face what is real, versus the half-truths we've been fed. The loss of these stories creates an opening. If this opening is pursued with curiosity and discernment, we can discover our awe-inspiring ability to create and embody a new body story for our physical and political bodies and the earth.

I'm Ali Shapiro, and I host the Insatiable Podcast, so we engage in the type of conversations that will lead us to radically new body stories for ourselves, each other and the earth. To do that, we



discuss a more truthful approach to freedom from cravings, emotional eating, bingeing and being all or nothing. We explore the hidden aspects of fighting our food, our weight, and our bodies and dive deep into nutrition and behavioral change science and true whole health.

Fair warning, this is not your parents' health care, or the conspiratorial crazy of the wellness world. This is a big rebel gathering, to those who want to hold nuance, context and complexity in order to lead the way to a healthier future for all, because our lust for life is truly insatiable.

[OVERVIEW]

[0:02:46] AS: Hello Insatiable listeners. Welcome to Season 13, Episode 3, the religion of wellness culture with Anne Helen Petersen. When I was five-years-old, I asked my grandma, what happens when we die? Around the same age, I wondered how people communicated in heaven, if we all spoke different languages. My grandma, mother and sister would frequently ponder life after death, spiritual mediums, ideas like a universal mind, reincarnation, all the things.

I now know questions of death are also questions of life, meaning, and how is this whole world organized. In short, I've had a spiritual longing from as early as I can remember. However, given I was raised in a spiritual, but not religious household, and have considerable problems with how religion is used by humans, maybe I should say translated by humans to control people, and often shame women, I thought of myself as spiritual, but not religious. Yet, little did I know that the values and beliefs that made me want to be "good" with my food, body and the story that made me feel unsafe and turn to food, were the blended values of Protestantism. I have such a hard time pronouncing it. And puritanism.

In short, I was unknowingly practicing a form of Christianity by hating, fearing and blaming my body for just about everything. Now, I have joked here on this podcast that those of us who don't have religion by nutrition. All too often, because the beliefs and values of Protestantism



and Puritanism formed the dominant culture in North America, and often, other Western cultures to some degree, striving for things like “clean eating,” or enjoying pleasure makes you guilty, right? How many times have you thought of food as a guilty pleasure? We are actually practicing this religion, just not at a church.

Today's episode hopes to make these connections for you. That perhaps, your own values around food in your body are you are influenced by two religions. Puritanism is an offshoot of Protestantism. You might be practicing this religion, even if you don't believe in it. Truce with Food and my truce coaching certification. Before we can change our stories, we have to understand how they were formed. You can't reconstruct something until you deconstruct it. To deconstruct it, you have to know how its formed.

In other words, who influenced our ideas of being good and being bad? I talked about this a bit in episode two. Because until you can see who has influenced you, you will assume these authoritative influences like religion are normal, or just how it is. Not one opinion on how to relate to food, your body and be good in your story. This is especially useful if perhaps like me, these norms aren't working for you in your body.

To discuss this, I have today's guest on who I'm a huge fan girl of. Anne Helen Petersen. Anne is an American writer and journalist. She received her PhD in media studies, where she did her dissertation on celebrity culture. We will get into why this is applicable in this episode. She worked as a senior culture writer for BuzzFeed until August 2020, when she began writing full-time for her newsletter culture study on Substack. It's one of the few Substacks I pay for. It's so good. I know many of you read it. It's just, I can't sing its praises enough.

Her most recent book, *Out of Office* is about the future of work. She has two new podcasts of her own, called *Work Appropriate* and *Townsizing*, which is about people living in small towns. Today's episode is going to give you a lot to chew on and digest. I hope you enjoy it as much as I enjoyed getting to interview Anne.



[INTERVIEW]

[0:06:58] AS: Hello Insatiable listeners. Today, I am here with truthfully a bucket list guest for our podcast. We have Anne Helen Petersen today. Anne is a cultural critic and she's going to tell us more about what that means in a little bit. I'm just a huge fan of her work, because she dives into and unpacks popular culture. So much of the work I do with my clients around the stories that make them feel unsafe and turn to food, or the stories we have about our bodies is really deconstructing how we make meaning.

Really helps us figure out an X-ray, I think how we're making meaning in the culture, and how that translates on everyday languages, everyday level, is helps us to see how our personal baggage is often the baggage of the culture, and how our struggles – we can have more agency and choice in our struggles once we can name the thing that we're actually struggling with. Her work is just brilliant. She recently wrote a couple of pieces that I have particular interest on, called the Millennial Binocular of Fatphobia, and a whole series on Peloton and that is like, I want Anne to come out. Thank you, Anne.

[0:08:11] AHP: It is totally my pleasure.

[0:08:13] AS: I'm super excited. Before we get into, basically, what I want us to do is workshop the Protestant and Puritan influences on wellness culture today. Before we get to there, I want – you have a background in media studies. You did your dissertation in celebrity culture, which I just love, because so much of – so much now, even a wellness culture is celebrities getting into wellness culture. What does this mean, you're able to understand and perhaps, see about our culture that we cannot?

[0:08:43] AHP: Well, I think that one of the skills that I really learned over the course of my graduate career was just thinking about how a star, or a celebrity, or a symbol of any kind, can mean a lot more than what they maybe intentionally mean, right? Even someone, whether it's



Kim Kardashian, or Britney Spears, all of these different people who have become meaningful in pop culture, they might not want to be meaningful in the way that they have become. There's what they intend to say, what they intend to be. Then there's the reception. The way that people make meaning of them.

This is true with any song, or movie, or television show. There's what the director says the meaning is, and then there's how people interpret the meaning. I think that one thing that you can really look at with the stars, you can read them, or a celebrity, you can read them as a text. You can say, what are all the different things that are going on? How is the celebrity making meaning in our culture? How do they mesh with the dominant ideology? How do they reinforce it, or push back on it?

I think something, like looking at the piece that I wrote on the celebrity vernacular, or celebrity vernacular. The millennial monocular of – See, I can't even say the name of my piece. The Millennial Vernacular of Fatphobia. A lot of the stuff that I talked about in that piece is sometimes coming from Seventeen Magazine, or just sayings, or ideas that were coming down from our moms, or grandmothers about what bodies are best, or the way that you should be thinking about food and consumption and that thing.

Then also, those ideas were reinforced in the ways that we talked about celebrities fluctuating bodies. A lot of the phrases and the ideas that I put in that long list of ideas about how millennials got their ideas about bodies is like, Jessica Simpson is fat. The way that it was acceptable and actually, even promoted to talk about a female celebrity's body in particular.

[0:11:01] AS: Yeah. I remember even that picture you used in your piece, it was like, we all remember this photo. I was like, I do remember that photo. I can't remember what happened yesterday, but that photo of her in the jeans and the black shirt, and people commenting on her weight. Even the fact that people – I mean, it seems, I think, if you're not analyzing culture,



well, of course, people were commenting on her weight. What you're saying is that says something about us.

[0:11:26] AHP: Right, right. The way that it wasn't about Jessica Simpson as a person, right? It was about reinforcing these ideals of slenderness, that if a body changes from that ideal, that body has to be disciplined. The way that we discipline that body is by talking shit about it, right? By being like, "She looks fat in those pictures." I want to reinforce that, at least in my understanding, and I think a lot of people who are trying to reject fatphobia, there's nothing wrong with saying, someone's fat. It's not a bad thing to be fat. At that time, fat was considered a pejorative. This is the way that you censor Jessica Simpson. You try to encourage her to make her body different to adhere to ideals.

[0:12:11] AS: Yeah. If we use fat as it has no meaning, it's just a descriptor versus fat that implies all these other things. That's what we'll actually get into a little bit more today. That's where the problem is.

[0:12:22] AHP: Yeah, totally.

[0:12:24] AS: Yeah. Before we dive further into your work around fatphobia and Peloton, I did want to provide our audience just with a brief background on the cultural orientation in the United States, and where our culture is often exported. That pervades how our society sees many things, how we make this meaning. Why was fat back in the 80s and 90s? I would argue, still today in some circles, why is that considered bad? Our ideas around health, wellness and our bodies are informed by Puritanism.

If you've been raised in the States, you may remember from history classes, the Puritans were a strict religious sect who came over to America from England to practice a strict form of Protestantism. I can't pronounce Protestantism.



[0:13:07] AHP: Protestantism. Yes.

[0:13:09] AS: Without interference from the Church of England, the Puritans saw the Church of England as too similar to Catholicism, which they believe represented idolatry, so we idolize people, materialism and excess. The puritanism is based on a strict moral and religious principles, including that people should avoid physical pleasure. Which, again, sometimes there's this part of the meaning around fat being bad as, oh, people are decadent.

Puritanism was an extreme form of Protestantism, which once again, take you back to history class, began in Germany with Martin Luther protesting the Catholic Church. Both Protestantism, generally as well as Puritanism believe in predestination. A belief that everything has been pre-ordained by God, especially that certain people have been elected for salvation. Sometimes also others are destined for reparation. This to me is the modern-day version.

If you're doing the #blessed, you're pre-ordained for salvation. If you're struggling, including with your weight, perhaps it's not a structural issue. It's a #lowvibes, AKA, you did something deserved and aren't working hard enough. Yeah, I would say, I'm someone who – my dad was Jewish, my mom was Catholic, but they didn't really believe in religion. I never thought I was religious. I thought it was spiritual. It took a lot of work for me to realize, oh, I actually was adhering to that whole religious value code. I just didn't know it.

[0:14:37] AHP: Oh, totally No, and that's the thing that I think is sometimes hard. I grew up Presbyterian, which is Calvinist. It's not Puritan the way that we think of that, but it is – there's a lot of stuff about predestination that people don't really talk about until you get older. That whole idea that if you're safe, if you are a good person, a moral person, then you will just naturally behave in ways that adhere to these ideas of discipline and deprivation even. Even if you grew up Jewish, even if grew up Muslim, in the United States, that is the pervasive ideology that is everywhere. You talked about history texts. It pervades our history texts, it pervades the magazines that you see just hanging out in the checkout at the grocery store, all of these things.



[0:15:29] AS: Yeah, that's why I laugh when – and I know there's different versions of Christianity. When there's like, Starbucks has a war on Christmas, or war on Christianity. Our calendar, our entire culture is revolves around this, whether you, people realize it or not. Yeah, and just one last thing I wanted to wrap up for everyone is the Puritan, or Protestant work ethic, which you may have heard of, refers to the view, which is basically what Anne is saying is that the hard work is a signifier of one's election for salvation, and that diligent work is pleasing to God. For brevity sake, I'll be referring to this as PNP.

For all of you who have ever dieted, you can see how this view is laid on to, well, if I'm depriving myself and if I'm thin, I must be – I'm working hard at being thin, in this case, successful. Successful isn't just about being successful with weight loss. It's, oh, I'm chosen. Women have been especially socialized to be chosen. With that background, I wanted to discuss your epic piece and everyone, we will put links in the show notes to Anne's pieces and join her culture study.

I make sure to read as much as I can every week. The Millennial Vernacular of Fatphobia. Here you share your own experience, and what you learned from growing up in the 80s and 90s with magazines like Seventeen. Describing this time period, you wrote, this was amazing, “That the era was the vernacular of deprivation, control and aspirational containment. It's the language we use to discipline our own bodies and others and then normalize and standardize that discipline.” That word aspirational containment, I mean, was that a stroke of genius?

[0:17:12] AHP: No, I just think of the way that we thought of it back then was that if your body – just you have to keep the ideal feminine. I don't think this is unique to millennials. It was just a particular – There were different inflections of this ideal, but it has been, I think, the case for several centuries, actually, is this idea of women's containment and keeping not only your voice, but also different parts of your body, your behavior, your hair, all of these things should be demure in some way. Anytime that the body refuses that, like I wrote a whole book about



the unruly woman and all the different ways that bodies can push those boundaries in terms of size of body, the nakedness of the body, what happens when the body becomes pregnant.

An unruly pregnancy is one that refuses to be a basketball pregnancy, where it looks like you've swallowed a basketball one day, and then the next day, you're suddenly looks like, you don't have a basketball in your stomach anymore. How those are very natural. Women, their bodies aren't naturally what the ideal is. Instead of being able to dedicate our lives, our energies, our days to other things, like advocating for the things that are important to us, advocating for equality, we spend our time, our days, our energy trying to make ourselves into that ideal, even when most of us, it's physically impossible for us to fit that ideal.

[0:18:45] AS: Yeah. Don't you think even that ideal is constructed based on the meaning that we think it means? I always think so many – because again, I've worked with a lot of clients who are like, okay, they don't want their weight to be as important as it is. It's like, what we really project, especially these days, health and wellness has become the status symbol, because it requires time, resources, money. It's like, oh, but thinness is the subtext for having resources, for having ease. We think we're going to get those things with that body when it's actually, it requires so much.

[0:19:18] AHP: That's the thing is that they think that what's really fascinating to me is the way that ideals aren't so incredibly arbitrary. To have the ideal body now, this incredibly slender body that's tan, those are all hallmarks of the body of a worker 50, 75, a 100 years ago. Those are markers of a body that has to labor and thus, undesirable. Plumpness, evidence that you didn't have to labor, white skin very, very untanned skin, or lighter skin in places where people are black or brown, all of those things were the ideal. The fact that we can just flip that on its head to say like, “Oh, no. We want this to be the ideal now,” to me, highlights just how ridiculous it is, that you can shift what is ideal when it comes to beauty, or body size.



[0:20:13] AS: Yeah. So true. Never thought about that in terms of work. Yeah. This is why I love having you on. Do you have any further thoughts on how the US's PNP roots influenced this 80s and 90s vernacular? Specifically, the deprivation control and aspirational containment. I just love that word.

[0:20:35] AHP: Yeah. I mean, I just think that if we think about something like dieting, it's basically asking someone to deprive themselves of galleries in the name of – and bodily function. Because when you're not eating calories, or sufficient calories, if you're trying to lose weight, your intellectual function goes down. Your physical capacity goes down. You might feel more tired. I know all the times that I've tried to diet or deprive myself, all I think about is the next thing that I could eat. Incredible focus.

You are dedicating all of these resources in order to gain this ideal, that keeps you from doing all of these other things. It's all in the name of containment. It's all in the name of making yourself actually smaller, right? Your body taking up less space. I know that there is a very serious conversation to be had about how idealize bodies and eating disorders affect men. It's no coincidence that this obsession, the fact that you can't, in some ways, it's harder to get a job. All these things that make it harder for a woman if you are not trying to obtain these ideals. It's not a coincidence that it aligns with the fact that we still live in an unequal society, that we still have not achieved the aims of women's equality, of feminism, all of these sorts of things. These are very much connected.

[0:22:05] AS: Yeah. Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth*, she talks about how every time feminist, and not every time, but she cites a couple examples. Every time feminists start making progress, I forget what specific era. But the other – I will say, the other side. Maybe there's multiple sides, but start saying, well, they're butch. They're ugly. No one wants to date them. The way that they disseminate the collective organizing is to go for that jugular around the looks and stuff. It's so textbook.



[0:22:33] AHP: Or even someone like, I don't know, AOC, who –

[0:22:37] AS: We probably can't hate her, because she's beautiful.

[0:22:39] AHP: Right. Or, they discredit her because she's beautiful, or because she has spent any amount of money on clothes. There's no middle ground, right? Either you are too old, or too shrill. Or you're too focused on beauty and too focused on these other things, and it distracts from – it's an incredibly effective diversion from which you were actually saying and what you were actually arguing and advocating for.

[0:23:05] AS: Yeah, that's so true. I even think about how our language, like clean eating, especially when we know how important the soil and dirt and all that is coming to light. I think about clean eating being this rooted in purity. I don't know. That's one of the things that I think about. Even what foods we eat. Part of the racism of this country was denigrate, squirrel, Groundhog, all the native foods, so that we can further create class and differences. I even think about that stuff.

[0:23:39] AHP: Oh, 100%. The things that are oftentimes considered clean eating, instead of the things that indigenous people ate, that were very much a clean eating, just but what things get to be considered, or given that label of clean.

[0:23:57] AS: Yeah, for sure. That it's such a binary. It's like, we are missing context. One of the things I do in my work is help people deconstruct what they mean when they say like, “I feel fat,” because fat is not a thing. We alluded to this a little bit before, but I have this theory that in PNP culture, it equates fatness with being bad, specifically, undisciplined, lazy, out of control and unsuccessful. Then there's this hidden assumption that it's all a matter of personal responsibility and failure to work hard enough and be disciplined enough. You're the one at fault, right?



One of the things I loved in The Millennial Vernacular of Fatphobia piece that you wrote is there's no accounting for genetics, for race, for abilities, for access to time and capital. Thank you, Anne. Or even the existence of actual diverse body shapes. The ideal shifts slightly from decade to decade, but it never disappears. If anything, the sheer number of products and programs available to help it arrive in its ideal state proliferate. If you can't arrive at the ideal body, it's not because your existing physical form cannot achieve it, it's an implicit or explicit failure of will. Can you speak to how these PNP religious beliefs influence us today around fatphobia and especially health as a morality barometer? Because that seems to have exploded in the last 10 or 20 years.

[0:25:22] AHP: Yeah. I mean, I think this is especially complicated by thinking about how disability fits into all of this, right? How natural bodies fit into – Just the way that a body for us, like how metabolism works, or what your genetics are, all of these different things. I remember thinking, I hated my stomach so much when I was in high school, because of course, I fetishize the Britney Spears six-pack. So much damage that that six-pack has done. Of no fault of Britney's, but just what that idealizing that did to different girls, especially since we were all wearing these low-sling jeans that were the least –

[0:26:02] AS: A lot of jeans.

[0:26:05] AHP: Well, just the day they made it, you just wear of it all the time. This is why I love high-waist jeans, not because they make me feel skinnier, but just because they make it so that I'm not constantly thinking about my body. I never thought about the fact like, so I'm Norwegian. The way that my body builds fat is still very much tied back hundreds of years to how my Norwegian ancestors needed to have fat on their bodies to stay warm in incredibly arctic winters.

To try to make my body do something other than what is genetically programmed to do. It would take all of my energy all of the time to be able to do that. Just fighting myself, fighting



my body and thinking of that as like, I'm trying to get to the ideal is very backwards in many different ways. I also think that just this idea of deprivation is at the heart of Protestantism. The more you can deprive yourself, the more you are serving God. There's a clarity of that, that comes – a lot of religions actually believe this, that there's a clarity of thought and a closeness to the higher power that comes with fasting, that comes with not focusing on inputs into the body in any way. Just, you were able to have this clearness.

I think that the deprivation that's associated with Protestantism on a daily basis, and morality of like, I can resist temptation. I am every day, resisting the sinful foods, the sinful lifestyle that's around me. If someone is thinner, they are automatically perceived as being better at that. Instead of the fact that a lot of people who are thin are oftentimes not “healthy.” They may or may not have strong hearts. They might not be exercising. They might not be building muscle. They might not have good lung capacity. All of the things that are actually markers of health.

Whereas, someone who's in a larger body might have all of those things. We are so based on what we can visually see in terms of how we consider someone's ability to resist temptation, even though oftentimes, just body size has nothing to do with what you do, or do not necessarily eat. There's just so many different things that that influence what a body looks like.

[0:28:32] AS: Yeah, when you're bringing up the part about all the religions, it makes me think of, especially we're here in October, and the Jewish Yom Kippur is coming up. You fast for a day, or continual – or even with Catholicism and Lent, I mean, you give up something. Well, at least the way that I – I mean, my mom was – she called herself a recovering Catholic. There may be some loosey-goosey ways I understood it. You're not giving up. You're not dieting. It's just this, thinking of some of that discipline.

It's the context, right? It's not continual, and it's not in service of your body size. It's for the purpose of, I don't know, I guess it's different in each. I mean, Yom Kippur is about, I think



forgiveness and atonement and stuff. It's different, perhaps based on the religions, but it's not chronic. It's not, again, in service of body size.

[0:29:26] AHP: Well, I think what it is, is a lot of it is – these ideas of denial, of self-denial. Denial of desire and of sin have become perverted, and turned into a whole lifestyle. Somehow the more that you can try to deny yourself things that you like to eat things, that you like to do. The more that you can deprive yourself of calories, or of foods that you delight in, and then train yourself to think of – people are like, “What's your favorite food?” Oftentimes, I will say broccoli, because it is a food that gives me delight. I also think about how broccoli over the course of my lifetime, I think of it as a good food, a “good food” that is not harming me, or making me fat. That it has a valance to me that is very difficult to shake as a non-sinful food.

I have to sometimes think about like, okay, why do I really like broccoli? How is that layered with the fact that I don't feel guilty when I'm eating it? One thing I always like to talk about when I'm talking about this stuff is like, it's a continual unlearning process. You can know all of these things. You can see them. You can write about them, like I do. You can listen to all of the different podcasts and really know it. When you have internalized something over the course of decades, it takes a really long time to unlearn it. Offering yourself some grace when you do feel a feeling, whether that's a fatphobic feeling, or just whatever arises, to just be gentle with yourself as you continue to try to unlearn it.

[0:31:10] AS: Yeah. I'm glad you say that, because that's a lot of what my work is just really embodying, making the connection between I know this internally, but then figuring out. You actually wrote about, well, let me complete that sentence and then I'm going to read a little more of your writing. Changing what we measure, right? With the broccoli, it's – Especially, because my background is an adult, how adults actually change. Adults actually need to see pretty quick benefits to something actually to stick. It's like, with the broccoli, it's like, it can delight me, but how do I like it? How does it feel actually satisfying? How does it actually help me with my health, versus this long-term potential gain in of “weight loss,” or something like



that. It takes a while to figure out what that is on your terms, to your point, versus what you've been told and should mean.

[0:31:58] AHP: Yeah, totally.

[0:31:59] AS: I'm thinking of even how I did Weight Watchers growing up. I was like, "Oh, vegetables were free." Even with that through a PNP lens, it's like, they are not compromising your morality barometer.

[0:32:11] AHP: Yeah, yeah. Totally. That's the thing is these things are – sometimes I think about it in grad school. My friends and I would joke like, everything good is bad. Everything that felt restful, that felt like taking time off, whether it was going out with friends, or watching TV, or going on a hike, all of those things were actually bad, because we weren't working. Everything that felt bad, AKA working, just doing our studying and our writing and all those things all the time, we conceived of it as good, because we were working all the time. I think sometimes that flipped understanding also applies to the way that we think about food.

Celery, which tastes literally nothing becomes a good food, because it's actually a calorie negative food, which is part of that list of things that are included in The Vernacular of Millennial Fatphobia. Or, other things that just don't necessarily taste good, objectively good, because they have fewer calories and somehow satisfy that desire to eat that we all have, because we are human. Then, but then don't actually taste good food, but we convince ourselves that they're good.

[0:33:28] AS: Yeah. That reminds me of that developmental psychologist that some of my work is rooted in. His name is Dr. Robert Keegan. He talks about how we really change. He has this quote. He goes, "We have to think our way into new feelings, and feel our way into new thinking." It's because how we think we know is based on what we feel, but in developmental



psychology, our feelings are rooted in stories, right? The story isn't like, "Oh, celery is good." It's these deeper values. It's good to be disciplined. It's good to be in control. It's great to not rest.

That actually leads me into my next question, because I love that you see, of course, you see the connection, that – you wrote a great piece about aging into athleticism, which I just loved. It's part of how you're learning about the importance of rest and nourishment. That is also the same track that you're learning in your work as well. You're learning the value of that in both places. Can you talk a little bit about – again, I'm just going to quote you because your writing is brilliant.

Again, I think that this PNP, again is part of this. It's not just dieting, or food, or work. It's like, oh, my God, what we call in developmental psychology, I'm self-authoring my values. You talk about rest, nourishment and satisfaction. You write, "I am slowly dismantling the part of my brain that only conceives the hard, extended cardio exercise as exercise." Rest is part of exercise. I may have had that knowledge before, but it was not embodied.

Exercise just generally no longer feels punitive, or disciplinary. Instead, I feel something more akin to curiosity. If part of me feels weak, or tweaky, what's struggling in other parts of my body that needs strengthening, rather than I'm wrong, right? I just love that. If I'm attentive to my body, if I'm legitimately kind to it, can it do more than I thought it could? I love this part. I also know there's some time limit on how long I'll be able to do any, or all of this. It makes every run precious and helps foster an appreciation for my body a care for it that I've never had before.

Maybe this genre of awe is akin to what some people feel after giving birth. For the first time, I'm treating it as the remarkable assemblage of systems that it is, deserving of rest, respect, and nourishment. Can you expand on this evolution of these values a little bit more, as someone who is intellectual and knows all this stuff, but now that you're actually living it? Maybe you had to learn it in your work first, or I don't know, you can tell us. I'm curious.



[0:36:05] AHP: I definitely think it's connected to how we think about work. All of this is also connected to just these millennial ideas of how we should treat our bodies generally. Bodies includes minds. I think that it makes sense that we're talking about this after, talking about the fatphobia article. That, I think, a lot of us grew up thinking, the more that we can work – Obviously, this has deep roots in Protestant culture. The more you work, the better you are. The more you can force your body to work even more, the better you are.

The more you can ignore signals that say, stop working, you are very tired. You're very tired in your ability to produce good work is diminishing. The more you can ignore that, the more you think that you are doing better work. It's something that I see all the time and myself and others is like, you've put in a nine-hour day, or you've put in a long day. You know that you're just not doing a good job of whatever you're trying to do. You're just incredibly distracted. Whatever ideas you're coming up with are bad, or just not great. You feel like, if you stop working, you're not working hard. There's this real idea, I think, that any break in the day is weakness.

I see this in my friends all the time, this idea that to take a lunch break somehow makes you a worse worker, or a less dedicated worker, or can you believe that person has a whole hour blocked out on their calendar for lunch?

[0:37:39] AS: Right. Right. They're not suffering like the rest of us.

[0:37:42] AHP: Right. A lot of this is that we've lost labor norms that even our grandparents had. There was just this very strong understanding that was an outgrowth. Large part of the labor movement that everyone deserves rest. That is something that we work in solidarity to achieve and we work through unions, negotiating with companies to not only have something like the weekend, but then also to have breaks during the day. Those breaks are a laborer's human right. Then, they also make you a better worker, because you are pausing your mind and your body, and recovering in some small way.



I think, some employers also understood, it's good to have these breaks, right? Whether it's going out to lunch for an hour and leaving your work from an office place, or being on a construction site and stopping your work for an hour. It is good to have that rest. It makes you a better worker. That has been overwritten with this idea that working through lunch, never taking a break, working the weekends, especially for salaried employees is the way that you evidence that you are a better worker, that you shouldn't be laid off in the next round of layoffs, that you are not the stereotype of a lazy millennial.

That idea, I think, has really been millennials in particular, I think, have internalized that idea. Other generations also have it. I think it's also a symptom of trying to find work in precarious economic environments. I think, some of these ideas, too, are passed down from boomer parents who were the first to really go through – The way that I situate this in my book about burnout is that in United States, in the post-war period, there was just enough, like the golden age of American capitalism lasted just long enough for people to think that it was always that way. When in reality, it lasted 20, 25 years.

My boomer parents and a lot of other millennials that I know, their boomer parents, they were entering the workplace right as it was starting to fade. They also had to go through these moments of economic precarity and trying to prove that they weren't lazy. If you go back in the literature and look at newspaper articles, magazine articles, the same anxieties about lazy millennials were there about lazy boomers in the 1970s, late 1960s and 70s.

[0:40:02] AS: I didn't know that.

[0:40:04] AHP: Yes, it's the exact same stuff. They don't know what they want, they want more. They just want to be landing jobs and be treated great already. They don't want to pay their dues. They are just slavingly in all these different ways. Those ideas about work, I think were passed down. Gen X has, I think, there are complicated ways that we can – or, there ways that



we can complicate how Gen X resisted that, what they saw with boomers, and I think are passing on some of their ideas about work down to Gen Z.

It never neatly goes – generations are just these buckets that we use to try to describe different trends in the way that larger age groups are adapting to the conditions of their time and there are people who might identify more with one generation or another, depending on when they were born. I'm using them here just as a useful way to think about this thing. I think that in my mind, coming into, I graduated from college into the wreckage of the dotcom boom, then I went to grad school and then finished grad school, still in an economy reeling from the Great Recession.

Also, I was in academia, which is an incredibly precarious environment where, again, these ideas of like, you have to work all the time, or else you won't find a career at all. I had that idea about work, which actually made me a very good journalist, because I was very fine-tuned to this idea of work all the time is great. I feel great when I'm doing work all the time. That also extended into the way that I viewed exercise. That the more exercise I can do, and especially in a way that is very measurable, quantifiable, and that we had been told as millennials is the way that you regiment your body.

Even doing something that you know how many calories it can burn, which is so ridiculous when you really think about it, but that idea of calories out, calories in and looking at the little thing on the elliptical machine and being like, “Okay, okay. I’ve earned my lunch or whatever.” All of those toxic, toxic ideas, they were intertwined with the way I was thinking about work. As I'm unlearning those ideas about work, I'm also unlearning those ideas about exercise.

[0:42:24] AS: Yeah. Part of the work that I do with clients is we experiment with our – Because it's not that our stories are never true, or untrue. It's like, can we get more texture? More nuanced? What have you found is the value in rest in your training as you – in that aging into athleticism? I mean, you talked about it a little bit, but I'd love for you to talk about it a little bit



here, that value of rest and nourishment. Because I think that's what helps us go in body things, versus just knowing them. I'm curious, what's been the biggest ahas for you?

[0:42:54] AHP: Well, they think the thing that really taught me this was not reading something and being like, “Oh, I get it now. I should rest.” I'd always read those things and I'd be like, “Yeah. Well, that's not going to work for me, because I need to do more of this.” I think it was doing the power zone training on Peloton, which I started to get into at the beginning of the pandemic. Power zone training really talks about how if you do not rest, you are just going to get worse. You're going to be less powerful. Your strength is going to diminish. There is a diminishing returns here if you do not rest. Rest is just as important as the days that you are putting it in training.

Also, cross-training just as important. I think for me, I started listening to that, because I was doing these challenges, where they spell out like, here's what you need to do throughout the week. Also, if I tried to do more than what was in the challenge, I would feel horrible. I would feel like I was losing strength. That was a really good lesson to actually learn that in my body. Then also, because I'm still battling these ideas about my body, my body image, to see that rest doesn't change my body.

If anything, it just makes me feel stronger. Especially doing strength work, which is not that coveted cardio all the time idea. It's strengthening your body and making it so that you're not getting injured as much. Talking to you right now, I ran a marathon yesterday. This is the longest I have ever gone without injuring myself while running. It's not a coincidence that this is also the first time I have really trained for running, while having a really strong rest culture and also, a really strong cross-training, having days where I'm not doing any cardio at all and just strengthening my core especially, because I said it the other day on Twitter, it is a revelation that all of my body parts are connected to one another.



Like, oh, if you strengthen your core, it's going to help your legs so that they don't get all messed up, so you can't run, so you can't do the thing that you want to do. Rest is so important to being able to do that thing that you want to do.

[0:45:12] AS: I love that you said that, because so much of the reason I bring systems and structures into my work is because I'm trying to show people that the way that you've been socialized is not how your body actually works. That's the whole thing. It's like, these systems are – we think it's us when it's like, “No, it's what you've been taught about your body that is broken.”

[0:45:30] AHP: Totally.

[0:45:32] AS: We have been socialized to think, again, if your body is not that ideal, it's view and you are immoral, which often feels like shame. That's a word. We don't think like, “Oh, the Protestant values.” Instead, we're like, “I just feel ashamed, or my body's uniquely broken.” Versus, the whole manual I've been given sucks.

[0:45:51] AHP: 100%. Well, and this is why I'm trying to change the way when I think – my internal monologue about my body, or the way that I try to express it to my partner, is instead of being like, “I feel fat or whatever.” Just say, “My body feels weird today. It feels off. It's making me feel negative thoughts about my body.” Or, I'm experiencing some body dysmorphia today. Meaning, I'm not thinking about my body the way that I know I feel about my body.

[0:46:23] AS: Yeah, I like that. It's even getting more curious outside of the box of I feel fat, or I feel this. It's like, what is really going – Yeah, with my clients. I don't know if this will help you, but we often – I show them how body image is fluid and it's often correlates with what we feel is at risk in our lives. I actually talked about this with Laura McGowan, who connected us about – she talked about on our interview, her old restriction and stuff starting to come back as her book edits were getting closer. The book was getting closer to done. It's like, yeah, we often



think thinness will – we always say like, “Well, if I was thinner, I wouldn't be feeling this.” Which is a shortcut of saying like, “If I was a different weight, I wouldn't be feeling life.”

As you get closer to whatever risk is happening, for her, it's the book. How's it going to be received? It's like, “Oh, man. I have so many feelings, because this is a wild ride of uncertainty.” I don't know if that's helpful for you. Next time it happens, start to think like, “What feels at risk?” I often say, what feels unsettled? What am I worried about that's not related to my body?

[0:47:31] AHP: Yeah, yeah. For sure. I think too, though, whenever another part of our lives feels out of control, that makes you want to have more control over your body. When you can't for whatever reason, in part because we can't control our bodies, especially as someone with a uterus, my body changes every day. The way that my body feels changes every day. Also, I think, coming to a bigger understanding of how that works has been – I'm 41. I should understand how my body changes with my cycle. Being able to ascertain that a little bit more, too, is really useful.

[0:48:13] AS: Yeah. I still think some of it is – Geneen Roth wrote a book, Women, Food and God. I don't remember a lot of it now, because I read it so long ago. Again, I think I define God as the great mystery, the great unknown. When you're launching a book, it's like, I don't know what's going to happen, but I'm creating. I also think God is the creative force. I think that it's often like, will I be saved? Deeply, am I going to be okay? Part of it is about control, but part of it is like, what's going to happen?

We're going to take a little bit of a break. When we come back, we have just finished talking about how wellness culture in some ways is an updated form of religion. I want to shift to talking about wellness church and your writing on Peloton.

[MESSAGE]



[0:49:05] AS: Ali here, popping into let you know that if you're enjoying this season's Food is Safety theme, and feel in a place where you want to take action, which is where the results unfold, come join me and other intrepid health rebels who hate small talk, for my free Food Safety Gathering Series. In this series of three 75-minute calls, I'll share practical application tools for your own stress eating, workshop a few participants stress eating challenges, and continue the conversation.

These Zoom calls will take place from 12 to 1:15 pm Eastern Standard Time, on Wednesday, November 9th, December 7 and January 4. Come to one, two, or all three and recordings will be available to everyone who registers. These gatherings are casual. Come as you are in nourishing. Even showering is optional. The Truce with Food and Truce Coaching certification groups will tell you these types of conversations have sustained us during these transitional times. Because if you're feeling stressed and anxious right now, you're paying attention.

Let's find our footing together, instead of using food and support each other through the holidays, which is a rich time to become aware of our stories, protection strategies and experiment with some new tiny behaviors that lead to big results. If you've ever wanted to take the first step in your own truce with food, this is an amazing opportunity to get started.

Did I mention, they're free. You can register for free at alishapiro.com/food-as-safety. The link will also hopefully show up in your podcast notes, wherever you listen to your podcast. All right, back to the episode.

[INTERVIEW CONTINUED]

[0:50:46] AS: Okay, so in your series analyzing Peloton, which I just love, you clearly outlined how each instructor was communicating “a way to mean.” I love that statement. Which is what religion does, and that along with the community as much of what I think people used to find at church. We know in American culture, church attendance is declining, right? I think, church



gave us things that we needed as a culture, not necessarily the belief system, but it gave us community, it gave us a moral compass.

You write, each instructor is meticulously individualized. Jeff King is a rave kid. Alex Toussaint is the drill sergeant. Robin Ruzan gives you a type A tough love. Then you go on to say, Cody is the gay friend. Dennis is the Silverfox. Jen Sherman as a mom. If those sound reductive, they're meant to be. They're not full-fledged personalities. They're image foundations, carefully cultivated by Peloton and the instructors themselves. As with all stars, whether or not the reflections of the real person is inconsequential. Their image is their vibe. Their style of teaching, their self-presentation and ultimately, the way they mean.

You also write, which reminds me of the role of clergy and the Peloton instructor has your full attention. You've shown them your worst and best self. Then for the community aspect, you write, I thought this was so brilliant, because I think we're also lonely and want to be in community, but being in community is really hard. You can use Peloton to get the same workout you would get while doing the elliptical on low resistance, while watching HGTV.

Or, you can get in the best shape of your life by yourself in your living room, or the sliver of space next to your bed, surrounded by the aura of community, but not the inconvenience of it. Can you speak to how wellness celebrities and brands have given us the secular outlets to these human needs that often, religion, especially Puritanism and Protestantism have given us, or used to offer?

[0:52:37] AHP: Yeah, yeah. I mean, I think Ryan Broderick, he's one of my favorite writers on Internet culture broadly, but he really thinks of fandom as religion, as a form of religion. The way that people create fan communities and the norms around them and the worship and the rituals even, and I think that that's very, very true, whether they're talking about a K-pop star, or Elon Musk, or a Peloton star, the way that people talk and think about influencers in the



wellness community broadly, whether it's in Peloton, or someone else on Instagram, or whatever, they are adherence to the church of that person.

I think, some people have a much more casual relationship with these people and follow them on Instagram, but aren't serious members of the church for them to [inaudible 0:53:28]. Or, they go on – a phrase for the type of Catholic that goes on Easter and –

[0:53:37] AS: Chreasters. Yeah, Christmas and Easter.

[0:53:38] AHP: Yeah. That's the person who does their Peloton twice a month. Then, there are the people who really have intense parasocial relationships with these influencers. A lot of times, these parasocial relationships, there's some give and take, because the instructors themselves whether it's through call outs, for people's birthday, or 500th ride, or whatever, but then also, responding to things in DMs, or reposting. If you post a picture of doing a ride and tag them on Instagram and they repost it, it feels a very small reciprocity. It makes you feel connected to that person.

I mean, I think this isn't that different from if you were an attendee at a very large church, or synagogue, where you actually have very little one-on-one interaction with your spiritual leader, but you listen to them a lot, right? You spend a lot of time just receiving their wisdom and thinking about it. That's not that different from the amount of time that you spend on a bike, receiving the wisdom of Robin Arzon, for example.

[0:54:47] AS: That's so true. I never thought about that.

[0:54:50] AHP: Well, I just think, oftentimes people are like, “Oh, these things, they're digital. They're not like religion in any way. There is no community there and they're not in person, so it's totally different.” Those people have never really, I think, look closely at the way that the community that has formed around a lot of these instructors function. Some of that community



is really toxic. So is a lot of the community around a religious organization. I think that sometimes there's just this fetishization of presence and of a more old-fashioned, or traditional relationship between people who are practitioners and their leaders.

I think, Peloton is not that different if you look at it very closely. I also think the other thing, and I've written about this and had other guest writers write about it, is there's a lot of – people who think – the physical presence in a physical space, especially for something like exercise, it's just better. The energy is just better. It creates more community, without understanding just how the lack of inclusivity that they often have.

I'm not just talking about price point. I'm talking about what people in larger bodies feel like in those communities, but also, people who are disabled. I had a woman who has MS and loves her Peloton, right about the her specific relationship with the bike. Because for her before the pandemic, when she would go to exercise classes and try to do them in her modified way, it always invited the most rude questions from people like, “Why do you do it like that? Why is your body moving like that?” You think that they were two-year-olds, instead of 40-year-olds that were in this class with her.

For her, it's enough of a struggle to really put herself out there to be in these spaces, and then to have to deal with that too. It changes exercise. It changes the entire balance of exercise, to be able to do it without other people's gaze upon her.

[0:56:51] AS: Yeah. Wow, I never thought about that. Because no one ever makes those comments to me. How would I know? But yeah, you're right. Well, especially because I feel – I mean, I grew up, I'm would be considered a Gen X. I grew up in the 80s and 90s. When I went to the gym, we were wearing whatever old t-shirt you had.

[0:57:09] AHP: Totally. 100%.



[0:57:11] AS: And Ambrose that [inaudible 0:57:12].

[0:57:14] AHP: No. Sometimes they call us generation Catalana, or Oregon Trail generation.

[0:57:19] AS: Oh, Oregon Trail. I love –

[0:57:22] AHP: That interesting transition point between Millennials and Gen X. Yeah, that was my experience going to the gym, too, until I got into my late 20s and 30s, and then it was a fashion show.

[0:57:34] AS: Right? Exactly. All of a sudden, it became this thing. I'm like, because I was from a small town. I wasn't in the big city yet. No, that things have shifted. I also think about how many of those church pastors have TV shows. Joel Olsteen, I'm going to admit this, but he's – I don't believe what he says, but he's oddly charismatic to me. I can't figure out why. He looks like a cartoon character. I don't want to criticize his looks, but what is it about him? For me, I mean, I figured out, it's like, he offers this form of certainty that I just don't ever really believe in, but want to believe in, do you know what I mean?

[0:58:10] AHP: Oh, yeah. For sure. For sure. For me, I'm no longer religious either, but I love going to actual church services, because I love ritual. I actually, I really loved going to group yoga classes before the pandemic. I like to go into other types of classes. It was also really hard to wedge into my day, just because of the way that my day was arranged and that sort of thing. It created more anxiety than it solved. I remember going to these yoga classes, where I was going through rush hour traffic in Austin to get there. The teacher would always be like, "If you ever can, give yourself more time to get here, because you don't want to come into this space with just this incredible ball of stress all around you. It's undoing a lot of the work that you're going to do here in yoga, if you are coming into the space incredibly worried about everything."



I think that because of the way that especially for a lot of people pre-pandemic, just the rigidity of their schedules, it was like, you can't leave work until 5 and then exercise classes at 5:30. Somehow you have to change and find parking and all of those things. Whereas, it changes the dynamic when like, okay, I can get off it, or I'm working from home and I can go do a Peloton class at noon if I want to. It changes my attitude, my relationship with the exercise itself.

[0:59:41] AS: Yeah. Yeah, well, because, I mean, in the, again, I'm looking at it through my background, but it's like, you have self-authored your day more. It's like, I'm more in choice about this, versus feeling like, this is actually part of the way we change to make meaning. It's like, "Oh, if I'm doing it in the middle of the day, all of a sudden all the creative ideas I had from this morning got jumbled around in this great way."

Now, I have energy to work. I mean, not the way – It's only about work, but for the afternoon. When you're doing it at 5:30 to 6, and it's like, this is more energy than it's worth, but it's like, "But I'm bad if I don't do it." It's like, the whole meaning has changed when you have more flexibility, I think.

I want to swing back a little bit with one of the things you wrote about the Peloton instructors that I loved was, that you said, their primary skill remains being good at fitness instruction, which is a real skill, but not a particularly dynamic one. This makes me think about – I think, I'm probably in the middle between wellness and health care. I'm integratively. I see a lot of these "wellness influencers." I don't follow a lot of them, because I don't get it a lot. A lot of them have portrayed themselves as having made it. That's part of what we want to talk about Peloton. Joel Olsteen.

I did this episode, oh, my God, back in 2017, called Your Green Juice Doesn't Make You Worthy. It's about how the meritocracy belief that we have in America, which I think is rooted in PNP religion, which is if you work really hard, you can pull yourself up by your bootstraps. In a lot of Christian sects, it's the prosperity gospel now. Even though Jesus pay attention and listen to the



poor, or the marginalized, it's like, how do we get from there to Joel Osteen is more chosen and he's worth millions, right? That's part of the prosperity gospel, which is Protestantism. If you're chosen, you will be successful. Which is why we think fatness means unsuccessful, blah, blah, blah.

I feel like, these wellness influencers, who they're not – they're in between celebrity, but they're not like the rest of us. I'll put myself in the category. How do you think that makes this idea of meritocracy, which again, rests on personal responsibility, discipline in productivity more accessible? It's always the story, well, I started this and now I'm here with my health, and you can too, and then they're usually running a multilevel marketing supplements. I don't want to just have some. It's not for me, but I get that. Can you talk a little bit about how these people that you say like, you did have to have charisma for Peloton to choose you, but when you take something that someone feels can be accessible, and then someone is now feels chosen, or they've made it, how does that actually reinforce some of these PNP values, versus challenging them?

[1:02:33] AHP: Well, I think this is an interesting – It's a way to talk about the difference between old school Hollywood stars and this level of celebrity that is much more accessible and “just like us.” Old school Hollywood, so think of Greta Garbo, Bette Davis, Joan Crawford, even though each of them in some way had a story of they came from nothing, or they were in some way, just like us, they became larger than life; physically larger than life. This is something that I think I used to teach when I was teaching Hollywood stardom that –

[1:03:06] AS: I love that you taught Hollywood stardom.

[1:03:11] AHP: Before the invention of the television, you would never see these stars on anything other than a movie screen. You would never see Greta Garbo's moving body on anything other than an enormous movie screen. Most of the time, you would see them in a picture palace theater, which is a giant theater that was incredibly ornate, beautiful, just an



exquisite experience. They were also in black and white. Exactly, they were not your life. They were a different – There wasn't a mimesis of real life, even though it was film.

You also had photos of them and other such situations that you could see in a fan magazine, or something like that. But your primary experience was of them on the screen playing these larger than life characters. Over the course of the last 80 years of stardom, we have gradually changed the stars as they were have fallen to earth. The way that you achieve stardom, I mean, even now, there's a real divide between say, Julia Roberts, and then that echelon of stardom, that is the star system of Instagram, where it's people who are saying like, “I really was just like you, and then I worked really hard. Now I have found success. My life is together. My body is together. I feel great. The way that I can continue to make money off of being a person on Instagram is by selling you my story.”

They have to keep telling the story in order to keep selling the story. That's why a lot of influencers burnout is because the story ends right, or the story veers severely off the path of that. I've made it. I've got it all figured out, that they've been trying to tell. Either that turns into a scandal, or it turns into them disappearing off of Instagram altogether. I think that part of the charisma is people seeing that person and being like, “I want to study them. I want to figure out what their life is like.” This is also, I think, some of the popularity of the beautifully broken type of celebrities. It's like, “Oh, this is me being real.” It's like trying to say, “I've got it all figured out. Also, don't worry, I'm also still like you, because here's a real moment from my Instagram life.” Still, they're performing that brokenness, or performing that vulnerability in a way that makes it seem relatable. That still is not actually their real life. It's still a performance.

[1:05:49] AS: Yeah. Wow, you just gave me the aha about, they're selling a story. Because I'm always like, “What? Why do people want to buy?” That's me. But I'm jaded. I won't say jaded. Maybe I would say, discerning a good day.

[1:06:04] AHP: Yeah. Yeah, totally.



[1:06:06] AS: I'm just like, what is the – I can't figure it out. You're right, it's the story. I mean, maybe that's – Yeah, I just never thought about that. I was trying to intellectualize it, but I guess, it's that emotional like, this is the path. This is the formula that I just need to hack.

[1:06:22] AHP: Also, because it's a bootstrap story, right? It's this idea of, if you just discipline yourself, you can have this, too. It is achievable. Instead of, this is a – my success is at the nexus of power and privilege. That has everything to do with race and family background and body size, and all of these different things that make you someone who can be a successful influencer. Instead, the story is you can have it too and that is an incredibly alluring and lucrative story.

[1:06:56] AS: Yeah. I mean, it's related, but it's not directly to health, but I loved your piece on to talk about student loans, we have to talk about wealth. I think that it's invisible. You can't see it. I love that you wrote that piece, because I was like, all these things you don't think about in terms of it doesn't mean people haven't worked hard. That's one thing I also want people to realize listening to this. It doesn't mean that responsibility, that control. It's a nuanced line, which is why we can know it intellectually. Even with my own stories, doctors kept telling me like, “Your depression is a serotonin deficiency, or you have genetic risk. Your IBS, take in acids.”

Then when I really got to the root of it, and did look at food not through a diet cultural lens, but actually as medicine and then heal my cancer trauma, it was like, “Oh, I do have some agency here.” Now I don't have all that stuff. Even, I was infertile and then I worked through that. I also always tell people, there's also this great mystery piece that we'll never fully know why something happens, but there is privileged as well, which I think the great mystery and privilege people often lump together as luck.

[1:08:03] AHP: Well, and that's the thing with cancer is this idea that if you are strong and a fighter, then somehow you beat cancer. It's just cancer and cancer kills you. Of course, the



regimens associated with treatment are really, really important. Also, you can't positive think your way through cancer. It's just not possible. I think, there's a real frustration, I think, too, with people who are like, "Oh, if you just would be more positive, then somehow you would beat cancer."

[1:08:35] AS: Yeah. I've thought long and hard about this, because – so I have this theory and you can tell me. Because I Am always looking at the lens that someone's making meaning through. I think a lot of people who have been in my situation, they are like, wow, we do have more control. I mean, the federal guidelines for what to eat are ridiculous. We can all agree, it's a mess. Then I think what happens is you – In developmental psychology, there's this called the self-authoring lens. Your lens can be really effective, but it can also be riddled with errors. You may not know that, unless you hit another limit where you're struggling.

I have this other theory that the people who are hell bent on personal responsibility. I have this theory that they deeply fear interdependence. That's one of my theories. I'm not going to spend the time to figure it out. All of this is to say, roundabout, is that for everyone listening, we're not saying that – something like discipline. It's like, well, discipline used to mean, came from disciple, and it was that you educated yourself. It wasn't about control. We're just saying, responsibility. Women have to define responsibility differently than men in general. To your point, power and privilege determines how much responsibility you can really take, versus systemic influences.

Even me with someone who had my parents were both teachers, white, lower middle class in the 80s privilege, I still was in a neighborhood that used [inaudible 1:09:58] and pesticides. That's part of what contributed to my cancer. For everyone listening, I want you to realize that this is what makes this stuff tricky is that when people are saying, "Well, I've worked hard." Yes. There's been all this other stuff that has helped you sometimes. That's okay. That's okay, but we have to start talking about that. That people don't think like, "Oh, you really dieted your way into a size whatever." It's like, "No, you were might just naturally be that way."



[1:10:27] AHP: Or, you grew up in a place where fresh fruit and vegetables were abundant choices in your house all the time, and you never were hungry, and you never developed really difficult to shake ideas about scarcity in your home. There are all these different things that put you in a different place as an adult in terms of your relationship with food and nutrition, and the way that your body approaches food and nutrition, too.

I think of it and this also applies to, I think, with wealth. If security and social acceptance is at the top of a 10 steps, right? Some people are starting on step six, just because of the family that they were born into, or adopted into. Some people are starting on a different step. That doesn't mean that they are better, or worse people. It is a function of their power and privilege in society. I think, also, because in America, we want to continue to valorize that story of like, it was all hard work. We invisibilize the structures that make someone start on step five, or six.

So that we can also say, well, that person doesn't deserve any help, doesn't deserve any structural assistance, because it is only hard work that gets you to the top of the staircase. Instead of acknowledging something like, oh, the fact that all of these GIs who came back from World War II, really only white GIs were given the benefits of the GI Bill, that changed the entire trajectory of families. That made it so that black families only for the large part, only could get up to sub-1, 2, 3 in terms of wealth, accumulated wealth. The cushion around you that can absorb financial catastrophe, as opposed to my family, which I have never thought of as extremely wealthy. Because of the GI Bill, there was that cushion of accumulated family wealth, so that never torpedoed our family, because of a financial catastrophe. It was always there to absorb any hits.

[1:12:26] AS: Yeah. We were just in Florida visiting my husband's in-laws, and we met up with some friends. I was telling them about the GI Bill and how black veterans weren't eligible for it. This woman's dad did get the GI Bill. She's like, "What?" I'm like, "Exactly." I think it hit her. I mean, she has more, I would say, empathetic views on policies, but it was like, what? I think



about that. I mean, my parents were in a teacher's union, and my treatments would have bankrupted us, you know what I mean?

That was the 80s, before things were as astronomical as they are. It's that stuff where you're just – You're like, “Wow, I'm so grateful. I want to help other people.” I think most people, once they understand that, because I think there's also a lot of guilt around privilege. I was talking to a friend and they're like, “I feel bad, because I want to send my kid to this school.” I'm like, “No, the idea is not that you don't get to send your kid to a good school. It's that everyone has the opportunity to send their kid to a good school.” Not that we should have to choose in this, because that's another big zero-sum belief system that –

[1:13:28] AHP: Or that every school is good. That difference, too. What if we funded schools in a way so that it wasn't about trying to send your kid to a good school? It's about every school is good.

[1:13:39] AS: Yeah, yeah. That's what I meant. She was like, “Oh.” She was assuming her wanting her kid to be at a good school was that she should sacrifice sending her kid to a good school. I'm like, “No, the idea is that everybody can send their child. Not that it's a zero-sum game.”

[1:13:56] AHP: Well, I mean, this is an interesting point. Because I think there's a lot of conversation about this with parents not wanting to send their kid to an elementary school because, “Oh, this school is not as good. It's a title one school, blah, blah, blah. We have these privileges. We want our kids to also have these privileges. We want to set them up for success.” That's oftentimes the rhetoric. Without understanding that by not sending your kid to that school, by not contributing the privilege of your – your standing to that school, right? You are not helping to lift that school to be a better school.



You need to have people who are in more solid financial situations in a school to help make it into a school, where everyone is getting a good education. Instead of what we have now, which is a very stratified system, where people are like, “Oh, I only want a good school for my kids, so I’m only going to move to a neighborhood where there are already good schools.” Instead of, what happens when we live in neighborhoods where there are “bad schools,” and we create a middling point, where all schools are good? Instead of, some schools are excellent and some schools are poor.

[1:15:07] AS: Yeah, yeah. Well, then we would just have to remove the racist idea that your real estate taxes should fund schools. I mean, talk about an idea of normally, it has to go.

[1:15:19] AHP: Tell me about it.

[1:15:21] AS: Yeah. It’s like, “What?” Do you see any overlap? I always think about this concept of manifesting, which is wellness adjacent, or maybe it's integrated. Do you think manifestation has any roots in this Protestantism of predetermination? Even though you have to “work for a minute.” When you're manifesting, but not really. It's like, again, if something good happens to you, it's because you manifested it, rather than –

[1:15:47] AHP: I mean, this is just such bullshit. I'd say, if I think it. I think it absolutely is connected to Calvinism and the understanding of the elect. If I am a good enough person, and I manifest this effectively enough, then it will just appear in my life. Then whether you would attribute it to God, you are attributing to something that is making it appear in your life, that is also an extension of your overwhelming goodness. Instead of, this is a period in my life because of my connections to power in some way.

If you grew up with money, or not, you can still be a person who has a connection to power that can make that thing manifest. It's happening because you are able to have a spouse who stays home and takes care of all of the domestic responsibilities. That allows you to manifest



your dream vocation, or dream business, while invisibilizing all of that other unpaid work that's going on in your home. It is a pure fantasy, that people just manifest these things. No, they obviously work hard, but they are also, again, relying on the labor and their privileges in all of these different ways.

[1:17:04] AS: Yeah. I think about that with even celebrities and their health. They have people cooking their meals, shopping for them. All of this stuff that ultimately, not everyone has access to. Again, I don't know how stressed they feel or not. Maybe it's like, "Oh, I thought I would be happier at this place." You have different existential crises. We all have challenges, but I think about how much access to resources they have that the rest of us do not. I mean, even –

[1:17:35] AHP: This is why celebrities have so many children. How would your life be different if you had a night nanny? How would your capacity to have children be different if you had round the clock care?

[1:17:48] AS: Oh, my God. Again, at COVID, I could cry. I have the capacity for one. Even that's stretching me right now. Yeah. Well, I just want to thank you so much, Anne, for your work. Do you have anything left to share that I didn't cover, I think, around just in general, the Puritan and Protestantism values that really influence how we make meaning around health, wellness, and obviously, also spills into work, because I find a lot of my clients don't have time for their health, because they're we're working so much, or they eat because they're tired, and they need energy, because it was all connected. Do you have any thoughts on this before we wrap up, that I didn't ask you?

[1:18:36] AHP: Well, I mean, I think that it's incredibly ironic that this Puritan work ethic led us to this space, where we think that working all the time is good, when whether or not you're religious, within that framework, there was still a day for total rest. Christians still absolutely believed in a Sabbath. We have extracted that part of the belief system, but kept all of the work



all the time stuff. I think that rest makes you a better worker, if that's something that you are really concerned about.

How am I going to be someone who is really successful if the work that I'm doing someone – How can I do the work that I'm most proud of? How can I advance and be the worker that I want to be? Rest is a fundamental part of that. Then also, there's nothing that makes a body that deprives itself of rest, or a body that deprives itself of food and nourishment into a better body. It doesn't make you a better person. There's no moral balance there. That is all ideology that makes us believe that. Just continuing to see that framework for what it is and remind yourself of that, even though it takes a long time to unlearn it.

[1:19:46] AS: I love it. What came to mind is save yourself, choose yourself versus thinking someone else has to do it for you. Thank you so much for being here. Where can people find more of you?

[1:19:59] AHP: They can find my newsletter culturestudy@annehelen.substack.com. Or you can find me on Twitter [@AnneHelen](https://twitter.com/AnneHelen), on Instagram [@AnneHelenPetersen](https://www.instagram.com/AnneHelenPetersen).

[1:20:08] AS: I cannot recommend Culture Study enough. It will blow your mind on so many topics. Thanks for being –

[1:20:14] AHP: Thank you so much.

[1:20:15] AS: Yeah. Become a paid member if you can. Super accessible. Thanks, Anne.

[1:20:22] AHP: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]



[1:20:25] AS: Thank you, health rebels and visionary storytellers for tuning in today. If you know someone who would benefit from this episode, please share it with them. Remember, we have transcripts of our episodes that alishapiro.com/podcast for your non-audio friends and family. If you can, I'd love it if you can leave a review on Apple Podcasts. It helps more people find the show. Both actions, reviewing and sharing with others helps us change the cultural narrative around food, weight and our bodies. Thanks for engaging in a different kind of conversation. Remember, always your body truths are unique, discoverable, profound and liberating.

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