

## Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness & Anne Curzan

**JVN** Hey, hey curious people, I'm Jonathan Van Ness, and welcome back to Getting Curious. You guys, I have a special update. Special bulletin. I literally met Shania Twain last night. I will talk about that one more time in our interview with our guest today. But just so you know, I literally met Chennai Twain. I asked her literal career advice. She made me cry last night. I bet in a good way. I love Shania. You're a goddess. And you cite sidebar. Language. Linguistics. What's it all about? I like through my career and really through my life, I've. I love language, I love vocabulary word, I, I love a motto. In fact, in fifth grade, I literally started a motto company where, like, I made a list of words that were like phrases that I invented, like I have always. And then this other kid in my class started like a rival fucking motto company. And then our teacher, Miss Rescue, who also was the one who got me obsessed with Finland, because she was like, Finnish. It shut down our company. She said it was causing too much strife in the class. So our motto company got shut down. But I think being such a public figure and I'm a writer, I'm a comedian, I and also just generally am interested in language. I've had to have a lot of conversations around language and how it's perceived and how it comes across. And generally I want to use language better. I want to be more curious about how I can use language better. I'm also really curious about like how language is evolved, how it's changed, and like how our language is policed, both like in real life and on social like media. And if there's a difference to talk about this and so much more. And you guys just like this is one of our like, I just it's giving me like just this episode. It's so fucking good you guys. So to talk about this, we're bringing in an Cosan to ask how can we use our language more effectively. Let's find out some more about and on is the Dean of literature, science and the Arts at the University of Michigan, where she also teaches courses on the history of English, English, grammar, language and gender, and the dynamics of Conversations. She's a trained linguist and historian of the English language. Her TEDx talk at U-M called What Makes a Word Real? Has over 2 million views on the national TEDx site. She earned her B.A. in linguistics from Yale University, and her PhD in English Language and literature from the University of Michigan. Oh my God, her credentials are so major and I definitely match night Twain last night. Oh my God. Her book says who? A kinder, funner usage guide for Everyone Who Cares about words just came out on March 26th and welcome to the show. How are you?

**ANNE CURZAN** I'm great and I am delighted to be here. Thank you so much for inviting me to join you.

**JVN** And some of my favorite people in the universe have been named and like my assistant, who I love so much, his name is and my grandma's name was. And I love Ian's. So thank you for coming. Thank you for sharing your expertise with us. Because you are really doing it just in our intro, we were talking about your tenure, which is just like stunning, like you've done so many cool things and you're a linguist, like. When did you realize that you wanted to be a linguist? Were you like, young? Were you like in school? Like when were you mining? Like, how were you mining your own business? And then, like the linguistics bug, just gotcha.

**ANNE CURZAN** Jonathan, I love starting with this question because I went to college as a math major. I didn't know what linguistics was. I, of course, went to college before the internet. I'm old enough that that is just true. And I knew there was something out there called linguistics. I was a really mathy kid. I liked math, I was good at math. I was also interested in languages, and I liked languages. So I went to college as a math major, and I took an introductory linguistics course just to figure out what it was. And I would guess some of our listeners are also like, well, and what is it? So it's the scientific or systematic study of language in general or languages specifically. And that course was interesting enough that I thought, well, I'll take a second course. And my sophomore year in college, I took a course called The History of the English Language, and it changed my life. I loved it. This professor, whose name was Maribor off, knew the answer to questions that I hadn't realized I wanted to know the answer to, but oh.

**JVN** Like what? Tell us one, tell us one.

**ANNE CURZAN** So when was double negation standard in the English language? Why is kernel spelled with an L and pronounced with an r? You can answer that question if you study the history of English. And I fell in love and I became a linguistics major, and here I am, 35 years later, still studying the history of English.

**JVN** We've learned a lot on the part about like, things that ended up having this is a little bit of a right turn, but I'm just curious, especially like with where we are just currently and in the world. Yeah, like the history of the Kalari, the BMI, like a lot of these things have so much like racism and there's like eugenics, like folded into it, which is really intense that things that you wouldn't even know. But it's like racism and misogyny in the patriarchy. It like really seeped its way into like all up in this culture. How does that history interplay into linguistics? Like does the linguistic like academic community like, talk about this? Is there like a spectrum there where people are like, oh, get off that stuff. Like, let's just talk about double negatives and and participles. And then is there other people that are like, no, we really need to reckon with some of the ways that like language was used to like enforce like class or perception or like how someone is like received because if they didn't, you know, get enough education and then then they weren't like seen as like deserving of respect or whatever. That was a lot. I'm sorry.

**ANNE CURZAN** Oh, but it is such an important question. And the two pieces that you said, is it one or the other? And I would say, actually, they're closely linked together. And the fact that language matters for those fundamental social questions is why I stayed in the field. And it was in graduate school that I had an advisor who helped me see how linguistics matters for real people in real time, in real educational systems, because we judge people and discriminate against people based on their language. So the stakes are high. Language is also a key part of who we are. Sometimes people will say language is just like clothes. You can put it on or take it off. And and I say, no know. Language is part of our identity. It's part of the communities in which we grew up and then the communities with which we identify. So it's a big part of us. And when people criticize our language, it can feel very personal because they're criticizing a really foundational part of our identities that.

**JVN** Also just my intrusive thought went into they them pronouns, because that's such a I'm a gender queer person. Like, I didn't really get exposed to that language or under, but I

mean, this was a feeling and an identity that I had always had. But then when I met a local, then I really understood that a good friend of mine we like did an episode on this podcast and like a for the show on Netflix. But once I learned the language, I was like, wow, these are the words that I've been like, searching for to describe how I experienced gender and my experience of gender, and being able to tell the difference between sex and gender. Like, that's a huge thing that I think no one's arguing on biology, although we kind of are, because intersex people aren't really ever factored into the conversation like where they should be, because even biologically, like, it's, you know, we know that it's not fully, oh, such a cut and dry binary, even though there's like a, you know, there is more of a majority but is still is like a spectrum. But what about they them pronouns and singular use like what can I say that did you see that like clip of that British lady like on that British? So show. And she was all like refusing to use they them pronouns with that like cool journalist. And so I just use that because it's simply not true. Have we ever done they them pronouns for a singular? Can you school that lady or or what?

**ANNE CURZAN** Oh, I have such strong feelings on this. I would love to. I have spent, for better or worse, pretty much my entire career, thinking about pronouns and thinking about singular they. So thank you for asking. I'm going to climb right up onto my soapbox.

**JVN** Let me get it out for you, honey.

**ANNE CURZAN** Here we go.

**JVN** Yes.

**ANNE CURZAN** I'm going to start with the fact that we actually have two different uses of singular day that I think are worth distinguishing. One is really old, and this is what I would call gender neutral singular. They this would be they in something like a teacher should learn their students names where we're talking about any teacher. This is a teacher whose gender is irrelevant to this conversation. A teacher should learn their students names or someone who knows where they're going. Right? So someone it's clearly singular, who knows where they are going. Now, a lot of people think that's new. And I'm here to say, as a historian of the English language, it is hundreds and hundreds of years old. We have evidence back to the 1300s, 1400s of singular they. So that one. Even though in the 18th century grammarians decided to say it was wrong. It's never it's not wrong. And so here I'll do a little schooling because people will say to me and they cannot be singular. And I say, but it is. And they say, but it can't be. And I say, but it is. Which is not a very interesting argument to have. But if you listen to the way we speak, and this is true of American English, British English, Australian English, the list goes on. They is singular because we can say someone who knows where they're going should give us directions. The and then they'll say, but a pronoun can't be singular and plural at the same time, which is a really funny argument to make about English, because we already have a pronoun that is singular and plural at the same.

**JVN** Time, which is and.

**ANNE CURZAN** That is you. Yeah. So you used to be only plural. So you had you as a plural pronoun for the second person, and you had Thao as a singular pronoun. And then in

the Renaissance, or at the time of Shakespeare, thou starts to fall out of use as a singular. Obviously, there are still a few communities in the world that use Thao, but most of us don't. And you took over the singular function so that you have you are one person or you are lots of people and notice that it kept the plural are, but you are can be singular. Now of course, Jonathan, what you and I know is that people have also developed new plural variants. I don't know what yours is for. I really wish that I was a y'all speaker.

**JVN** I do say.

**ANNE CURZAN** Y'all, so it's not part of my grammar. I grew up outside D.C. I can't pull it off with any legitimacy. I really wish I could. I use you all, which is a subtle difference, but I can pull that off. In Pittsburgh, people use yens,

**JVN** Yeah, I live in Texas. I totally say, y'all, but I've been saying y'all for like, a long time because I come from, like, west central Illinois, like on the Mississippi River. So, like, people do say, y'all, I feel like. Or at least they did at camp somewhere I heard that.

**ANNE CURZAN** Oh, absolutely. All over the South. All over the South. You have y'all in African American English. Many speakers will use y'all. It's a great pronoun. So. So in any case, we go back. You can be both singular and plural. So when people say to me they cannot be both singular and plural, I say, well, that is not a very persuasive argument because it can, and more importantly, it already is. It already is both singular and plural. So we've been having this argument and and what I try to help people see is the argument is really it's not can it be singular? The question has been, are we allowed to write it down because we say it and there's no good reason we can't write it down. So you have that singular they and then more recently and this is relatively recent we have non-binary Day. So this is singular day for people whose pronoun is not he or she who don't identify within that binary. And they is their pronoun. And I think it's really important. You'll sometimes hear people call it a preferred pronoun, and I think it's much better to say it's people's pronoun. It's not that they prefer it in the way one could say like I prefer she. No, she is my pronoun. They is other people's pronoun. So I think that that's a helpful distinction for people to have on that. The non-binary day is a really important development for people who need a pronoun that is not he, and it's not shy and it expresses their identity. It's true to their identity. And sometimes people will say to me, I don't think I should have to use they as a singular pronoun. And my response is, it is fundamentally an issue of respect, that respecting people is respecting their names and respecting their pronouns.

**JVN** The grammarians. When did the. Who the fuck are they? Were they like the literal grammar police? When did they come about? Were they like. Were they like in the. When were they.

**ANNE CURZAN** You ask the best questions. Who are these grammarians? And I wish more people asked this question. And it's why I titled the book Irreverently Says who? That we should be asking this question more often when someone says double negatives are illogical, or someone says they can't be singular, we are allowed to ask the question, who said that? And do I have to believe that person?

**JVN** Yeah.

**ANNE CURZAN** So these grammarians in English, we start to see the earliest grammars in the 18th century ish. That's when they become popular. It is a lot about class mobility. So these grammars are a way for people to, quote unquote, refine their English. And this is when we're seeing the rise of the middle class.

**JVN** Oh, wait, when was this again? I think my brain paused.

**ANNE CURZAN** So this is 1700 ways.

**JVN** Of the rise of the middle class happened in the 1700s.

**ANNE CURZAN** Sometimes the 1800s. We're seeing the rise of the middle class, and we see these grammars come out. So if we look at something like singular, they the earliest grammars that talk about this are in the mid 18th century. So mid 1700s. And one of the really early ones is a grammar by Anne Fisher. It's by a woman. And she has this rule in the book that says the masculine encompasses the feminine. So in case you were wondering, John, if the masculine encompasses the feminine, and then she says for this reason he can be used for everyone, and this gets picked up in this grammar. 1795 this grammarian named Lindley Murray, he was an American. He published this grammar called English Grammar I very, very creative title, and it went through dozens and dozens of editions. It was highly influential. And in that grammar he takes a sentence with a singular they. And that's important because it means that Lindley Murray knew that that's what people were saying and writing down. So he took that sentence and he crosses out the they and he puts he. And for 200 years, we were stuck with this rule that the correct, singular gender neutral pronoun was he. And I'm old enough that I grew up with that rule in elementary school. Junior high school was that I was supposed to write. A teacher should learn his students names, and that covered all teachers. Even though I will say even at a young age, it was quite clear to me that it did not include me.

**JVN** The first time we see them, like talked about is like the 1700s or did they exist like before that?

**ANNE CURZAN** Well, so there have been grammarians for a long time, and the question is what kinds of books they were writing. So a lot of the early grammars were designed to help people learn a second language. And we still use grammars that way. So you may have a Latin grammar or a German grammar to help you learn a language that is not the one that you grew up with. What we see starting in the 1700s is these grammars that really are usage guides. They're not designed to help you learn English. They're designed to help you, quote unquote, refine your English so that you will write and speak in particular ways that are seen as better or.

**JVN** More educated, more civilized.

**ANNE CURZAN** More educated, more correct, more refined than other varieties. So these grammars are written to native speakers of the language to say you need to improve your language. And this is what is so powerful about these grammars, is that they naturalize this sense that whatever variety they put out there as the good or the best use of English, what

has happened is that's been naturalized that that's just good English, and that all the rest of the kinds of English that most of us speak most of the time are somehow not as good or even wrong. And a lot of kids in school are told that they talk wrong. And I think that that is devastating. If you want to silence a kid, tell them that they talk wrong, that they're grammars bad. You're not only telling them that they talk wrong, but that their mom talks wrong, their family, their community. And it's really powerful. And I want to say, as a linguist, it's also ill informed and not. Accurate. They're not wrong. They may be. Speaking of variety. That is not the standardized variety, but it's a systematic variety.

**JVN** How has all of this affected our society and what does it like? What do these standardized formalize rules say and what's their effect been on culture and really like America?

**ANNE CURZAN** So many important questions packed in there I'm sorry. No it's good I love it I really do. And and let's start with education because I think it is really at the core of this. And if I had a magic wand and I could change something, it would be how we teach language in school. Because kids are curious about language, because I actually think humans in general are curious about language. And and in the book I talk about that every one of us has an inner word in our head, and this is the part of us that loves language. And it's clear from your questions, right? You're curious about language. You enjoy it. People like to play with language. They like to make up slang. You know, we know right now people are playing Wordle and spelling bee and, you know, they rap. They liked it. We play. We love.

**JVN** Like poetry.

**ANNE CURZAN** Poetry, right. It's fun. It's beautiful. We can play with it. We should be nurturing that in school and what we should be doing even as early as elementary school. If you think about elementary education, kids are learning a tiny bit of chemistry, a tiny bit of biology, some geology. You know, even if we don't call it physics, like they're starting to learn about things that are.

**JVN** Gravity.

**ANNE CURZAN** Gravity, they're learning some math. And then with language, we start with this very prescriptive place, these rules that have been handed down for generations, as if that's what it means to study language. But no, we should start with how does language work? Where do dialects come from? Why do people in Texas speak differently from people in Michigan? How do they speak differently? Help kids answer the questions about how language actually works, including, for example, who wrote the dictionaries that you're using? I was never allowed to ask that question. I didn't even know that was a question. Did you know that was a question?

**JVN** No. Who did I write? Those fuckers. I asked too many before, so we got to. We're still on your train of thought? Yeah.

**ANNE CURZAN** No, we're going to go there. Because if you think about early childhood in your classroom, there are dictionaries. And now online there are dictionaries. So quote unquote what does a word mean. And people say go look it up in the dictionary as if there is

only one, when of course there are many, many published by different publishers with different editors and different philosophies. And we should be able to ask, who wrote that? When was it published? Because also language changes. And so it might not be up to date.

**JVN** And my Shania Twain brain, I literally because I was like, when you first started doing this, I was like, well, really? A dictionary just is like there's like how it's spelled, but then it's the description, like the description of what the word means that's so important and like how it's supposed to be used. Right.

**ANNE CURZAN** Exactly. And that dictionaries are an amazing resource. The people who write them are highly trained. They are also human beings with human bias. And so we can think about the ways in which historically, for example, they defined marriage. And now many dictionary editors have revised that definition because they're trying to capture the way the word is being used. And it's people often go to dictionaries to find out what does that word mean, what does it really mean? Or they'll say, is it really a word by which they put it in a dictionary? And of course, there are many words that are words. A word is a set of sounds that you and I can use to communicate to each other with a shared meaning. And if it's new, it might not be in a dictionary yet, but it's still a word. But so people go to find, quote unquote the answers. If you talk to dictionary editors, and I actually am friends with dictionary editors, so I get to talk to them all the time, they will say, we are just trying to keep up with all of you, that you keep changing the language. Words mean different things. We are tracking you all. We're tracking the writing and the speech that is being produced. And then as something changes, we're trying to update our dictionaries so that we can keep up with the way language is changing. And we can take a word like peruse. Is that a word that you use the verb? Yes. So what does it mean for you?

**JVN** Go like do a light look about it. The thing.

**ANNE CURZAN** Okay. Love that. That is the way almost everyone uses it 1 or 2 generations back, it actually meant to read carefully or to pore over.

**JVN** Where.

**ANNE CURZAN** And if you if you go into most dictionaries, the first definition will be to read carefully or to pore over. And then, for example, in the American Heritage Dictionary, they have the second definition, and they preface it with usage problem. And then they have skim or scan.

**JVN** My mind is blown. I always used to refer to things as like, she she she like like a like a shampoo. Like anything. Like anything. Could be a she. Then I had some people tell me how, like, really, it's a little bit like it's giving a little bit like patriarchal if you dig into it a little deeper because it's like the, like, why can't it be a he? Why isn't it funny if the shampoo is a he? Why does it have to be a she that's playing into this idea of like being hysterical, being, you know, these like it's just there's misogyny in that. And I don't want to be misogynistic. So I sometimes it still slips out, but I like I tried not to like gender and Adamant objects. And then another thing was, is that like any you mentioned AB or AB earlier, I think before I understood like our history, like a lot of things. And I've been called out on this on TikTok, like lots of times that like, you know, the way that like white queer men and then I'm like, I'm

non-binary. But when everything, will co-opt this language that was really created by black women, but that has caused me to, like, have to do work around myself. And I notice that, like, I would kind of like code switch, like I would like, talk differently if I was like with this person or that person. And so then I was like, oh, maybe I don't really like this. That actually kind of makes me feel cringing now that I understand, like more things. So it's like our language does evolve with what we know and that's okay. But I think it can trigger so much of this. Like, am I a bad person? Like, am I like, it's just the guilt and the shame. So even I think it's a shame I bring it makes me want to cry. But why do we like it? Because it did. It just like totally touched my like, shame about the way that you come across like. And why does this happen?

**ANNE CURZAN** I again, your openness to the feedback about language is inspiring and really important that you're telling stories in which you're saying, you know, when someone said this to me and I rethought something about the way I was speaking, and that is exactly the interaction that I hope we can have, which is that we can be thoughtful speakers and open to people saying, you know, that language that you're used to using is worth rethinking and that we can be not defensive about that. The other side of that is that we can be generous listeners. And so when someone says something that rubs us the wrong way, we're like, that we give them the benefit of the doubt and say, now, occasionally there are times where we don't give someone the benefit of the doubt. We're like, I know you use that language to harm, but that in a lot of instances where we say, I don't think that person meant harm, and I'm going to say something in a generous way to say, you know, here's how I heard that, here's what it felt like. But the emotions run so high here, I think, because this is about power. It's fundamentally about power. It's about the power to say what is acceptable and not acceptable, what's harmful and not harmful. And historically, there have been some groups that have been socially powerful and able to say, this is the right language and this is the wrong language. And everybody else has had to be very careful about their language. And we can think of all the ways in which women and black speakers and have had to be incredibly careful about the words they use, because the consequences can be dire if you use the wrong words. And one of the things that we're seeing in this movement that people often call political correctness or PC, and I know one can see this, but I'm using scare quotes because people use that in a whole range of ways. But what we're seeing is that groups that have been historically marginalized. Are getting the microphone and are able to say that language is offensive to us and we are asking you to use different language. And sometimes you will say to me, well, this is new. And I'm like, ooh, some of that language has been offensive for a long time. It's just that people weren't empowered to get to say that language is offensive. And we're at a moment where we have more groups with microphones who can say, we're asking you to rethink that usage. And the key is going to be that for the speakers who historically have been powerful, who haven't had to rethink their language because they can say whatever they want because they are powerful. What I hope is that they can adopt the attitude, Jonathan, that you've had, which is to listen when someone says, I'm ask you to rethink that, to be open to that feedback and say, do I want to use language that someone else is telling me is offensive or is it worth rethinking? But I think the emotions are high, because what I will have people say is, why do I have to be so careful? And part of my response is, you know, other speakers have been careful the whole time. I think generosity in this space is really important. And giving people some grace that to one of the ways I've found helpful to think about this is that both intention and reception matter. And I think sometimes people want only one of them to matter. They want to say I didn't mean it to be

offensive and therefore it doesn't matter that you found it offensive and that's not the way language works or people want to say, I heard that is offensive. And so it doesn't matter if you didn't mean it that way. It was offensive and you're wrong and they both matter. And I think this is where we can be generous, which is to recognize people's intention. It does matter. But that for those of us as speakers, even if we didn't intend it that way, to be open to someone saying, well, this is how I heard it. And then and I think this is what you're describing, making a decision of, okay, I hear you. And actually, I think it's worth changing or I hear you, but actually, I really don't mean it that way. And I've appropriated it, and I'm using it in a positive sense, and I'm going to own that, but that we take both of those seriously as we as we make decisions, right? Decisions with lots of data and input about how to achieve what we want to achieve.

**JVN** I didn't realize that this is going to kind of turn into therapy, but I'm just going to do a full send. Because there's also a large history around, like we talked about, like pronouns is being gendered. But then there's also a lot of like, perception on how you come across with the language that you speak, your fem, your butch, your this. And I wrote down earlier, like like I say, like so much, I can't help it. I've tried to, I don't know what. I don't know if it's my ADHD and I don't say that lightly because like, I do have ADHD. Like, I don't know if it's the processor. I don't know if it's a coping thing. I try to slow down. I try not to say it, but I kind of can't help it. And so and then there's just like the queerness of my voice, like I've, I've never been able to, like, I do jokes about how I can't sound straight and my impression of a straight man is so funny because I just it's not in my register like I don't. I wish I could find it, but I just, I can't.

**ANNE CURZAN** It's this there's a field of study here that is really important around language and gender and language and sexuality around people's expectations for based on people's gender and people's sexuality and what it means to break those expectations. So you're absolutely right that that when we break those expectations and there was a lot of work early on about that worked within the male female binary on this sort of assuming heterosexuality and that sort of thing. But that women's speech was often read as not powerful and not assertive, and that was a way to be feminine. And so there was this movement called assertiveness training, where women were trained to, quote unquote, speak like straight men. And when women do that, it goes really badly. And we know the B-word that people use when women speak that way, that we are all navigating this complex web of expectations about how different groups speak, which are based on stereotypes and all those sorts of things. And we're navigating our way through that as we're making decisions about how to get done what we're trying to get done, like we're all trying to get stuff done. And the question is how with this audience, given the expectations that I'm managing with my identity, how am I going to get that done? And it is complicated terrain. And I was thinking about that also, as you were talking about the ways in which some words are getting appropriated or identity term shift, this is really complicated territory. And I will hear people say, you know, I hear your message and that I should be sensitive and thoughtful and I should listen to the feedback, and I want to be, but I feel like things change really fast. And, you know, I was supposed to use this term, and now I'm supposed to use this term, and how am I supposed to keep up? And and I think you and I can both get that, that there are some parts of the language that move fast. And, and this is where I think we're all in it together is to say we try to keep up. I actually don't think it's too much to ask if you care about being respectful, you try to keep up. But it also for me is about the generosity is to recognize that it

is fast moving and complicated territory, and people may not always get it right when they are well-intentioned. And to give people again, give them some grace.

**JVN** Yes, clean. It's the grace. It's hard to come by these days. It is. It is. Okay. Also, what about swear words? We're we're coming into, into into home base. But, what a what is the history of swear words? Like, what does it mean? How do they evolve?

**ANNE CURZAN** Oh, swear words. Such an interesting category of words. So the first thing to say is that I'm going to call them taboo words to start with. Because there are lots of them. Swear words are one category of them, but we have taboo words around taboo topics for many people. So death, sex. Particular body parts that are seen as intimate. There are words that people see as taboo. There are epithets, the horrible things that we say about other people which are taboo words. And then there are swear words. Curse words. What I think one important message is that all of these words fundamentally show the power of language, that there are words that we see as so powerful that we either don't say them or we're very, very careful about saying them because we know that they can be explosive. So whenever somebody says it's just words, I'm like, it's almost never just words. Words are really powerful. They're part of our identity. They're how we respect other people. There's a lot going on in this space. But what's also interesting about taboo words or swear words is that in the name taboo words, there's a suggestion of that. We can't say them, but of course we do say them. A lot that when you do studies of how often people swear and it depends on what you count as a swear word, but, people swear a good amount because swearing it can be offensive and a lot of people just stop there. But it can also be funny. It can be intimate. And I think about this because, for example, when I'm at work, I don't swear. For the most part, it's not the identity I have at work.

**JVN** Yeah, I don't either, I don't, I keep it pretty.

**ANNE CURZAN** You keep it. Yeah.

**JVN** I'm kidding. And all I do is fucking kiss. Everywhere I go, I'm like, I got to get the fuck together. I want to, I want to be more like you, honey.

**ANNE CURZAN** Well, no, I mean, it's just that. That in the in the environment I work in, in the university, it's not the way that I perform my identity in that space. So for me, it's a signal of intimacy with my friends and with my family that I can let that guard down and I can curse. And I actually remember I was teaching this in a graduate course at one point, and one of my graduate students said, you know, I really remember when I came to graduate school, I was being super careful. And I never curse because actually I do curse a lot, and I didn't. And then I remember when I felt like I knew people well enough that I could stop kind of performing graduate student, and I could be myself, and I could curse where I crossed the cursing line. And I thought that was just great.

**JVN** What did you think about that trend? Did you see that trend when, like, the parents were letting, like, their little kid, like, go into the bathroom with the phone and they'd be like, you're allowed to come out and say whatever word you want to in this bathroom only just, you know, come out when you're. Did you see that? It was like everywhere I did not it was like everywhere on the internet a couple months ago. If you put on TikTok like kids cussing, it probably would come up. But these little toddlers would like, they'd be like, okay. And then

like, the parent would leave the bathroom, would like the kids accordingly. The kid would be like, shit, fuck, bitch. Damn, goddammit, fuck. Shit, fuck. God damn. Like, these kids were hilarious. But what do you what does that like? It does. I just mean, like, kids are so perceptive and, like, get it so young.

**ANNE CURZAN** So that's one thing. Yes. Exactly. That they sense that these words are powerful and they pick up on them, and then they will say them and they get a response from adults. Right? So the kid says it and they get a very strong response from adults. The other thing that it's worth saying about swear words is that they seem to we have a physical response to them, and they actually seem to do some work. So they've done these studies where they they asked college undergraduates because that's who they test to hold their arm in a bucket of ice water. And the students who are allowed to curse actually can keep their arm in the ice water longer, that it seems to release the pain in some way. And we can all imagine that, that if you stub your toe or something, what comes out of your mouth at that moment, it is usually not the word the.

**JVN** Yeah, it's like, oh that was yeah. No, it's yeah, you're definitely cussing. My senior brain took us all over the place in this episode, which I think was part of the magic. Yeah. But really what we've talked about is like the policing of language a little bit. Who gets to say what? How does language evolve? So I love the idea of like a caretaker of language rather than a gatekeeper of language. So how can we be caretakers and not gatekeepers with our language?

**ANNE CURZAN** I really appreciate you bringing that up, because it is one of the fundamental messages I want to get across, which is to redefine what it means to care deeply about language. Because I think what has happened is that there's a sense that the people who care deeply are the people who police other people's language, and who have a sense that there's one right way and lots of wrong ways, and that the, the, the best caretakers are the people who are enforcing those rules. And I don't think that's right. I think that caretaking of the language is about understanding how it works. And a couple of important things to understand is that the language is always changing. It is just a natural part of language. And a second important thing to understand is that the diversity of language is part of the diversity of us, that we are a diverse community of speakers, and we are going to speak in a diverse set of ways, and that is a rich and wonderful thing, and we need to embrace that diversity. And the third thing is that what we learned is right and wrong is actually not nearly as stable as we think it is. And so to be a caretaker is to understand those things, and then to observe the language around you and think, what is happening and how can I use the language effectively? So one of the analogies I came up with as I was writing the book, which was really fun, was could we adopt, first of all, the mindset of a birder or a bird watcher, which is that we see and hear things that are novel to us. Maybe it's new, maybe it's from a different variety of the language, and that our response is to be curious is to say, what is going on over there? Where does that come from? How does it work? Who says that as opposed to what I think is sometimes people's reaction, which is kill it, which is not a very good attitude for a birder. So there's there's that way of coming at language. And then to realize that the goal is actually to be effective speakers and writers, and that we are speakers and writers in a whole range of contexts, and that one way of speaking and writing is not going to be effective in all those contexts. So to think about rather than what's right and what's wrong, that we do much better to think about in this context with this audience,

given my purpose, what is the most effective way to use the language? And that is going to vary depending on all of those factors. And that is being an informed, careful, engaged speaker and writer of the language. I mean.

**JVN** And really, it's like when I was saying, like, sometimes I get feedback where it's like too strong. It's like I'm it's like it's giving me Goldilocks, like not too strong not to, like, soft, like just kind of learning how to be an arbiter of the language in the way that we that's like most effective literally what you said, it's efficacious language hunty.

**ANNE CURZAN** And it means that when we do it that way. And this is, of course, the subtitle book, first of all, it's more fun because we get to be curious and it is also kinder. It is a more generous way to approach other people and their language.

**JVN** Yeah. No, I feel like this, that actually that that was such a strong ending. I think where language is going next is going to be in our part too, about like our eras tour. Yeah, that's that's giving eras tour. I love you so hard not to like go right into the L word on our first meeting, but like, and it's not your fault the obsession hit me hard.

**ANNE CURZAN** Well, you ask, your questions are so spot on.

**JVN** That was a gorgeous place to end. But then I keep thinking of one more. But maybe this will be the last one. But we'll see. See, based off of your response, the tortured poets department, Taylor Swift, linguist, like honey, like she's giving us linguistics. Have you listened to it?

**ANNE CURZAN** I have not, so this will not be the best place to end. But I'm going to go listen to it.

**JVN** I tell you something right now. I'd rather burn my whole life down. Then listen to one more second of the. Your bitching and moaning. That's like. It's one of my favorite lyrics from this album. I'm sorry. I don't sing like her.

**ANNE CURZAN** You don't hear me sing at all. Ever.

**JVN** And you got to, like, get into some the tortured poets department. I just think as a linguist, you and also Ariana Grande, I just feel like both of these artists, would really. You would love how they are using linguistics up in their music. It is so fucking genius. I can't stand it.

**ANNE CURZAN** And I know this about both of them and I have been a little distracted.

**JVN** Why? Because you're just like a dean of, like a major college in the middle of, like, a gigantic political upheaval that we haven't seen since, like the 70s or something.

**ANNE CURZAN** Like, I can hardly wait to to go do that. So I'm going to do that this weekend.

**JVN** With like a little bath soak with.

**ANNE CURZAN** A little bath.

**JVN** Soak with them tortured poets department head.

**ANNE CURZAN** That's what I'm going to do as I take a long back.

**JVN** And also, that'll be good for you to become a swifty in preparation for our next interview, because then you'll really vibe with, like, the era is like the era is, like analogy or metaphor.

**ANNE CURZAN** This will make my niece very happy because she's a total swiftie, and she has been wanting me to get on board here. And and I'm absolutely willing to get on board. I just haven't had time to get on board. So I'm gonna make the.

**JVN** Time that we got to get. Yeah, we got to clear a little space of time for Taylor. I know that you do have your. And people, like.

**ANNE CURZAN** Supporting the community through it.

**JVN** Come on. And, well, we got to have you back for part two. We're going on a history tour. And thank you so much for coming on, getting curious. We appreciate you so much.

**ANNE CURZAN** Oh thank you. This was such fun.

**JVN** If you were as riveted as I was in that episode, please get and book. It is so fascinating. It's available where we get your books again. It's called Says Who? A kinder, funnier usage guide for everyone who cares about words. You guys get the book support ends work. We're obsessed. Did we learn how I can be more effective with language? Yes and no, because I didn't stop talking so much. And we're definitely gonna have to have Ian come back for a second episode. It wasn't because he didn't answer it effectively. It's because I was so excited by everything that she said. I didn't let her finish, like, half the questions. But I do think I a little bit have learned how to be more effective with language. And I think this is the other thing, how I've become, like, less effective with language and why I've gotten more scared of language, I think is because like when our language is criticized, it can be so personal. And it's that can be tough and painful and just it touches the shame and the guilt. So I thought that was really interesting. But there's a lot more that I found interesting, the idea of being a caretaker of language versus a gatekeeper of language, I thought was interesting also because. And I think Ian's work so much speaks to like respecting someone's POV and being like a generous listener, as she was saying. I thought that was fascinating, that when you go back hundreds of years, there are there's evidence of them being a singular, like all the way back to Shakespeare times. And then every kid who learns, every kid who learns language reinvents it with the peruse. That was everything. And also what's going on in our brains when babies learn language. Also, my TikTok and Instagram algorithm recently started showing me like, what I now know is like Spanish linguists because they're like, don't order your coffee like this. Order it like this to sound like more of like a native Spanish speaker, because I was saying like Play-Doh to narrow un cafe. It's like, can I have a coffee? But then this guy was like, that sounds super like how an English speaking person might say it. So you just have to say like Damien Cafe por favor, or like

Cafe Por Favor. And it's just like, more like natural sounding. So. Okay, well, we love you so much. Thanks for coming on. Getting Curious. I have to go take a shower. And go Shania Twain and go and quiz on. Okay. We love you guys.

You've been listening to getting curious with me, Jonathan Van Ness. You can learn more about this week's guest and their area of expertise in the episode description and follow us on Instagram @CuriousWithJVN You can catch us here every Wednesday and make sure to tune in every Monday for episodes of Pretty Curious which we love. It's our pod pass on all things beauty. Get into it. Still can't get enough and you want to get a little spicy with us. You can subscribe to extra curious on Apple podcasts for commercial free listening and our subscription only show, Ask JVN where we're talking sex relationships are really just whatever is on my mind. That week, our theme music is Freak by Quinn. Thank you so much to her for letting us use it. Our editor and engineer is Nathaniel McClure. Getting Curious is produced by me, Chris McClure and Julia Melfi with production support from Julie Carrillo, Anne Currie and Chad Hall.