

Ep. 08: Second Adolescence w/ Zach (he/him)

Wed, 3/2 7:24AM 53:38

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

gay, adolescence, queerness, queer, feel, relationship, friends, part, identity, dating, high school, college, people, spaces, feeling, person, thinking, year, girls, talk

SPEAKERS

Adam James Cohen (he/him), Zach (he/him)

A Adam James Cohen (he/him) 00:09

Hello, hello and welcome to this week's episode of the second adolescence podcast. I'm your host Adam James Cohen. This week's episode features a conversation I had with someone who is a good friend of mine in real life, my friend Zach. And it was so fun and also really interesting to have a friend on the show because I learned so much more about his story than I even knew before. On this episode, you'll hear him share about growing up as a kid and the different feelings he had towards boys and girls how in high school, he had this really meaningful romantic relationship with a girl before he had an understanding of his gay identity. And then yeah, what his process was of getting more clear on his identity. And then pursuing these experiences and relationships with men in college and beyond, we cover so many different things from you know, the power of queer content on YouTube acting as a fill in for queer mentors we may not have access to to the interesting and complex ways we have been in relationship to being gay in straight spaces to identifying with the label gay versus queer. And yet, there's just so many things that came out of this conversation. And it was just such a pleasure. And I'm really excited to invite you into it. And as with each episode of the show, I want to invite you as listener to listen with open curiosity, knowing that each guest story is going to be unique. And you might hear people share things on the show that really differ from your experience. Whereas you might hear other things shared that absolutely give words to what you went through or currently going through. And I hope all of this happens and that together, we can continue growing and expanding our awareness of what life and queerness and healing can be for folks, if after the show you want to connect further, feel free to head on over to secondadolescencepod.com. For show notes and more, and head on over to Instagram and follow the show at [secondadolescencepod](https://www.instagram.com/secondadolescencepod). All right, let's dive into the conversation. Thanks for being here. Welcome to the second adolescence podcast. Before going anywhere, I like to invite the person on your end to just briefly introduce yourself just to give a little context who the person is behind the voice. And who are you question is a ridiculous one, but a brief introduction. And we can go from there.

Z Zach (he/him) 02:28

Well, my name is Zach, I guess identity wise, I am a gay cisgender man live in San Francisco have lived in the city for seven years. I'm from the Bay Area in California. I am a high school

have lived in the city for seven years. I'm from the Bay Area in California. I am a high school math teacher. I'm 32. I feel like in a lot of ways I've started new chapters in my life. But teaching for me now is a new chapter that just started this year for me.

A

Adam James Cohen (he/him) 02:59

Hmm, yeah. I mean, just to start there. How is that new chapter going?

Z

Zach (he/him) 03:03

It's been good. I mean, everything is about expectations. My friend always says, I forgot how the saying goes like life is the gap between expectations and reality or what have you. But my expectations were very, very set at the ground level coming into this year, I was like, it's gonna be really hard. I'm going to come home crying every day. So because of that, I've been like, oh my gosh, this is like, totally manageable. I mean, it's still been very hard. But it's been good. I think my big fear going into it was that I was going to be like, I've made a terrible mistake. And you know, it was definitely a risk to do it. And so I had no idea how I was going to be. And so overall, I would sum it up by saying it's been like affirming of like, oh, this is hard. But this is a good path. And so that's been a good feeling.

A

Adam James Cohen (he/him) 03:48

Oh, awesome. But starting this career in the pandemic, being a teacher during the pandemic is like the wildest thing to do. Because that's like a whole other long conversation that I'd love to dive in with you about to hear what that's like. But for the purpose of what we're doing here, I'm going to pull back, I'd love to hear more about your teaching as we go. But so just to land back here on this show on this idea of second adolescence. I'm curious to start there. Like when you first heard that idea of second adolescence, what in it resonated with you and your story? Like how did you make sense of it? Where did you first go when you heard that idea of second adolescence?

Z

Zach (he/him) 04:20

Okay, so lots of thoughts on it. I would say the first thing that I thought about when you mentioned it is like what are the feelings I associate with adolescents and like how do they see those feelings later in life, particularly around like coming out and stuff? And I think for me, so much of it is kind of the self consciousness and like awkwardness and specifically this might be like too specific of an example but having to like look things up in secret like not knowing things you want to like, you don't have people to talk about, and that's something I associate with being like a teenager of like, you don't really like know anything and you're very self conscious about your body and you don't know who to ask and you know, we were in the era like very beginning of I don't even know if I Google things, but you could like go on websites and look up things today. I very much associate that with like my actual adolescence. But I also very much associate that with coming out in college of like watching YouTube videos and

having this like own secret world of like me trying to learn about things that I didn't talk to anyone about. And that doesn't even get into kind of the identity part of adolescence changing. But that is like one very real similarity between like those two faces for me.

A

Adam James Cohen (he/him) 05:27

Absolutely. I'm thinking for my own self, the Googles that I had to do. So yeah, I don't know if any are particularly coming up for you. But I definitely absolutely remember like, how do two men have sex then the rabbit hole that went from there, but I don't know if there's any specific example that comes to mind in that process for you,

Z

Zach (he/him) 05:45

the googling less so like one very strong memory for me. I don't know if we've talked about this. But have you heard of the show One girl, five gays? It was on like Canadian MTV. It was maybe like 2009 I can associate it with like college like the later years in college. And they put all the episodes on YouTube, I think they're maybe doing a reboot of the show. I loved it. It's very cheesy. But I had such a soft place in my heart. Basically, it was kind of like a panel talk shows like one woman who's the host. And then five gay guys, who at the time just felt like such adults to me, but they probably weren't that much older than I was. I mean, they were probably in their like mid 20s or something. And it was kind of like, edited with a quirky style. But basically, they like ask 20 questions, and then the guys would talk about a morale answer. And some of the questions would be random of like, if you had a superpower, what do you want to be like that kind of stuff. But some were like sexual? Like, would you ever do this with a partner? Like, have you ever done this? And then some are more personal of like, What's your relationship with your parents like whatever. And it was just such like catnip because just like interviewing tons of gay men, I felt like I was like hanging out with these cool older gay guys. And I'm sure so many younger teens, you know, gay guys had that experience, like, watching these guys. And they were just like, random. I don't even think they were actors. They were like, random dudes who lived in like Toronto, like, I'm so fascinated by the backstory of that show. But anyways, I spent countless hours watching YouTube videos of that. And I feel like that served a lot of the like, vicarious feeling like you're like learning from an older cousin kind of thing. Totally. And how old were you at that time, it was definitely college. And then maybe even after college a little bit like I think I probably watched those after graduating. So I would say like, early 20s, which like that phase was at the time where I was like, fully out, certainly fully myself, but even fully out publicly, but like, had a lot of questions about gay stuff, didn't have a lot of gay friends then like that era, late college and early 20s. That was a time when I was very much curious,

A

Adam James Cohen (he/him) 07:52

Totally, sounds like that late college early 20s was really kind of the beginning of your experience of second adolescence. And there's probably so much more in there that I'm curious to hear about. But before going there, sometimes it's helpful before really making sense of second adolescence, first making sense of our first adolescence. And so I'm curious, start us there. Like, where did your story begin? You mentioned growing up the Bay Area walk us through kind of what life was like for little Zach.

Z

Zach (he/him) 08:16

Okay, so I was very small. I was very high energy. I had lots of things to say and ideas. My mom used to very charitably refer to me as a human exclamation point. When I was a kid, I was just like, always, like at an 11. So I was kind of a personality when I was like a kid starting in middle school, for sure. One of my friend groups had a lot of it was like me, maybe a couple guys and like a lot of girls, and even now that group of friends like me and five girls is like one of my core friend groups, and certainly was through high school. And I think navigating the social dynamics of like, do I prefer being friends with boys do I prefer being friends with girls was such a like thread of me processing my own identity? Because I felt like even when I started to question, Am I gay? I was like, Well, I don't want to be in a relationship with guys because I don't like guys. So I'm only friends with girls. I only like it really did throw such a wrench in my own acceptance of like, do I want to be in a relationship with a guy cuz I was like, I don't like boys. That's why all my friends are girls. I mean, it really confused me. Of course I don't want to be with a guy cuz like I only have the girls. But I did have some guy friends in elementary school. But starting middle school in high school. I think most of my close friends were girls. And that I feel like is another thing of like, just developing more friendships. I mean, even through college, most of my friendships were girls. And then as a gay man as an adult wanting more gay friendships were some of my first friendships with guys like I just didn't have as many friendships with as so then in high school, I think I don't know it is so hard to think back and have an accurate sense of like, what you were like, I was definitely really focused on academics. I don't characterize myself as a type A person now, and I don't know if I would have then. But I definitely was very ambitious and just like to do a lot of things, and was engaged in a lot of extracurriculars. Like, growing up, I did sports, and like, I was never very good at them. And I remember in high school, I did hurdles and they got like, last and like every hurdles race, and my mom was just like doing a personal check in of like, hey, like, how do you feel like, do you kind of feel fine, you know? And I was like, Yeah, I'm just here to have a good time. And she was like, Cool. Well, I definitely was not like, competitive, but just loved to be like, engaged in activities.

A

Adam James Cohen (he/him) 10:42

Yeah, so I guess first off, you mentioned this idea of examining your feelings towards girls and boys and your friendships with girls and boys and how, when you first started kind of being curious about your sexual identity, how that fit just a very confusing part of your story there. And I guess before that, like, growing up, and around that time, like, what do you remember kind of being taught or told or exposed to around queerness? Like, what was your beliefs around queerness at the time?

Z

Zach (he/him) 11:10

I'm not sure. So the few things that come to mind. So I did Cub Scouts in second grade. At the time, obviously, there was a lot of news headlines about the Boy Scouts, like not letting gay leaders or participants never, and my mom was not supportive of or was like, you know, against that rule. So I don't even remember this myself. My mom tells me that she brought it up to me, it was like, Hey, this is their policy, or this is something going on, like how do you feel about that? And then she says, I was like, Okay, I don't need to be part of it. Or like, that's bad,

which, clearly there was some politic there. But I honestly don't even remember that conversation, or, I mean, I remember being in Cub Scouts, but I don't remember that being a thing. My dad was a teacher. And so a lot of their friends were teachers. And so my fourth grade teacher who is friends with my parents, and came over, they were part of like, dinner, not club, but just like friend group called the gourmet group, and they would do dinner together at each other's houses once a month. And it was like all these different couples, Mr. Mrs. So and So Mr. Mrs. So and so. And then there was Mr. Huber and Mr. Forbes that always came together. And he was just by coincidence, also as a fourth grade teacher, and I don't know, I honestly think it wasn't until high school. It couldn't have been college. It was late that I put together Oh, they're gay. Or like, a couple. They would always come together. i You always said their name, Mr. Huber, Mr. Forbes. And just somehow, in retrospect, I'm like, How are you so clueless, but I really don't think it was till much later that I was like, Wait, there are a couple of my parents like, yeah. What's not clicking back? I just did not get that. So like, certainly had exposure to me. I don't remember really, like being super aware of like, oh, there's a gay community, like really at all. So I feel like some gay people like I knew I was gay. So I was like, four. I did not feel that way. Yeah, for me, it wasn't until so one of the girls who mentioned friend in high school, we were like best friends and middle school, best friends are the high school, and then started dating and then dated, I think it was like sophomore year through senior year. That was a big part of my high school experience. And I really did love her. I think because of that I wasn't really like exploring other parts of my identity. But then near the end, we broke up and got back together and broke up and got back together. It's like it happened a couple times. And then it was during one of the, like, breakup periods that I feel like I had the turning point mentally of like, Oh, I'm gay, I have to come out at some point. And like my high school, like, certainly, there were a lot of not a lot of but like we're out people. And I think that kind of factored in a little bit, which I think a lot of people go through this, no matter what stage they're at, where they're like, Oh, I'm not like them, or like I don't quite identify with them. And so that certainly made me not embrace gayness has like an identity of like, oh, this is part of who I am. Yeah. Which is internalized homophobia, and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. But

A

Adam James Cohen (he/him) 13:59

yep. I mean, that part of your story, in particular, I personally resonate with a lot. I think I had a different experience of more awareness to being queer at a younger age and kind of more kind of internal conflict, trying to distance myself from that being less confused by it, but more kind of actively trying to change it. But yeah, a big struggle was as I got older, and adolescence not seeing exposure to a variety of different types of queerness. And then absolutely, this internalized homophobia of kind of only seeing a certain presentation of what it means to be queer and kind of having a lot of rejecting feelings towards that. So that just like, I mean, that's an added benefit. Now we have such a more expanded view of what queerness can be and what it can look like and sound like and all the things so that's great. And we didn't really have that when we grew up, because we're about the same age, same time kind of going through adolescence in the 90s, early 2000s.

Z

Zach (he/him) 14:49

Yeah, it was a different era. And I feel like one of the big representations is like, Will and Grace, which at the time, I mean, just like culturally is so fascinating to me. Because like, I feel like so many of us internalize this like dichotomy of like, Are you a jack? Or are you a will, like, became

whatever and like, Will is the like protagonist and just framed in the show of like, Jack is like the buffoon and like you don't take him seriously like, whatever and like, will like is a professional and it's like, handsome and like, you wouldn't know he was gay if you weren't, you know, whatever it is, and like, I get so many of us had this dichotomy of like, Oh, I'm secretly a jack, but I wish I was a will. Which like, seems like a fun way to view it. But is like, so just like, ingrained of like, Are you a jack or a well? Yes, it's funny because they used to have like a promotional like one of their commercials with Jack being like, just Jack was like, the thing you would say. And I would imitate that and be like, just say, like, even before it was like out. What do you do it like? Weird, but so I've come back around. I'm embracing Jack, you know? Yeah, hell yeah. Yes. Maybe a flawed representation. I rejected him for so many years.

A

Adam James Cohen (he/him) 16:05

Yeah, totally. Okay, so I'm really curious about your relationship in high school, because it sounds like there was a lot you speak about this relationship, at least how I feel you talk about it with so much love, and so much gratitude. I'm curious, what was that experience like kind of as you were still making sense of your identity, also being in this relationship with this girl who you had such like a connection with? What was that journey,

Z

Zach (he/him) 16:27

I love her so much. And she was such a pivotal part of my I mean, I honestly should have mentioned her first in terms of like, describe your adolescence, because she was like such a pivotal part of adolescence. So we live like three blocks away from each other. And she's like, transferred to the school in third grade. So then on, we were kind of in the same orbit, but really, I feel like are close together in high school, we would walk home together every single day, we would always kind of like end at her house. So almost daily, we would spend an hour or two, like eating snacks, just talking like every single day. And that formed so much of our relationship was like that time after school like talking, she is incredible. But she's a very strong feisty energy like, well, I call you out on things. And it's like, very loving, but is a very strong personality, which I was so drawn to and like, fascinated by. And we would have so many kind of like philosophical, like debates and argue, you know, is this could a crime ever be ethical could line to some area, you know, like, whatever, we just kind of like fight and argue. But like it was such a stimulating relationship. Yeah. And so I felt like a ton of intimacy Porter. And then like, when you're adolescent, like, what is a crush, because I didn't really feel like a sexual person at all. And so it's like, if sexuality is not an ingredient in your life, and you're intimate with someone that is just love you meaning, if sexuality is not something I'm even like thinking about, then it's like all the ingredients that would want in a partnership kind of are there. Yeah. And anyways, and so then we started dating, we're together for several years. And at the beginning, it's really hard for me to kind of remember the exact timeline. But I have no sense early on that I felt like anything was wrong, or something was missing. The One memory I do have, which I have no concept of like when it was, I think it was like later when I started to have like a conception of myself as gay. And this is like, so funny, but I was like, dead serious about it, that I think I like knew that we weren't sexually compatible. But I was convinced that we were just like, partners. And I could not picture myself as partners with a man. I could like, visualize us like getting married and living together and having a home and having like, two separate bedrooms, and like, give one bedroom and I had another one. Which is like funny. I'm like, that was my game plan. And like, I don't actually know, I would love to like, interview

myself at the time. But I am pretty sure looking back that I was just like, Well, that makes sense. Like, I don't want to be in a relation with the guy I don't like guys, you know, like, I want to be in a relationship with her. There also was a thread throughout this time of like watching gay porn privately. But like cognitive dissonance is so real. But you can just compartmentalize that and you're like, well, but that that's separate, that doesn't count. And then, I don't know, it must have been Sr. I don't remember. But then there was a point where I feel like I understood and like inevitability of like, I'm going to have to come out at some point and I don't fully remember when that switch was but the part I do remember is us not being together and it was senior year and they'd be like, Okay, I don't want to come out in high school senior year like don't want to deal with that. I don't want to come out in college when I don't know anyone. It's like I'll come out during the summer between senior year and college. So it must have been close to the end of senior year or something. When we were not together, but I think that was the first time that I like started conceptualize of like, okay, I've accepted like this is gonna happen at some point. But then the tricky part was we ended up getting back together. So then we were dating through summer and then we're dating into the beginning of college and then broke up at the beginning of college. And so then I was like, crap. Now I don't want to come out because I just met all these people. And I just came in with a girlfriend. So that complicated the plan. Oh, yeah. Oh, but I came out to her in high school. I came out to her and then we got back together!

A

Adam James Cohen (he/him) 20:33

Wait, say more about that.

Z

Zach (he/him) 20:36

Okay, okay. Yeah, I skipped over that part. So one of these days, I should like fact, check with her. It's funny when you like, have these like narratives about yourself that you reinforced every time you thought about it? Yeah, I'm pretty sure it's all true. But sometimes I wonder if I get the timeline or like details mixed up. Okay. So my memory of it is like in this interstitial time when we were not together the senior year. And I was like, I'm gay. Don't want to come out. Now. I don't really have a game plan. But I'll come out over the summer. And then, but we were still like, really close friends. And we hang out all the time. There was like one day where we were like, hanging out. And then she kissed me. And I was like, and then she was like, I think we should get back together. It's like what she said. And I was like, I don't think that's a good idea. And then started the Most High School, eight hours of us talking in circles for eight hours. I don't think that's a good idea. Why do you not think it's a good idea? Well, I just don't think it's a good idea. Well, do you like me? Yes, I like you, then we should get back together. Now. I just don't think it's a good idea. Like, literally for eight hours. We went on a walk to a market, we bought sodas we walked around the block, I think we should get back together. I don't I mean, like literally just like God sets I mean, just whatever, right? And then at the end of that day, we were like back at her place. And then she was like, I feel like there's something you're like, want to say, and I don't think she was thinking that or I don't even know. But she was just kind of like you're acting weird. But why don't you think it's a good idea, whatever. And then I was like, burst into tears. And I was like, I think I'm gay. And she was like, What do you mean, you think you're gay? And like, What do you mean? What do I mean? And I was like, I like boys. And then she was like, Do you also like girls? And I think I said, I don't know. And then she was like, Do you like me? And I was like, Yes. And then she was like, Well, that's all I care about. As long

as you like me. She's like, I always assumed you also were attracted to other girls, but you chose me. So if you're attracted boys, and you choose me, that's fine. Which I think she was thinking. And I was thinking for her, like, Oh, this is a very, like, progressive, enlightened response, right? A little bit naive. And your 17 year old boyfriend is like, I think I'm gay. But you know. And then she was like, kind of the offer still stands. Like, I still want to get back together. And I was like, I need to think about it. And this sounds more cynical. I don't think it was the cynical but like, I think part of it for me was like, I did like being with her. So I was like, then I should be with her. That's like, what I like, I think I was also aware of like, I'm not gonna date other guys in the meantime at high school. So like, why would I not be with her? Because I feel like I shouldn't be when like, I actually like, enjoy being with her, you know? So anyway, so then I basically was like, yes, let's get back together. So that we did, and then classic, so many college relationships, that Turkey drop Thanksgiving break freshman year is when we broke up,

A

Adam James Cohen (he/him) 23:31

Ah, what a journey, that relationship journey, oh my gosh, they're getting back together, interrupting your plan to kind of use the transition from high school to college to like, start a new and like to be out and feel what that feels like. And I'm just thinking about your story is a great example of something that's so true for so many of us great people in adolescence, like this need to compartmentalize our sexual self into something else, then like kind of how we are showing up in most of our relationships most of our day. And so that's like a very complex process to then later figure out how to integrate in and so I'm curious to kind of follow that thread, but also the thread of what happened next, after you broke up with her. You mentioned it sounds like that's right around the time that you did come out. And so tell me about that process, and then keep going from there.

Z

Zach (he/him) 24:18

Well, so one thing I was gonna say about your last comment of how to integrate the two things is I remember very strongly feeling like I wanted coming out to be like the last thing that happened, part of how I felt was like, I haven't met anyone who I'd want to be with so like, I don't need to deal with coming out yet. And it was like such a chicken in a catch 22 where I was like, Well, you're not gonna meet anyone if you're not out yet. But like, it never felt like urgent to me. And so it was so easy. Like I didn't talk to my parents until junior year of college like three years later. Part of it. It's just been non confrontational. I just like didn't want to deal with it. Yeah. And it was so easy to kick down the road. In retrospect, I'm like, No, you should have come out. First, because that's going to help you figure out all the other things. But it felt like well, I'm going to wait until I like have met someone who I want to date. I'm really confident my sexuality group of gay friends, like those can happen. Yeah, so that was kind of fall a freshman year, there was one other friend from high school that was kind of in a separate friend group who came and visited and they came out to her and I don't remember exactly when that was, but that was like such a nice, like, release valve because she was like, the first person that I kind of like, came out to, I will say, like, the story of all my coming out is I'm just like, really hated coming out to people like the actual like logistical act of being like, I have something to tell you like, it takes 30 seconds, but I just hated it so much. And like, friends always joke that like, I built it up so intense that they thought I was gonna be like, I'm dying. And they're like, Oh, you're gay. Okay. But if I have something to tell you, I need your support. Like, yeah, I would come up to one person. And then back off, they got Epstein and then like, wait another

four months to come on to that. Like it was a long day to think. But let's see. So the first guy that I ever kissed in retrospect, he was kind of like a weird, creepy dude. He was like a junior. And I think he was someone that I think was very into finding people that weren't out yet. And like encouraging them to come out, like in a way that in retrospect, I'm like, it's like, maybe weird that you're then like, hooking up with them? I don't know. I don't know. But he was someone who I was very aware was gay. And so at the end of my freshman year, he was like, involved in student government. And I was like, considering, like, running for something. And he's like, Oh, come over, and we can meet and talk about whatever. And we like, kissed and made out. And it was like, the first time I'd ever like kissed a boy. Because how old were you? That was like freshman year of college. Like, the actual experience itself was positive. I think I really hated feeling like there was the secret especially because he was such like a conspicuous is the wrong word. But just kind of like someone people like knew and kind of thought was weird. And I was like, embarrassed if people knew that. I would like see him in the dining hall. And like, didn't want to acknowledge that I knew him whenever later on, there was like somebody else. I started hooking up with freshman year that was completely removed and like, never ran into him. And no one knew him. And that I didn't mind that being a seeker because I just felt like a parallel universe. Like no one had to engage with this one guy. I remember just always feeling a little bit like, stressed that like, it would come out or the you know, whatever. Yeah. But on the flip side, it was a relief to be like, Oh, this thing I'd built up of like, do I want to kiss a boy like happened? And it was like, okay, that felt right. You know, that that was the end of freshman year. And then sophomore year was the first time that I came out to someone, like one of my friends at school. So it was fall 2008 famously, Obama got elected. Prop Eight also passed the California complicated election night. I don't even remember. I mean, obviously, I had feelings about Prop Eight, but like, I didn't feel super angsty leading up to it. Yeah, but the night it happened, I was just like, emotional mess. And I like plans to meet up with like, one of my best friends at the time, we were in a class together, we're gonna work on a problem set together. And I was like, very distracted and kind of like, stood her up, wasn't responding to texts, and was just like, rude. And she was mad, like, we have plans to meet like, whatever. So the next day, I like talk with her and was like, sorry for like, kind of being a jerk last night. And also, I was feeling very distracted because of Prop Eight. And then I came out to her. And then that started, I think sophomore year, it happened in stages, but I ended up kind of coming out at school. And so then after sophomore year, I worked at a summer camp. And that was the first time it was like, mostly new people who I was meeting my work there with, were like, came into that environment gay and it was such a relief. It was so cool. It is so cool to not have to like edit yourself or like, the constant like garden. This I felt like I was just like, always not like lying, but like, you just get so used to having this like second reality. Yes. And it was like cool to not have to do that. And like, I remember there was this guy who was like, my co counsel at the time, and then later on, he was my manager at camp and he after college was in the military is like six three, just like ripped just like the classic man of just like whatever. And he is also like a huge teddy bear just like the sweetest, sweetest person, but is straight and it's just kind of like I think in my head was just like the archetypal straight man. And he was so wildly just like warm and like accepting and like towards me would like talk about my gayness, but not in a weird way and just kind of like a matter of fact, gay. And that was like, so meaningful to me because it was like, Whoa, this is cool. Yeah, it was like a very, like positive experience for me.

A

Adam James Cohen (he/him) 29:50

Totally. I mean, I have similar experiences, and I feel some complicated feelings around how meaningful the validation from like straight masculine men For many years has been right like Yeah, and like for my younger self who was coming out to my straight friends and navigating

life and kind of then being able to have my queerness be present and have that celebrated by straight men by straight sis men. It really was so impactful in healing and very much for at least me, I go back to because you mentioned kind of younger you didn't like boys, so you were friends of boys, but like also like, not like you didn't really like boys. Like, for me, I was also more friends with girls, but more so from a place of I felt really uncomfortable around boys. Unconsciously, I've later kind of made sense of kind of why that is related to my queerness. But it has been really healing to like, have straight sis men giggle with me about like, a sexcapades I had or like sharing with them about like, my process of healing from shame or all the things because it's like, kind of like, yeah, 12 year old me is like getting to bond with like, the 12 year old boys that I didn't really get to bond with. So yeah, it's both complicated that they hold this power. And I get it. So yeah, I get that.

Z

Zach (he/him) 31:05

Also that comment about like, laughing kind of about gay things with straight people is also I feel like complicated for me. And something I've like grappled with, like, in more recent years, obviously, like, you have, like, so many phases and like, early on, for me, it was like, Yes, I'm gay, but it's not my identity. It's like incidental. I used to always say it's, like, incidental to who I am or whatever. And I like took it as like point of pride. Like, I think I had this like image of kind of like the will in like, Will and Grace of like, you wouldn't know the person was gay if they didn't tell you. Like that felt like kind of the model and that like, Oh, they're multifaceted. They're like, Student Body President Oh, and they happen to be gay. Like, yeah, to me, just seems so like, what I wanted, whatever. And then I feel like later on, I felt much more like no, this like, is a big part of our identity. Like having gay friends is important. Like I like talk about being gay. But then I would notice like, often people would be like, introduce yourself. And I'm like, I'm Zack. I'm gay, which even now sometimes, like, that's like, weird. But whatever. It's like a thing of like, how central to it? Is it a part of that is like, how does it come up in like humor, or like in your like persona, like, in groups, and I think we've talked about this before, but for some reason, I'm very aware of it in my Burning Man camp of like, partly because there's like, well, depending on the year, like another gay guy, but for some times, I'm a go only gay person in the space. And a lot of people are like, queer also, but like, it's very much like a queer gay friendly space. And also, it can feel so kind of like tokenizing where it's like, people in the most loving way, are like, Well, if you want to talk about man, expert, talk to Zack. Kind of like, insert punch line. Yeah, I am. But like, I'll make that joke in that space. Totally. And then afterwards, I'll be like, What are you doing are just like weird. And like, obviously, it does have to do with identity. Part of it is just like a lazy joke. Just like oh, like lazy humor. But it's like when you're around a bunch of like, gay men, you're not going to be like, Man expert. Right. Right. I kind of go back and forth. I noticed that sometimes in like other spaces where like, it's just such a delicate balance, because it's like, if three people very casually make jokes, not about your gayness, but where your gayness is a part of it on one hand, I'm like, Oh, good. That's like normalizing it, you would do that about your straight friends deliver by me. But somehow it just like, when straight people make top bottom jokes, it just, I need to unpack this and I don't have coherent thoughts of I think this is good night. Ah, totally. I mean, I feel that way when gays make top out of those two.

A

Adam James Cohen (he/him) 33:41

Yeah, absolutely.

Z

Zach (he/him) 33:43

I guess I'd like a separate thing. But yeah, it does just make me think of like how central to my not even identity because gayness is central to my identity. It's like my persona, because I think everyone has like a persona that says, a comedic character, but part just your like presentation. And I think I don't even know how I feel of how central I want that to be to it. But I feel like that's changed over the years. It varies by space, you know?

A

Adam James Cohen (he/him) 34:09

Yeah, absolutely. Me too. I particularly kind of, in my mid 20s, shortly after kind of starting to, like really live fully in my queer self. I feel like the pendulum swing quite far on the extreme where I was very much leading with kind of this caricature of what it means to be queer and like making all of those jokes in the straits spaces and feeling a lot of exhilaration by getting kind of positive feedback for that and like, in hindsight, at least, like for me and my story, I see how that was like very much like a counter to the shame I held for this part of my identity for so long. I was like, Okay, I'm gonna like go the full other side, have this leap forward and get validation for this and the process to like, Okay, well, that's not fully how I'm in relationship to my queerness. That's not fully me. And so finding that has been an interesting part of my journey the last kind of several years. of how do I authentically show up? Like, what does it mean to and I love how you talk about yourself on that persona. But like, who is myself fully integrated with my queerness? How does that person show up has been an interesting ride back to you and your story, I want to go back to like, Okay, after that summer camp kind of experience of coming into it without hiding behind any type of mask, or just bringing your full self into it, and then kind of the rest of college into kind of early 20s. Like, and then going back to this idea of second adolescence, like, what was that like to start dating and having sex and exploring relationship with men? What was that process for you?

Z

Zach (he/him) 35:36

What was that process for me? Junior year in college, I had a boyfriend for maybe like a year and a half. But only part of it was when we were in college together. And then he graduated, the part of it was long distance, I would say like, now I kind of think of that I've had like four relationships in my life. So the girl in high school, college, kind of one that was a couple years post college, and then kind of a big gap. And then chip now, and dating Jamie in college was interesting, because I was like, my first relationship with a guy. One thing that I find so fascinating, is there are so many similarities in terms of dynamics and personalities across my relationships, even including Gwen from high school, which is like interesting, I think just like the bottom line is I'm just like, drawn to like strong personalities. And I find that really, like stimulating, but it was like a fascinating realization to be like, Oh, my relationship with a guy doesn't look that different, like the actual like interpersonal social relationship. I mean, obviously everyone's individual's I don't want to like flatten them. But I feel it was like, a couple years ago, it was like, after I had a to David to that was just like, reflecting across my relationships and being like, Whoa, it's fascinating that like, when he kind of fits in to those relationships in a way that I may not have expected. So in terms of like, second adolescence, I think my friend tea was a really big, I don't know if we've talked about here, if you know who that is, but he was like, a couple years younger than me at school worked at camp, we were

like, Whoa, counselors together. And so also gay was just such a pivotal person, I think, in my second adolescence, because he's very much someone who's like, Zach, I don't care what you're doing chop you're doing let's like, go to the bar, we're going to, like, go meet hot boys or whatever. Like he was just this kind of like catalysts. And like, was like fearless, kind of like an instigator in a way that just like gave you permission to like, be like, so this thing happened in a hookup or like, like, he just kind of, like removed so much of the like social niceties of like, I don't know if it's like weird to talk about this. And so like, we went out a lot and went to kind of gay spaces together. And with like, talking about hooking up and all that kind of stuff. And it never I mean, we were just friends. It never crossed into a line for that. But he was just like, such a great role in my life. And that was like, early 20s. I would say cool. And then dating. I honestly don't know if I like obviously was on like dating apps for a while and stuff and kind of went on a million first dates kind of all that. I'm trying to think like, how much of my I mean, it's like impossible to like uncouple it from the fact that it was with guys, but like, I'm trying to think if I had any specific feelings about the experience, like in high school, when I was like coming to terms with me being gay, I was like, Oh, I don't know if I like connect with guys. At the time. I was like, dating, I had already kind of gotten confirmation that was like, oh, yeah, no, there are the guys that I connect with. And so like, I felt past that. So that didn't really feel like dynamic in dating as much.

A

Adam James Cohen (he/him) 38:45

Yeah. How do you remember feeling like starting online dating? Like, was it just excitement? Was there? Uncertainty? Was there confusion? What? Fear? What Yeah. What was that? Like?

Z

Zach (he/him) 38:53

I felt pretty excited about it. I mean, I think very early on. So let's see, I feel like I probably started online dating and like, a year after graduating college, so like, 2012 or something. And I think maybe before I had hang ups, certainly with like hookup apps and stuff, I think had a hang ups around like, is this desperate? Am I like embarrassed is this like, whatever. But I was living in a house right out of college. And like, everyone in that house, we're all on dating apps. So like, one girl in particular was like, this is the future. Everyone's gonna do it. It's not weird, whatever. And I would just fully subscribe to that. I was like, yeah, and she was right. I mean, I thought like they were new then. But it definitely did feel like because like hinge and stuff wasn't around then it was OKCupid Oh, yeah. I didn't really feel many hang ups around being on dating apps. And it was like fun. I mean, I'm an extrovert and it's fun to like, meet people and kind of felt like a game like I think I very much have like a game attitude. Which ironically, I think the way that I think I view relationships now is like different from probably how I viewed relationships then, because I think I very much had a model then I was like, you're either compatible. You're not, and it's just kind of a numbers game. And like, I want to be a strategic with like creating my profiles possible to try to like suss out either we are we're not. And it's like a discovery game to see like, who's compatible. And so it felt kind of fun. And also kind of like the grind of like, well, you just have to go through it, you'd have to, like, go on enough dates to like, figure out who you're compatible with, which I mean, that's not like, untrue. I think there are some people you're not compatible with, I think now, which I feel pretty aligned with chip on is like, it's a combination of that. And also, you also just like find compatibility and build compatibility with someone like you need to have kind of a baseline of shared values, but it's not quite so needle in the haystack of like, just a numbers game is maybe I had like, conceived

at the time. But at the time, I think that was kind of like my view of relationships. And then I have one relationship in maybe like, a couple years after college like 2013. And we were only together for a year. It's so funny to think in retrospect, that took up even four years after like five years after we broke up. It felt like he was just such a pivotal part of my early 20s. I'm like, we weren't even dating for a full year yet, just like a long time. Yeah. But now like, I just like Time flies faster. I don't know. It's weird. He went on and then dated someone else for like, a long time. And but I held on to that. I was like, that was one of my core relationships.

A

Adam James Cohen (he/him) 41:25

Totally. I mean, well, I don't know if this is true for you. Like for me, in my first relationship, like it felt very much like the whole thing was like this tumultuous kind of on and off year and a half window. But we were really only together for like a small portion that maybe like four months officially together. But that became something I also held on to for almost like four or five years after that. And for me, I made sense of that. Because it was like my first love my first adolescent relationship very much felt like the relationship with a man that I didn't get to have in middle school in high school. And like it in many ways kind of lingered for me, because it was just like kind of the container through which I learned how to feel I learned how to like navigate being in a relationship. It was just like the model. And so for a while there, anytime I tried to like put someone else into that model, I of course, thought of my first love. And it was also so messy and complicated. So like it lingered for that reason to have like, unpacking all of that. I don't know if that resonates for you? Or how you make sense of why this first relationship really stuck with you for so long?

Z

Zach (he/him) 42:28

I don't know. So the one I was thinking of was actually like this second, so you're not the college while I got to college, but it still might have been similar in that, like, when I was in it, it felt like serious. Yeah, part of it just has to do with like, how time is very strange. And like, had I got into another relationship soon after? Then maybe it would have been a blip. But like, literally four years went by and people be like, oh, like, Are you single? Or like, are you in a relationship? It's like, well, I was but now I'm single. Like, even though it had been four years. Like, I mean, it could have been partly like that I didn't really think of myself as someone who like, was single, like I kind of held on the identity of like, I'm sometimes in a relationship, sometimes single, even though proportionally like the relationship was such a blip into it. And so maybe it was me just like holding on to like, oh, yeah, I'm a relationship person. I mean, it probably has to do more with that than him in particular, of like, I really like being in a relationship. But I do now like I like partnership is very valuable to me. And I just like enjoy it. So I would say it more has to do with that, that I like, if I look back on my 20s I'm like, Oh yeah, I had boyfriends. Even if it's like just a small proportion of the whole 20s.

A

Adam James Cohen (he/him) 43:41

Totally, thank you so much for doing this. I'm just like loving hearing your story. And there's so many more places I want to go with it. I guess, just to pull back to your 20s your second adolescence really kind of having these experiences, having these relationships, growing all the things getting to where you're at. Now, you mentioned chip, your partner of a couple years.

And I guess as you look back at what the chapter of your life since coming out, up until now has been what do you see as the things that like really helped propel you to get to where you're at now in terms of growth or healing or whatever, like you needed in your second adolescence. What do you kind of track as like those impactful either experiences or processes? Where does that go?

Z

Zach (he/him) 44:28

Hands down, I would say gay friends and gay community. I mean, like one thing I was thinking about before this call was I was trying to think of kind of my timeline for coming out and like what I felt about second adolescence and like queerness and gayness and whatever. And to me, it kind of felt like there were like three different components of gayness are coming out for me and like, that one was like the sex part of it, which I think was kind of the first thing that like, prompted me to like, think about it and then There was like the relationship part, like, do I want to be in a relationship with guys. And that was the confusion I mentioned earlier, like the sex part came before the relationship part. And so it whatever. But then the third part is like the identity community piece of like, Oh, I'm part of the like, gay community. And honestly, it wasn't until thinking about this call going to happen that I was like, Oh, they all happen at very different times. The sex part was when I was 15. Relationships was college when I was like, Oh, I could be in a relationship with a guy. And then the identity part, I don't think it was until being friends with T and honestly, like, Davey, and like, kind of in like, mid later 20s That it was like, Oh, I'm part of the gay community. I mean, I'm so grateful for living in San Francisco. And like, you mentioned specific moments. Like, it's funny. I mean, I think it's like another conversation of like, why do so many activities revolve around alcoholics, probably not good. But I can think of being in a lot of gay spaces, like bars, like day parties, where it just feels so joyful, just to see like a ton of gay men. I think those moments meant a lot to me, because it just kind of affirmed the like, community identity piece. But having gay friends, I mean, Davey, in particular, I think, like, facilitated that kind of third pillar.

A

Adam James Cohen (he/him) 46:12

Hmm, so important to have this community and particularly with other queer people. I think for me, I have a similar experience where that's been some of the more impactful moments of feeling free, and feeling liberation and feeling more layers of healing from still like shame residue that I still held for my identity. From all of that internalized homophobia. It's really magical I love often when I'm in these queer spaces, I'm thank you for naming the complicated nature, too. How? Why is it that so much these gay events in gay spaces do revolve around alcohol? That is another conversation about why that's so immersed in our community. But yet, when I'm in those places, I can't help but like, see, I see all these queer adults around me, I can't help but like, see their little 12 year old selves right there with them, too. And see, like, oh, we all get to be together, which like, we didn't get to back then. And it just feels like super yummy and super healing. And so yeah, as you're talking about, just like seeing myself in those spaces, having that moment, because it's so powerful, and it's so helpful.

Z

Zach (he/him) 47:21

Wait I have a question. Yeah, we're probably out of time. But I'm so curious, your journey with like, queer versus gay as like identity markers?

A

Adam James Cohen (he/him) 47:29

Yeah, absolutely. I'd say Great question. Um, I think identified as like, gay was the word I really knew for so long and gay, like when I was Yeah, first, discovering my sexuality and confronting with these feelings I had for other boys in middle school in high school, like, gay was the thing that I was like, fearing and rejecting and like holding, like, I think this is me, but I don't want it to be in all the things. So gay was the language that I had, and then even kind of throughout my journey, eventually coming out, you know, I think there's been more of this, like, interesting collective shift and dialogue around the word queer and queerness. And, of course, it comes with like, the shadow side of that it brings a lot of history with trauma and with oppression, and particularly folks have a certain generation, like, that's a really activating word that doesn't feel true for them because of how was used against them. And so that's true. And what's also true is and seeing and really resonating with, just like the inclusivity and expansiveness that the word queer offers for all of us, and particularly as we're kind of, like when I think of the word gay now it feels very sis male like, and particularly in our community, like so much space has been taken up by sis white men that like I kind of think of the word gay with that, again, just in my perception. I think it's very rad and awesome for people to still identify with that. But for me, I kind of I really love the expansiveness of the word queer, for really kind of stepping out of kind of this more just sis male dominated existence in the gay community and just seeing like, no, there's an importance to like, bring everyone more to the same playing field and, and lift each other up in that way. And so I love the word queer now, and that's been my journey. I don't know what you connect with in the idea of queer queerness versus gayness? It's an interesting conversation. So I'm really glad you asked that question.

Z

Zach (he/him) 49:24

I mean, I have a similar read on the word. I always feel like what you're describing like gay has this like connotation of like, sis white man, which it does, but I'm also like, that's me. Like, feeling an authentic like queer to me. I always feel a little bit like like, it is very broad and inclusive and I love that but does me using it feel like I'm being like, US queer people, and it's like, Bitch, shut up. You're a white man.

A

Adam James Cohen (he/him) 49:53

Totally. Yeah,

Z

Zach (he/him) 49:54

cuz it's definitely like kind of like radical as a word. And does it feel like kind of unearned or does it feel like like I've heard people make a similar critique, which is like not a critique for me to make, but like, use of broader terms like people of color can be if someone is black, I've heard Black will say, I want to say black no person of color, because that's like, kind of more specific. And like, yeah, when terms are really broad, it's inclusive. But then also, like, you're losing specificity of identities. Anyway. So for me, I love the word. I always feel a little phony using it. I can't tell if it's weird. It's the same way I feel complicated about like straight people

saying, partner, I'm like, I like that we're kind of trying to normalize it, but it feels a little bit like we're a partner. Yeah. And sometimes I can't tell like things like queer spaces. Like, I love that. Because you're declaring and inclusivity to space. Yeah, it's more if I say like, as a queer person, it always feels a little bit like I'm kind of CO opting a term kind of unfairly a little bit, but that could be my own hang up.

A Adam James Cohen (he/him) 51:02

No, I so appreciate you bringing this up. I think like, both ends. Like I think like there's value to like having part of this dialogue, kind of the part I was proposing, I think there's absolute value to have the part you're proposing. And I think all this is so important, as we talk about this right now, I don't know if we necessarily have like the answer. But I think it's just an important thing to be in dialogue about because, yeah, the points you make there are so true, and are interesting. And I'm receiving that and marinating on it myself in the moment. So I'm really curious to just keep reflecting on that. Oh, and I now just want to talk for hours just about this idea of like the word queer and what it means to be a cis white male, using that word and talking about it and hearing from other folks with different aspects of identity, who identify as queer and kind of what their experience is, like seeing kind of this more expanded use of queer amongst a lot of different identities. I think that's an really important part of this tool. Ooh, cool. Oh, I love this shit. I love having conversations like this.

Z Zach (he/him) 52:02

Me too. I love this. Thank you, Adam.

A Adam James Cohen (he/him) 52:04

No, thank you for coming on and doing this I'd like selfishly and taking so much from it. And because these are the conversations I've always like, wanted to listen to and have and like I'm a sucker for younger self healing and like younger me, like wanted to be able to talk with other queer people, other gay people, other all the things people about what their experience is like. And so this has just been like, such a fun thing to do. And I'm just so appreciative that you came on and shared your story,

Z Zach (he/him) 52:31

of course, thank you. Thank you

A Adam James Cohen (he/him) 52:41

Hey, thanks for joining us for today's conversation. Feel free to head on over to secondadolescencepod.com for show notes and more. And you can connect further by following the show on Instagram at [@secondadolescencepod](https://www.instagram.com/secondadolescencepod). If you're interested in being a future guest on the show and you want to come on and share about your own second adolescence visit secondadolescencepod.com/beat A guest and you can submit your interest there. Alright,

that's it for me for now. Whether it's morning, afternoon, night, wherever we're finding you and your day, go on out there and keep doing things that would make younger you absolutely thrilled. That is what it's all about. Alright, take good care.