



She Had to Choose Her Career Over Her Parents

As a kid, Olga loved writing and developed a passion for journalism. But her parents, immigrants from the former U.S.S.R., strongly opposed her choices, fearing the financial prospects were slim. Long-standing arguments created a rift in their relationship that grew worse over time—leading her to choose between her calling and her family. In this episode, Juleyka also speaks with a career coach about how feminist

women can negotiate and find common ground with our parents.

Juleyka Lantigua-Williams:

Hi, everybody. Today, I'm speaking with Olga. A brilliant, brilliant, former colleague of mine from The Atlantic. From a very young age, Olga discovered a passion for writing and journalism. Her parents, who are immigrants from the former U.S.S.R., had a very different idea about what career she should pursue. The tension between them grew over the years and for Olga, it began to deeply influence her relationship to her family. Let's get into it.

Olga Khazan: My name is Olga Khazan. I'm a staff writer for The Atlantic and at home I call my mom and dad mom and dad, because when I was a teen, I took this big stand and decided that I didn't want to call them the Russian words for it, which is mama and papa. So, I'm the firstborn, so when I was really, really little, my relationship with my parents was very close. I was like a huge adult pleaser. I just wanted to make them happy and be obedient and do whatever they said. That kind of changed when we immigrated to the U.S. from the U.S.S.R. when I was three. Over time, I started having a lot of tensions with other kids, because I was Russian and we lived in Texas, so I started to kind of act more American, and that caused some unhappiness for my parents.

I've always wanted to be a writer and I was editor of the school newspaper and they were I would say medium supportive of that. So, I started competing around the state in journalism competitions, like where we would go and travel and write a story. Of course, my teachers had to drive me everywhere, because my parents weren't driving me to these things. So, my teachers had driven me to Austin to compete at the state level, and I won, and my teachers were driving me back and they were like, "You should call your parents and tell them." And I was like, "I don't want to call my parents and tell them." I was worried that the reaction of my parents would not be as excited as they, as Americans, thought that parents

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should be at something like that, and that I would have to explain it, and then it would be really uncomfortable for everyone.

I started talking really seriously about wanting to become a journalist after I graduated from college and that is when they really... it kind of turned from, "You're so cute!" And, "Yay! You're a good writer!" To, "You really need to become an accountant and do whatever this is on the side." They were like, "You really cannot do this as a job, like talking to people and writing about it is not a real job and you can't do it." I really wanted American parents in that moment. I really wanted parents who were like, "Reach for the stars and you can do whatever you want!" I really wanted that instead of practical advice and like pooping on my dreams because they wanted me to make more money.

I had an internship at the Washington Post, and that's when things got even worse. My dad was driving me to the airport, and he screamed at me the entire way. "You're wasting your life, you're wasting college, nothing's gonna come of this, you're gonna live in poverty, we didn't bring you here to make \$20,000 a year. This is a huge waste of time." Screaming and screaming and screaming, and I was crying, and so he dropped me off at the airport and I was like in tears. I had sort of decided that I was picking journalism over them at that point.

And then I applied to grad school in journalism and they once again were like, "We're not. We don't support this. We're not gonna help you. We're not gonna give you any money." But that was another moment of tension and my dad and I actually didn't speak for like... I would say several years because of that.

I absolutely think that they were projecting their own fears onto me. I mean, that's one reason why we do have a relationship now, is that I think as I got older, I realized the incredible fear that they had, and that they brought to all of those conversations. They immigrated. It was very scary and traumatic for them. The way they describe it, it was like the biggest stressor of their lives. I think they do get it now. I work at a publication that's well established. I think they don't understand what I do still, or why I want to do it, but they are... They at least don't try to stand in my way.

Yeah, so I just published a book. It's called *Weird*. It's about people who are different from everyone else around them, whether that's because of their identity, or their sexuality, or their beliefs, or something else about them that just sets them apart. I got the idea for this book because I was a Russian kid growing up in West Texas. I was like, "How did this affect me?" And some of the things we've talked about, like not having my parents be as understanding of what I was going through as other kids' parents were. And one of the interesting things that I found was that it actually... People who feel like rejected or different often have greater creativity. Once you see that your life doesn't follow the rules, you kind of learn how to break all the rules.

So, I think, I don't know, this is not scientific, but I think that's one reason why there are so many immigrants in journalism. I think that maybe a life of being not quite fitting in or being kind of different from other Americans prepared us for this work and caused us to be more creative journalists. Or at least that's what I think about myself sometimes.

Lantigua-Williams:

So much of Olga's story deeply resonated with me, especially the part about wishing you had American parents who you presumed would understand your experience growing up in the United States, and who would push you to want to explore and take risks. I bet there's a lot of us right now trying to figure out how to tell our parents that we want to do something different, to convince them that what we want to dedicate our lives to is worthwhile. So, to help us figure it out, I called in an expert.

Cynthia Pong: My name is Cynthia Pong and I'm a feminist career strategist for women of color. I'm also a speaker and the author of *Don't Stay in Your Lane: The Career Change Guide for Women of Color*.

Lantigua-Williams:

So, you heard Olga's story.

Pong: Yes.

Lantigua-Williams:

What did you hear as you listened?

Pong: I heard a generational and cultural divide between parents who do seem to have a lot of deep-seated fears and predetermined expectations for their firstborn child, and I think that the conflict and the tension was because both sides kind of had different norms and expectations. I also heard a really sad and hurtful, painful rift that grew slowly over time between them and then turned into a really significant period of time of not talking. I know from personal experience too, but it's very difficult to have to pick something or someone over your parents, because your parents cannot get on board.

And lastly, I heard how Olga realized how fear, and love for her I'm assuming, and wanting the best for her, plus I think ego and feelings of disappointment, all that kind of came into this perfect storm that just blew up into that awful conversation in the car on the way to the airport.

Lantigua-Williams:

I think you picked up on the thing that I also picked up on when I talked to her, which is that there was an escalation. How does that escalation evolve? What are some of the warning signs? And for parents listening, how can they catch

themselves if they are not completely bought into what their children are pursuing?

Pong: Right. This did seem to really develop over time, and I think that there were warning signs. I mean, Olga knew. She always knew that her parents were not really into this idea. You know, even before that interjection of like, “You need to pursue accounting,” it seemed like from specificity that’s probably what they said. And for parents, I think it’s really difficult even for the most well-intentioned parents to not have particular expectations for your children.

Yes, we want them to be able to grow up, and be happy, and be able to support themselves, and be safe, and all those basic needs. Have those basic needs be met. However, are we then closing our minds to how that can happen? Are we projecting very specific dreams and ambitions that maybe were our own onto our children?

Lantigua-Williams:

So, what can the adult child, because I think that they are for example first gens going into college, coming out of college, with really divergent ideas about what they want to pursue. How do they assuage their parents’ fears, but then also, how do they strengthen their position to say, “No, this is really important to me. This is really what I want to devote work and time to.”

Pong: So, I always have thought that once our parents raise us, we have to go through a process of raising our parents. And I mean this in the least condescending, least paternalistic way possible. But there is sort of a power shift when we, as the children, immigrant children, first gens, when we come into adulthood, as with any set of parents and children, but there are specific, I think, things that we as immigrant kids face. So, I think remembering and reflecting back to the parents that, “I know that you love me, I know that you want the best for me. At the same time, I’m sharing with you, like I’m being vulnerable here. I want you to know that this is actually my desire of what I would like to do with my life. And I understand that that may not be what you expected of me, but I’m asking if you can trust me.”

Lantigua-Williams:

Parents have been so good at making all kinds of good decisions for us, that they have to give us a little bit more trust about these things. So, what are some of the ways that folks in similar situations can prepare for or deal with when something like that happens?

Pong: Right. I think there’s no getting around that. If the jobs are particularly low paying, it’s not unreasonable for the parent to want to know, “Okay, what’s your financial plan here?” We live within capitalism. We have to pay our bills. We have to meet our basic needs and that requires a certain level of money. So, I think for someone in Olga’s situation or similar, explaining like, “Listen, this is what the salary ranges are for this particular type of work that I want to do. And I understand it might be

lower than what you were hoping and what I could potentially make as an accountant, but here's my plan. If I need to, I can earn supplemental income from doing this. Or the potential for growth over time is this. Or people who are my mentors in this industry, this is how they got to where they are now, and this is how much they earn after X number of years."

Kind of demystifying what it's actually like and educating the parent. It's like any negotiation, like you cannot go into this in an antagonistic, "I'm gonna fight you," kind of way. Because that's not gonna work. We know this. So, making sure that we're coming at it from a place of showing that we are trying to understand, and patience, and compassion, which I know is really, really hard, but that is I think the key. So, trying to really be up front about the numbers around the finances I think would demonstrate to parents and gain the trust. Like, "Oh, she does know what she's talking about. She knows how much it's gonna cost to rent an apartment and put food on the table and all that."

Lantigua-Williams:

I actually want to pull this thread of negotiation, because in a negotiation, the premise is that both parties have something to offer to each other, right?

Pong: Sure. Yeah.

Lantigua-Williams:

And so, what is the negotiation here when the power dynamic intergenerationally is pretty much completely nonexistent?

Pong: Right. So, that is complicated. It's true. I always encourage people to think about negotiation as a problem solving conversation. It's not about, "I want to take back power from you, parent." Because that is not gonna work. It is going to then be a power struggle and that won't end well, certainly with an immigrant household. So, think about it as problem solving. The goal for both sides, there's overlap there, right? The adult child wants to be happy and fulfilled doing the work that they want to do. The parent wants the child also to be happy, but their definition of that might be a little bit different.

The parents immigrated here, was a very traumatic experience, came from the U.S.S.R., there is a lot, a lot, a lot to unpack there and we have to understand that the parents are bringing a lot of their own baggage, just as we all are. But the parent wants the child to be safe, to be healthy, alive, able to support themselves, so that may be how they define happiness. So, in that overlap, we have to basically let the parents see that this is the common goal.

The only problem is we have different ideas of how to get there. We do want the parents to be able to express themselves and know that you hear them and that you understand. They need to get that stuff out before they will be able to listen to you. When I think about that, in order to remember to be understanding and

empathetic of my parents, I remember something that one of my friends told me who's a first gen and Taiwanese American, and she pointed out once that in a way, it really sucks for our parents' generation, because they grew up in the home, the mother country, where it was expected that child does what the parents want into adulthood, and then the payoff, as it were, is that your children then will do what you want and take care of you until you die.

But coming to the U.S. really throws a wrench in that plan, because those of us who are born here or come here from a very early age like Olga, we tend to rail against our parents and go our own way. Our parents' generation really got the short end of the stick.

Lantigua-Williams:

So, talk to us about how we can cultivate empathy for them, because I don't think that we do. I think that intergenerationally, I would say the relationship is mostly antagonistic.

Pong: Finding a way to ground yourself so that you are emotionally and mentally very strong and resilient, so that when you go into the conversation with your parents and you start to feel the heart rate go up, and your palms get sweaty, or all those type of fight or flight responses, at least it's a little bit dampened to the point where you still can control how you interact and not say something that you might later regret, and have a productive conversation. A problem solving, negotiation conversation with them.

All those things, building that understanding and empathy, at least a little bit, is the key to having a productive conversation. Otherwise, you're really on the side of the spectrum where it's so tense that it's gonna break.

Lantigua-Williams:

Let's talk about absolute dos and don'ts in these types of negotiation conversations from your vantage point and based on how you work with your clients.

Pong: So, do try to see things from their perspective, which isn't to say that they're right and you're wrong or anything, but simply to connect to a sense of empathy for your parent or parents. Also, do make sure that you have the support that you need to process these painful differences, like the shame that you might have grown up with, situations where both of you kind of feel disappointed. So, whether that is therapy, or getting really supportive friends who understand, or supportive mentors who can give you some outside kind of advice, set that up for yourself. And don't give up. Unless it is a situation where it's become incredibly toxic and or verbally/psychologically abusive and things, but generally speaking, don't give up. I do think that you can bridge these gaps with our parents. Sometimes it takes a long time. Sometimes it doesn't meet our expectations, right?

Sometimes it takes years and that's okay, but don't give up.

Lantigua-Williams:

Beautiful. Thank you so much.

Pong: Thank you.

Lantigua-Williams:

All right, let's recap what we learned from Cynthia. Guide them lovingly. Speak clearly and calmly about your decisions, while recognizing they may be different than what they wanted for you. And acknowledge their feelings. Talk about money. As you talk about your career, bring up finances, salaries, costs of living. Doing so shows that you've done your homework, that you have a plan, and it helps you gain their trust. Think of negotiating as problem solving. It's not a tug of war for power, since ultimately you all want the same thing: your happiness and security. You're there to solve the misperception about the goals based on their fears, not to emerge victorious from an argument. Understand their baggage. Your parents' own experience is informing their resistance, fears, and concerns, so be more empathetic by asking them about their trials and then addressing those concerns directly. Ground yourself. Showing up calm and collected to these conversations allows you to better connect with your loved ones. Be kind and be patient. These will lead to a more fruitful conversation. And remember, get support. It can be hard to process these important differences with your parents, so having other supportive people in your life, friends, mentors, a good therapist, can help you when you're feeling disappointed.

Lantigua-Williams:

Thank you for listening and for sharing us. How to Talk to [Mamá and Papí] About Anything is an original production of Lantigua Williams & Co. Virginia Lora produced this episode. Micaela Rodríguez is our founding producer and social media editor. Cedric Wilson is our lead producer. On Twitter and Instagram, we're @TalktoMamiPapi. And please remember to subscribe on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, and anywhere you listen to your favorite podcasts. Bye, everybody. Same place next week.

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