

***This Being Human***  
**Episode 0 — “Welcome to *This Being Human*”**

**WAJAHAT ALI:**

I always say there's no such thing as a Muslim community. There just isn't. It's Muslim communities. There's no such thing as a Muslim experience to Muslim experiences. There's no such thing as unity in Islam. It just hasn't existed. This is just my story.

**SHARMEEN OBAID-CHINOY:**

In my more than two decades of filmmaking, I have found that if you gain trust, people tell you things that they have never told anyone. Sometimes things they have never even admitted to themselves. And that's the power of storytelling.

**SULTAN SOUD AL QASSEMI:**

I think that one thing that art does, is it humanizes us to each other. When we see works by people from different cultures, we can imagine the beauty that they create and not just what the news tells us about them.

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:**

The voices of Wajahat Ali, playwright, CNN and *New York Times* contributor; Academy- and Emmy-award winning filmmaker Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy; and Sultan Al Qassemi, founder of the Barjeel Art Foundation, and one of the most prominent art collectors in the world.

You know what they have in common? They're all at the top of their game in what they do, be it in journalism, filmmaking, or art. And they're all my guests on a new podcast I'm hosting, featuring my encounters with the extraordinary people that make up the kaleidoscope of the Muslim experience.

My name is Abdul-Rehman Malik. I'm a writer, journalist, an educator. I've travelled the world in search of great stories and great coffee, and now, I'm canvassing the world for the most interesting people — to hear about their journeys and their work.

Born in Canada to parents who came from Pakistan, I've grown up with a sense of having my two feet in four places at the same time. I grew up surrounded by at least four languages, travelled frequently and went to a mosque where our friends hailed from Egypt, Sudan, Nigeria, India, Bangladesh, Iran, Syria, Guyana, Somalia, Jamaica, and beyond. I was keenly aware that being Muslim could never be one thing — it encompassed a breathtaking diversity of culture, politics, and practice.

For me being Muslim has also been a passport for some of the most enriching and unlikely encounters. From poring over books with the librarians of Timbuktu, to swaying with Sufis in the back alleys of Damascus, to interviewing architects who design entire buildings to mimic the sweeping calligraphy of the Quran, my sense of what it means to be Muslim is constantly being questioned — and it's constantly being renewed. From Bamako to Jakarta, from Copenhagen to Cape Town, the kaleidoscope of the Muslim experience has been a way for me to see joy, pain, possibility and challenge in new, beautiful, and heartbreaking ways. It has taught me what it means to be alive in the world today.

And perhaps nobody has captured that experience - of being alive - than the revered 13th-century Persian poet and Sufi mystic Jalaluddin Rumi. He captured it so beautifully, in his poem, "The Guest House."

**FEMALE VOICE:**

This being human is a guest house.  
Every morning a new arrival.  
A joy, a depression, a meanness,  
some momentary awareness comes  
as an unexpected visitor.  
Welcome and entertain them all!  
Even if they are a crowd of sorrows,  
who violently sweep your house  
empty of its furniture,  
still, treat each guest honorably.  
He may be clearing you out  
for some new delight.  
The dark thought, the shame, the malice.  
meet them at the door laughing and invite them in.  
Be grateful for whatever comes.  
because each has been sent  
as a guide from beyond.

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:**

I just love the message behind this poem, that every day, there is something new to feel — delight, a despair — and that we're to welcome all of it, because that is what it means to be human. So welcome to *This Being Human*, a podcast inspired by Rumi's words and motivated by all those who carry this message forward in the world today.

*This Being Human* will feature in-depth conversations with people at the very centre of Muslim art, culture, and life. Everything from prayer and pilgrimage, politics and pop culture, love and education, feminism, and film, representation and responsibility, and so much more. On *This Being Human* you'll meet athletes, artists, celebrities, writers, and thinkers — the people shaping our world today.

People like Wajahat Ali. You may have seen him on CNN, or read his work in *The New York Times*. Last year, he got a phone call that would change his life — and his family's — forever. His then two-year-old daughter, Nusayba, had been diagnosed with Stage 4 liver cancer.

**WAJAHAT ALI:**

I was just like, Oh, it's a gut punch. And the first thing you do as a father and I'm not speaking for all fathers is you make this negotiation with God.

And if you don't believe in God, that's fine with the universe. And this is a negotiation after I've talked to many parents who have gone through this. All right.

Easy trade, my life for hers or I'll absorb everything. Let my daughter go. And you expect an answer. But no answer comes from the universe. And then the second thing you can do, which we did not do, and I'm very lucky about this, is you can then do your lament against God. And that takes you to a very dark place, because that's quicksand. Why me? I was a good person. Why Nusayba? Why a baby? She was two years old at the time. Why us?

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:**

On *This Being Human*, you'll meet people like Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy, a director whose work has earned her two Academy Awards, and six Emmys, to name a few. We talk about how she uses anger to fuel her films... about everything from survivors of acid attacks in Pakistan, to a unit of all-female Muslim police officers sent to Haiti as peacekeepers.

**SHARMEEN OBAID-CHINOY:**

Anger has driven my work, I see I have a barometer of anger and I choose my topics based on that barometer. I think it's very important to hold up a mirror to society and to search for the truth and in the kind of societies we live in. It is extremely hard to be a truth teller. And I often say that I'm not here to win a popularity contest. I'm not here to be loved. I'm here to be free. I'm here to speak the truth so that's what is happening.

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:**

And people like Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi, a prominent art collector, a professor, and a member of the ruling family in Sharjah, in the United Arab Emirates, who shot to international recognition as he tweeted through the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011 to try to make sense of it all for us.

**SULTAN SOUD AL-QASSEMI:**

It was quite difficult. I must say it was an honour. It was a privilege. It was a responsibility. It was one of the most beautiful times of my life to be with people, to be part of this phenomenal change. This change that I would be forever proud of being part of, despite the revisionist history that's taking place across the region, casting the Arab Spring as something negative.

The fact is that the Arab Spring turned into a winter. It turned sour. We had a lot of deaths. We had a lot of people who were displaced. There's a lot of negativity. Our people died. But our culture was also affected.

Our historical sites were destroyed. We had extremists who took opportunity and just took this opportunity and started trying to influence our future. Something that we wanted to influence was taken away from us.

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:**

Sultan, Sharmeen, and Wajahat are just a few of the incredible people you'll meet on *This Being Human*. Join us. Subscribe to This Being Human wherever you get your podcasts.

*This Being Human* is generously supported by the Aga Khan Museum, one of the world's leading institutions that explores the artistic, intellectual, and scientific heritage of Islamic civilizations around the world. For more information about the Museum, go to [www.agakhanmuseum.org](http://www.agakhanmuseum.org).