

This Being Human
Episode 1 — Wajahat Ali

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

My name is Abdul-Rehman Malik. I'm canvassing the world for the most interesting people — to hear about their journeys, their work, and what it means to be alive in the world today. And perhaps nobody has captured that experience, of being alive, better than the 13th-century Persian poet and Sufi mystic Jalaluddin Rumi 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!

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

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 episode, playwright, journalist and provocateur, Wajahat Ali.

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.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Wajahat Ali is a true polymath. He's a *New York Times* contributing op-ed writer, a former CNN contributor, a recovering attorney, a playwright, and a consultant for the U.S. State Department. Wajahat was recently named Senior Fellow with the Common Good Program and Leadership Initiative to Combat Anti-Semitism at the Western States Center. He's also a husband, and a father to three young children.

Wajahat first came to prominence after 9/11, when he became a reluctant voice for and about the Muslim experience in America. By the time Donald Trump was elected president, he was a seasoned commentator on all things Muslim and beyond. That's what you get when you're named one of the top 25 Muslims in the United States. Then, a couple years ago, Wajahat was delivered every parent's nightmare — his then two-year-old daughter, Nusayba was diagnosed with Stage 4 liver cancer. He used his Twitter account to break the news, update his followers and help find her a liver donor, a uniquely harrowing and inspiring journey that we'll talk about later. I spoke to Wajahat

pre-pandemic near his home in Washington, D.C. I hope you enjoy this conversation as much as I did.

WAJAHAT ALI:

I really appreciate being known as one of the most prominent Muslims. I wish you could tell my wife this. It would be nice to get some respect in the home. But that's fine.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Thank you for being with us on *This Being Human*. Growing up, did you have as a sense of belonging or who you were? I mean, you know, you talk a lot about learning Urdu before you learned English. I can totally resonate. I grew up in a house where Urdu really was the mother language. And I remember going to Pakistan when I was in Grade 1 over the winter break and it was a bit of an extended break and coming back with an accent and being put in ESL classes.

WAJAHAT ALI:

I was in ESL. Yeah.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

We were born in the United States and Canada. This was our home and we're put in an ESL class and I feel like that has a real impact on our on our sense of belonging and identity. I mean, did you have a strong sense of belonging and identity while growing up?

WAJAHAT ALI:

So, I think — and pardon me for the assumption — you and I got lucky in that we used our outsider status in a way to actually engage people who are different from us. And with our full selves intact. Does that make sense? So many of our peers, as you know, many Muslims, many people of colour feel they must wear different masks. They have to be the Wajahat or Abdul-Rehman in front of their white friends, in front of their parents, in front of the mosque and in front of their Muslim friends. It's exhausting, the burden of wearing so many different identities. Whereas I joke that Allah drew me as a Pakistani-Muslim-American.

Like it was, like I bleed ghee and daal. Like so much so that people are like, "Aren't you Pakistani?" I'm like, that's hella specific. I just can't help it. I'm saying I'm literally drawn to the tea. I couldn't hide my Muslim-ness, my Desi-ness, or when I travel abroad, I can't hide my American-ness. In the Muslim-majority countries, you're really American. And so what do you do when you cannot blend in and all you want to do is have the pretty girl, Jessica or Jennifer, the cheerleader, look in your direction? And you want Trent and Chad to invite you over to their house to have something called meatloaf that you've only heard about? Right?

You always want to blend in and you can't blend in. You always want to be part of the crowd, but you're not part of the crowd. And so I, kind of in a strange way, I don't know why I was always like this. I kind of always had this resistance, if you will. And I kind of

wore my shalwar kameez to school sometimes. And I ate with my hands. And I fasted and I became the cultural ambassador at a very young age, much like you, for 1.7 billion people in this thing called South Asia, to most of my peers and friends who did not look like me, did not know Pakistanis, did not know Muslims — which in hindsight gave us the X-Men danger-room simulation training ground for the stuff that we do for a living now.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

And I think in your story, 9/11 happening while you were at university...

WAJAHAT ALI:

Yeah, that's right.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

...was that kind of crucible moment, right? The moment —

WAJAHAT ALI:

For our generation, correct.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Yeah. Where the, where the superpower had to have —

WAJAHAT ALI:

Had to actually emerge.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Yeah, had to reveal itself. So what happens to you that you have this life, this training? You're right. It's kind of having your two feet in four places at the same time. And then 9/11 happens while you're in school.

WAJAHAT ALI:

Yes. So 9/11 happens. UC Berkeley, I'm 20 years old, senior, undeclared, have no idea what to do. Not going to be a doctor, freaking out about my future. FML. I didn't join the Indian student association. I literally turned left into the Muslim Student Association. Literally. That was like a fateful decision, like *Sliding Doors*. Because both the Indian students and MSA were happening in my freshman year at the same time across the room from each other. I'm like, let me join the Muslims. And for me it was — going back to identity — it was the first time I actually ever engaged with Muslims on a campus. I was so ecstatic. Fast forward four years now. I'm part of the Muslim Student Association Board. I guess I'm the V.P. All right. 20 years old. 9/11 happens.

[SOUNDS - PLANE, SIRENS]

WAJAHAT ALI:

I'm sitting in my pajamas watching the two towers fall. I remember it vividly. And for my generation, that was a pre 9/11 and a post 9/11. There was a baptism by fire.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Within days of the towers falling, Wajahat's own roommate put his name on a website for media liaisons. Calls came in from around the world, journalists looking for a Muslim voice to make sense of the shattering news.

WAJAHAT ALI:

Next thing you know, I get these calls from right-wing radio. No one's given me training. I've had no public speaking experience. And now I am the cultural ambassador of 1.7 billion people. And on the drop of a dime, I have to be an expert on Islam, Qur'an, Sharia, hummus, Hamas, Bollywood, like everything. And if I mess up, not only am I being targeted, I'm now representing this thing called Islam and Muslims. And all of my people are being indicted, interrogated and convicted by a nameless judge, jury and executioner. And we have to, you know, engage in the condemn-athon and be perfect. And that's been the story for the last, you know, 18 years. And like, you know me, I'm actually a middle of the road, chill guy. And so I transform into an accidental activist. And it gave me the very brutal "throw-the-boy-in-the-water, let's-see-him-sink-or-swim." Which for better or worse becomes the revelation of the superpower, the skills, the public speaking, the activism, the organizing, the strategizing, which then lays the seat for the career.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

You write after 9/11 and that writing that you begin to do becomes this play called *Domestic Crusaders*.

PLAY VOICE 1

Do I dare disturb the universe? Figure that one out and you might have an idea of where you're doing.

Play VOICE 2

I'm sure that's exactly how T.S. Eliot meant it.

PLAY VOICE 1

Well, T.S. Eliot is dead!

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

The play is about the trials and tribulations of one Pakistani-American Muslim family — all three generations — trying to make sense of their new post 9/11 world.

In many ways, I first knew about you through this play, which I knew had been written by this guy, Wajahat Ali. What made you channel your feelings in the way that you did through writing and particularly by writing a play? I think there was a lot of people writing commentaries and opinions.

WAJAHAT ALI:

Yeah.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

But you write a play, which is a family drama, and it's compelling. You're telling stories that those of us who were reading and reading your play were like, "This reminds me of home."

WAJAHAT ALI:

Yeah.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

What were you channelling as you were writing *Domestic Crusaders*?

WAJAHAT ALI:

So *Domestic Crusaders* happens as a result of 9/11 and me being a 20-year-old English major at UC Berkeley. And my short story writing professor Ishmael Reed —

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

The legendary.

WAJAHAT ALI:

The legendary Ishmael Reed takes me — I missed three weeks of school in his class because I was an accidental activist. Right. Like literally you're just dealing with so much chaos. Hijabis are terrified to come to school. You're getting hate mail. You're working with the school. You're trying to figure out what to do. But it's a short story writing class. And as you know at Yale, it's like 12 to 15 kids and they bring their stories and they read them out loud. And it was my turn to write a story. So I write the story. It's a crazy story, four-page story, like a fiction story about two ogres who hate each other and then they're married and they're celebrating their 50th wedding anniversary and they both poison each other's goblet without like, you know, all assuming that they're killing the other person. And at the end both them die. They were saying — it's like a dark comedy. And I come in and I recite this crazy story and I do the accents.

And my teacher, Ishmael, he says, "Meet me after class." I'm like, man, this guy's going to chew me out because I've missed three weeks. And he says, "As a black man, 9/11 happened. Your people are going to get hazed for the next 10 years. It's gonna be bad. As a black man, we've been going through this since the beginning of America. The one way we fought back is through art and culture, by telling our stories. I think you actually could write a really good play. Dialogue and characters are your strength. Don't waste your time in my short story writing class. Give me 20 pages of a play." He goes, "What are you?" I'm like, "Fat? Scared?" No, he goes, "What's your ethnicity?" Pakistani Muslim. He goes, "Yeah. Write me an American story. But from a perspective of a Pakistani Muslim. You ever read *Raisin in the Sun* or *A Long Day's Journey Into Night*?" I go, yeah. He goes, "Write something like that." He goes, "Come back in two months. You know, you don't really have to go to class anymore. Give me 20 pages or you'll fail." And so that was the impetus of *Domestic Crusaders*, a story about three generations of American, Muslim, Pakistani family. And what I decided to do and get, going, it goes

back directly to our question is, I went deep into the authentic merchant masala and chai in Urdu and Arabic of our homes.

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PLAY VOICE 3

“My first born, my daughter, my children, they all blame me. Mothers are always blamed for everything.”

WAJAHAT ALI:

The stuff that we as people of colour still in Canada and in America are told is not relatable or mainstream or ordinary. It is too quote-unquote ethnic. And mainstream is code word for white. And ethnic is code word for the rest of us. And I decided I'm going to write a universal story for a universal audience through a very specific cultural lens. And that's what I wanted to do. And the second decision I made — and again, you make artistic decisions; whether people like it or not, that's fine — is I wanted to invert or subvert all of the “Muslim porn” stories. I call it “Muslim porn.” Terrorism, hijab, acid in the face, honour killings. And if you really think about it, it's a very ordinary family in an ordinary day. There is no violence. There is one [speaks in Urdu] *tapper*, a slap, and there is a spilled tea. That's the only two acts of violence. And I wanted to see if I can sustain that. And the tensions that Muslims are feeling and Pakistanis are feeling, that America's feeling at this moment in a post-9/11 climate through a very traditional two-act kitchen drama.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Domestic Crusaders went from its first stage reading in 2004 in a cramped Pakistani restaurant, to the Berkeley Repertory Theatre. Five years later, the play made its off-Broadway debut at the famous Nuyorican Poets Café, garnering a legion of fans along the way, Muslim and non-Muslim alike—including writer and publisher Dave Eggers, British actress and writer Emma Thompson, and the late, great Toni Morrison herself, who came on the play's last day.

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WAJAHAT ALI:

I think it was October 11th or 12th. 2009. And Ishmael had tried to get Toni and a few others to come see the play, and Toni's son Ford was trying to do a documentary about the play. And he's like, “I'll try to get my mom but, you know, it's impossible.” So Ishmael says, “Toni's coming.” What? He goes, “Yeah, she's coming to the play.” And so two hours before the play at the French Café, two stores to the left of Nuyorican, I'm sitting having dessert and coffee with Ishmael Reed and Toni Morrison. And Toni Morrison had just seen Wanda Sykes's comedy special the last night, the night before, and she keeps trying to tell Wanda Sykes's dirty jokes. But she couldn't finish it because she keeps cracking herself up. I have this indelible memory of Toni Morrison [saying]: “and then Wanda said...” [Imitates laughter]. And then me and Ishmael Reed are just like chuckling.

But then, it's amazing. I mean, it was profound at that time. I am grateful for it. And even after she passed away, I became more grateful. She looks at me and she goes, “But you know how the artistic process is for us writers. You know that the really fun part is

how it just grows inside your head and takes a shape of its own, then comes to life.” And she's doing it in this melodious Toni Morrison way. Very deliberate. And then it comes to the words on the page. And then I was just, the whole time, like “Don't say anything stupid, don't say anything stupid.” And her and Ishmael were talking about racism and Barack Hussein Obama and politics and friendship and the artistic process. And then she looks to me and sees me as a peer. And then she comes and sits down in the second row right behind Ishmael Reed and sees my play. Laughing at all the right parts. I jump on stage and being the son of an immigrant, plucky and resourceful in front of everyone, as Toni Morrison like tries to leave, I say, “Toni Morrison is here. Toni Morrison, what did you think of the play?” Which is a ballsy thing now that I think about it, because...

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

You asked her from on stage?

WAJAHAT ALI:

On stage. As she was standing in front of everyone, pin drop silence. I know now in hindsight, I'm like, that was a really dumb thing to do because she could have been like — but she pauses and knowing full well that everyone's about to write this down and there's 200 people staring at her. She says, “I thought the play was brilliant. Moving, Shapely. Clever. Funny.” And then I say to all the haters and all the people who don't like it, “That's fine. You're entitled to your opinion. But guess what? Toni Morrison and I had dessert and she came and saw the play.” And I want I want to flex, the rare times I wanted to flex, I said, “Toni Morrison said this about my play.” Drop the mic, drink my chai.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

In some ways, you've become a fixture in American mainstream media. You're a CNN contributor, an op-ed writer at *The New York Times*. You were a host on Al Jazeera America. When did you start to think that your opinions mattered so much that others would not only be interested in them, but that your opinions could maybe move public opinion? Because you're often asked to talk about this thing called the Muslim experience. And you know I can, and we know how reductionist sometimes —

WAJAHAT ALI:

It's always reductionist!

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Yeah, like, “Wajahat Ali, tell us about the Muslim experience.” I mean, there's a real pitfall to that, isn't there?

WAJAHAT ALI:

Which is why I've always tried, and this is why you have to keep doing it, even though it does even matter. 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, it's Muslim experiences. There's no such thing as unity in Islam. It just hasn't existed. This is just

my story. That being said, I know that my story is entering a cultural battleground where there's like me and Osama bin Laden. And now it's getting better. But in the absence of our narratives, they latch onto whatever is there. And they project onto that narrative very unfairly all their fears and hopes and glories and worries. And now you get that, you know, you're on the receiving end from also Muslims who say, "That's not my story" and dismiss it. "That's not the African-American experience. That's not my immigrant experience. I'm not that religious." So there even your own communities are unwilling to confront or engage your art because it does not reflect them. And so they say, "*Hallas*, I'm done." And so that's something that also happens to people like us and that happened with *Domestic Crusaders*.

And it also happens now where I am expected, or various interest groups demand and depend upon me, to carry their water and I have to be their vessel. And this is the interesting part. I told my parents at the age of 25, I said there will be two groups that will come after me in my career. The first group will be this this right wing that will metastasize and transform and evolve into this intersection of hate. I saw the signs then. I said, "They're going to come after me because I'm brown, because I'm Muslim." I'll be outspoken. And also I'll be the most terrifying villain for them because I don't lose my temper, I'm articulate, I can make a point, I can write, I can out-panel them, I can outwit them, I can be funny. And we are the most dangerous people to them because we destroy that stereotype. I said the second group that will come after me is Muslims and desis. Because there'll be a time where I might diverge from them or I might criticize them or I might say — I might air dirty laundry. And just like that, they'll turn on me because I know my people.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

As we look at kind of the frontlines of Muslim storytelling and cultural production and activism and the deep roots that Islamic culture and the Muslim experience has and as things as diverse as jazz and blues and hip hop and revolutionary politics and American history, are you hopeful at what you're seeing now on the frontlines? Do you feel like there's amazing things going on at the front lines of of a Muslim culture, art and activism?

WAJAHAT ALI:

So, let me tie it together. Based on the conversations we've had, you know, I think about what's my role. And in my role at the age of 39 as a father, with all the challenges that this new generation faces, as I feel like, okay, there's three roles. One, I feel like we're Hodor from *Game of Thrones*. And for those --

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Explain that.

WAJAHAT ALI:

For those of you haven't seen *Game of Thrones*, Hodor is this giant who, his whole sole purpose in life is to hold the door. And you try to find out throughout the entire series, "Why is this guy named Hodor?" And you find out there was prophesized that he would

use his girth to literally hold back the demons that were tearing through the door to come and kill the protagonist. So his whole purpose in life is just to sacrifice himself, to give the kids enough time to escape. That's one role. The second role is the janitor. Our role is at this stage in life to give our kids a chance at having some clean slate. The third role is the gardener. Can we plant some seeds that will bear fruit or at the very least, bear some shade for our kids? And this is where both as a Muslim and maybe as a cultural creator, you know, our words, our deeds, our acts... can they be the seeds that bear enough fruit? Or at the very least, provide shade for our kids? Because if we don't do it, we are missing out on 20 years. And our children now have to pick up this mantle where they're the sidekick. If our role is to be the sidekick or to emerge, if you will, from antagonist to sidekick to maybe third role, maybe that's the victory and maybe our kids can be the protagonists.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

The kind of future we're leaving our children, to *his* children, is an issue never far from Wajahat's mind. In fact, he gave a TED talk in 2019 called "The Case for Having Kids," about why it's the ultimate act of hope in these cynical times. What the audience didn't know at the time was that his daughter, Nusayba, had become ill while he was away, waking up with a weird rash that alarmed his wife enough to take her to the hospital.

WAJAHAT ALI:

And here I was in Vancouver, about to do a TED talk where my mind with the whole time was with Nusayba. And during that entire week, the dilemma I had is, should I stay and give this speech or should I go home? And my wife and my mom said, I don't know. We'll see. We'll see. Let's see what the diagnosis is, the diagnosis is.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

And you get a call. What happens on that phone call?

WAJAHAT ALI:

Yeah. So what happens on that phone call a few hours before I actually walk onto that stage is my wife, who's a doctor, confirms that the tests came back and Nusayba had Stage 4 cancer called hepatoblastoma. And it's one thing about, you know, fearing the worst and then when you actually get the diagnosis. And so when I actually got the diagnosis, 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?

We never, ever, ever, *hamdullah*, as we say, went into that quicksand. But that was a diagnosis and here I am giving "The Case for Having Kids." Oh, the irony. And why are

you giving the case for having kids when you find out that your kid now has Stage 4 cancer and might not survive? And you're gonna come and lecture us. And so I did not have any of this in my speech, obviously. And the speech was going to end, I think, in a poignant but like lighthearted manner. And I decided then, too, it would be a betrayal of both the intention and the honesty of me as a person delivering the speech if I did not discuss this.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Was it your way of processing it?

WAJAHAT ALI:

I don't know if it — no. I didn't want to use the stage to process it because I wanted to honour the stage in the audience. I didn't want to make it therapy. But at the same time, you know, I put myself out there in the speech already, like I started off that speech saying, "I'm a father. Let me tell you, you know, how why we had kids and here I am exhausted. But let me make the case for kids." And then at the end, though, it's a test to myself. After I have found out this news, do I still want to make the case for kids? And that was my debate with myself and I landed on yes.

DR. ULRIKE AL-KHAMIS

Hello, I am Dr. Ulrike Al-Khamis, Interim Director and CEO of the Aga Khan Museum. If you are enjoying our *This Being Human* podcast, why not visit our website at Agakhanmuseum.org? Here you will find a treasure trove of digital collections and online resources related to the arts and achievements of the Muslim world. From historical artifacts and thought-provoking exhibitions, to a wide range of educational materials and contemporary living arts performances. All of this is made possible from the vision and dedication of Prince Ayn Aga Khan and his Highness the Aga Khan himself to encourage an appreciation of the cultural threads that bind us all together.

Again, our website is agakhanmuseum.org. And now, back to *This Being Human*.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

You leave Vancouver, you head back home into this maelstrom of treatments and diagnosis and your and your daughter changing. How does your life and Sarah's life change? Especially considering that, you know, you're out there talking, commenting, writing, being in the world. And now the only world that you care about is the world right in front of you inside your home. What? What does that look like over the next few months? How does your life change?

WAJAHAT ALI:

Yeah. No. So I everyone every parent who comes at me says, "I can't even imagine what you're going through." And my response is, "I hope you never have to." That's my prayer. No parent should have to see their baby endure Stage 4 cancer. You develop a new normal every day and that normal is disrupted and shattered every day. And every day brings new challenges and every day brings its own rewards. And those rewards

are often measured in the mundane. Example. Oh, she pooped today. It was a good poop. She only vomited once. Ah, the NG tube is still in. Okay, the levels are good. And now I've learned all these things about platelets and levels and mag levels, right, you know. And you know, you. I'm learning all this. I'm still learning. Oh, okay. They have the chemo scheduled. The chemo went well. The post chemo levels went down. But okay, she's getting an infusion. That's how you measure success.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

It soon became apparent that Nusayba would need not just an operation, but a brand-new liver. Wajahat began the fraught process of finding the right donor.

How difficult was that search? Because viewing it from the outside, I mean, it seemed like climbing Everest.

WAJAHAT ALI:

It was like climbing Everest because Nusayba — again, a great Wajahat Ali story — has O blood type. O blood type is a universal donor. Wonderful. But to get the liver, you need an O blood type, which makes it even harder. When you get on the universal donor list, regardless of your rank or status, your gender, your ethnicity, you're just at the whim of fate. And so oftentimes what happens is yet we had to have our phone on all the time because they said you could get a phone call at 2am. We could get a liver and then you gonna have to take Nusayba to the hospital. And she could get there and we could realize, oh, it's a bad liver. And then they literally either throw away that liver or they give it to someone else and your hopes are squashed.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

And you cast a wide net. I mean, you appeared on CNN where you're a contributor to talk about this. And I think I think one of the incredible things that I think people have witnessed you do is that, like you said, you speak about the personal. But you make it about more than that when you speak about healthcare and you speak about what ordinary people are going through. But here you are on places like CNN and saying, "I'm casting my net wide. This is what my daughter needs." Is it tough to be public about that, about that call?

WAJAHAT ALI:

You know, the thing is you had to do it. And so my only superhero strength — and this is the funny thing. My mom actually said, she says, "You know, you didn't become a doctor. But maybe Allah made you into this weird writer thing with the huge social network to save Nusayba's life. Because without the social network that I had, especially Facebook and Twitter, we would not have done the viral callout, to be honest. And then we did the callout because we had to. And the call out specifically was for any donor. And CNN, to their credit, a lot of the anchors and producers on their own said, "Can we do the callout?" I never asked them. I said, yes. It was a tension and still is a tension with me and my wife because she's like, "Do people need to know everything? How much do they need to know? What can we keep private?" But then I push it back and I said, "We know our intention. We're not trying to be exploitative. We need to save

our daughter's life." And once you go public, then the debate still becomes, well, how much does the public need to know? Because there's so many people invested in her journey.

But as a result of the callout, we did get a donor. Megan Black, who I who I knew from the year before. We went to Auschwitz together as part of this kind of a progressive group of diverse Americans who went to Poland to talk about the rise of white nationalism, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia and how to combat it. And we stayed in touch. And she said, "I applied on my own. They called me back. I'm coming for tests. I'm a match." We were ecstatic. "All of the doctors have told me thumbs up." Megan's a go. I'm like, "Are you sure? Because we're sure. Do you have a green light from everyone?" Yes. "Can we announce it?" Yes. We're ecstatic. Megan comes, the lead doctor, who's a pro, does the final test. And he says, "I see something with her liver. It's great, but the way her arteries are, it doesn't necessarily match up with Nusayba perfectly, and Nusayba's going to be at risk for a blood clot." And all the other doctors are like, "Just take it, just take it, just take it," but he's the lead one. We spend the entire day going back and forth and debate and at the last second as Megan's in my home, willing to do this in like three days, he goes, "Pull the plug."

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

That must have been crushing.

WAJAHAT ALI:

Oh, crushing. The whole day we were just crushed. But this is where faith comes in, you know. I know people mock faith. It's about perspective. Faith helps you with perspective. So you don't have to believe in God. It helps give you... It helps you imagine a perspective, I think, that is much more healthy. Let me put it that way. That's what faith helps you do. So my wife and I are like, "Okay, this is a challenge. We can't despair." So we do another call out and we get this anonymous living donor that and and who steps up and the doctor says he's a perfect match. And we could talk about that if you want.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Do you know the donor now?

WAJAHAT ALI:

I found out who the donor was right before the surgery, by accident because a mutual friend direct messaged me and said, "My friend Shawn just asked for prayers because he's going in for, you know, a surgery. I think he's doing it for your daughter." I'm like, "Shawn. Who's that?" And then I said, listen, "I want to respect the family. Why don't you share my information if they want to reach out to me?" And then his wife, Ritha, was there. They kept us separate. And now we're just sitting there waiting. And then she reached out to me and then said, "Let's meet up." And then, after the surgery, I go to the commissary and I see this this Muslim girl who looks Pakistani with hijab and her elder father, I'm like, "Are you Ritha, wife of Shawn?" She goes, "Yes!" And that's where we first met.

And Shawn Zahir is now a 30-year-old Pakistani American who is not on social media. His wife, Ritha, follows me on Twitter, has been following me for a while. So sitting on the couch, read my call openly out loud. Shawn, her husband, who's like a dullard when it comes to social media, says, "Hey, give me the phone." He actually opens the Twitter thread. She didn't even open Twitter thread. He keeps reading the tweets. He goes, "Oh. Type O blood. South Asian. Oh, that's me. I'll go see if I can do it." She goes, "You will?" He goes, "Yeah." His surgeon said – this is right before we knew who he was, right after the surgery ended. And the surgeon was about to cry. He said, "Listen, man, I've done this a lot. I just want to let you know your daughter got a good man's liver. She really did. She got a good man's liver. You know what the first thing he asked me when he woke up from the surgery?" And I said, "What?" He goes, "When can I donate blood again?" 'Cause he donates blood and marrow." And so that's the story. We got very lucky.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Has Shawn met Nusayba?

WAJAHAT ALI:

They've met. They're friends. He came over last week. He invited her to her birthday. She knows his liver is in her belly. They compared their scars. And so, it's amazing. Pardon me for rambling.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

It's not a ramble at all. I think it speaks to the real human costs of disease. And like you said earlier, you've been reflecting so much on what does medical care mean and what does the medical system mean? And I know you have praised in your public statements about this, the incredible doctors and medical staff that have been there for Nusayba and for Sarah and you and for your family. Did you have insurance?

WAJAHAT ALI:

I had insurance through my wife. I am a freelancer. I am a guy who just, you know, ambles along in life and gets lucky from time to time. But if we did not have insurance, Nusayba would be dead. We got the bill just for the liver transplant surgery. The bill just for the surgery was four hundred and ninety-two thousand dollars. We're not even talking about all the chemos and pre-transplant care and post-transplant care and medicine. In America — and this is for the Canadian audience — we don't have Medicare for All.

And people right now in this country are rationing their insulin just to survive and there are men and women who should be living long lives who are dying at the age of 25. And the reason why a lot of people who get kidney transplants die is not because the kidney fails. It's because three to five years after the kidney transplant, they cannot afford the medicine to keep them alive. If this does not anger you or outrage you or make you feel something, you should pinch yourself because you're spiritually dead. So this is why I try my best in every type of, you know, forum not to just focus on myself, but to say first

or foremost, we're so lucky that we had insurance, but why should we be the lucky ones? And imagine your fellow Americans who don't have insurance or don't have the friends or the family or the community or the means. How are they going to take care of their kids? And what you're basically saying is your child's life is only valuable if you work and only if you work at a certain job. Then and only then are you worthy of life-saving insurance. Just think about that.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

In what way have you changed and your family changed through this process? If you're able to kind of pinpoint that thing that's really shifted in you and Sarah and your loving parents. What was that thing?

WAJAHAT ALI:

Well, it's very interesting you asked that because he last night and I don't think it was in anticipation of this interview. You know, when you have those moments of clarity at 2 a.m., those moments of solace late in the night as you're praying. Like I had this flashback of about my life and where I'm at and where I was. So I thought about this stuff last night and I was just very grateful. And so, I was thinking, like, "what would they say?" These are the morbid thoughts that I have, but not really. But I was thinking about you know, if someone asked me, like, "What would you want on your tombstone, what would be your obituary?" It's like, mine is very easy, I replied. I wrote it out last night. I said, "Here rests Abu Ibrahim wa Nusayba wa Khadija. Husband to Dr. Sarah Qureshi. He was lucky to love and be loved. He is pleased with his creator, and he hopes his creator is pleased with him."

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

What is this being human to you?

WAJAHAT ALI:

This being human is a journey which is a struggle and an opportunity. To hopefully find love. And to be loved. Before your time is up.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Thank you so much.

WAJAHAT ALI:

Thank you. Thank you for having me.

[SOUNDS - PEOPLE CLAPPING]

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

That's a clip from the MedStar Georgetown Transplant Institute of Nusayba Ali leaving the hospital with her father in October 2019. And in January of last year, Nusayba, donning a Superman costume, rang the bell marking the end of her chemotherapy. She then sprinted down the hospital hallway, her red cape flying behind her, to high five and

hug her liver donor, Shawn Zahir. After nine months of living with Stage 4 liver cancer, she is now cancer-free.

Thank you again for listening to *This Being Human*. I'm Abdul-Rehman Malik.

This Being Human is an Antica Production. Our senior producer is Pacinthe Mattar. Production and sound design by Mitch Stuart. Research by Alexis Green. The music is by Boombox Sound. The executive producers are Kathleen Goldhar and Lisa Gabriele. And Stuart Coxe is the president of Antica Productions.

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