

This Being Human
Episode 7 — Omid Safi

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 al-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.

OMID SAFI

Many of these sages remind us that to be human is fundamentally something that has to do with intimacy.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Today, Omid Safi.

Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and right doing, there is a field. I'll meet you there when the soul lies down in that grass. The world is too full to talk about it. The wound is the place where the light enters you. Lovers don't finally meet somewhere — they're in each other all along.

You've likely heard these quotes before or seen them posted on Instagram, hung on a wall in a yoga studio, inked into someone's skin as a tattoo, or read aloud to wedding guests before vows are exchanged. They're some of the most popular words of the poet many know as Rumi, or Mawlānā Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī, the 13th-century Persian poet, scholar and Sufi mystic.

Omid Safi has spent his life studying Mawlānā Rumi's words and works. He's a professor at Duke University's Islamic Studies Center and a scholar on mystical Islam and Sufism. His work melds together the worlds of religion, radical love, and

progressive Islam, one that draws upon the traditions of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Here's our wide-ranging conversation on Rumi, radical love, and the relevance of the revolutionary that is Dr. Martin Luther King today.

Omid, salaam alaikum. Thank you for being on *This Being Human*.

OMID SAFI

Alaikum salaam, and peace to you and to all the friends who are listening to you.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

You know, our podcast is called *This Being Human*. And it was inspired by Coleman Barks' translation of a poem from Mawlānā Rumi, which he translates as "The Guest house."

OMID SAFI

Yeah, I love that poem. I love that poem very much.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Well, what do you hear in that poem?

OMID SAFI

So here's what I hear in that poem. You know, "This being human is a guest house. Every morning, a new arrival, a joy, a depression, a meanness," and so on. And so, what Mawlānā is talking about there in this phrase "the guest house" — this refers back to that old and still present Muslim and Middle Eastern, also South Asian, tradition of hospitality. There were guest houses, sometimes also caravans arise, where you could show up as a stranger and you could stay for three days and you wouldn't have to worry about paying rent or paying a hotel bill. And after three days, you know, you'll be rejuvenated and you would pick up and be on your merry way. This is how Mawlānā talks about being generous to your own emotions. You know, we spend so much time, and rightly so, thinking about how do we as human beings behave in a way that is gracious and kind and dignified towards our fellow human beings. And ours is certainly a global age in which we are struggling with that right now. But it actually begins at home. It begins much closer. So the way that he treats it is to say you yourself are not your emotions. You are the host of your emotions; these are your guests, so be gracious towards them. And so you can actually imagine this, you know. "Oh, look, here comes Joy. Joy, you are one of my favourite friends. I love it when you come to visit. Come on in. Make yourself at home. Stay for a day, two days, or three. And then here's the saying, "I know that this, too, shall pass." Right? It's one thing to say, "This, too, shall pass" when you're talking about a calamity or a disease or a difficulty. Can you also be fully present with joy and still say, "this too, shall pass?"

And then comes Sadness. Could you look at Sadness and say, "Oh, hello, my friend. It is so good to see you, Sadness?" You have been one of my most faithful companions. I'm not going to fight you. So come on in. Stay for a day, or two, or three." And I think the reason that that poem — and I'm so delighted to hear that it's the inspiration for your

whole podcast — is such a powerful one, is — you know, think about so many of the great Muslim languages Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Urdu, others. In the old days, you know, we wouldn't say to each other, "What's up?" We wouldn't say to each other, "how is it going?" We would actually ask each other, "How is your hall? How is your transient state of your heart? So, whether it was *kayfa halak*, [greetings in different languages], or whatever the equivalent would be in other languages. There was an awareness that when we come across another human being, that they are a guest house. They have thoughts and emotions that are visiting them, but these are transient guests. And so, what we would ask each other rather than "How are you?" or "What are you up to?" — like, as if asking someone about the activity that they're engaged in defines who they are — we would ask each other, "What guest is visiting your heart right now?"

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

I wanted to know directly from Omid what we knew about Rumi himself, the man, the person.

OMID SAFI

It's extraordinary because we actually know probably more about Mawlānā than we do about virtually any other pre-modern Muslim figure after the Prophet Mohammed. So, you know, if you want to know how he played with children in the street, we have that story. If you want to know how he treated the widow down the street from him, we have that story. If you want to know how he was in his tender and intimate relation with his wife, we have that story. If you want to know how he cheered up his son when his son was in a state of melancholy, we have that story. And then in addition, of course, we've got over 60,000 lines of exquisite poetry. And it is something of a blessing, and also a complication, to see Rumi almost becoming a brand, as it were, in the English language.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

Rumi's pop culture power today is something of a dilemma for Omid. This Muslim mystic, sage, and poet whose works revolved around issues of the soul and spirituality, chopped up into bite-sized, often mistranslated quotes for social media.

OMID SAFI

And then on the other hand, there are also sayings and interpretations which have so little to do with Rumi. Anything that the earthly, historical Mawlānā ever actually said, um, that you know, all kinds of memes and Facebook quotes and sayings just become attributed to him. If somebody finds something beautiful, they just slap Rumi's kind of name on it and up it goes.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

Omid says much of the original meaning behind Mawlānā Rumi's words have been watered down, warped and divorced from its spiritual, religious, Muslim roots.

OMID SAFI

So, just as one example, “Out beyond ideas of wrong-doing and right-doing, there is a field. I'll meet you there.” And if you actually go and take a look at the original, he's seeing something far more radical than right-doing and wrong-doing. What he's saying is that there is a plane. There is an opening beyond that which we tend to think of as infidelity and faith itself. And what he means by it is that for the majority of people, we follow a religion because our parents raised us in it. Or we might even reject the faith that our parents tried to cram down our throat because it was not appealing to us. And instead Mawlānā says that what you have to do is you have to unlearn religion as a kind of inheritance — that, he calls that real infidelity. And you even have to go beyond the notion of a simply inherited religion in order to arrive at a faith that you know to be true in your bones.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK

I'm fascinated about the moment you begin your journey into Mawlānā Rumi's works. Do you remember the first time you experienced them or came across them?

OMID SAFI

No, because this is one of those great love stories that has no beginning and no end. What I do know is that, you know when I was a teenager, that I would read the love poetry of Mawlānā and it spoke to me. What I didn't have at that time was a framework to really understand him and receive him as also being a Muslim sage. I had a sense of its literary and poetic excellence and its luminous way that it worked on the heart. And I have to say that it has been a journey of decades.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER

Today, the Rumi effect is everywhere. The band Coldplay has blasted a reading of “The Guest House” to a stadium of thousands in Frankfurt. Quotes from Rumi are the sign-off in people's e-mail signatures and their Twitter bios. Even Demi Moore and Deepak Chopra performed a joint reading of a Rumi poem, “Desire Together.”

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK

What do you make of the ways in which he's being taken up today?

OMID SAFI

We are living in a culture in which we're all love-thirsty, spirit-thirsty, soul-thirsty. So there's no doubt about the fact that so many of the people who've gone to pick up a Rumi book from the local bookstore, or sharing a meme or a Facebook quote — it's not because they're trying to tap into something which is an inaccurate translation. They're tapping into it because they recognize light. I think that's on one hand. And then on the other hand, I also think that for those of us — and I'm here, pointing the finger and extending an invitation to ourselves. My own community in this case, meaning Muslims. If you don't want New Age-ified inaccurate translations of Rumi to become marketized, do something with it. When was the last time we heard a line of Rumi poetry being recited in a Friday sermon? And why? Why is it that on one hand we say, “Oh, yes, Rumi is the best-selling poet in America? How great.” And it is. It's wonderful. But why is

it that the great public conversations that we have as Muslims, that this isn't even a part of the treasure box?

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK

So this divorce of Rumi from his spiritual Islamic faith and background is something that... it really goes both ways, doesn't it, then? It's something that's happening within pop culture and it's something that's happening within Muslim communities. And that's clearly a source of concern for you.

OMID SAFI

It is. It is. And, you know, I'd been teaching Rumi's poetry for about 25 years before a first year student at the university just made this point in passing that literally made me stop the class, grab pen and paper, and write it down. You know, I'd given a whole lecture about the ways in which popular versions of Rumi take him out of his Muslim context and Sufi context and Persian literary context, detaching him from the Qur'an and the sacred hadiths of the Prophet Muhammad. And so as a result, what we get is a Rumi that is separated from Islam. And then this 18-year-old student in my class just made this brilliant point that, "Oh yeah, and the other tragedy is that we get an Islam that is separated from Rumi." We get to have an Islam that is largely devoid of poetics, of beauty, of mercy, of sensuality, of tenderness, and even of eroticism. And what is that Islam?

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

Omid has been teaching Rumi's poetry for over two decades now to packed lecture halls of students. He also leads what he calls spiritual tours to places like Turkey and Morocco, places with deep histories and traditions of spirituality where there's been a legacy of peaceful coexistence. These "illuminated tours," as he calls them, touch on everything from colonialism to calligraphy. They're open to both Muslims and non-Muslims. Anyone who's searching for a little something more.

OMID SAFI

Typically, what people say when they come to these retreats is that they're missing love in their life, that they're looking for love, that they hear about it in movies and in songs, or maybe even in the love poetry of Rumi. But then they say that when we look into our own life, we've never experienced it. We've never tasted it. And I think, you know, one of the things that is so healing about Rumi's realization is that he tells you that there are so many different shades of love. That what we tend to think of as love, which is romantic, physical, even possibly sexual love. And it's beautiful. If you have it with someone who mirrors it back to you then, Mazel tov! May it be love, as our Turkish friends say, Eshkol Sun. May it be love. Let it be love. But there's also the love of a friend. There's also the love of the parents. There's also the love of a child. There's a love of a teacher. There's a love of a neighbour. There's a love of a stranger. And, you know, I think part of what Mawlānā and all of these teachers of radical love are trying to get us to do is to un-collapse our definition of love. And then I think part of what we're intended to do in these retreats, in these conversations, is to go back and remind people that you were born in love. You have been raised in love. If you're alive today,

the reason you're alive is that somebody loved you. And here we are going, you know, "I don't have love in my life." Well, you know, when was the last time you called that person who loved you? If she's still on earth and if it wasn't your mama, maybe it was a grandma. Maybe it was an adopted parent. Maybe it was a teacher in first grade. I think that's kind of what I experience in these conversations and retreats with people is that people come with a thirst. And I just keep trying to remind them that the answer that they seek is not in a person sitting in front of them. It is actually in the very ocean in which they are immersed.

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 Khan and his Highness The Aga Khan himself to encourage the appreciation of the cultural threads that bind us all together. Again, our website is Agakhanmuseum.org. And now, back to .

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

You know, there's something about the title of your latest book, *Radical Love*, that is really arresting. I think we live in a time when the idea of a radical has become a pejorative, has become something negative.

OMID SAFI

Of course, I'm aware of the fact that this word "radical" has acquired a certain connotation. We have an entire division of the government that is now set up and has been set up for decades to do surveillance on people that it deems to be radical, generally defined as people who oppose government policies. And in a real way, many of the people that have been oppositional to the injustices here at home have been deemed to be radical. And I find myself very drawn to people who have responded to that surveillance, not by doing that which is easy — which is to say, "Oh, no, no, no, no, no, no. I'm not radical. I'm quite moderate. I am not dangerous. I will criticize extremism in my own community. But I don't have a mumbling word to say about the injustices that my own government is committing." And in response to that, there've been people like Dr. King, who used to be called a radical, who used to be called an extremist.

CLIP — DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.

I'm sorry to say this morning that I'm absolutely convinced that the forces of ill-will in our nation, the extreme righteous of our nation, the people on the wrong side have used time much more effectively than the forces of goodwill.

OMID SAFI

And it takes him a while. And then at some point he says, "Well, you know, in the beginning when I would be called a radical, I didn't like it so much. When I would be

called an extremist, I didn't like it so much. But wasn't Jesus an extremist in the cause of love? Aren't we called to be extremist in the cause of justice?" So he actually turns it around and he embraces that. And Martin says at one point and this is an actual quote. So the question is not whether we will be extremist, but what kind of extremist will we be? Will we be extremists for hate? Or will we be extremists for love?

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

You speak about Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and I think one of my earliest introductions to your work, Omid, and your passion is Dr. King. You know, I've often seen you as one of the kind of the pre-eminent Muslim voices speaking about, commenting on, interpreting and making Dr. King relevant. And I'd love to hear the intersection between these two passions of yours, Mawlānā Jalāl ad-Dīn Rūmī and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

OMID SAFI

It's humbling to realize what a shallow introduction to Dr. King I had growing up. Really, up until 9/11, about the only thing that I really had ever read of Dr. King was the "I Have a Dream" speech. And I do remember in the aftermath of 9/11, trying to include a couple of quotes from Dr. King in every talk that I would give about, you know, the moral bankruptcy of violence, which was really a call to say, "We're nothing like those terrorists. Please don't hurt us." And as time went on, I started to realize that Martin — and I like to call him Brother Martin — and I got to see Martin who is showing up for sanitation workers, who is leading the Poor People's Campaign. And then Martin, after he has won the Nobel Peace Prize, after he has been invited to the White House, after he's overlooked the signing of civil rights legislation. He is pushed and challenged by 18-year-olds in his movement to answer the question, "Dr. King, you keep saying that violence is wrong. Why don't you have anything to say about our own governments dropping bombs on Vietnam?" And that Martin, who is already called America's Black Moses, he starts to challenge himself and he comes out against the Vietnam War. He says...

CLIP - MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR

And so let us stand in this convention knowing that on some conditions, cowardice asks the question, it is safe? Expediency asks the question, "Is it politic?" Vanity asks the question, "Is it popular?" But conscience asks the question, "Is it right?"

OMID SAFI

And I think for us, as Muslims who are drawn to the path of love and justice — which is really, for me, the heart of the radical love tradition. If you love the folk, you cannot bear to be silent when you see folks suffering.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER

In 2018 Omid Safi was invited to speak at the 50th anniversary of the assassination of Brother Martin, Dr. King. Crowds turned out on a chilly but sunny day in April to hear him and some of Dr. King's closest living associates, like civil-rights leader Jesse Jackson, speak at the National Civil Rights Museum at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee.

CLIP — OMID SAFI

I stand before you as an unapologetic Muslim child of Martin. My beloved prophet Muhammad stands in the same prophetic tradition of love and liberation as Amos, as Jesus of Nazareth, as Brother Martin and Brother Malcolm.”

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK

That must have been a momentous moment. But if there was a word to describe being there at that moment with Brother Martin's family and those people still surviving who stood with him and those who are holding up his legacy, what might that word be?

OMID SAFI

A prophet is sent to hold a mirror up to society and to remind us that the way we are with the most vulnerable people in our midst is the way that we stand with a law. That if you want to get a sense of your spiritual well-being, it's not about the amount of wealth that our society is generating. It has to do with the way that the poor, the needy, the orphan, the widow, the refugee, and the babies in cages are faring at the moment. And because prophets are so challenging, we've got all these tactics for not taking them seriously. And the last great distraction that we have is to turn him into an icon, where you stop once a year and you venerate them instead of actually picking up the mantle and doing the work that has to be done today in the midst of where we are. And I think so, yeah, I was very honored as a Muslim, unapologetic Muslim, and I - you know, I started that gathering in the name of *Bismillah al Rahman al Rahim*, cited from Rumi, cited from the Prophet Muhammad, brought up Malcolm. But mainly it was a conversation with Brother Martin that, you know, we're here to say that babies in cages matter. Our black sisters and brothers matter. That poor folk matter. Muslims matter, refugees matter. Our Hispanic friends on the southern border matter. Jews matter. Gays and lesbians matter. Palestine matters. Ferguson matters. Flint matters.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK

What is *This Being Human* to you?

OMID SAFI

There's a wonderful Rumi poem that relates to that. Many of these sages remind us that to be human is fundamentally something that has to do with intimacy. And he says, "Look at where your own wounds — physical, spiritual, emotional — are, where the wounds of humanity are. Where are we bleeding?" And of course, today it hurts everywhere, but also see the healing. The healing was from the light. The wound is where the light enters you.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK

Omid Safi, it's been such a pleasure and it's been heart-filling. Thank you for joining me on *This Being Human*.

OMID SAFI

Thank you.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER

This Being Human is an Antica production. Our senior producer is Pacinthe Mattar. Production and sound design by Phil Wilson.

Production assistance by Sydney Bradshaw. Original music by Boombox Sound. The executive producers are Kathleen Goldhar and Lisa Gabriele. And Stuart Coxe is the president of Antica Productions. *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.