

This Being Human
Episode 6 – Dr. Alaa Murabit

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

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 VOICEOVER:

So welcome to *This Being Human*, a podcast inspired by Rumi's words and motivated by all those who carry that message forward in the world today. Today, women's rights advocate Dr. Alaa Murabit.

ALAA MURABIT:

How do we talk about issues of religion and women's rights, of faith and women's rights, of scripture and women's rights and say these are not mutually incompatible? In fact, they reinforce each other. And in fact, it is in the very foundation of our faith that women are leaders.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

Dr. Alaa Murabit calls herself an accidental activist. Growing up in Saskatoon, in a household with 10 siblings, she wasn't planning for the life that was ahead of her — to one day be speaking at the United Nations, affecting global policy or to be nominated for a Nobel Prize. Alaa wanted to help people in a different way. She wanted to be a medical doctor. When she was just 15 years old, she left Saskatchewan to study medicine in Libya. While she was living there, she witnessed the 2011 revolution. That year, she founded a group called Voices of Libyan Women that led campaigns to advance women's rights. Alaa has since become a well-known expert in global health and security, earning praise from people like Malala Yousafzai, Bill Gates, and Jimmy Carter. Her TED talk "What My Religion Really Says About Women" has been seen over seven million times. She's a United Nations High-Level Commissioner on Health, Employment, & Economic Growth. And she's a fellow at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard. I spoke to Alaa last fall over Zoom.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Alaa, as-salaam alaikum. Welcome and thank you for joining us on *This Being Human*.

ALAA MURABIT:

Thank you so much for having me. I'm excited to be here.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

What was it like growing up in Saskatoon with 10 other kids?

ALAA MURABIT:

It was interesting. I think a lot of it when I was younger was just so normal that I didn't realize everybody didn't have that. So I'd have friends who are only children who would always want to come to our house. And I'd be like, "But why? It's so loud. There's so many people. You never get privacy. Like I want to be at your house where you get all your own clothes and you get all your own things and you never have to share." It's interesting. With 11 kids, there's almost like these many natural alliances based on birth order. And then, of course, there's kind of the negotiation where, you know, someone is your mom's favourite or someone is your dad's favourite. So they're the one who gets sent in to really kind of give the general request from the rest. So there's an interesting dynamic that plays out there. I think the most pronounced thing growing up was you learn very quickly how to leverage people's wants and needs. And I don't mean that in a negative way; I actually mean it in a very positive way. Because in a family of 13 — 10 brothers and sisters — anything you did always impacted somebody else. And so you always had to really kind of see six steps ahead. "If I'm asking for this, what does that mean for them? How are they going to feel? How is that going to potentially impact me down the line if I asked them for a favour?" So you really begin to kind of map out your game before you play. And I think that's been very helpful as I've gotten older.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

In other interviews, you've talked about your mom and you said that your mother once told you you can't build a house on a crooked foundation. What foundation was your mom and your father building for you? What were some of the values that you remember sort of being the guiding values of your home?

ALAA MURABIT:

My mom, the first thing I remember ever hearing from her, because we would go to the mosque on Sunday. And I, when I was 10 and 11 and 12, I listened to the Backstreet Boys and the Spice Girls. We all did. And, you know, at the mosque, everything was like, "Well, you're going to go to hellfire. You're listening to Spice Girls; you're going to go to hell." And I was like, "Well, that's good. I mean, I'm 10 and I'm already going, "You know, it's going to be tough to crawl out of this hole." And so I would tell my mom, I'm like, "Well, there is no point." And my mom would be like, "No, no, no. God's mercy is always greater than his wrath." And she would always kind of have reflections on how, you know, God is more merciful than a hundred times how merciful your parents are. And so my mom was really about this idea of mercy and compassion and forgiveness. And she was always willing to listen. And I remember even when she would punish us, when she was when we were younger, she'd come and apologize after. She'd feel so bad for, like, reprimanding me or putting pepper in my mouth when I was being really, really kind of

lippy, that she would come in and she'd apologize. And it was very rare, not only among the people I knew, but it was even real within our family for someone to always be prepared to say, like, "I was wrong." Especially for it to be the older person, to be the parent. So my mom, always her foundation, I think, has always been mercy and compassion and service. And my dad has always been about work. I remember when I was young, my dad would say the greatest form of worship is work. So they were very good — I think yin and yang in the best way — growing up.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

So you finish high school in Saskatoon and then you move to Zawiya, Libya. What was that like for you as a teenager moving from Canada, to that "back home" of your parents' generation, to Libya?

ALAA MURABIT:

I was 15 when I moved to Libya. And I think that's a tough age, no matter where you are in the world. I was starting medical school, which was also pretty interesting because I was doing that in Arabic, even though I didn't speak very fluently, at least for the pre-med year. The rest was in English. And so I kind of walked into the situation. And Zawiya is not the capital city. Zawiya is a very, you know, everyone knows everyone. It's provincial in that sense. We lived on a farm. It was so different in many ways. I think the one thing that really was glaring for me was in both Canada and Libya, you always kind of felt — and I think so many kids and people in my position are like this — that you don't necessarily belong. And so for me, in the beginning, I had romanticized going back to Libya, because when I went back when I was seven in the summer and had ice cream and went to the beach, it was beautiful and perfect and fantastic. When you go back as a 15-year-old young woman, it's very different. You're not just visiting. People aren't excited to see you for two months, you know? You're now a permanent member of the community and you're accountable to that. And so the sense of never really belonging in Canada when I was younger... Because of that, I had always romanticized — like, when I go back to Libya, that's home. And when I went back to Libya, I was like, Wait a second, I need to go back to Canada. I don't feel at home here." And it was a really tough conversation to have with myself at 15 and one that I kind of avoided a lot. And one that plays out even now.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

You talk about aspiration, but I want to get this straight. You started medical school at the age of 15. How does a 15-year-old from Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, from a Libyan family go back to Libya and end up in med school?

ALAA MURABIT:

Well, so I knew I wanted to be a doctor from a very young age. I think there are very few places that could replicate the power and the — I don't know — the mercy and the honesty and the... of a hospital. I don't think there is a temple or a church or a mosque or a synagogue that is as full of faith, genuine faith, as a hospital chapel. Because you walk in there and everyone, regardless of background, regardless of whether even they believe in God, is there and is at their most honest self, I think, you know, asking and bartering and bargaining and... So, I had always felt very at home in hospitals and knew I wanted to be a doctor. And I finished high school in

Saskatoon when I was 15. And at that point was speaking with my high school counsellor, who told me it's really unlikely at the age of 15 that you would go into medicine here. You might have to wait because you're so young, you know, it'll take four to six years. And so I was talking with my parents and I was like, "Yeah, it'll take four to six years just for them to think I'm old enough to be a potential candidate, where in Libya I could just finish med school by the time I'm 21." I was perpetually impatient, which in retrospect probably isn't the best feature. But I was like, "Why wait six years when I already know what I want to do?"

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

While Alaa was going through school, she witnessed firsthand the unrest in Libya that ultimately led to a revolution in 2011.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Did you have a sense of what was happening around you politically, socially, economically? And how were you seeing that as a 15-year-old?

ALAA MURABIT:

I moved to Libya in 2005, and that was actually almost immediately after Libya kind of reopened to the international community. So my first six years, from 2005 to 2010, 2011, Libya was actually significantly changing. I mean, culturally, socially, it was opening a lot more. You had malls coming up all the time. I remember when I first moved there, people had problems with my mom driving a truck. By the time 2011 rolled around, nobody really cared. You know, cell phones went from being a complete abnormality to something that everybody had. So it changed in many ways and I think it mirrored a lot of other countries in the early 2000s that were going through that same kind of technological shift. I think when it became clear to everybody in the region that there was a significant shift was when Tunisia first started... there first started being protests and conversations there. But Libya did not mirror a lot of its neighbours in that same sense at that time. I think what ended up being really critical in Libya was, despite the fact that it was opening up internationally in terms of trade and economy and consumerism, et cetera, it wasn't opening up in that same regard politically. The challenge was always you could, you know, access all of these new global platforms from the comfort of your own home but you were very cognizant of the fact that you could not voice your opinion in your own community, in your own house, without fear. And I think that really began to bubble up.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

When did you realize that a revolution was happening?

ALAA MURABIT:

Well, Zawiyah was the first city in the west to rise up and it rose up quite quickly. And a lot of people in Zawiyah became a lot more engaged. Some of my classmates became a lot more vocal. You would find kind of etches in some of the desks. That was when I first felt like something might happen. And then the feeling changed when the uprising in Zawiyah was quashed because my dad, he was on the front lines. He and my brother were treating people in the maydan, in the central square. And so I knew very well, I mean, firsthand that things were

happening and then it was quashed. And it was kind of a sense of, okay, what's happening next? Because, you know, our history is rife with moments of political unrest and political uprising that get quashed by regimes. And so I did begin to wonder, "Is this going to be one of those moments?" And so the second time where that really happened was my family and I stayed up and watched the UN Security Council resolution.

NEWS CLIP OF SUSAN RICE:

Tonight, acting under chapter 7, the Security Council has come together to condemn the violence, pursue accountability and adopt biting sanctions targeting Libya's unrepentant leadership. This is a clear warning to the Libyan government that it must stop the killing.

ALAA MURABIT:

They were really kind of debating whether or not they needed to engage militarily to protect civilians in Libya. Now, there's a huge debate about whether or not they did that adequately. But I think that when I think about a specific moment, it was that debate. It really was. And it was more the sitting with family. We didn't have Internet connection; that had been cut off. So it was being able to watch that on television and see, you know — it was, I remember, so late for us when it was happening — and get a bit of a sense of what the conversation out of my own home was, out of my own bubble.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

You're sort of, you know — you're an eyewitness to a revolution. You're seeing members of your family, particularly your father and brother go out into the fray to serve those who are raising a call for fundamental, vital, necessary political change. You see all this and you make your move, and that is to create this organization called The Voice of Libyan Women. What was it? What were you hoping to accomplish through it and what did it end up doing?

ALAA MURABIT:

You know, throughout the revolution, especially in medical schools and pharmacies, and especially to transport things like gas and food and clothing and vaccines, women were essential. They really were. I mean, cars were searched less so the gas would be put in them. Women were able to provide information. They fed, you know, entire... not just soldiers, they fed communities. They really were kind of that fabric of the community. And then the second that the conversation became political, it became about, "OK, "we're transitioning to a new form of power." Suddenly women were being excluded.

And so VLW was really about saying no. How do we take the incredible leadership of women and ensure that it's embedded politically, ensure that it's embedded economically in a way that the operating system was not necessarily designed for? And so initially, VLW started on, you know, things of political empowerment, economic empowerment. And very quickly we noticed we were seeing the same people. We were seeing women who already had family support for political engagement, which was great, you know? We were able to train the majority of the 17 women that were elected into our first parliament. So it became a conversation with many people in our own circles of "Why is this conversation not bigger?" And what happened was

there was a lot of people came back saying, “Well, I mean, it's good to talk about women's political leadership, but it's against our religion.” And that was when VLW shifted gears and we started the Noor Campaign. And “Noor” in Arabic means enlightenment. And the approach there really was, how do we talk about issues of religion and women's rights, of faith and women's rights, of scripture and women's rights, and say these are not mutually incompatible? In fact, they reinforce each other. And in fact, it is in the very foundation of our faith that women are leaders and that women are educators and that women are champions. So it was important to do that. And that was really kind of where the organization shifted to looking at how do we open up a much more difficult conversation around the cultural foundation of women's rights.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

Alaa's work with Voices for Libyan Women got a lot of attention. The Noor Campaign was the basis for her 2015 TED Talk, “What My Religion Really Says About Women.” She spoke at high profile events. And she was invited to a UN advisory committee to review their landmark resolution on women, peace, and security, which had passed 15 years earlier. At the end of that process, she delivered a speech to the United Nations Security Council.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

What did you say to the UN Security Council?

ALAA MURABIT:

I think everything that remains true to this day. I mean, the way we look at global security and the way we look at kind of inter-country security and conflict is we tend to prioritize having people around the table that occupy those spaces of power, that have the guns, that that we think have that traditional hard power, and that are really shaping that conflict. And what research has shown us is that actually isn't the most effective way. I mean, 90 per cent of peace processes fail within five years. That is a dismal record. I mean, it's incredibly bad. But when we have women at the agenda-setting table and we have civil society at the agenda-setting table, they're 35 per cent more likely to last 15 years. That is an incredible difference. And that's because a lot of the conversations that civil society and women are bringing up are not the same ones that armed militias are bringing up. You know, some might be talking about impunity. Others are talking about victim reparations. Some might be talking about territorial and land ownership, and others are talking about education and housing and health care. Right? And so, in order to really be as representative as possible for all the solutions that we need, we need to have women in civil society at the table.

I remember back in 2015, one of the things that was glaring to a lot of people was, a lot of people having this conversation around women's, you know, inclusion in extremist networks and that they were recruiters, et cetera, et cetera. Because women, two and three years before intelligence even really knew these extremist networks were gaining traction, were saying to diplomats, “By the way, something is happening in our community.” Right? Women were hugely involved in negating a lot of that sentiment and in actually trying to propel more peaceful solutions. So, yeah, it was really highlighting that. I mean, we have ample examples, we have evidence, we have research, we have data. What we don't have is political will.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

What's it like to be a person who trained under the Hippocratic Oath to serve and what from that experience as a frontline doctor do you carry into your day-to-day work?

ALAA MURABIT:

I think we would be served very well if more doctors were in global politics. I do. And the reason I say that is there's a different approach to problem solving in medicine. You know, if you go in with a really bad infection on your arm, a really bad infection, the first thing your doctor is going to do, they're not going to Band-Aid it up and send you home because then you might come back a few days later. The infection has gone deeper. You might have to get it completely debrided or you might have to get amputated. I mean, no doctor in their right mind would send you home without getting a full history and doing a culture and really trying to go to the root of the issue. Before you can ever get to the stage of diagnosing or giving a prognosis, you have to actually explore it. And I think with politics, we look at something like global migration and we're like, "OK, well, let's just... Let's stop the migrants at their port of entry. Let's put them in camps". That's like putting a Band-Aid on gangrene. It doesn't work. It does not work. We end up creating bigger problems. Things fester. And I mean, we're both sitting in Canada, which is a great example of the fact that we go globally and talk about a feminist foreign policy, and yet our most significant issue nationally is missing and murdered Aboriginal women. It is the fact that Indian reserves here have boil-water advisories and we talk about it's going to cost too much to give them clean drinking water. I think it's impossible for us to continue to go globally and say we're this progressive human rights country, when we are more willing to put pipelines in the ground than we are to ensure that we give people clean drinking water. I think it's things like that where medicine, I think is... I mean, I think it's a lot more black and white, which for someone like me, can be quite helpful, because I think if we had a bit more of that, if we had a bit more of being honest about how we got here, we could be a bit more honest about how we get out.

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 Aynn Aga 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 *This Being Human*.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

The work Alaa does is tireless and always evolving. It's exhausting just to read her biography: the appointments, the awards, the campaigns. But one thing she had to learn later in life was how to avoid burnout and appreciate the down time.

ALAA MURABIT:

Up until I was 25, 26, 27, my focus had been entirely on what do I contribute to my community, or to be quite frank, on what my kind of more capitalistic sense of value was. What do I achieve? What do I deliver? When I was 27, 28, I had spent a few weeks with my sister and her kids. I spent some time with my mom. I stopped moving for a little bit in the same way that 2020 has forced us all to kind of stop moving for a little bit. And I wasn't delivering anything inherently. I was not meeting deadlines. I was not publishing, I was just hanging out. And it was the first time where my niece was talking to me about, you know, her favorite book. And I had time to really engage on that. And I think it took stepping back from work and realizing that, you know, there is inherent value in just existing and in being a good sister and a good daughter and eventually kind of a good wife and a good mom and a good partner and a good person in my community, that I didn't always have to be working.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

What has been your focus in a way during these last few months? What's igniting Alaa Murabit right now?

ALAA MURABIT:

Well, I think the primary thing has actually been COVID. It's that intersection of health, security, and economic growth. And what I mean by that is one of the first conversations when COVID started was, "Well, how do we protect the economy? We don't want to close it down." And it was this recognition, I think, that has now ... most people have now had, that you cannot keep an economy healthy if the people are sick. And so that's been really important, is working with different countries and different governments around the world on their COVID response. And then the second thing is, I've been advising the Canadian ministry, actually, on women's rights and on their gender-based violence policies. And something that we know because of COVID, a lot of people are in homes that are not safe for them. The rates of child and elderly and spousal abuse have never been this high. And I think it's easy for us to say, you know, stay home, shelter at home, et cetera, when you have a home that welcomes that. We've all been sold this idea of, like, not just trickle-down economics, but also, like, trickle-down equality, like we'll all get it eventually. I think people are now realizing it's not a buffet. You can't pick, "Oh, I want health care" if you don't also have proper education systems that could handle something like virtual school. You also don't have proper support systems for survivors of domestic violence. I mean, we just... we're missing so many things and I think it really is a wake-up call for all of us to demand more of ourselves, our communities, our elected officials, but really recognizing that at some point, you know, nothing changes if we don't change it. And I think that's what 2020 has been the best example of. It is an opportunity for incredible change.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Before we conclude, Alaa, I would be remiss not to ask about your daughter. Is this your first child?

ALAA MURABIT:

She is. She is.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Has motherhood changed you or made you ... or, I should really ask, how has motherhood changed you?

ALAA MURABIT:

I'll be honest in that I had never expected to become a mom. I had told most people since I was old enough to speak about motherhood that I'm not a maternal person and I never thought I would be good at it. And I am excellent at it, Alhamdulillah. It is fun. She is fantastic. I overthink almost everything in the world. I overcomplicate issues all the time. And the only thing I don't overcomplicate is being her mom. It is an excellent reprieve in many ways for me mentally. And I now have this new motto for my life. And my daughter, if she ever hears this in the future, is going to be like, "Thanks for all the pressure, Mom." But that if I don't accomplish anything else, at least I, Inshallah, will raise a good, compassionate kid.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Alaa Murabit, what does this being human mean to you?

ALAA MURABIT:

Sorry, my daughter is trying to walk, and it's the funniest thing because she keeps falling. It should not be funny, but it is. This being human means to me to be grateful, to experience it, to be grateful for the things you don't even know you should be grateful for, for the little things that you kind of take for granted. For the ability to feel those emotions, for the ability to recognize that you still have the opportunity and the chance to learn. I think being human means to be grateful.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Alaa, keep fighting the good fight for all of us. Thank you so much for joining me on *This Being Human*.

ALAA MURABIT:

Thank you so much for having me. It was a wonderful conversation.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

This Being Human is an Antica production. Our senior producer is Kevin Sexton. Our supervising producer is Pacinthe Mattar. This episode was produced by Ebyan Abdigir and written by Kevin Sexton. Mixing and sound design by Phil Wilson. Original music 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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