

Meili Criezis

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SPEAKERS

Meili Criezis, Eleonora Anedda

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- E** Eleonora Anedda 00:02
Today is the 30th of April 2021. My name is Erleonora Anedda. I am working as an oral historian for the Institute for Diversity and Civic Life. I am in Sardinia, Italy on a Zoom call with Meili. Meili, would you like to introduce yourself and tell me what you're joining this call from?
- M** Meili Criezis 00:21
Sure. Hi, I'm Meili Criezis, and I'm joining the call from Texas.
- E** Eleonora Anedda 00:27
Thank you. Just to start, would you like to tell me a little bit about your childhood?
- M** Meili Criezis 00:33
Sure. I was adopted from China at eleven months by American parents, my dad was born in New York and my mom was born in South Dakota. In the my dad's side, the family history extends to Greece, Turkey, and Albania, so that Balkans area plus Turkey. Then my mom's family, they've been here for several generations. They're White American with also some Native American as well from the Sioux Tribe, from South Dakota.

E Eleonora Anedda 01:07
That's lovely. Thank you. What is your relationship like with your family?

M Meili Criezis 01:13
I'm fortunate to say that I've always been very close to my parents. Growing up, I don't have any siblings. I'm an only kid, I feel spoiled as a rotten egg. It's nice. It's nice to grow up as an only child. But also, sometimes when I was younger, I wanted to have siblings just to play with, go outside. Although it was nice to hang out with neighborhood friends. But I thought at the time it would be more fun to have a constant playmate, companion. But now that I'm older, I'm like, "You know what? Yeah, I like being the only child." I like everything. I have my personal space, have my alone time, so now I'm happy. But as a kid, I felt energy-wise, like, "Oh, I wish I could expend this energy with someone else my age more often." Yeah, so I've had a really nice relationship with my parents. I feel like I always could trust them and talk with them about pretty much anything. I'm lucky to say that they are very supportive. I feel like we're such a great match as a family.

E Eleonora Anedda 02:17
I'm an only child as well, so I understand you. Who do you consider to be a mentor to you?

M Meili Criezis 02:28
Let's see. I guess mentor kind of implies non-family members. But I mean, I'd say definitely my parents, but outside that, also some college professors that I'm really grateful to have encountered in those years, because they helped me grow a lot as a person. But also academically, the experience of taking their classes, it made me really interested in academia specifically, and also upped my writing skills. Some of these classes, I was terrified, like, "Oh, my God, they're assigning so much reading, the paper lengths, they're so much longer compared to high school." At first I didn't like it. I even thought to myself, "Let's make sure not to take this class again, because it's so time consuming. You're here to enjoy college, don't do that stuff." But then I realized if I wanted to grow and learn how to write better, just critical thinking skills, then, "Okay, well, you have to struggle a little bit and work hard at it and then take classes from strict professors in the sense of grading."

M Meili Criezis 03:30

I'm really glad I did. I guess I can name people, right? That's okay? Dr. Melissa Burns was definitely my primary mentor at Southwestern University, the school I went to, thirty minutes from Austin. She was one of my mentors over there. I'm really grateful for everything that I learned from her. It's funny, freshman year, I was very intimidated by her course, when I first entered it. Then I realized, "No, this is an opportunity to grow. College is fun, but also, let's use the time to grow basically."

E

Eleonora Anedda 04:12

What was your experience like in high school?

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Meili Criezis 04:15

My high school was a lot less diverse than my elementary and middle school. Elementary, middle school, I was really glad to be in an environment where you had people from various countries, people from various backgrounds here in the United States, different races, different religions, so it felt pretty open, and I didn't even notice really about being a minority as a kid, at those ages. But then when I went to high school, my family and I, we moved, so I went to a different - what is it called, district? I just can't remember the name, but a different, I guess, zoning thing. Then I went to a high school that was probably about 90% White, maybe more. That's when I started to really notice that I'm a minority, and that things are definitely much different than I thought the way the world works, because the only previous exposure I had was elementary and middle school.

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Meili Criezis 05:08

But yeah, the high school environment, very White, very wealthy. It was confusing at first. At the time I didn't notice this, but looking back now, I realized that a lot of my friends were either minorities, so Black, Asian, Hispanic. Also, my other friends were international students, too. White students, but they were from Greece or France, stuff like that. I felt like I clicked most with those people, and probably subconsciously gravitated towards that crowd, instead of, I guess what you might want to call within the context of that school, that mainstream White social circle within that high school. Yeah, looking back, I realized that and it was interesting to have that experience of going from a more diverse environment to such a homogenous crowd. That's when I realized about what it's like to be a minority, the weird, unspoken racial dynamics that play out that I never noticed before. Then in high school, it was just very odd.

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Meili Criezis 06:05

I can't say that I liked it, especially by senior year. Oh my God, senior year, I felt, "I'm almost out, now I'm going to allow myself to be more negative," because earlier, I didn't want to start with the negative thoughts, because I knew that would ruin the experience anyway. It's like, "Well, you got three more years. Why complain? Because it will affect academics negatively, too." I didn't want to let it do that. But yeah, by senior year, I thought, "Well, I'm almost out of here, I can be honest with myself and understand that I totally hate this environment." I started just complaining with my friends and like, "Oh my God, yeah, I hate it too here." Then we just talked to each other about how much we hated it. Although we had never really done that so openly before. I think it's because we didn't want to let negativity pile on so early.

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Meili Criezis 06:51

But to be fair, the teachers, for the most part, were really good. I'm grateful for that. I'm still friends with some teachers from high school, actually. Now that I'm older, and they're older, and we're more outside school, no school context friends, we're those kinds of friends - yeah, they've been honest with me, they've told me they don't like it either. It's so funny to hear that from them too. Because you can't tell that in the classroom. And you wouldn't want to, you want to think the teacher loves the job, or at least doesn't have some sort of bias. But yeah, now that we're friends, they've definitely told me they are not huge fans of the crowd there. I'm like, "Oh, okay, so it was not only me and my friends. Them too," which made me laugh.

E

Eleonora Anedda 07:36

Did things change in college?

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Meili Criezis 07:39

Yeah, a lot. It's interesting, environmental, I guess, demographic-wise, when I went to college, it also was majority White. But I didn't notice at all that those same weird racial dynamics and the occasional openly racist comment, but then a lot of the more ambiguous racist dynamics that maybe you wouldn't be able to even sense out if you're not a person of color, you know what I'm saying? But yeah, so in college, people were very open-minded, there was a mix of people, I would say ideologically, it was mostly liberal. Not surprising, right? But there were also conservative students too, so there still was a mix of ideological backgrounds as well. Then I made friends with anyone there pretty much. I felt very open, I didn't have that pattern of only gravitating towards minorities and

international students. But actually, I have to admit, my best friends happen to be Asian, but I don't think it's because I only sought them out. It just happened to match personality-wise.

M

Meili Criezis 08:39

But yeah, I really loved meeting people at that college. The professors were amazing, just such a wholesome environment. I think that kind of helped me grow out of developing too much of a chip on my shoulder from the experience in high school, because in high school, after I graduated, I thought, "Wow, is this what the real world is? Is this how rich White people act? Because if this is how everything goes, well then, yeah, I think I'm developing a bit of a chip on my shoulder and resentment," which is never good. Even at the time, I thought, "That's stereotyping people. That's not good, because I don't like it when that's done to me or friends or whatever. So it's not fair for me to do that." But it just was more of an emotionally-based reaction after that experience. Then in Southwestern there were pretty wealthy kids, White, but definitely not the same dynamics. I think that helped me be more open to people in general, and not start to just gravitate only towards minorities and international students and stuff like that, just be open in general to everyone. I really appreciated that experience, too.

E

Eleonora Anedda 09:47

Yeah, and your reaction seems very fair. One thing that I didn't ask you, what did you study in college?

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Meili Criezis 09:55

I studied the most useful undergrad degrees of history and French. Those are total job getters, aren't they? Yes, immediate job after college, immediate hire. But I picked those subjects because going into college, I had already had French credit. I knew I would be able to get French credit by taking the credit by exam thing, so I took that. Then one of the French professors, before the year started, he emailed me, and they came back with the results. And he said, "Well, you have all the credits for French one through four here. And that means you definitely can minor in French, no problem. But if you're interested, doing a major wouldn't be that difficult either because you're almost already there, and you don't have to take all the credits starting freshman year." Then I thought, "Okay, sure, why not? Having a major in a language could look good for international business or whatever the heck."

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Meili Criezis 10:47

Then I eventually chose history because of my mentor, Dr. Melissa Burns, who was a history professor, and I loved her classes. Then I was really, really, really into the Algerian War for Independence. I was full-on obsessed. I still am obsessed, right, but maybe not as much as in college. But I really love that topic. Dr. Burns was also really focused on Algeria, actually, which is funny and a nice coincidence. That also made me think, "Okay, let's take more of her classes, more about Algeria, more of an academic challenge, and learn from this really awesome professor. That's why I picked history. Because again, the Algerian War, right? Isn't that very useful for a future job? Yes. People are just knocking at the door to hear about Algeria, about the Algerian Revolution for Independence.

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Eleonora Anedda 11:40

I mean, you're talking to another person who majored in history.

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Meili Criezis 11:44

Yay, you get it. But yeah, I just loved it, though. Actually, my dad though, he did kind of push back initially, because he would ask me, "Well, think about the future, what can you do with this kind of degree? Maybe do history, but partner if with something a bit more pragmatic, like business or something something like that." I thought it logically made sense. But I think unfortunately, or fortunately, I'm the type of person who really wants to feel a passion for it. If I feel kind of meh about something, then it's hard. It's hard for me to do it, especially for something like a major, I'm like, "Oh, I don't want to major in business, I'm gonna die. I'm gonna fall asleep." No offense to business people that love that. But just in terms of what we feel passionate about, different things for different folks.

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Eleonora Anedda 12:29

I totally understand. About Texas, could you describe what your relationship with Texas is like? Or has it changed over the years?

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Meili Criezis 12:44

Yeah, so growing up, I didn't think about Texas. I knew I was in Houston. Yay, go Houston. But then I think by high school, that resentment from those racist things and that weird environment, it made me think that the rest of Texas was like that. That's when I started

to develop more of a negative impression of Texas as a whole. Like, "Ew, I don't want to be from Texas. People down here are racist. So much backwardness." Yeah, I kind of was totally unfair in that regard about Texas. I developed maybe an impression that someone from New York might think, "Oh, Texas, aren't they all rednecks down there, slinging guns?" Although I think the gun carrying thing, I don't think that's exaggerated, unfortunately. People have way too many guns down here. It's wild. Okay, that one is fair. That impression is fair.

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Meili Criezis 13:34

But yeah, I think I had a negative relationship with Texas during that time, and also throughout college, because friends, they would say, "Yeah, I love being on campus. But when I go home to my insert small Texas town though, it's a completely different environment where I can't be proud that I'm gay, my family doesn't accept it. My community is religious, so I hate going home. I don't like this." Then other things too, negative experiences as minorities in different towns in Texas. Yeah, I don't think that really changed too much during college actually, either. I'm like, "Oh, man, this state really sucks. Look at all these people going home not being able to be themselves and feeling a lot of pressure from their traditional family and traditional community." Yeah, that probably worsened it actually.

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Meili Criezis 14:19

But then when I came across IDCL, at the same time, I really liked the emphasis on the diversity of Texas. Texas is not just White, it's not just strong conservative, it's not just Christian conservative. It's actually a pretty diverse state, and we want to help break that mold of how people perceive Texas, both within and outside of the state. That started to make me think more critically, like, "Hey, maybe I've been so unfair to Texas, maybe I need to calm down and not stereotype it, basically." I think working as an intern with IDCL, that actually helped me be more open about Texas, but I still have to admit I still have that impulse reaction where I'm totally fine saying I'm a Houstonian, I'm an American, but if someone says, "You're a Texan, right?" I don't want to say that actually, even now I'm like, "Ah, no, I'm Houstonian."

E

Eleonora Anedda 15:13

I see. Is that why you joined the IDCL as a whole to push back this narrative about Texas and that you also have about Texas?

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Meili Criezis 15:23

Actually, I was super interested in IDCL because of the work that they do, such as focusing on diverse voices, interfaith work, just things more along those lines. Then the Texas thing didn't really pop up in my mind until I read stuff about the diversity of Texas, and what are the key goals of IDCL? To expand the Texas voices that are outside of what people would think are Texas voices, basically. So yeah, the primary interest though, was the interfaith communication and focus, and also the social justice awareness angle. I really liked that a lot.

E

Eleonora Anedda 16:02

That's great. Within this framework, what does Texas mean to you?

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Meili Criezis 16:11

Currently, I would say Texas means to me stuff like delicious food, great barbecue, and then within various cities, so much international food, which is amazing. Fantastic. Then in terms of people, Texas is diverse, has a really interesting history, even though I had to take Texas history in middle school, which I thought was totally boring. But now looking at it, it's actually a pretty unique history. I think Texas probably could do a better job of confronting things like being the last state to free enslaved people, to acknowledge that, because I think the news reached Texas particularly late, and Texas didn't really want to do that either, the history of racism here, segregation, and then racial injustice against Latino communities and Native communities as well. I think Texas could do a better job reconciling that. So there is that diversity within Texas too, from communities of color, but it just didn't really make the history books, because being people of color, we're disenfranchised in a lot of ways. So yeah, I think that's also what I loved about IDCL. Focusing on also communities of color and raising those voices, since the history books, they're always pretty White, aren't they?

E

Eleonora Anedda 17:29

Yeah, history is for the victors.

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Meili Criezis 17:32

Yes. The winners write the history books.

E

Eleonora Anedda 17:35

Exactly. Unfortunately, the saying is correct most of the times. But something that you may want to talk about is about your faith. Would you like to say something about that?

M

Meili Criezis 17:58

Yeah. I probably should have included this in the growing up section. But I grew up in a mixed religious, non-religious home. My mom's Catholic, well, she was Catholic, she was pretty practicing, at least in my early years. I learned the Catholic prayers, and I'm still glad I learned those because it's really nice to be exposed to different religions. There's a spiritual comfort as well. My mom taught me those, but she wasn't at all strict or anything, like, "You have to be Catholic." She just taught me them as a kid. Then I learned the basic Bible stories, which is really good for general cultural knowledge as well. Regardless if you're Christian or not, it's good to just learn the basics of different faiths and the overall general stories from the Bible too.

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Meili Criezis 18:39

Then my dad has always been a pretty hardcore atheist. He would just be like, "Oh, you're going to church? Okay, whatever. Well, that's dumb." He wouldn't mean it in a cruel way, not like actually angry way. But he would just kid with my mom, like, "Oh, you believe in that? Okay. Sure, whatever." She would laugh about it, so it wasn't a hostile thing. But I definitely knew my parents had very different conceptions of religion. I would say, I was probably just general Catholic growing up, I didn't think about it too much.

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Meili Criezis 19:13

But then I remember in probably fourth or fifth grade in elementary school, a friend who's Christian, she was talking to me about another one of our friends who is Muslim. I think I said something like, "Oh, yeah, she's so cool. She'll go to heaven," something like that. Then my Christian friend said, "Wait, no, no, she's not Christian. She can't go to heaven." Then I asked her, "What do you mean, why not?" Then she said, "Well, you have to accept Jesus Christ as your Savior, or you're not going to go to heaven. That's the key to going to heaven." Then I remember that conversation definitely sparked a critical thinking moment about religion like, "Wow, it's pretty narrow to think that everyone who is not Christian is not going to go to heaven." I think when I started thinking about that more intensely, I realized, "Yeah, I better be careful what I hear, be careful what I think about religion."

M

Meili Criezis 20:03

Because religion is very comforting. It's nice to believe in a higher power, but the more exclusivist angles, I can't imagine if there is a God, God telling everyone to go to hell unless they're the right faith. I also thought, "Well, what if she's wrong? What if you're not Jewish or you're not Hindu or Muslim, you're going to hell? What if you're wrong as a Christian?" It just sparked those kinds of trains of thought. Then for a while, I ended up becoming atheist more on the lines of my dad, like, "Oh, it's all bullshit, no way. I don't like this stuff at all." But then honestly - this is an individual thing - but I felt, I guess, a little bit depressed at the idea of there being no God, and there's nothing after life and, stuff not making sense, like it's just random. Part of me still feels that way internally, like, "It's very possible. This is just a series of coincidences that have led to our being and the universe exists, doesn't exist, and there's nothing more. It's just energy, and that's it," in the more scientific sense.

M

Meili Criezis 21:05

But in terms of personal comfort, I realized, yeah, I actually did enjoy believing in a higher power, whether I think that's willing suspension of disbelief or not, it still is comforting. Then in high school, you know those family projects you do? I don't remember when, but there was some sort of thing where it was basically look at your family history and learn about it, whatever. When I looked on my dad's side of history, I that's how I learned more about them being from Turkey, Greece, Albania. Then because of Turkey, I became more interested in Islam, like, "Oh, what is this? This is interesting. My grandma's from Turkey. She was born in Turkey. Let's learn more about this country." Because at the time - this is going to put an age date on my dad - they were born under the Ottoman Empire. I'm two generations away from the Ottoman Empire, which is kind of surreal. Wow, that's weird.

M

Meili Criezis 21:59

But anyway, because of that, I became more interested in Turkey, Ottoman Empire, and of course, Islam is a very integral part to that. Then I guess I started more academically being interested in Islam, because of knowing about Turkey, and then somehow it seemed spiritually comforting, because of the concept of the oneness of Allah. There's no intermediary, like Jesus being the son of God, but also God Himself, which I guess confused me. Not to say that it's bad for people to believe that, but personally, I just felt confused about it. I think that's why Islam was particularly attractive to me, because of that, but also the family history. It felt like a connection to Turkey in a way.

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Meili Criezis 22:42

Although I have a lot of connection to Greece. Actually, I've been there before. I know some of the language, I can read it okay, not the best, but I can make it, I'm not gonna die in Greece, right? If I got dropped in some random small village, I won't starve. I definitely feel a cultural affinity and pretty fairly strong connection to Greece, which I'm really grateful for. But for Turkey, there's nothing, right? It feels like nothing. But through Islam, it felt like more of a shared experience with that side. I think that's why Islam was interesting to me, because of family personal reasons, and then the whole oneness of God, and that's it.

E

Eleonora Anedda 23:26

If I were to ask you, how do you identify religiously, what would you say?

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Meili Criezis 23:32

I should probably state that I know there are problems with this term, but progressive Muslim. The problems with that term include things like giving the impression that progressive Muslim is better than other Muslims who are more conservative. I definitely don't mean it in that way. Just conservative versions of religions definitely do not resonate with me as a person. Never have as a Catholic, do not as a Muslim. That's why I say progressive Muslim, but not to mean it in like a demeaning way, just to be a descriptor. But that's some of the issues that can pop up with that terminology. But that's how I mean it. Then also, maybe a little confusing, but a little bit agnostic too, because at the back of my mind, like I said earlier, I can't be sure. I can never feel 100% sure, and I guess that's what having faith is, you just put faith in something that does not logically make sense to you, in many ways. You just you just have some faith. But at the same time, I think I will always have a bit of that agnostic approach, like, "Yes, no, I'm just unsure." I can't get rid of it. Maybe, I would say agnostic Muslim for progressive values, which sounds like a bit of a mind twister in some ways.

E

Eleonora Anedda 24:34

No, but it makes sense with all that you've said, so thank you for explaining that. But what role does Islam play in your life today or has it played over the years?

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Meili Criezis 24:57

I think its given me a nice amount of spiritual comfort, although recently - I mean, it's

Ramadan right now. I'm trying to be more regular about salah, about praying. But it's kind of up and down. Sometimes I feel pretty spiritual and connected to Islam. Other times I just forget everything and I'm like, "Yeah, whatever." I think that's a pretty common relationship that people have with faith. Maybe it's not talked about as much, but there's ups and downs, like, "Yes, I'm connected. And then no, that's not central in my life right now." Which is totally fine, the relationship can change. I'd say right now, it's just more in the background, but still always there, which I appreciate. But I'm not super practicing either at the moment, I guess I never have really been.

E

Eleonora Anedda 25:47

But now that you mentioned Ramadan, last year, it was like this year during the pandemic. How has it been? Is this year a little bit better than last year?

M

Meili Criezis 26:02

Oh, well, not for me personally. I mean, I'm lucky to say I have the vaccine. I'm so elated. A lot of my friends have the vaccine, well, the ones that are here in Texas. I'm able to see them, just still be careful, not go inside crowded restaurants, we only eat outside, I only hang out with friends that have been vaccinated because I still think it's good to be careful. There are other strains out there, and the vaccine is not 100%. You still gotta watch it. But yeah, with the vaccine now, I haven't noticed that much of a difference, because I wouldn't be comfortable going to a masjid right now, because it'd be pretty full, especially during Ramadan. I don't want to go in an enclosed space with circulated air conditioning. I'm more cautious than some other folks, but I also live at home with two older parents. I feel a duty to be a lot more careful, knowing that I live in a household with other people, be careful for them.

M

Meili Criezis 26:56

Last Ramadan, I definitely didn't do anything. I'm like, "No vaccine, not going anywhere." But I'm hoping this year that I can go to iftars with friends and just be cautious about it, but still engage more in that outside community type activity, getting together with people. But last year, I did not do any of that at all. I didn't fast last year at all. I don't know if I will this year either. I studied abroad in Paris in 2015 in the fall. That was a really great experience. But then there was the terrorist attacks of November 13, 2015, the Bataclan and the multiple targets that ISIS had hit. After that experience, I feel like it affected my anxiety eating habits. I noticed after that incident, when I try to fast that it would kind of trigger a weird anxiety thing in my mind. I don't think it was mentally healthy for me personally, so I thought, "Okay, well, let me just cut down on fasting maybe

do it at the beginning or the end of Ramadan for like a week, nothing too harsh." I guess realizing that about mental health care, also physical health care, which everyone is aware of, but also the mental health aspect, that it's probably not the best thing for me to do too often. I probably will fast maybe the end of this Ramadan, but not a lot because of the terrorist attacks and the weird residual effects from those.

E

Eleonora Anedda 28:22

Yeah, and it's good that you were able to realize that there was a connection between the two, so you were like, "Okay, I'm going to detach myself from this just for my own personal health."

M

Meili Criezis 28:33

I know there are other ways to partake in Ramadan as well, with donations as well. Also just spiritual reflection, however people envision that, whether it's the more traditional, conservative ways, or maybe more of - some friends, they meditate, not even praying in the traditional Muslim way, which is fine, no judgment, but they find sitting alone, reflection, that type of thing to be invigorating. Or just praying more regularly for me, that's nice. It's really interesting, what alternatives do people find to be fulfilling if one cannot fast?

E

Eleonora Anedda 29:12

Yeah, definitely. I do have one last question, but before we wrap up, I wanted to ask you if there's anything that I haven't asked you about, that you'd like to mention?

M

Meili Criezis 29:25

Yeah, I'm trying to think. I don't think so. I can't think of anything.

E

Eleonora Anedda 29:34

Okay, if something pops up, we can jump back to it. But the other thing that I wanted to ask you was that because this interview will be archived, and people in fifty or a hundred years may listen to it, I wanted to ask you if there's anything that you'd like to share with future listeners, things that you really care about, that you'd like to mention.

M Meili Criezis 30:07
Ooh, let's see, for people a hundred years from now, always a reminder that life is short, and you got to live your life, and just enjoy it. Because it's existential to think about a hundred years from now, we're all probably not going to be here. Just shows you how short life is. A hundred years feels like a long time, or a long life span if you get to a hundred years. But in reality, it's not. It's just the blink of an eye, right? The existential viewpoint of, "Wow, we're here, and then we're not." Just enjoy it, just enjoy it while you're here.

E Eleonora Anedda 30:45
Well, thank you. That's a good reminder, definitely.

M Meili Criezis 30:49
Yeah, maybe not the most positive, but I'm like, "Eh, you know."

E Eleonora Anedda 30:53
No, no, but I get what you mean. Historically speaking, a hundred years, it's really nothing. Really, really nothing.

M Meili Criezis 31:02
Yeah, well, we're not gonna be here in a hundred years.

E Eleonora Anedda 31:08
Is there anything you'd like to mention before we go?

M Meili Criezis 31:15
I don't think so. Not at the moment.

E Eleonora Anedda 31:17
Okay. Well, perfect, then in that case. Thank you so much for doing this interview. I'll stop the recording.

M Meili Criezis 31:27
Thank you.

