

# Sarah Pearose

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Afghan American, Osteopathic medicine, Accessible healthcare, Hijab, Muslim woman identity, Shia Islam, Imam Ali, Nahj al-Balagha, Ramadan, San Antonio, Health Careers High School, The University of Texas at San Antonio, University of the Incarnate Word, Immigrant parents, Afghanistan, Farsi, Travel, Texas freeze

## SPEAKERS

Sarah Pearose, Eleonora Anedda

- E** Eleonora Anedda 00:04  
Today is the 27th of February 2021. My name is Eleonora Anedda. I am working as an oral historian for the Institute of Diversity and Civic Life. I am in Sardinia, Italy on a Zoom call with Sarah. Sarah, would you like to introduce yourself and tell me where you're doing this call from?
- S** Sarah Pearose 00:24  
Sure thing. My name is Sarah Pearose. I'm calling from San Antonio, Texas. I am a second year medical student. I'm 23 years old. And I identify as a Shia, Muslim.
- E** Eleonora Anedda 00:38  
Lovely, thank you. To start, would you like to tell me a little bit about your childhood?
- S** Sarah Pearose 00:44  
Sure. I was born and raised in San Antonio, Texas, this little big small town has always been my home. My brother and sister were also born in the United States, whereas my parents were born in Kabul, Afghanistan. So obviously, that was a dynamic that I had to kind of navigate my whole entire life, still am navigating with my parents being from the homeland, them emigrating like 35 years ago, and then having all of their children in the

US. So I am a true Texan at heart. I haven't ever been to Afghanistan, but it is on my bucket list.

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Sarah Pearose 01:25

But my childhood was a really good one that I'm grateful for. I'm the last child in the family, so I feel like I was born into more stable circumstances versus my older sister and my older brother. When my dad first immigrated here, he was still trying to get on his feet. He went to medical school in Kabul, and then had to take the conversion exam here in the United States and work really hard to learn the language. In that process, it was my mom and him just slaving until they could have a stable household for us. So I was lucky being the last one to come along, and the dust had pretty much settled. I'm happy here in Texas. But I am curious to see where adulthood will take me, like if I'll stay here forever, or move somewhere else. We'll see.

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Eleonora Anedda 02:23

One of my questions I wanted to ask you, if you identified as a Texan, but

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Sarah Pearose 02:29

Yes, very proud Texan.

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Eleonora Anedda 02:32

That's great. What is your relationship like with your with your parents and with your siblings?

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Sarah Pearose 02:44

Growing up, it was it was a little bit rocky, to be honest, because I just felt very misunderstood by them. Coming from Afghanistan, there's like a certain mindset I saw in my parents and a lot of my relatives. And it was one that I see myself emulating now, but it was a lot of humility, putting your head down and just working really hard, being kind of hyper vigilant of how others perceive you in the community. That would always get on my nerves, because I was like, "Mom and Dad, why do you care so much about what other Afghan people are saying? Or what the mosque is saying? Why can't I just be me?" And it was always a struggle, because I didn't understand it. But as I've gotten older, I'm like, okay, reputation and family honor and name, those things mean a lot to them. And I can see that mattering to me one day when I have my own family. So growing up, it was a lot

of back and forth.

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Sarah Pearose 03:48

But as I've gotten older, I actually am also studying medicine, like my dad did. I just see how much sacrifice it requires. And I kind of see how that has molded his personality into being someone who just drops everything for those that he loves. And with my mom as well, she works with refugees. It's so full circle because she came here as a refugee. And now she works at Catholic Charities which - every single day she's interacting with people from all over the world, people from Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, just everywhere. And I can see that they carry those traits into their work and they also carry it into their personal life. And as I'm becoming more independent and going to join the workforce, I feel like you carry a lot of your work traits with you at home as well. So it makes more sense to me, but now in my adult life as I've grown closer religiously to God, I just see our personalities meshing a lot better.

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Eleonora Anedda 05:06

Could I ask you if there's someone in your community or even your parents that you consider a mentor to you?

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Sarah Pearose 05:14

Yeah, I want to say, my parents have always been my mentor, even my older sister. My sister and I, we have a 12 year age gap, so when I was young, she was older. And she already had accumulated a lot of wisdom from being the first generation, oldest child in the family. I would say her, my father, my mother, even my brother, but if I had to specifically pick one person, I think it would come back to my dad, because he really did pave the way. I always think about how he didn't know the language, yet he somehow came and succeeded and fought tooth and nail for a position to be a resident at the local hospital here. So I think he's definitely my role model.

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Eleonora Anedda 06:14

Is your first language English?

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Sarah Pearose 06:18

Yes. I guess I could say I learned Farsi and English simultaneously. But obviously, I spoke English just so much more in school with my friends. There is an Afghan community here,

but I wasn't speaking Farsi with my Afghan friends. We were all just speaking English. Now into my adult life, I - when I do speak Farsi, especially with like my in laws - I am struggling. I am racking my brain for every word that I can remember, because it's just not fluent the way I want it to be. I've considered even just taking a course, so I can clean up all of the errors I make whenever I am speaking. But I realized the best way to like really learn it is to just speak it at home, and I'm lazy, and I don't do that. But that's something that I have on the forefront of my mind. I'm like, when I interact with my parents, it just needs to be Farsi so I can sharpen those skills up.

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Eleonora Anedda 07:29

Can you tell me a little bit about your education experience? How you went to school, high school, and what your favorite subjects are?

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Sarah Pearose 07:47

I feel like I was always a good student, I guess you could say. I was always on top of it. I remember in first grade when my family was going on a vacation somewhere, I was anxious to be missing first grade. I wanted to be present for everything. So I think since being young, I always had an idea that I wanted to go into medicine. Having seen my dad do it, there was just an interest there. Elementary school, middle school, went along, stayed in line, and then high school came along, and we have a medically oriented high school here in San Antonio. It's called Health Careers. My older brother and sister had both gone there, were kind of a family of medicine. So I was like, "You know what? This is the perfect opportunity for me to see if I'm actually interested in this," because this high school is really cool. They let you essentially, actually go into the hospital in scrubs, like actually get experience shadowing physicians and nurses and PAs to get an idea. Those four years of high school I spent a lot of time taking medical terminology courses, things that would kind of prepare me for medicine. And I ended up really liking it, and from there I knew that I would probably be majoring in pre med or doing something with medicine in college.

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Sarah Pearose 09:24

I ended up going to the University of Texas at San Antonio here in San Antonio, which is really nice because I kind of knew I didn't want to leave home. And at this point, my parents are still in San Antonio, so I was just wanting to stay near to them. I went to UTSA, and then my priority after that was also to just stay close to home for medical school, stay next to my parents, and thank God that also worked out. I am attending the University of Incarnate Word School of Osteopathic Medicine. They are a newer program, which was

really exciting to me because their mission is kind of different to most medical schools.

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Sarah Pearose 10:10

Osteopathic medicine is - I guess I should take a step back. To become a physician in the United States, there's basically two routes. You must have heard of like the traditional Doctor of Medicine route, and then there is the Doctor of Osteopathic Medicine route. And this is kind of the newer thing. Not as many DOs as there are MDs, but it is on the uprise. The main difference, I would say, between the two is our focus, when we're learning medicine is very much holistic. Looking at the patient's mind, body, and soul when it comes to treating them and realizing that there is an interplay between every body system.

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Sarah Pearose 10:54

Another really cool thing about DO school is [coughs] excuse me, we learn this set of handheld ways to treat patients. If I have someone that comes in with a headache, obviously, I'll do my normal protocol to treat that. But then DOs can also use their hands to, you know, feel and diagnose. And maybe I feel you have a lot of tension at the base of your skull. We have special techniques where you pull on the skin and relieve some of that tension, so I think it's very cool. We have like an extra tool set to treat patients. That's kind of a wrap up of my education.

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Eleonora Anedda 11:42

That's wonderful. What do you like about this holistic approach?

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Sarah Pearose 11:48

One of the first things that I really liked about our curriculum was we got assigned this textbook, an integrative medicine textbook. And basically, for all of the common conditions that you can think of, there are approaches that are non-medicinal, things you can do in your lifestyle, natural herbs and supplements that you can take to make you feel better. I think that just goes back to this really great issue we have in our American healthcare system where we are over-prescribing drugs, we are treating diseases too late, when a lot of times there's these modifiable risk factors that we all possess, that we could just make changes early on, and then we have better health outcomes. I think just the focus on diet, the focus on exercise, taking care of your mind and soul, making sure that you have some kind of spirituality, some kind of outlet for your stress. These are all focuses in integrative medicine, and I think that just resonates to me, because personally, I know

how important it is to have all of those things in check for me to feel good. I want to give that message to my patients as well.

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Eleonora Anedda 13:10

I hear you completely, I think one of the things that struck me the most, when I moved to the US was going into a CVS and seeing a lot of medicines on the shelves that here wouldn't be available. You'd have to get to the doctor and first get the prescription. And then can get the - yeah.

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Sarah Pearose 13:33

That's a good observation and a sad one. It is our reality here and our health care system is really - it's not the best, it could be a lot better. It's hard to enter into the workforce, knowing all of these issues, and knowing all of these barriers, a lot of them out of your control. But I like that my school talks about it, we often have a lot of difficult conversations about the reality of the world. It's gonna take some fresh minds to kind of change the way our system currently is.

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Eleonora Anedda 14:16

How would you describe your identity as a Muslim person?

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Sarah Pearose 14:22

So, for me, I feel like Islam has always been just how you are to others. I feel like that is the hallmark of a good Muslim person, where you interact with somebody and you just feel like - I don't want to say good vibes, but you feel to their core that they're a good person. I have a lot of role models and positive influences within the Muslim community, within the Afghan community, within my own family that I often want to model myself after. Specific things that really did mold me as a Muslim woman though, I would say it was from a young age learning to read Arabic. Although I don't have a full understanding of what it is I'm reading, I think being able to read God's words, and actually read the text off the page or read the text off of the Quran, it's a very powerful thing. And it's been a goal of mine to link up meaning with the actual verbiage. I think that was really important.

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Sarah Pearose 15:43

Also, when we were young, as a family, even now, as a family, we like to pray together. Even if that means just once a day when we're all home in the evening, we make that a

priority. And I really enjoy and my dad often will read religious texts to us. He'll read us hadiths from the Prophet, he will read us sayings from Imam Ali. And I feel like there's so many hidden gems in these books, like how to carry yourself as a person. I actually have a few that I often reference. I can read them to you really quickly, just some of my favorites because I feel like I really do model my life after these.

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Sarah Pearose 16:29

Imam Ali, he was the cousin and son in law of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him. There's a lot of amazing profound things that he said that you're just like, "How could he have said that in that year when there was - he had no formal education." It's just crazy. Let's see. "Man is hidden under his tongue." I really love that one, because it reminds me as a Muslim woman, I am a representation of Islam, the way that I speak the way that I carry myself, I need to be conscious of that. And another one I really like: "Patience is of two kinds: patience over what pains you, and patience against what you covet." And then another one that I often reference: "Prepare for the future as if you are going to live forever, and pray your prayers as if you're going to die tomorrow." When I'm feeling down, when I'm tired of studying, I like to reference that book that he has upstairs. It all comes from this book. I think it's called Nahj al-Balagha. I don't know if I'm saying that right, but it's seriously just a gem. I love to just model my personality traits after things that Imam Ali said.

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Eleonora Anedda 17:59

What role does Islam play in your life?

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Sarah Pearose 18:07

Many, many, many roles. I think it's the main grounding force in my life. I think since starting medical school, I have been under a lot of stress. And as I have and as all of my classmates have, we're always scrambling to find something that is an outlet for us. I remember first semester, I had heard about meditation and specific apps that guide you through the meditation process. I downloaded Headspace, which is an app I really, really like. And I remember thinking, naively, I was like, "Well, I'm spending so much time with meditation, how come I don't spend the same amount of time with God? How come I don't take it to the prayer mat and go through the same process?" But I really realized that as I learned what meditation was, I essentially could take those skills and then use that in my prayer, so that I was having a more concentrated prayer, more focused. I left the prayer mat feeling like I really just did have a conversation with God, which are things I never really felt before.

S Sarah Pearose 19:24

I think that that has been the most powerful thing for me just my staying on top of my daily prayers, and then also bringing new light and meaning to them, and making them purposeful because a lot of times it was just a thing that I would check off my list, which I still am guilty of sometimes, but I just noticed there's a lot more intention behind them these days because I've learned how to turn my mind off to the outside world and just focus in that moment. And realize I'm talking to God, I'm in front of God, and I should do my best to be present.

E Eleonora Anedda 20:07

Do you feel like you have - that your practice has evolved or changed during time?

S Sarah Pearose 20:16

Definitely evolved forward and then regressed at times. I realized faith is something that you really need to practice at. You really need to put in work. And it's been hard with COVID not being able to go to the masjid on Fridays. And Ramadan is coming up again, so this will be the second one that we're spending socially distanced. It's hard without the external cues, to remain dedicated and to put in the work and the hours. And especially with school for me, I often - in my head, I'm like, "Oh, I'm so behind. I can't listen to this lecture right now. I need to finish my coursework." But I'm starting to realize how much more rewarding and how much better it is for my health when I just take a step away from my work, and I focus on the things outside. It's a constant battle, up and down, my level of dedication on each passing day. But I think if I had to trend it overall, I would say, I am kind of going on the upwards. I feel like I am positively growing as a person, and with that, my faith also expands as well.

E Eleonora Anedda 21:50

You mentioned COVID, and you mentioned celebrating Ramadan now for the second time during the pandemic. Could you tell me what that was like last year? And what do you think it's gonna be like this year?

S Sarah Pearose 22:07

Yeah, it's tough. We have a community here that we like to break our fast with every now and then, like once a week, at least we would see each other, and it's just such a rewarding feeling to come together as Muslims and be like, "Yeah, today was hard, we



were starving today." Or in the summer heat, you get so thirsty here. And it's like a good 14 hours that you're going without water. It's just so nice to break your fast with people. Now, I'm grateful I at least have my parents here with me. I'm living in their house, so I always have them, thank God. And then my brother is also in town because he recently graduated from medical school, so he has some time off, and then he's here with his wife who's pregnant. So this Ramadan is going to look different, because we have a new baby joining us soon, and there's that excitement.

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Sarah Pearose 23:05

And it's nice, because I feel like my siblings are back in the house again and it's a different vibe. I remember being very annoyed with my brother when I was younger, because he was always so annoying. Around the time, we're gonna break our fast, I was just focused on food, and he was bouncing off the walls. But now that we're older, it's just so nice to go through this struggle together as a family, and then every single night, just have that moment of relief and happiness. It's gonna look different. But I'm hoping the next one we'll all be vaccinated, or we'll have that general herd immunity and we can all gather together.

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Eleonora Anedda 23:53

One thing I haven't asked you is, before COVID, what is your community like? And how was it to grow up in your community, in your neighborhood, and in San Antonio?

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Sarah Pearose 24:14

When my parents moved to San Antonio, there wasn't much of an Afghan community, we didn't have relatives here. They were moving to an uncharted city. And it was because it was the best work option available to them. We got very lucky because we somehow came into contact with other Afghans that also lived here, and there weren't many at that point in time. There's about five or six families that I have grown up with, their kids are my cousin's practically because I didn't have - my mom's side all lives in Australia, my dad's side is scattered throughout the world. So I didn't have that sense of family, extended family. They have given that to me. Those are my best friends, the Afghans that live in this community.

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Sarah Pearose 25:09

And then when it comes to the Muslim community, we have a really great Muslim community here in San Antonio. It was a little bit harder to find specifically a Shia

community, because we are a minority. It was so long before we even had a masjid like where it was just Shia Muslims. We have been going to this small, humble masjid. There's probably on a Friday, an average Friday, when I would go to prayer, probably like 10 to 15 people total on the men and women sides, a very small community. But I really have come to enjoy how tight knit, small, and personalize the experience of going to the masjid is. When it comes to celebrating Eid, we would tend to go to the bigger masjid where a lot of Muslims would congregate. And that was always like a really beautiful, contrasting experience to see so many people celebrating the same thing. I guess you could say I'm used to really small tight knit communities.

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Eleonora Anedda 26:28

I was wondering if - because when you said there just 10 to 20 people, I thought, "Oh, that that's very, very few." And maybe this is me projecting, but did you ever feel claustrophobic? Because if it's 10 to 20 people, everyone knows each other, so I don't know, expectations and all that?

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Sarah Pearose 26:59

That's a really good question. I think it's weird, because I found the masjid was the one place in the world where people just kept their head down, and they didn't really look at you in any way, see you in any other light that you wouldn't want to be seen. I feel like it was always a safe space. And despite it being so small, the the reason we were there and never changed. It was like each one of us was there for God and God alone. And then the community did bloom out of that unified purpose. I know when I was a teenager, and I was going, I felt a little bit like, "Wow, this is like eyes are on me, because there's not many of us here. I got to maintain my posture. I got to sit up, right." But I quickly realized that it was a very non-judgmental space. And it was kind of a privilege that there were so few of us.

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Eleonora Anedda 28:13

Now I wanted to ask in-between questions. You you grew up in Texas, you're a Texan. How is it to be a Muslim person living in Texas?

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Sarah Pearose 28:32

I kind of have a unique experience because I didn't start wearing a headscarf until I graduated high school. I feel like I kind of lived two split lives, and I experienced what it's like to be your average American girl who - you look at me you don't see a Muslim

woman, you can hardly tell what ethnicity I am, I think, versus I put the headscarf on. And now I have like this obvious identifier, the minute I walk into a room. And it was hard that first year after I had put my scarf on because I really did recognize the difference in treatment.

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Sarah Pearose 29:10

And I don't mean mistreatment, I think I mean more so the people I attracted towards me. I want to say that's probably my favorite thing about wearing hijab, because I almost feel like it filters who approaches you. The friends that I have made, I feel like they're more like me. We have more of the same morals, more of the same beliefs. And those are the binding forces that create lifelong friendships. I think I've made a lot of Muslim girlfriends after wearing the hijab. Much more filtering in terms of negative influences or bad influences. Less of that coming towards me, more of good coming towards me.

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Sarah Pearose 30:02

I feel like it is like a protective force, and thank God I've never really dealt with direct forms of racism or direct forms of discrimination. I've never seen that head on. I haven't yet, but that's not to say that it doesn't exist because I have so many friends who do have experiences with that. I've just been lucky in the few years I've been wearing it. I have my cousin who is the same age as me, wears a scarf. We're best friends. She has many stories, she's moved around a lot. When she came to Texas, she really did kind of notice the different culture in some areas, especially if you go to the more rural outskirts, you kind of feel eyes on you when you walk into a store, when you're filling gas in your car, you kind of feel people looking at you. And you know it's not just curiosity, sometimes there's something deeper to the look. She has stories of on the highway cars chasing her just harassing her, tailgating her. So those things happen. But because I'm in a big city here in San Antonio, I do feel protected, and I do feel a lot more love than I feel anything else.

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Eleonora Anedda 31:29

Have you ever traveled somewhere else? Maybe in another state or another country that's not the US, with or without your parents or with your friends or without your friends, and you felt that Texas was different?

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Sarah Pearose 31:52

Yeah, I think it took a long time before my perspective and horizons were brought in just because, I thought everywhere was like Texas, obviously you always think that until you

leave. I'm trying to think specifically. I think specifically the first time I noticed a difference was when we went to Europe, we went on a family trip and it was so beautiful. We went to Paris and Rome and Italy and I was a little bit younger, I think I was in sixth, seventh grade. I remember just the way - my mom at that point, she was a visibly Muslim woman wearing her hijab. My dad looks Muslim with his facial hair and his bushy eyebrows. We had the look. I remember encountering a few instances where it was like we felt different. We felt like we stuck out in some areas, and so I noticed that different culture. But then I also saw a lot of the positive differences, like how healthy generally speaking the people were. The food options were a lot healthier.

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Sarah Pearose 33:04

There was just less work more living, I felt like. As soon as I left Texas, I noticed that. And every time I do leave the United States, I noticed that difference. There's a lot more living that goes on outside of the United States. We're very work oriented here. That's not to say other countries are not, but I just noticed that we're very much a 40-plus-hour work week country. And that's something that is disappointing. I've definitely noticed the differences, and that's what makes me want to leave and explore other areas.

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Sarah Pearose 33:43

My fiance, he lives in New Jersey right now, and I recently just went to New York for the first time and saw the East Coast for the first time, and I just loved the vibe. It was just so creative. And there's always something to do and everything is inspiring. The art is beautiful there. Versus here, it's like my city is one where you just work and go to school and maybe raise a family. But there isn't a lot of inspiration, there isn't a lot of nature. I'm very open minded to going to different places, taking what it has to offer, and then internalizing that and then one day making a decision, where it would be best to settle down.

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Eleonora Anedda 34:30

New Jersey's cold though.

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Sarah Pearose 34:32

It is cold. That's the one thing I'm not built for the what the winter time, I'm really not, so we'll see.

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Eleonora Anedda 34:40

I was thinking that, yeah. Have you seen Texas change over time?

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Sarah Pearose 34:52

Yeah, especially with the recent election. We almost were a blue state. The closest it's been I think ever. And I've noticed so much development, I noticed a lot of people are moving here. Austin is a big draw to a lot of people. As more people come in as there's more diversity, I do feel like it's booming and expanding in a very positive direction. I think however, there's a lot of drawbacks. As you might know, we just had this crazy winter storm, and it's because Texas doesn't really - I don't know the exact logistics, but I just know Texas doesn't share power with other states the way that other states do. We got into this pickle, and there was no one really to save us. Many of us were cold for a week, no water, that type of thing. So a lot of the policies, I'm not a fan of. I'm not a fan of a lot of the ideologies behind the leaders in Texas, but the people I can say, I've noticed a lot more diversity over the years, a lot of different types of people moving into the state.

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Eleonora Anedda 36:16

Just because you mentioned the Texas freeze that happened as you said, did that affect you in any way, you and your family, your home? What was it like for you?

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Sarah Pearose 36:30

It was a rough time. We didn't have power for about three and a half days. There were some rolling blackouts during that time, so we would get little, maybe an hour, maybe 10 minutes, it kind of just varied. And then we didn't have water for about a week. Our home is kind of open, like open air plan. Upstairs, we were trying to gather into one room, so that we could kind of just use one another's body heat to stay warm. Eventually what we had to do, because it's such an open plan, we had to close off the walls with plastic tarp, just to gather the heat in one place.

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Sarah Pearose 37:16

It was brutal, but it was also so humbling, because I know that we live a life of such luxury where those things are never taken from us, and we don't question whether it's going to be there or not. But even just going to sleep cold for two, three nights, it was so difficult. I felt like coming out of it I had lived a whole life just trying to survive with my family. It's crazy that we're back to normal. It's crazy that that feels like a distant memory, when really a

week ago, we didn't have water. So yeah, it was rough.

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Sarah Pearose 37:57

But I know others had it far worse. We were lucky at least we had a fireplace. That was a lifesaver. I can't imagine those who didn't have gas to heat up food or any form of warmth. I can't imagine if you had a child, and you couldn't keep your baby warm because my sister-in-law is pregnant, and she's close to the big day. There was many families here struggling far worse. And there wasn't much hope from the government. There wasn't much action until after the fact. I know they started to distribute water and tried to make amends for what had happened. But it was far too late for many people and many families.

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Eleonora Anedda 38:49

Did this situation and what you just mentioned it, did it frustrate you in any way?

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Sarah Pearose 38:55

Definitely. I know you might have heard the whole big story about our senator Ted Cruz flying to Cancun in the middle. It's frustrating because especially starting to work with patients in our community, there is such a disparity. And it's all because one party has money one party doesn't. Basically, if you don't have the money to fund your life, to have health care, to have electricity, to have decent food - and that exists so much in the city - you're just so behind. And there is help from the government, but it's very little help. You have to make a very small amount of money in order to qualify for these things. So there's just a huge sector of people that exist in this gray area where they make a little too much to qualify, but they're really not making enough to live a functional life where they can afford these basic human necessities. With the freeze, it reminded me of how broken our system really is, and how frustrating it is for people who have had to build themselves from scratch.

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Sarah Pearose 40:17

I feel very lucky that I have my parents who did that process. They came with nothing, and they built something, and then that in itself gave my siblings and I a better life. There's so many people who are still attempting to build and they just - the system is kind of set up to bring them down. Those things were really frustrating, and I did notice that. I don't know if this is fact but I just really noticed the more affluent neighborhoods never really lost power. Some of them when the entire, you know, week and they were fine with power

and water versus other parts of the city where they were cold for days. There's there's a lot of things I noticed that are frustrating. But it's kind of a mirror of the US government as well.

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Eleonora Anedda 41:16

What you just said reminded me of the book that I'm reading, and I'll tell you what it is later. We went on a Texas freeze tangent, but you mentioned deciding to wear a headscarf, only recently, a few years ago, and I wanted to ask you if you wanted to share, why did you make that decision? What is it that that brought you to that?

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Sarah Pearose 41:44

I love that question. When I was graduating high school, I saw it as the perfect opportunity because I was going to enter a new era in my life, I was going to go to college, I was going to see new faces. And I was very sensitive about the decision to wear it at that time, because I knew I was shedding my old skin and I was putting on this new coat. And I just jumped at the opportunity that I wouldn't have to answer questions. I knew in a new environment, I would be Sarah with the scarf. I wouldn't be anything before that, so timing was for that reason.

S

Sarah Pearose 42:26

The actual reason behind wanting to wear it, a multitude of things. I think, primarily, I wanted a daily reminder to myself, that I'm a Muslim woman, because growing up in the United States, growing up in San Antonio, where there was a Muslim community, but it wasn't as powerful as the big cities, I often felt lost. I often felt like I had to conform to the majority and be like my friends in school. I often felt that growing up, and I was so tired of that tug, constantly being tempted by morals and ideals that really didn't align with who I wanted to be.

S

Sarah Pearose 43:19

So I decided I'm going to put the scarf on, people are going to see that I'm a Muslim woman, I'm going to see that I'm a Muslim woman. And that's going to serve as my daily reminder that I need to carry myself as a good representation of Islam. I need to speak as a good Muslim woman, I need to get my prayers in because I already have the scarf on, that's step one. I just saw it as the next stepping stone in my spiritual journey. And as soon as I put it on that was when the challenge really began, and I had to start from square one and really discover who I was and who I became with wearing it.

S

Sarah Pearose 44:03

But overall, it's the most positive thing I feel I've ever chosen for myself, and it's definitely hard. A lot of times I - for superficial reasons, for deeper reasons - realized it's a daily sacrifice and a daily struggle, but I think that's kind of beautiful because the the best things in life, you have to kind of struggle over, so it's taught me a lot of lessons and it's, you know, made me more resilient and made me maybe fight harder for the things I want, but I also am grateful for the protection it offers me.

E

Eleonora Anedda 44:45

Yeah, I think it was beautiful what you said earlier about it protecting you and the people that you attract. I never thought of it that way, and I thought it was beautiful that you pointed that out.

S

Sarah Pearose 44:59

Thank you.

E

Eleonora Anedda 44:59

Do you remember the first time that you walked out of the house wearing a headscarf and how you felt?

S

Sarah Pearose 45:07

Yeah, I had to muster up the courage to leave for the first time. My cousin, she came over, and she brought me cupcakes and flowers, and she was like, "Congratulations, you did it!" And I was like, "I did it. But I haven't left the house yet. That's when I can say I've actually done something." And it's so funny, because I know I was saying I was eager for the opportunity where I could show up and be a new person to everyone around me, so I wouldn't have to explain my decision to anyone.

S

Sarah Pearose 45:38

But I actually was still working the same job. That was the one area where I kind of awkwardly just showed up looking different one day. And I remember people didn't even look at me twice, to be honest. A lot of my co workers, they didn't ask me what I was doing, which, in retrospect, I kind of wish they would have brought it up, I wish they would have been like, "Hey, you look different today." So I then started to offer it instead of



waiting for them to ask because I know it can be uncomfortable, and it was a personal thing. I guess I am grateful that they weren't just putting me on the spot and asking.

S

Sarah Pearose 46:20

The first time was for a work shift selling baby clothes. It was a very chill environment. I remember every time I'd kind of explain why I was doing it, I would get a little bit emotional, and it was a mix of happy and I guess mourning a little bit the previous person I was, and how I was kind of letting her go physically. It was a mix of emotions, and then took me a good month. I really got used to it, but the way I was styling my hijab was really funny in the beginning, like I would wear actual like, like scarves around like fuzzy scarves, I would wear that on my head, because I didn't know any better. And so I look back on photos, and I cringe, and I can just imagine what the people were thinking. But it was it was good once I finally left the house.

E

Eleonora Anedda 47:19

Could you elaborate a little bit more on what you said about you offering instead of waiting?

S

Sarah Pearose 47:26

Sure, yeah. I would just jump the gun and be like, "I know, I look different. I kind of just made the personal decision to wear a head covering because I'm Muslim. And it's my choice." I would always emphasize that it was my choice, because I know there's a misconception that this is pushed upon a lot of Muslim women. And in some cases it is. But I just wanted to reaffirm that it was my choice. I would offer that information. And then a lot of times they'd counter with questions - a lot of people just thought it was like, "Oh, it's winter time, you're just covering yourself up because you're cold." Or they just thought I was getting married, and so maybe I had like a new life change, and that's why I was covering up. It was hard for them to understand that I just woke up one day and started dressing more modestly. But I think with time more questions came out and more people understood.

E

Eleonora Anedda 48:33

I just thought of something, because you said you started dressing more modestly. Did you also change the way that you - besides the headscarf - did you also change your wardrobe?

S

Sarah Pearose 48:44

Yeah, that was a slow progressive thing. It started with me just putting long sleeve t-shirts under everything I owned. I think a lot of hijabi women, when they start it's very hard to develop your style, because you have to alter what you're wearing like 50% of my closet was short sleeve stuff or capris pants. I had to get rid of a lot of that slowly and also build my scarf collection. It took me probably two years before I could put together a decent outfit that I'm proud of today. It really took me some time to figure out, "How can I maintain my sense of style, but also wear clothing that is more modest?" And thank God in recent years, it's gotten a lot easier. There's a lot of hijab companies popping up, a lot of more modest options when it comes to clothes. It's a lot easier than it was say 10-15 years ago.

E

Eleonora Anedda 49:50

Do you buy your clothes locally? Do you find that San Antonio has nice stores that you can go and shop into, or do you feel like you have to buy online and find resources?

S

Sarah Pearose 50:07

I used to be a big shopper. I loved just going to the mall here and buying a lot of pieces that just were not sustainable. And then I entered medical school, I wasn't working anymore, money became tight for me. And that's when I realized I needed to invest in pieces that would live on my shelf forever. I didn't want to play into the fast fashion cycle where I'm buying the trending pieces, and then I'm bored of it a season later. Lately, I've been buying a lot less locally, like in terms of the big mall stores. And I find myself gravitating more towards very unique, sustainable pieces. If I'm shopping in San Antonio, it's mostly because I'm like going to a thrift store, to be honest, but most of my fashionable pieces are coming from online boutiques.

E

Eleonora Anedda 51:09

I have one last question. We'll actually two. Earlier, you mentioned that you wanted to tell people that this was your choice, and this wasn't forced upon you. And as you said, this is this is a narrative. And as you said, in some places, it's actually that way, but in Western countries not. How do you feel when, you know, or you read that people are, quote-unquote "concerned" that you don't have a choice? How does that make you feel? And what do you do in that situation?

S

Sarah Pearose 51:56

I think it's so funny when people say that, because you're in the act of accusing a woman - who clearly has a choice - in the act of accusing her and saying, "You're suppressed, you don't have power over your life." You're literally taking power away from her and doing that. I can't take those arguments seriously. If you're going to tell me that I can't cover up, and that I should take my scarf off, because there's more freedom in that, that argument is so illogical. I really think every single woman should have the choice. If she wants to be covered, and she finds freedom in that, that's her choice. If she doesn't, and she finds freedom in that, that is equally her choice. I do see a lot of that online, from on Twitter, sometimes those kinds of comments will pop up in my messages. And I usually don't engage in those conversations, because I just know that it's like arguing with the wall sometimes. I've decided I only put my energy into conversations where I know they're actually listening. And there's a forward and backwards engagement in one another's ideas.

E

Eleonora Anedda 53:28

Understandable. My last question is, it's a bit of a general one. Is there anything that I haven't asked you about that you'd like to instead talk about, or something that we have already talked about, but you'd like to elaborate a bit more? And you can take your time to think about that, it's really no rush.

S

Sarah Pearose 53:52

Okay, let me think. [pauses] I don't think there's anything specifically. I think, unless you have more questions for me, I think I'm okay with what's been said so far.

E

Eleonora Anedda 54:18

I only have one last question, but it's more of a question about the future. This interview will be archived, as I said, and hopefully in 50 or 100 years, someone will be listening to it. And I was wondering if there's anything that you'd like to say to this person? Your hopes and about this world, I guess.

S

Sarah Pearose 54:52

Yeah. Wow. That makes you really think, it's crazy. I just hope the world is better than we have left it. I hope that there's more attention given to taking care of the planet, taking care of one another. Just more emphasis on well-being because I notice a lot of our own personal health is just sacrificed for the system. I really hope that there is true emphasis

on taking care of yourself and taking care of your neighbors. And there's just more progression for Muslims and for women and for minorities and all the marginalized groups that struggle to obtain basic things to live. I hope the world is better than we left it.



Eleonora Anedda 55:49

That's great. Thank you so much, Sarah for doing this.



Sarah Pearose 55:53

I appreciate it. It's so nice talking to you.



Eleonora Anedda 55:56

Great. I'll stop the recording.