

# Obaid Zia

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## SPEAKERS

Obaid Zia, Rimsha Syed

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Rimsha Syed 00:02

Hello, this is Rimsha Syed. I am the program coordinator with the Institute for Diversity and Civic Life. The date is October 17, 2021. I am on a Zoom call with Obaid Zia for the 9/11, Twenty Years Later oral history project. How are you today Obaid?



Obaid Zia 00:22

I'm good Rimsha, how are you?



Rimsha Syed 00:23

Good, good, happy to be doing this interview. Would you like to introduce yourself and tell us where you're joining the call from today?



Obaid Zia 00:32

Yeah, sure. My name is Obaid. I am calling from New York. I was born in America. My family wasn't. I was the first one born here. We moved around a lot. We lived in New Jersey, Massachusetts, Texas. Now I've been in New York for a couple of years now. Background, we're Pakistani, we're Muslim, and my family's been here for about thirty years now, long before I was here.



Rimsha Syed 01:09

Right. Obaid, I want to back up a little and ask if you could talk about your childhood, your family dynamic, and where your parents grew up.



Obaid Zia 01:20

 Obaid Zia 01:20

Okay. I was born in New Jersey, but mostly I grew up in elementary school in a suburb outside of Boston, Massachusetts, and then middle school and high school, I grew up in Houston, Texas, a suburb outside of Houston. My parents however, they were both born and raised in Karachi or near Karachi, their parents having migrated all the way from the other side of India. They came here in the 80s, maybe the 90s, and then I was born later in the 90s, but my siblings are much older, they're a decade older than I am. They were born in the early 80s, so they were pretty grown by the time I was around. They were immigrants, but I was born and raised in the US.



Rimsha Syed 02:15

What was your impression of Texas when you moved, and how old were you, and how long did you live in Texas?



Obaid Zia 02:23

We moved from Boston to Houston when I was ten years old, I think 2006, and it was really like, "Where did we just move to?" We had farm land, and there were cows, and I think at that point I'd only seen cows in Pakistan, so to see cows just roaming around by the highways, by the roads, it was very strange. It was actually a little bit more diverse than I expected. Our school was full of transplants from other parts of the country, so it was a lot of Indian people, Pakistani people, obviously a huge Latinx community, and very different from Boston where it was predominantly Irish, Italian, Catholic, White people. Houston was a lot more different. It was kind of weird because it seemed like we were in a part of Houston where people had been settled there for a couple generations, and all of a sudden there was this influx of people coming in from all over the country. I was there for that conflict that was starting to happen. It wasn't a bad thing, but it was definitely something that was new for the area that we had moved to in Klein, Texas.



Obaid Zia 03:43

The old community was trying to catch up with what was changing, all the changes, urbanization was starting to happen. This was probably where White flight was for Houston, and now we were pushing them further out, so more people were moving further outwards, and the community was definitely going through rapid change around that time. It was very interesting. I was definitely very scared about Houston. I was very scared about moving to the South, and you have all these ideas about what the South is like, about what Texas might be like. But it was very interesting. It was almost as if we formed different communities. You had the community of local White folk who knew each other and knew the town. They were on school boards, PTOs. Then you had all the Brown people. Was that everything?



Rimsha Syed 04:51


You talked a little bit about community, and I wanted to know, did you find it easier to navigate your Muslim, Pakistani identity in Boston compared to Texas, or was it the other way around, seeing as you mentioned that you were around a lot more Brown people in Texas?




Obaid Zia 05:17

Texas was really interesting in that basically almost everyone that I was around in Houston, they were basically from somewhere else. That was very interesting, because that meant that not only did I meet people who looked like me, but we were also navigating this new city, this new part of the country that we had never lived in, because we were

from either the West Coast or the East Coast, or straight overseas. I did manage to find a very good community in Houston. We were very, very proud of our ethnicity. There was a lot of Indians and Pakistanis who were very proud of being Brown. There was a huge emphasis on retaining culture, and it was really interesting how we would support each other in that way. Not that everything was always perfect, or that this wasn't a product of being marginalized by the communities that were already there, the kids who were already there.

 Obaid Zia 06:27

But I did find it interesting how despite being in an area where we wouldn't have expected so much diversity, we had a mosque twenty minutes away, which was something that we didn't have in Boston, where mosques were very few and far in between. Houston is full of mosques. It's many different kinds of people, there are many different kinds of Muslims, different kinds of people from all over the world really. It's a really international city, even out in the suburbs. It was very different. Boston had a much smaller Desi community, a much smaller Muslim community. I think there was also a class aspect of it. Boston's a much more expensive city, so there probably wasn't a lot of extra income for people to form these institutions. People weren't that invested in building community centers or masjids or temples. They were just trying to get by in that community.

 Obaid Zia 07:36

But the community Houston, it was the opposite. It felt like there were a lot of wealthy people, oil people, business people, medical professionals, in an area that was a lot more affordable to live in. We had these magnificent, beautiful mosques all over the city. There's plenty of temples all over the city, there's this big giant marble one in the south of Houston. It was very interesting how that affects it, but I also feel like this passion around our identities that aren't necessarily American was more because we feel like we have to hold on to these cultures, these religions, these practices, just the feeling of community, because I don't think we were fully ever accepted into the communities that were already there, if that makes sense.



Rimsha Syed 08:34

Seems like things like Ramadan and Eid might have been more lively for your family in Houston.

 Obaid Zia 08:41

Yeah. I was the second president of our MSA in high school. I had a very community-minded focus. I knew that this is high school, and then after high school, people leave, they go all over the place. I wanted to make sure that people understood that the world's a little bit more different. It was a little bit more conservative when I got there. Segregation is not always a bad thing, of course, but I made sure that when I rewrote our constitution for the MSA, that we wouldn't have gender segregation, because it didn't make sense that you would segregate during the MSA meeting, and then go to the same hookah lounge afterwards. I made sure to write in the constitution that we would only have segregation if any one of our female members wanted it. If they felt like they wanted and needed it for their own comfort, and then we would revisit it every semester. As a way to kind of loosen things up because segregation does create barriers.

 Obaid Zia 09:52

What I mean to say is that we did have a big community and we were pretty much involved in some way or another.

This was in the context of not only Sunni Muslims having their own community, but we also had a huge Ismaili Shia community who were also very passionate about their own communities. Then we had Hindu communities that were also hosting events. Sometimes they did [overlap] so we would sometimes be able to celebrate together in some sort of capacity. People were often visiting each other's celebrations, functions, Garba, Eid Namaz. There was a lot of sharing and discussion going around. It was really cool, because we would have this big community, a lot of the kids would go to the same high schools around the area, and then we would be able to meet up at the mosque afterwards during Ramadan. We had a bake sale at Taraweeh. It was actually a very interesting, very cool way that these spaces are very accessible for us, but these are also spaces that we had on our own, isolated from the rest of the town or the rest of the city.

Rimsha Syed 11:04

I know that last time we talked, you mentioned that your dad works in the airline industry. Is that the reason why your family moved around a lot when you were younger?



Obaid Zia 11:15

My dad, he's worked for Air France since he was in his twenties. This is around 1980-ish. He was working for Air France for about thirty years. This is how he came to America in the first place. He gets a new job, it's usually at a different airport, so we'd move to another airport city, and this is why we kept moving around. Actually, we were in Boston from about '99 to 2006. We spent about seven or eight years in Boston when he worked at the airport there, and then we moved to Houston.

Rimsha Syed 11:53

Do you have a lot of family here in the States?



Obaid Zia 11:58

My family, I think we were the first ones from either side to come to America. After my parents came here, other people started popping up. I have a few cousins. I have a cousin in Houston who recently immigrated with her husband and their kids. Another cousin in Atlanta, who's there with his family. Then an uncle in New York, an aunt in Boston still. A few people here and there, but most of my family on either side, they're all in Pakistan still.

Rimsha Syed 12:33

Yeah, that's pretty similar to my own situation. You talked a little bit about your involvement with MSA in high school, but I was also wondering if you could tell us a bit more about your religious upbringing and then where you are in terms of your own spirituality in present times.



Obaid Zia 12:53

Yeah, sure. It's really interesting. My mom says that she and I follow different aqidahs, different theologies. It's not the nicest thing to say, I don't think she realizes that's kind of crazy to say. But my family, we're not super conservative, but we are practicing. My dad always says we're simple middle class people. We go to work, we pray

five times a day, and we give zakat and fast, and that's all we need to do. Growing up, I think it was basically just my mom - my mom's always prayed five times a day, and I've always seen that happening. Then my dad always goes to Jum'ah, whether or not I've seen him pray outside of Jum'ah, I don't know, but every job he's had, he's always made sure that he has Friday off just so he can go to Jum'ah. That's basically where I am. Even after I left home when I was about eighteen, I always make sure I try to go to Jum'ah. Praying five times a day is definitely something I value. If I'm not doing it consistently now, it is something that I do think I would have to do or get to do eventually once I'm at that point.

#### ○ Obaid Zia 14:06

Most people I know, they have a religion education as kids, at least Muslims. There's always this big joke that Muslim kids, we have weird vocabulary. "Obligatory" is a part of eight-year-old Muslim kids' vocabulary, and things like that. Most people I know, they had an uncle over phone, on Skype, or from Pakistan or Dubai or something, teaching them, or they go to the local mosque or something and get it there. My mom's best friend, she's a nice woman, she grew up in India. She's from, I think, Lucknow, and she actually taught me how to read Arabic. She taught me Qur'an, and she was actually my introduction into religious education, at least Muslim education. I think that had a big impact on me. She was very kind, she was very patient. If I didn't want to read Qur'an that day, then she would just be patient, and she would make food for me, or I would help her with some sort of chore, and she would talk or she would buy me toys or something. It was very patient. It was very loving. She treated me like I was her own son, and that, I think, made a huge difference in how I perceive religion and how I approach religion. There should be a lot of patience, a lot of love.

#### ○ Obaid Zia 15:38

One of the big things she taught me - even my own mother - I had been taught from a very young age that a Muslim is someone who doesn't hurt anyone's heart, and that really did stick with me for most of my life, and that's where she came from. A huge part of that is that she grew up in India, so her experience as a Muslim was definitely different than my mother's who grew up in 70s and 80s Pakistan, which is very different. It was very much like, "You are part of a community, and everyone else has a community, and just because you don't follow the same things or believe the same way does it mean that they are valued any less than anyone else." I think that made a huge difference.

#### ○ Obaid Zia 16:29

Other than that, I had Sunday school in Boston, which is really cool only because since I was so interested in all these stories that my Ruby Aunt, my mom's friend who taught me Qur'an, would tell me about these prophets and all these stories of the Sahabahs, and it was always really interesting. It was intriguing, obscure history, and I was like, "Wow, that's so cool how it works out like that." Sunday school was just kind of okay in Boston. In Houston, it was kind of weird. I think that's really where I started forming more of a firm philosophy or a firm stance of my religion, where I stand in it and how I want to perceive and how I want to practice it. I always say that it wasn't because of the mosque that I am the kind of Muslim I am today, it's in spite of it.

#### ○ Obaid Zia 17:27

There were little things that bugged me. I remember the first thing I noticed was one of our Sunday school textbooks specifically said something about Muslims don't believe in saints and don't worship at graves, and it was a footnote. And I was like, "That's really interesting. Why did they have to point that out?" Because this is something I was also


taught growing up, that we don't worship graves and we don't have saints in our religion, it's just you and God, there's no one in between, there can't be anyone in between. And I was like, "Okay, cool. That makes sense." But that one line really stuck with me, because I was so intrigued how this was a footnote, but it had to be said, it had to be in the textbook out of nowhere, it had no context, that was just it. It was just a footnote on some chart, I think it was a chart about the timings of prayer. It was very, very strange. That stuck with me, and I started questioning this. I was like, "There must be a history behind this, there must be a reason behind this." I started asking people, learning. The internet I've literally seen evolve over the last twenty years from when I was ten years old looking up things about Islam, and now it's completely changed. Information has changed, the reliability, the sources have changed.

 **Obaid Zia 18:41**

That's where I started questioning things about what I was being taught in a mosque and how this might relate to what our community was trying to do, needed to do. I feel like we all come here from different countries - not all of us obviously, there are Muslims that are here, from here, have been here long before any of the people of my community have been here. But at least in Houston, especially in Houston, you have people coming, at least different heritages from different countries, if not directly from different countries. And since every country is a different part of the world, and religiously has their own spiritual dialect, you have to make a decision when you're sitting in Spring, Texas and trying to figure out what kind of mosque you want to have. I feel like it just became very easy for a mosque to be like, "Alright, let's just stick to the bare minimum." That was kind of a cop out to avoid deeper questions about theology and philosophy and how to keep the practice of Islam up and alive, versus just trying to keep the community alive. I know they're difficult decisions and whatnot, but it is very interesting how the community makes those decisions and decides to do that.

 **Obaid Zia 20:16**

I don't know, I went to a mosque for most of my life, a specific mosque, but it never really felt like my mosque. It always felt like a mosque that would judge me. I remember clearly one time I was making wudu, and this kid told me that I was doing it wrong because I was wiping my neck, and you're not supposed to wipe your neck. I was like, "That's kind of strange. I just think that everyone must do it a little bit differently. There must be a reason for that." But that was the kind of mosque we were in, and that was very reflective of how things were. I remember one year - it's Rabi' an-Awwal right now, and it was Rabi' al-Awwal one year when I went for Jum'ah, and our mosque didn't believe in celebrating the Prophet's birthday, they didn't believe in Mawlid, and that's cool and all, whatever. But the fact that they made the entire khutbah about not celebrating Mawlid, and I just thought that was very strange. It was kind of like, "If you don't believe in it, then you don't have to talk about it for half an hour. You can talk about literally anything else." I don't know, I feel like I went on a tangent, but do you want to direct me to something?

 **Rimsha Syed 21:26**

Sure. I think the second part of my question from earlier was, how do you feel about your own spirituality in present times?

 **Obaid Zia 21:36**

I'm definitely more spiritually and religiously involved than my siblings who grew up about a decade earlier than I did. I feel like that has to do with a lot of external factors, including the reason for this interview. Because I had that - I don't want to say tolerance, because it wasn't really about tolerance. The basis that I had for religion told me that

Islam is inherently a good thing. Therefore if there is something that conflicts with our sense of good or our sense of morality or ethics, there must be a reason for it. Either we have misinterpreted something, you're misunderstanding something, or there's an other kind of logic behind it. I guess it's kind of like apologetics, but I definitely do consider myself a Muslim and a practicing Muslim. I fast every year, I pray when I feel guilty enough about not praying, I try to make Jum'ah whenever I can. I only eat zabiha halal, which is really basic, but it turns out that it's actually not that common as I thought it was. I think out of my siblings, I'm the only one who still keeps keeps zabiha. I don't know why I still do it.

### ○ Obaid Zia 23:09

I'm very into this idea that there is something, there is a role of Islam, there is a way that - especially as Muslims in America, we come here and we build these mosques and then we enter these mosques, and it's as if we aren't in America anymore. It's like, "Oh, I'm in Pakistan now, so I'm going to pretend like I'm in Pakistan." Those cultural values and not just values, but also the bad norms. About how women are treated or even how people of different classes, different ethnicities are treated. These conflicts and this discrimination comes out again in our mosques, and then these mosques are also - I keep saying "mosques." These masjids are actually in a community, but they don't really try to relate to the community. Especially in New York, we have so many masjids in New York, an insane amount of masjids. There's plenty of neighborhoods where there was a masjid on almost every block, which is really cool, really impressive. But it's also like these masjids are in communities, they are forced into these communities that weren't Muslim, that might still not be Muslim, but they do nothing for that community.

### ○ Obaid Zia 24:28

When Muslims came to India, it was very different. It was very much like, "Oh, I am here, I see social issues. Let me help you." It was like, "I see this class divide. You also have value. Come here. Come to my school, my khanqah, and have some food. Then if you want to listen to what I have to say, go ahead and listen to it." They were serving a social purpose. They were feeding the poor regularly, people became dependent on these random Muslims from Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, Iran, wherever, coming here and basically feeding people in villages and whatnot. But they became a part of the community, and this is something that we're not doing here. I definitely do see the value in using Islam as a tool for filling of social role in a society that has a lot of social ills in terms of discrimination, inequality, and just how we treat each other, how do we see our neighbors, and if we can ever see ourselves as part of the communities here instead of just visiting from another country. So yeah, for me, Islam is definitely a motivation, an encouragement to form community with other people, because they are other people, because they're human. Regardless if they're Muslim or not, if they're Christian, or Jewish, or whatever, there are still precedents. When I looked at my religion, I still see precedents, I still see encouragement and guidelines and encouragement to form community ties and bonds despite what differences we may have, because at the end of the day, we are all human. We all have intrinsic value. From a religious perspective we all have a sacred value.

### ○ Obaid Zia 26:33

I'm definitely into religion, I'm definitely into spirituality, I'm definitely into other religions and having this discussion. Middle school in Texas, I met my first Hindu person. I legitimately in sixth grade did not know that Hindus were real. I thought this was a cinematic thing that Bollywood would show because once upon a time, there were Hindus, and so in our movies, we would show Hindus. Then I met a Hindu and went, "Oh, you're real." It sounds terrible and weird, but in Boston, it was a conservative, closed-off, and very tiny Muslim Pakistani community that we had there. Not conservative in the sense that religiously we were zealous, but it was more like we kept to ourselves and things like that. But in Houston, going to middle school and meeting people, we would have discussions, and some of my best friends from middle school and high school in Texas, we would spend hours after school, in school, just talking about

each other's religions and trying to make sense of philosophy and the idea and conception of God through each other's eyes, and how this can inform our own religious experiences. With my Hindu friends, them explaining their perception of God and how God acts and how God is worshipped by them. Them explaining that and me explaining my own perception of God and trying to relate that with them, I feel like this really helped us become better, whatever we are, if that makes sense.



Rimsha Syed 28:15

Yeah, that was lovely. Thank you so much for sharing about your beliefs. Another thing that I wanted to ask is, do you ever find yourself struggling to balance your American identity versus your either Muslim or Pakistani identity, especially as someone who grew up in a post 9/11 world? In other words, have there ever been any instances where you felt like being Muslim was a challenge, whether that's in Texas or New York, where you are now?



Obaid Zia 28:58

When 9/11 happened, I had just started kindergarten, so I was very young. But I did notice, even when it happened, people remember having to leave school. I think for some reason, my kindergarten was only in the morning, so I was already going home the same time I usually do. I thought it was a big accident. But I did notice, eventually I did realize that it was not a big accident. It was actually intentional, and this had consequences for me when I realized how different people were starting to treat me. Literally, I think it happened the second week of kindergarten. The first to kindergarten, I was like, "Oh, I'm Pakistani." They were like, "Oh, that's cool. It's by India, isn't it?" But then after 9/11 happened, it was like, "Oh, you're Pakistani. Oh, you're Muslim. So what do you believe?" It became these very intense religious questions, theological questions, and cultural questions. For some reason, these grown teachers—they all retired while I was there, they were in their 60s, at least—asking a five-year-old deep theological questions. From the beginning, it's always been like, "You're kind of different, and for some reason I need you to be the spokesperson for a 1,400 year old religion practiced by millions of people." I feel like in those situations, you are reminded that you aren't from here, and you aren't part of this community, this society.



Rimsha Syed 30:45

Do you still feel like you're a spokesperson at times? Do you still get intense theological questions nowadays, or do you feel like that's changed?



Obaid Zia 31:04

The questions aren't bad, right? I'd rather people ask other Muslims about their religion than asking non-Muslims or the internet or the television. I do feel like I was put into this position of being the spokesperson, and then I adopted it. This is probably why I'm so into religion and spirituality and my culture, because I had to have all the answers, so I had to find out all the answers. All through middle school, high school, I was the guy with all the answers. I remember World History AP, we were learning briefly about the beginning of Islam, and I had so much to say about it. I was so upset that no one else really cared. It's history class, no one's paying attention. But even later on, I wrote a few articles for The Muslim Vibe, again, soapboxing about my religion, because I felt like the more people know and understand, the better it might be for us.




Obaid Zia 32:13




At some point, I had to realize that we all, whoever we are, wherever we're from, we don't have any less of a right to be here, to exist in these spaces than any White man whose ancestors had been here for two-hundred years or something. We're all from somewhere else, including the White people, White American society, also came from somewhere and we're here, we're here. We should focus on us being here and forming communities and building roots here, because at the end of the day, no one's any less part of this society, just because they're a different color or different religion. At the end of the day, it's the indigenous people who are the true Americans - not "true Americans," but the natives of this land. The rest of us, all of us, we're all settler colonial. If a White man can exist peacefully and independently of his culture, of his community, of his race, of his ancestors, heritage, and past, why can't we? Why can't we be our own individual people?

 Obaid Zia 33:23


I definitely do feel I've always been a spokesperson, and it definitely defined who I am as a person. My siblings, they don't feel like this at all. They never really had an interest. They were probably fifteen when 9/11 happened. They knew a life before 9/11. They grew up before 9/11 happened. They had formative years before 9/11, before 2001. You definitely see the difference, about how we feel about our Americanness. They may feel more American than I do, because there was a time where they were American. Again, "Oh, you're from Pakistan, that's cool. That's somewhere in Asia, right?" Now it's like, "Oh, you're from Pakistan. Are you one of the good ones?" Middle school, we had this one teacher in US history, and she put me next to this one kid who was pretty terrible. He was hardcore racist, White supremacist, and had all the moral justification for it. She put us both in front of her desk right next to each other, just so she could watch us argue all day long. This was an entertainment for her. I don't think she ever realized how traumatic that was, to be sitting next to someone who constantly had something to say about Muslims or about Pakistanis or literally anyone who wasn't White, just for the sake of reaction. This would happen time and time again.

 Obaid Zia 35:05

Nowadays, it's different. I feel like we've definitely grown as a society, as a community. I feel like you can't just ask people that you barely know about their religion. You also can't assume that everyone's religious, that they would know or that they have a relationship with a religion where this is a comfortable question for them. If someone asked me a question about Islam or about Muslims, I would be comfortable with that question, even if I don't like having to talk about it to someone and having to explain these complex topics and issues with all these factors involved. Some people, it's a traumatic question. They may not have a great relationship with their religion or with their with their religious communities, so having someone ask them about their religion could be triggering, it could be harmful for them. I think we've definitely grown as a society in that you don't just ask people, "What are you? Where are you from? Why are you like this? Why do you people do this?" I feel like that's definitely changed, but that could also be because I'm no longer in Houston, I'm no longer in Boston, I'm in New York where everyone's Brown and everyone's comfortable, and Muslims especially are definitely just a part of the culture here.

 Rimsha Syed 36:38

I know that you said you were in kindergarten when 9/11 happened. Do you remember how your parents and siblings reacted on that day, and maybe what they had to say about it, and then how it affected your community?


 Obaid Zia 36:59

My family has a tendency to keep me away from stressful and complicated things. I was five years old, so what are they going to - they were trying to protect me from what was going on. But obviously there was a point where I had


to be aware, and I was aware. For my family, our biggest concern was that my father's name is Muhammad and he works at the airport. It was an airport from which one of the planes had taken off from. This was very stressful for my family, and we were all very scared about what could happen, and God knows if anything did happen. Maybe someone did you know pull my father out, maybe he did have to talk to someone, maybe they did go to questioning, or maybe it was okay in the end. But definitely this was a big anxiety for family, especially because we were so intertwined with the airport. We're an airport family. We can really say anywhere is home, home as an airport. Whether it's the Boston Airport, the Houston airport, Paris, Dubai, Karachi, I think all of us feel most at home at an airport. For this to happen specifically in this way, it was actually very scary for us.

 Obaid Zia 38:16

I don't know how my siblings felt about it, how they reacted to it. I think that's because for them, it was probably a lot worse. Because for me, I was five years old, but so was almost everyone else I knew. Everyone around me, they were all just as clueless and they were just as affected by 9/11 as I was. For my siblings, they were in a community that was predominantly White, definitely conservative suburb of Boston, and they definitely would have seen the shifts. They would have seen their friends changing or becoming suspicious and things like that. I definitely did not have to deal with any change. It just was and is my experience of being an American, which is we are in a post-9/11 world. It's always been like that. I did always have this fear that because we are Muslim, SWAT teams dressed in black were gonna crash through our windows and arrest my parents or arrest my family or send them back. I would express these concerns, and obviously it's a funny thing for a five-year-old to be concerned about. They would always say that I'll be okay because I was born here, and they can't take me out. I was like, "That's worse, because that means that my whole family could be sent away for being Muslim or something, and I would just be stuck here alone." So it didn't really help at all, but this was the kind of anxiety that I would have.

 Obaid Zia 40:07

In school they're telling you, you can do whatever you want. You can be president if you want to, and I'm like, "I want to be president." Then even our own families - I feel like it's really our communities - that our relationship with ourselves changed, with our own religion our own culture. They were like, "You can't be president. You're Muslim, Muslims can't be president." Obviously me being an annoying American, I was like, "Of course I can be. There's nothing in the Constitution that says a Muslim can't be president." But we definitely became more quiet about our Muslim-ness. My mother wasn't ever really that religious. She prays five times a day, but was never outwardly religious. She never wore hijab. But her coworkers definitely knew that, "Oh, she's going to take a five minute break to go pray." My father, his name is Muhammad, and he worked for a French company, so I can't even imagine what he went through, French corporations being as casually racist and discriminatory as they are, must have been very difficult for my father.

 Rimsha Syed 41:28

Thanks for sharing that. As you got a little older was 9/11 something that you learned in school? Was it talked about? I only asked because in Texas and I know a few other states, it's mandatory that if 9/11 falls on a school day, that teachers are required to say something about it. I'm not sure if maybe you had that experience in either Boston or in Houston.

 Obaid Zia 42:01

We left Boston 2006, so it'd only been five years. I don't even think even then anyone really knew the full impact than

9/11 would have on Muslims, on Americans, on the world. In Texas, 9/11 wasn't really ever mentioned. It was always a page in the textbook, but because we weren't being tested on it, it was still a current event for while I was in school, at least, we never really talked about it. We had a moment of silence every single day. I don't know if that was something that came out of 9/11. I remember we had a pledge to the Texas flag, and I think around seventh grade when I had finally memorized it, they changed it, so you have to say "under God." I feel like that had something to do with it. I don't know.



Rimsha Syed 42:56

I think that the pledge to the Texas flag is pretty unique. I hear a lot of people who aren't from Texas talk about how they think it's weird.



Obaid Zia 43:03

So weird. 9/11 wasn't really talked about, but I think that's because for everyone around me, it was a current event. It was a recent event, until we moved on to the next current event, which was usually a consequence of 9/11. It was another terrorist attack, or it was another war, another invasion. It was always something that was either a response to 9/11, or a response to a response to 9/11. That was happening, and that's when things would become difficult, because people would come to school, and they would see us, or we would have our MSA events, and it was always like, "How do we become a normal part of the school culture?" We had at least three Christian clubs. No one batted an eye, no one thought anything about it. It was just "Okay, they're doing their thing, or it's an event." For some reason being in MSA became part of your identity. No one was a Fellowship of Christian Athletes, an FCA person. They would just go to FCA meetings. But for some reason, if you were in MSA, you were an MSA person.



Obaid Zia 44:22

But we tried. I especially tried really hard to make sure that we were normalized as much as possible. So even one year, our homecoming theme was superheroes or something. Every club had to window paint a window in the cafeteria with a superhero or something. We created a superhero for our MSA. Our MSA was called IKON, and we had IKON Man, like Iron Man. It was great. We had the best mural, and I feel like that was really big, this was a very public way for to show us. It's like, "We're not weird. We're not strange. In fact, we're a little bit more creative than some of the other clubs on campus at school." I don't know, did I answer your question? I'm not sure.



Rimsha Syed 45:12

Yeah, definitely. How do you feel about the way 9/11 is presented in media? Have you noticed any changes in that over time, over the past twenty years?



Obaid Zia 45:31

I feel like we're forgetting what happened after 9/11. Yeah, we will never forget that there used to be two towers in Manhattan, and now there's not anymore, and it's because of these random people who wanted to do something. But it's really after that was the big issue. It was a tragedy, yes. But it was also a tragedy of what happened afterwards, this sudden marginalization, or this intense marginalization, the suspicion. I feel like we don't really remember how the country reacted. As Muslims do fight to become more part of American society, we're starting to win federal office. Senators, representatives, state legislators, Muslim mayors. As we become more part of American

society, I feel like we kind of forget what was said, what was done, what had happened not too long ago. Part of that is because Muslims ourselves, our communities, ourselves, we don't really talk about 9/11. It's kind of a taboo topic. I don't know if that's because of fear of saying the wrong thing, having the wrong opinion, having a red flag, or if it's trauma, you just don't want to talk about it again. You don't want to talk about what happened, how your co-workers may have turned against you, how your teachers started treating you differently, how you'd become this unique butterfly, because as recently as 2014, 9/11 was still affecting my life.

○ Obaid Zia 47:38

I turned eighteen, I went to Pakistan the third time in a year, because this is the third cousin's wedding in a year. On my way back, they pulled me aside at customs. I've traveled my whole life at least once a year, if not two or three times, internationally. Knew customs like the back of my hand, knew the process, could do it by myself. Literally in my sleep I've gone through this process. They pulled me aside, had me wait in this room surrounded by a bunch of vaguely ethnic people, and they just asked me a bunch of questions. It was like, "Where did you go?" And I was like, "Went to Pakistan, came through Dubai, whatever." They're like, "Did you visit any northern parts of Pakistan?" And I was like, "No, we don't really leave Karachi." And they were like, literally, they asked me, "Did you go to any camps?" And I'm like, "Why would I go to a camp? We live in the city. We stay in the city." They asked all these questions, and at the end of it, they're like, "Do you have any questions for us?" Or I don't know, maybe I asked them a question. I was like, "Is this going to happen every time I come back into the country?" They said, "Well, since you turned eighteen and you travel, yes, you can expect this to happen."

○ Obaid Zia 48:59


It's such a strange thing. Just because I'm an eighteen-year-old male who goes to Pakistan for weddings, I should be expecting to be treated this way in an airport. After that, I stopped having family pick me up from the airport. I would have friends pick me up, because I don't want anyone in my family to find out, "Oh, he was pulled aside." I don't know, I don't think detained is the right word, but pulled aside for two, three hours after his flight. I would have friends, because I could tell my friends, "Hey, this happened again. Can you come back in a couple hours?" This last happened in 2015. It hasn't happened again after that. I'm not sure there was any reason for why didn't happen again. I definitely did stop going as often to Pakistan and leaving the country after I started college. But it's no mistake that the people in that room were in that room. It's no mistake that they pulled me aside, that I was marked or flagged. This is the remnants of that response to 9/11. Overnight, an entire community became public enemy number one, even if it was just for a short period of time.

○ Obaid Zia 50:31

Straight through that, we're still seeing that effect. In our own communities, we're still kind of afraid of it. I remember I was so excited to be in New York, I'm like, "There's so many organizations here, there's so many different kinds of Muslims here, so many different kinds of communities here that I want to be a part of." I would go to this event and that event. I was really big into ICNYU, the Islamic Center at New York University. And then my uncle, he sat me down, he was like, "I don't want you going to any of these events." Basically, his thing was you never know who's watching and what they're thinking when they see you go to these events. I understood what he was saying, and it sucked, because you want to be like, "I'm unapologetically a Muslim American. I can be Muslim and Pakistani and American at the same time. These are my realities, this is my culture. Everything I do, every day my Muslim-ness becomes apparent. I do something that's because I'm Muslim, or I do something because I'm Pakistani, or because I'm American. But it's a part of my identity, my personality is defined by this."

 Obaid Zia 51:46


You want to be unapologetic about it. But then you have these reminders, even from our own communities, that you have to be a little bit apologetic. You do have to watch out for yourself, even if that means compromising on your own values and principles of, "I'm an American. I should be able to have a right to my spaces and to my own communities and culture." I think that's part of it, too. We forget what had happened. As we become more comfortable in these spaces, I do feel like the larger narrative is being forgotten. As Muslims become more assimilated or more accepted by certain parts of American society - I feel like we do have a socially liberal trend going towards that direction - we shouldn't forget that these things happened to us, and they can happen again to us, and they can and are happening to other people.

 Obaid Zia 52:56


But at the same time, when the Muslim ban happened, it was a big issue in New York, for sure. JFK was full of people who had green cards and whatever, had their papers, trying to get back home, probably had to start working immediately and were stuck at the airport. There was talk - I don't know if it actually happened - but there was talk about people being forced to sign forfeitures of their permanent residency status and things like that. Crazy things were being said and happening. Me and my friends, we got really, really motivated, really empowered. We went to JFK, and we protested, and it was the most beautiful thing ever, because I saw Jewish groups and LGBT groups and LGBT Jewish groups and Latine groups and all kinds of different people who came out for my community. They came out essentially, generally for Muslims because of this ban. That was pretty crazy. You're seeing all these people that your own communities would never stand up for.

 Obaid Zia 54:11

This definitely became an issue more recently. Can Muslims who are politically active, socially active, active in social justice, can we stand with gay people? Which I think is a ridiculous thing, right? Because all I saw that day was a bunch of gay people and Jewish people and non-Muslims, Catholics, feminists, groups standing, yelling, screaming passionately for our communities, and we don't want to give that back. But that is an example, people did respond to us, and we are becoming more accepted. But I also feel like we need to remember that we should be giving that back too. We shouldn't forget what happened to us, what changed us, just because things are quieting down a little bit, things are getting a little bit better. Does that make sense?

 Rimsha Syed 55:09

Yeah, that was beautifully said, I couldn't agree more. Moving past these experiences of existing as a Muslim in a country that doesn't necessarily make it easy, what brought you comfort and what was healing for you in these times?

 Obaid Zia 55:30

Again, going to JFK was actually pretty pivotal for my life. Protesting against the Muslim ban at JFK was definitely a pivotal moment for me. I think that was the first time I actually felt American, because that was the first time I saw - I'm sure, obviously, it's happened - but that was the first time I experienced firsthand other Americans fighting for me, because I'm also an American. Not that being an American is a great thing, or it means anything, it means that they saw me as part of their community. Because as much as our Muslim and immigrant communities may act like, behave like, think like we're just here for a little bit, and we're all gonna go back one day, or we'll always

have some sort of tie, we're here and we're never leaving. I'm never gonna move back to Pakistan. I may visit. My siblings visit, they're never gonna move back. If any of our kids one day ever go to Pakistan, it would be an accomplishment. We are here, and we need to organize and live and think and contribute to the communities here as if we're here to stay, because we are. We are now a permanent part of the society that we're in. So that was the first time where I actually felt that way that, this is a community that I'm a part of, and I'm part of their community. What unites us is that we're here, either by choice, or circumstances, or whatever you have. We're here. That brought me comfort for sure.



Rimsha Syed 57:48

I have one last question for you today. It's more of a reflection, really, but seeing as this interview will be archived, and someone might listen to it several years from now, do you have a message for them? You can speak to what you feel passionately about, or how you hope society might change.



Obaid Zia 58:11

Yes. I thought about this for a while. I feel like 9/11 robbed me of being my own person. It's because of 9/11 that my identity was our questioned. In response to that, I had to become more American, but also I had to have answers ready. I had to become more Muslim to respond to questions, because for me, it was a very hurtful thing that if I couldn't respond to this person's question in an appropriate way, or a nice way, or an accurate way, they're going to walk around and leave with these misconceptions or these ideas, and it just spreads exponentially. One person tells two people who tell fifteen people, and it goes on and on. You definitely see this difference between me and my siblings, whose identity wasn't formed by a post-9/11 society or world. For them, being Muslim and being Pakistani - they never had a survivalist attitude about it. There was nothing to survive, at least not for their entire lives.



Obaid Zia 59:39


My interests, my passions, my ambitions were defined by 9/11 in a way that I can't fully realize. I will never really know who I would be if 9/11 never happened, because so much of my personality and my experiences and, again, my interests and my passions and ambitions, my work, is essentially a response to 9/11. It's created a divide in our own communities. You have a community of people. When I say "communities" now, I mean our Muslim or Muslim immigrant communities. You have a part of our community that grew up, and had formative years and time before 9/11 happened, and had an American experience before then, before 2001. You have another part of society that only knows a post-9/11 world, then you have another part of society that never experienced 9/11, only knows about it through books.




Obaid Zia 1:01:07

I have cousins, I think they're thirteen and ten. Their culture, their religion, their relationship with culture and religion and even language is directly affected by 9/11 in a way that wasn't for their mother, who was born and raised here as a religious Muslim Pakistani, but they will never know that. They will never understand that, because for them 9/11 is something that happened in history. It's as relevant as Jimmy Carter is to my life. I don't know much about Jimmy Carter, I don't know what he did, I don't really have an interest in what was going on in that time. Similarly, that's probably exactly how my thirteen and ten-year-old cousins feel about 9/11. It's just something that happened. They'll never know how much has changed for them. That's what I want people to remember, is that a lot changed after 9/11, and even if things are getting better, they still changed. I feel like it is a bit of a stretch, but with Japanese internment, what, seventy years ago. Today, no one thinks about that. No one really remembers that. Because Japanese


people aren't necessarily discriminated against in that way anymore. But it's still something that happened, and it's still something that we shouldn't forget. We shouldn't forget that this had impacted Japanese culture in America and their relationships with their own identity as Americans.

 Obaid Zia 1:03:05


We should also not forget how 9/11 had changed us in our communities, because whatever we are, however we are, and wherever we get was because of 9/11, whether for better or for worse. Not that this is our main trauma, and we should carry this trauma with us and never get over it and ever heal from it. But you can forgive and you can heal without completely forgetting, without not having learned anything. So that's what I want. That's what I want people to remember. I have a nephew, he's a year and a half old. That's what I want him to know when he's twenty-five. I want him to know that whoever he is, and whatever he is, it's great. I hope he's good and everything. But something had happened. Maybe this isn't the big pivotal thing. Maybe things have happened before that had changed a lot for us as immigrant Muslims in America. But 9/11 definitely changed a lot. Not just for Muslims in America or immigrants in America, but also for a lot of people all over the world, including Pakistan, where all of our cousins are and most of our aunts and uncles are. Their lives also were severely impacted by the events that happened in 2001. Even if today no one remembers and no one realizes and people have forgotten how that line is pulled across. Our rights, our relationship with our communities, our police, our safety. A lot of things happened and we shouldn't forget, and we shouldn't forget what we've learned moving forward.

 Rimsha Syed 1:04:57

Yeah, I agree. That was very beautiful. I know I said that was my last question, but then I realized that I didn't ask you what you're doing professionally in New York., and I would like to know.

 Obaid Zia 1:05:15

Nothing super interesting. I really like chemistry and I wanted to help people, and this is part of my religious background. I was very influenced by a book I found or someone had told me to get. It's a translation of a collection of sermons from the saint Nizamuddin Auliya, who I think is buried in Delhi. He says that the obligatory acts of worship have a set to reward for it, but it's the supererogatory, the extra things, that involved not just the tasbeeh, the rosary that Muslims may read, but also feeding people, and helping others, or bringing benefit to others. That is countless. The service to humanity. I try to fit that in, and I decided that meant pharmacy school.

 Obaid Zia 1:06:23

I came to New York for pharmacy school in 2014. I've been here since. I briefly went back to Texas after graduation, getting my license. I missed New York, they say that now the second best feeling is leaving New York, and the best feeling is coming back to New York. So I'm here. I'm working as a pharmacist in the South Bronx at an independent pharmacy. Can't deal with corporate nonsense anymore. Definitely like having the autonomy that independent pharmacy provides me, and I definitely do enjoy the direct patient contact, interaction with these communities, mostly communities of color, largely Medicaid patients who really rely on pharmacies. In Houston, it was mostly immigrants, Latine communities who probably did not have the documents or the resources to get any kind of government health care, and of course, Texas doesn't have much of a public health program to begin with. People really rely on the pharmacist as a free accessible healthcare professional who will try to help you and doesn't really benefit from helping you, but will still do it. Definitely enjoying that. I'm a health care worker that has a lot to say about race and color and politics as we do.



Rimsha Syed 1:08:07

All right, well, thank you so much for taking time to do this interview. I am going to go ahead and stop the recording.