

Layla: I'm Layla Saad, and my life is driven by one burning question: How can I become a good ancestor? How can I create a legacy of healing and liberation for those who are here in this lifetime and those who will come after I'm gone? In my pursuit to answer this question, I'm interviewing change-makers and culture-shapers who are also exploring that question themselves in the way that they live and lead their life. It's my intention that these conversations will help you find your own answers to that question too. Welcome to Good Ancestor Podcast.

Trigger warning: During this episode, we discussed our guest's experiences with PTSD as a result of sexual assault and rape. This may be triggering to some listeners with similar experiences. Please consider before listening to this episode.

Layla: Welcome, Good Ancestors, and welcome to today's episode. An author, screenwriter, and actress who started a movement with Monday Love Letters to Herself on social media. Reema Zaman is the author of one of my favorite memoirs, *I Am Yours*. *I Am Yours* is the story of Reema's unwavering fight to protect and free her voice from those that sought to silence her. Beginning in Bangladesh, moving to Thailand, then New York, and finally Oregon, *I Am Yours* is an iconic definitive book on the female and the human condition and I'm very excited to announce that the book will soon be made into a movie. Reema is also the author of the upcoming dystopian novel, *Paramita*. In this podcast, we discussed her upbringing and the painful experiences she not only survived but thrived through and went on to a journey of healing, forgiveness, and sharing that love with herself and with the world.

Hello, everybody, and welcome back to Good Ancestor Podcast. I'm your host, Layla Saad, and today, I am here with Reema Zaman, the author of one of my favorite books from 2019, *I Am Yours*. I love the back cover. It says, "To speak is a revolution," and today we're gonna be having a really amazing conversation about the power of voice, authoring your own narrative, and really standing up within yourself and really reclaiming your power. So, welcome, Reema. I'm a huge fan of your work. I'm really excited to have you here.

Reema: Thank you so much, Layla. I am a huge fan of your work, my entire family is. I think they love me more now because they heard that

I'm going to be on your podcast. Like, I am suddenly cool in everyone's eyes which has never happened before.

Layla: Well, you're very cool, very, very cool in my eyes and I wanted — before we open with our opening question, I just wanted to share this with you and acknowledge it to you and sort of give people some insight as well into kind of this sort of dynamic between us. So, I can't remember exactly how I came across your work, somewhere on Instagram, cannot remember, you might remember.

Reema: I remember, it was — I had written a post initially on Facebook and then I screenshot, because it was a long post, I screenshot it onto Twitter and then that went viral and then people started posting it, reposting it on Instagram, and it was me breaking down how presales for an author has a larger ripple effect in terms of publicity and marketing and bookshelves stocking your book and securing that author ahead of time to be on their show or morning news shows and I said like that's one of the single most empowering gifts you can give an author is to pre-buy their book —

Layla: Yes.

Reema: — presales and you have reposted it and I was like, "Oh my God." Yeah, I think I DM'd you where I said like, "Thank you so much," and I was trying to be very cool and chill and then you responded with so much love and abundant generosity and openness and effusiveness. I was like, "Okay, I'm diving right in." And then we started texting these like lengthy missives to each other.

Layla: Yes.

Reema: Yeah, and this was before my book had come out, before your book had come out —

Layla: That's right.

Reema: — and it was just out of this genuine pure love to support and lift each other's voice and each other's work. Neither of us had — I mean, you've always had a huge platform since you started doing your work but, for me, I was like, I'm nobody and here she is taking a genuine

interest in my life and you're asking like where do I live, and then we swapped early copies, we swapped arcs of each other —

Layla: Yes, yeah.

Reema: — this is going to change the face of the world and I sent you a blurb and I think that was the line that your publishers ended up using which is, "This is life changing and world changing."

Layla: Yeah. Well, thank you so much. Yeah, I do remember that post now and how we connected. What I remember though as well is, so I have a particular soft spot for people called Reema, especially spelt R-E-E-M-A as opposed to R-I-M-A because my first friend that I ever remember in my life is called Reema and we were two Muslim girls in Wales, born and grew up in Wales. You know, I'm East African and Omani, she is Jordanian, Palestinian, and we were both going to the same Roman Catholic nursery, right, and then school, so we grew up together. We were the only Muslim girls that knew each other. Our mothers became friends as the only Muslim mothers at the school and we're still friends to this day, right, and I've known her since I was around 3 years old. So, anytime I see someone with the name Reema, I'm always like, Reema, because it reminds me of her.

Reema: Right.

Layla: But then also when I got your book and I read the first page, I was like, I have to speak to this woman because she's incredible and we're gonna talk a lot about your book and your journey in this conversation. But I remember a few pages in, you mentioned your birth date and we are born four days apart in the same year. So, your birthday is —

Reema: Oh my goodness.

Layla: Yes. Your birthday is the 20<sup>th</sup> of November 1983, I am the 24<sup>th</sup> of November 1983, so it's just one of those things. I just felt like this is someone I feel very, very connected to. It's someone I feel a heart connection with and I really wanna have a conversation with.

Reema: This is blowing my mind because one of the — I mean, I just love that we were like born next to each other, like for each other and I

haven't told you this because I thought it would like tip me over to the edge of like, okay, this is too much, so I haven't told — so everyone listening and watching, this is actually new information for Layla. My childhood best friend growing up, her name is Lala.

Layla: Wow. Wow.

Reema: I reserved that piece of information. She's gonna be like, okay, it's too much, Reema, too much.

Layla: No. Definitely we're supposed to meet, yeah.

Reema: And her birthday is May 20<sup>th</sup>, so six months younger than me and so it's like the stars were aligned —

Layla: Yes, I love it. So, okay, we've created this beautiful fan girl love bubble that I hope everyone is joining us in. We're gonna start with our very first actual question. Who are some of the ancestors, living or transitioned, familial or societal, who've influenced you on your journey?

Reema: I love when you ask this question to everyone because it just, from the get go, it opens with so much love and intimacy and vulnerability, I think also, because the people who inspire us are the core of our being. And for me, the core of my being is definitely my grandfather, my maternal grandfather, and I speak a lot about him in *I Am Yours* and in Bengali, you call grandfather *nānabhā'i* and my *nānabhā'i*, he was a revolutionary and a human rights advocate and activist for his entire life. His day job was he was the director of human resources and the director of labor relations and union relations with labor workers and he was born in a tiny village called Ashram in Bangladesh and he got a scholarship to be educated in the city capital in Dhaka and his entire life, because he had one foot in the village and one foot in city life and he was a strapping, gorgeous man who commanded just this quiet presence whenever he entered any room and he was extraordinarily eloquent and known to be an excellent public speaker and, vocationally, he was a published author as well.

Layla: Wow.

Reema: And so between his natural and learned empathy for the disenfranchised and then his skillset of being like exceptional with the written and spoken word, he became a voice for those without one. And he did that as his profession as well as his chosen vocation his entire life. He was a student revolutionary in the Bangladeshi language movement which was our version of our civil rights movement that started in 1952 and he was a college student at that time and in 1953 he was arrested during one of the largest protests in — because Bangladesh, we were advocating for our independence as a country to be separate from Pakistan so the country of Bangladesh, people know Bangladesh but we used to be East Pakistan and West Pakistan used to house the main government and through decades — and this was decided after the partition of the Indian subcontinent and India became its own sovereign country after the British colonialists left and gave us back our freedom.

Layla: Right.

Reema: And West Pakistan and East Pakistan were grouped together, though we didn't share any land or boundaries or resources but all of our resources would be siphoned over to West Pakistan and we were seen as like the minority ethnic group and the minority half of this larger nation. And, ethnically, we are different and we speak a different language. Pakistanis speak Urdu while Bangladeshi, we speak Bengali, and we were banned from speaking our own language and therefore practicing our culture. Even our Nobel Laureate, Rabindranath Tagore, who so many people are familiar with his poetry and his novels, it was banned. His work was banned in the state media and we weren't allowed to read it, so all of these things — and as we know, language is the root of culture. Language is how we share bedtime stories with our children, language is how we pray, language is how we pass down ritual and story and narrative and the narratives that are spoken to us or about us are how we create our identity. So, everything comes from language and how we see ourselves represented and how we choose to speak about ourselves and how others speak about us and so our right to speak our own language and to have it not only decriminalized but to have the freedom to do so and to practice our culture, that was our fight for independence. It wasn't over oil, it wasn't over resources, it wasn't over money, per se. It was the right to speak and so "To speak is a revolution" is the foundation of my country and certainly the foundation of my family and my grandfather was, again, he had this amazing ability

to inspire and mobilize audiences and so he would speak at demonstration, he would lead demonstrations with his — he had a very natural stoic grace and strength and he would inspire people to expand their courage and step into what was right and he was arrested as a college student like I mentioned and he was expelled from university and so he went to community college and he finished his degree there and then Bangladesh, we won our independence in 1971 and then, yeah, on February 21, 1971 or 1972, and that was our international language rights movement, you know? Yeah, so from there, he was everything from me and he, you know, him being an author, all of his work was published in Bengali and so when I was in the tenth grade, he recruited me to take dictation while he was translating from Bengali into English and that was our project until he passed away from cancer a few years later and so my life's work is to finish what we started, in every sense of the word.

Layla: Yeah. I know that you opened or the acknowledgement, the opening acknowledgement in your book is to him and that's really powerful hearing about what his story was and the nature of your relationship with each other. It's really amazing to me how, you know, we are here in our generation, right, in our lifetime, and we think we're the first to have ever done what we're doing, right? But we look back and it's like, no, we're just that — we are the legacy of those who came before us.

Reema: Absolutely, and he was so values driven and not in an angry way or in an antagonistic way. It was always with tremendous dignity and grace. One of my favorite stories is when he was 4 years old, he witnessed a cow being slaughtered for Eid, for the feast of Eid, and he asked his parents what's going on, and they said, "Well, that's how we get beef," and he made a decision then and there to never eat beef again and I'm fully vegan and my transition to veganism was exactly the same where once I learned certain things about the way we conduct ourselves as a human race, as a species toward other animal species, it was just a very clear and simple decision and no matter what kind of temptation — like temptation doesn't register to me, like I understand it intellectually and my mother says I get this from my grandfather where discipline has been like who we are.

Layla: Right.

Reema: If we see something that we need to stand up for, we will do it and it doesn't require arduous effort because I think that is the way we feel or register empathy. It's a value and it's a vow.

Layla: I love that so much. Thank you for sharing that and I see, as I'm hearing you talk about him, I see so much of exactly the characteristics you're describing about him as what I see you are so it's incredible. You are his legacy and it's beautiful.

Reema: Thank you. We have the same hands. Like nobody in my family has these hands except for my grandfather.

Layla: Wow.

Reema: I know, and we literally make a living with our hands.

Layla: Yeah, and your voice, yeah. So I wanna talk about your book, *I Am Yours*. I wanna tell you my experience of reading it but I would love for you to tell our listeners, you know, just what this book is about. My experience of reading this book was from the very first page I was pulled in. I felt like I was having both an intimate conversation with you and an intimate conversation with myself and I just wanted more. Like, I remember just curling up and I want more and I wanna read more and it felt like this great generous gift that you were giving to the world and so I wanna thank you for this book. You call it a shared memoir and it truly, truly is. So, tell us what is *I Am Yours* about?

Reema: Well, first of all I received that and I hold that and thank you so much. You described precisely what I was hoping to give which is I think love is how we heal and I wrote the book that I needed to heal and I believe that, by virtue of being human, if I were to share it with other humans, it would have a healing component for other people who have gone through similar traumas and so that's why I wrote it. I actually wrote an entirely different version called **[inaudible 00:18:58]** and I wrote about 70,000 words of that and it was all in the third person voice and I was talking about myself as though I was a case study and I was studying other people too and I was trying to keep this very clinical distance because I thought that's what readers want and readers would respect a clinical distance —

Layla: Yeah.

Reema: — on a self-help book.

Layla: Right.

Reema: But it was like here's my soul.

Layla: Right, right, because this book is not that. This book is — I felt immediately inside the story. You talked about your journey growing up, right? You're a third culture kid like me so you've lived all over the place. You actually began your journey pre your birth which I found really amazing actually just hearing about your mother's story and a little bit about that, you know, your siblings being born, living in different countries, some of the really harmful experiences you've had, both as a young person and as a woman, your marriage and the intimate partner violence that was involved there, and then ultimately your reclamation of yourself, your finding back of yourself, and throughout is this beautiful thread of — this is how I interpreted it: an ongoing conversation with your inner voice, your own inner wisdom, and what struck me is often we talk about like — we talk about finding your inner voice or remembering your inner voice. That conversation often comes from like the adult self trying to remember, but what I really loved about your book was that it was — it was always there so the voice is there from day 1.

Reema: I think we are born with our voice and then the world does things to take it away from us. I positioned the inner voice as though it's my imaginary best friend growing up because perhaps that's what our inner voice feels like when we're children and then adults or the adult world tells us, "No, that's silly. Don't play with your imaginary best friend. Don't speak to them," even though like children are some of the wisest vehicles of truth that we know and we're blessed with and, yeah, I think the world's wounds and assaults can really rip us from the wisdom or the pure channel that we're born with, and so this book was about reclaiming that pure channel of truth that lives at the centrifugal core of all of us. And we position that as, yes, there's been a lot of books where it says, you know, a woman is reclaiming her power or wanting to be the hero of her own journey, but it's usually like free will



accomplishment. You know, if I achieve this in my career, if I achieve this in my personal life, I will have reached the summit of my existence and my calling and that's beautiful. I'm all about results and achievement and fulfillment, but I believe it begins with understanding that everything we need comes from within and that's why one of the parting mantras and especially on the final page is "You and I, we are truth. All we need, we have." And I think from that, anything becomes possible, once you truly understand and can take hold of the strength that lives burning inside of us.

Layla: Yeah. Yeah. You talk about some really important themes in this book that many women face and no men, right, in this world. You talk about it obviously because it's a memoir from your own personal experience, the culture that you grew up in and all of that but I think this is across cultures. This is something that across the world, you know, women are expected to play certain roles, to be a certain size, to have a certain volume, right, to take up a certain amount of space, to be in certain spheres of life and not in other spheres, and throughout your story, you talk about many situations where you, in trying to just express your full humanity and your full self, were time and time again told to take up less space, told to be smaller, told to be quieter, told to self-betray, right, and self-harm, right, in order for other people to feel comfortable. As you've been telling your story to other people, what have you found as people tell their stories to you about what they heard for themselves when they read your book or heard your story?

Reema: Yeah, I love that. The commonality and how any act of personal courage ends up having such a tremendous ripple effect on anybody else who comes in contact with you, whether it's through the written word or in person, and how love given to oneself becomes a revolutionary act then because it becomes contagious and it encourages others to start practicing that same self-prioritizing.

Layla: Yeah.

Reema: Another thing I realized is so much of the narrative that I was given about being small and that won't take up space, it's also because I never saw myself reflected in an empowering way on TV or film and that is also internalized as I need to not take up space at all because I don't see myself reflected, or if I am to take up space, it is to take up in the

role of a victim, and for Bangladeshi women and girls, and this is true of many people who come from cultures of color, in Bangladesh, we only see ourselves depicted as these clusters of starving, impoverished, brutalized women and girls who have no education and no rights and that's the only image that CNN or BBC or television and media have ever given Bangladeshi women and so of course we internalize that as, oh, we are the narrative of perpetual victim and *I Am Yours* is ostensibly loving and it's also, yes, there are insecurities that I deal with and self-harm that I deal with but I made sure to also always use the voice of self-empowerment and that being my ultimate goal is to fight, to claim my power and my agency and my voice, because I wanted to introduce a new kind of narrative for Bangladeshi women and girls to see themselves in, a narrative that is inspiring and motivating and empowering as opposed to be victimizing and re-victimizing and just empowering.

Layla: Right.

Reema: That's where I mean so much of our work overlaps and being the ones to tell our own story and through an empowering lens instead of the continual victimizing lens that white saviors or white media have thrust upon us by hijacking our narrative.

Layla: Right. It's really powerful. I love that you spoke about the importance of the intention of the energy that you put into writing the book because the stories that you tell throughout, which do involve violence at different levels, right? Whether it be emotional or other, it's easy because of the culture and the climate and the world that we live in to become hooked into that narrative that is being told, right? To hook into the narrative of "I am a victim," right? It is hard being me. I only see these images being reflected back so to actually take all of that and say, "I'm going to tell my story but I'm gonna tell it from the intention and the energy that I choose and not the one that is the norm," that takes a real level of — it takes a real level of sovereignty, it takes a real level of self-knowing as well as an awareness of who benefits from the narrative of me as the perpetual victim and who is harmed by it.

Reema: Thank you. Thank you so much and I have to do a lot of work on sussing out how to talk about rape in a way that wasn't disempowering or how to talk about emotional abuse that didn't feel disempowering for

the narrator because I have certainly never been taught how to do that, how to hold hard truth and hope and empowerment all at the same time. The book came very quickly but it was the process of finessing a particular kind of voice and a new kind of language with which to portray myself and, therefore, portray other people who found themselves reflecting the narrative, that was the part that I spent the most time on. And how to not skimp on specificity or the harshness or brutality of detail but also make it feel like even while you're reading it, it is healing and empowering in and of itself.

Layla: I think that's where we, again, have a lot in common, right? Because that's what I really tried to do with *Me and White Supremacy* and now as I'm writing the young readers' edition, I'm also thinking about those same questions: How can we write something that doesn't skimp on the truth, that tells the truth the way that it needs to be told but that even as the reader is reading it, even as they're going through the process and they're having to face those hard things 'cause they need to be faced, they leave the work with a feeling of there is compassion here. There is grace here. There is empowerment here. There is forward movement here or some hope here because we can get lost and I'm thinking about is the fact that you're writing — you've been writing a dystopian novel.

Reema: Yeah.

Layla: And I want you to tell us a little bit about what that is but as I was sort of reading up, you know, on what you've been to and reading about that you've been writing a dystopian novel, my thoughts immediately went to Octavia Butler, right? Who's been so present with so many of us this year because so much of what she wrote about we are seeing play out now and we're having to access where do I go with this, like what do I do with this? Do I devolve into anger and frustration and fear or is this an opportunity for me to step up?

Reema: Right.

Layla: How is that process going for you, and how is it different to writing a memoir?

Reema: I actually — so, I finished the novel. I started in April — on April 6<sup>th</sup>, thank you, so the bulk of my income comes from writing coaching, client 101, and then speaking gigs, and because so much of my work has to do with survivor rights and healing and recovery after sexual assault, April is usually my big media month. So, that's where I had budgeted my — most of my year's income coming from this April but then everything was canceled and how you and I operate, we're like necessity is the mother of invention. I'm in complete economic despair. The world is in complete despair. The only proactive thing to do right now is to take action, and so I started writing a book on April 6<sup>th</sup> because that was the biggest speech that was canceled from April 6<sup>th</sup>, and I was like I need to do something to empower myself, and I sat down and I wrote the outline and then I just charted it and I — it's with my agents right now and we have a meeting on discussing which publishers to send it to, so, yeah, it was April 6<sup>th</sup>, I sent it to them on October 5<sup>th</sup>, and I like — and I stress that because I think right now, necessity is the mother of invention and desperate times calls for desperate measures but also we are so capable of rising to the opportunity.

Layla: Speak a little bit more, yes, speak a little bit more about this because I'm thinking about it in the context of being a good ancestor.

Reema: Exactly, and so it's like if you tap into the greater channel of what is being spoken about, talked about and discussed and then what can be parsed from there, that's where this book comes from, because there's two narrators, one of them is a white woman, a 39-year-old genetic scientist and vaccine biologist in 2020 who is recruited by the President of the United States to invent a life-saving vaccine —

Layla: Wow.

Reema: — for a pandemic that has swept the globe. The other —

Layla: Sounds familiar.

Reema: It's alternating chapters between these two first-person narrators, and the other narrator is her mixed-race granddaughter, 80 years in the future, in a nation called Paramita, a country formerly known as the United States of America, and she's 18 years old and she's 39 years old and they're part of each other's journey in real time as well

as across time and basically I asked myself can there ever be a villain without a hero and can there ever be a hero without a villain, and, if so, what does that say about humanity, that we are each capable of both heroic feats as well as villainous acts and what lengths would we go to to save our children from demise or protect the human race from demise. If we had all the science and political power at our fingertips, what are the limits to how far we'll go? And so I stretched that and played with that —

Layla: Can I get an arc as soon as it's ready?

Reema: I'll send it to you literally like, because I've been sending it to my closest girlfriends to get their blurbs. Of course.

Layla: Please, please blurb me in. Tap me in for a blurb because —

Reema: I'll e-mail it to you —

Layla: Sounds amazing.

Reema: And because what I do is the entire of utopian cultures is that we become free of racism, misogyny, and violence of any kind, and so one of the challenges I gave myself is how would a matriarchal regime come into power without spilling a drop of blood? And you see them achieve this without spilling a drop of blood, because also my background is in Hollywood and Hollywood seems to think that violence is how you sell movies, carnage and bloodshed is how you sell movies and how you create a blockbuster and women are not capable of violence, and, therefore, we can never be their lead of a blockbuster and, therefore, we're given less money 'cause we have less box office value. So, I wanted — as a writer, my challenge and happy challenge to myself was could I create a political thriller without spilling an ounce of blood?

Layla: I can't wait to read it. So excited to read it.

Reema: Thank you.

Layla: Something that really strikes me about you, Reema, is I think people really underestimate you. I think that they see you and I think

you've spoken about this, right? They see you and they see this very petite, small, pretty, you know, woman and that you're very soft-spoken, right, you've got a soft voice. You have fire in you. You are fierce, right? How does it feel being underestimated and when you flip that on people, you know, what is that experience for you?

Reema: I used to get so angry about it, of course, and I used to physically revolt against it. I cut my hair into like a punk style for 10 years and had it spiky and different colors and I had eight piercings over my ears and I used to wear like silver skull earrings in middle school and I was really proud about, you know, being caught out of dress code 'cause finally people would like understand I have fire in my belly, and then like once I learned the power that is language, it became my sword and I didn't have to raise my voice literally or figuratively anymore to get heard and I really loved this quiet power that is burning in my belly at all times and usually under camouflage because people underestimate me constantly, even — sometimes even after they've gotten to know me and I don't take it personally. I believe it's because of our global indoctrination that strength looks like a particular kind of tall white man —

Layla: Right.

Reema: — and I am the picture of soft, demure, manners.

Layla: Right, and then we have, right, racist stereotypes around Asian women being more demure, right? Not having power.

Reema: And so I actually really enjoyed now having that social camouflage though I think I may have outed myself with this dystopian novel so I don't get to use it as much, but it also means that so many people, they'll say things in front of — my entire life, people have said things in front of me thinking I don't register it or I'm not going to remember their misbehavior and then I just come home and I write about it.

Layla: Power. Power.

Reema: Especially male people.

Layla: Yes, yeah. Throughout I think, you know, talking about this idea of being underestimated, you talk a lot about that in the memoir and I think in particular, you know, and I'm sure for so many people, the chapters where you talk about your marriage and that relationship, right, which is the place from which this memoir really was born was you finding yourself back on the page. Were you underestimating yourself?

Reema: I love that question and it means — 'cause you understand me so well. Yes. I signed up for that coupling or that form of partnership because after being discouraged to own the true expansive volume of my own voice or potential, I had molded myself into a small version of myself and that's the kind of man I attracted and settled for and I thought it was — I was willingly choosing the man who is now my ex-husband and was my first husband, not that I have a second husband yet, but whatever, you'd be like, wait, wait, wait, that kinda sounds, but no. I had signed up for a smaller version of myself and so I naturally attracted a man who wanted that version of me, and then as I started to develop my writing voice, it infused me with more confidence and I started developing more agency and a sense of authority in my own life and decisions and I started butting up against the walls of this relationship we had created and he would look at me and he'd say, "You know, usually the narrative goes that the man changed, but in our case, you're the one who's changed," and I'd say, "I know. I'm growing too big for the confines of this relationship," and in the end, it was a decision between remaining loyal to him and the contract we had, the emotional contract we had, not the legal contract but the emotional confines of that contract, or being loyal to my future potential, and because he was so threatened by my developing voice, that manifested as psychological abuse toward me and he tried to do everything to dissuade me from myself, basically, from standing up for myself. And as I would write about us, first just to unpack and parse out what was going on, I started noticing that abusers, they thrive on three things: They thrive on the feeling of dominance, they thrive on anger, and they thrive on fear. Also, of this, we need to talk about legal abuse which is I had immigrated to the United States on a student visa —

Layla: This part really got me, by the way. This part of the book really got me.

Reema: And this is why it was so important for me to write my memoir because it's a topic within the larger section of domestic abuse that we don't cover and I certainly haven't come across any other memoir or potential movie that covers immigrant abuse inside the domain of domestic abuse or intimate partner abuse, and so, when we met, I was on an artist visa that was sponsored by my acting and modeling agents and we met when I was 25 and I was steadily growing my resume and my portfolio in order to get to a place in my career where I could then sponsor my own green card and path to citizenship, and when we met, he never really proposed. He proposed a plan which he said, "Let's get married. It will be better for healthcare, taxes, all of that, and, this way, I can petition for your green card through marriage and you won't have to be working so hard to get it eventually yourself," and because, again, like I mentioned, I had signed up for a smaller narrative and a smaller narrative of potential that was possible for me. I thought, well, this is so romantic and he said, "I wanna be the reason why you're in this country." Isn't that romantic? And I fell for it. And we got married within like 6 or 7 months of meeting and we didn't have a ceremony because we knew it was like we're doing this for the green card and the taxes and all of that, the tax cut, all of that first, and then we'll have a ceremony with our families later, and later never arrived. But here I was, my voice was developing, my strength and confidence was developing. He was butting up against that and becoming more and more emotionally and psychologically abusive as I grew and I couldn't initiate leaving because he started threatening me with deportation and he would say, "You know, it's illegal what you have committed," and we'd be like having dinner and watching Netflix and I'd be like, "What are you talking about?" and he'd say, "You know, it's called immigration fraud if you get a guy to marry you just so you can live in this country," and I was like what are you talking about and it was just this other form of abuse that he started using and he started calling me his wife for greensies, not for realsies, just any way to invoke that feeling of dominance so —

Layla: I remember reading that part out to my husband actually because it just —

Reema: Oh, wow.

Layla: — it so struck me — because as you're telling the story of you falling in love, right, and you believing this was your magical fairytale



marriage and you went in so open-hearted to hear things like that from somebody who you think loves you the way that you love them, right?

Reema: Right.

Layla: It really blew my mind. I found it extremely hurtful and also just — it's so trapping because —

Reema: So trapping.

Layla: — what do you do in that situation, right? It is a legal situation now that you're in.

Reema: Right. People will ask me, "Was it really difficult to write the chapter where you were raped?" and I say actually, that was more of like I just had to compartmentalize and clinically go through that and the thing is I don't have any emotional attachment to the man who raped me. The harder parts was writing those conversations in the bed of intimacy when my then-partner turned to me and tried to make me feel more invisible than air, you know?

Layla: Right.

Reema: And to reduce me to dust because that's how abuse works is the abuser tries to completely dismantle your sense of self-worth and confidence because the more insecure you become, the more domineering and controlling they can be, and so, anyway, this is actually why I started keeping a journal again because I wanted to figure all of this language out of what was occurring in my marriage and the more I wrote about us, first of all, I started creating this body of knowledge and I started recognizing I'm actually smarter than everyone has thought or allowed me to think of myself as —

Layla: You got underestimated.

Reema: Yeah, being underestimated and falling for that narrative of my own self, I underestimated myself and I was like, oh, I'm actually a good writer and then I started using the same language and the talking points I was developing on the page against him to stand up for myself during arguments he would try to spark, and I would just give him these like

conjugating points back and forth and he would just get so flustered and I would stand my ground and I decided that, okay, if he's gonna threaten me with deportation, I know I can never leave on my own, so, I will have to come up with a plan to get him to think I am so insufferable he has to get rid of me and so how do you do that with an abuser? Well, abusers crave and thrive on the feeling of dominance, fear, and anger, and so I decided I would not allow him my fear, my anger, or any sort of subservience to make him feel dominant and therefore latching on to me. Abusers need someone to abuse and I wasn't going to be someone who's abused or giving him that satisfaction, and so I just started being emotionless and dry and stoic whenever he tried to pick a fight or tried to get me to cry and then one day he called me while I was babysitting and he said, "Don't come home," and I had a backpack, I had two sets of clothing, I had gym shoes, and I had sandals. I've just given him all of my money because it went to our mortgage and I would keep like little bits of money away for my citizenship process that I was still holding on to getting on my own, but everything else would go into our life together, you know? And I was going to make \$60 that day from babysitting and I had my laptop and I was so grateful 'cause he released me and I said, you know, I have my voice, I have sixty bucks and my laptop and my freedom. I am limitless. I can do anything now.

Layla: Wow. I wanna say congratulations on getting your citizenship.

Reema: Thank you.

Layla: You did it on your terms, in your way. Having just reflected on that time, right, and when it was so at risk, how did it feel to get to that stage and know that you had done it on your own terms?

Reema: It was incredible. It was incredible and, as you know that the book is being adapted and developed into a movie —

Layla: Yes!

Reema: — and my co-writer, my brilliant co-writer, Dara Resnik, when she heard me tell her the story of what it felt like to be in that final interview with a woman who is a naturalized citizen originally born in Ethiopia, looking to her face, speaking with her, one of the questions she asked me was, "Oh, I see here on your form that you are divorced. By

law, I have to ask you what led to the circumstances about that divorce,” and I said, “Irrevocable differences,” and she said, “I’m sorry, I’m gonna, by law, I have to ask you to elaborate,” and I said, “He didn’t want me to thrive,” and she looked at me and she gave me this look and she said, “I know that story, and I hear that story so often sitting in this room,” and then she asked me, “So what do you do?” and I said I’m an author and she said, “I’ve heard of your book,” and she started tearing up and I started tearing up —

Layla: I’m starting... Like chills.

Reema: And she goes, “Okay, so that’s how you are petitioning for your own right to live in freedom of choice in this country,” and, for her, it was a full circle. For me, it was a full circle. She asked me six questions about US history and I had memorized like a hundred answers and I answered those questions and then she signed this slip of paper with her name and 1 p.m. being the ceremony time that day and I was like, “That’s it?” and she goes, “Yeah.” We were both like it just took a few minutes and three decades and a few hours later, my parents and I and my aunt Trudy and my best friend Claire, we were all in the ceremony hall together and there were 75 people who were sworn in as citizens that day and I remember watching the video recorded by Trump juxtaposed with all of our hopeful faces and I was like people can either choose to believe he is America or we are America, and I am choosing to believe that *we* are America. These 75 hopeful faces and our loved ones, who are willingly choosing to be part of this country to say I will fight for justice and my freedom of choice and they swore us in in 25 different languages. It was incredible and, Dara, my writing partner, she was like, “That’s our final scene of the movie,” because, naturally, it’s like we leave off — *I Am Yours* has this very young, tender girl voice —

Layla: Yes.

Reema: — and we really wanna end — and we leave on the note of like now that I have my voice, now that you have your voice, we can do anything, so let’s go into the world and we wanted to give the next chapter of who this woman becomes now that she has her voice in her hand.

Layla: Yeah. One of the things that I write in *Me and White Supremacy* is it's — on the chapter on "White Silence" and it's the sort of disclaimer note for introverts, right, because I'm a card-carrying introvert and I know that white silence is an excuse that white introverts will lean on as the reason why they don't speak up for social justice and against racism and the quote that is in there that's often quoted, I've seen it a lot on social media, is you don't have to be the loudest voice but you do have to use your voice.

Reema: It was that chapter in your book that made me weep the hardest and I stopped taking notes because I was just writing, transcribing the entire chapter after a while because I completely would like — as introverts, we feel that so deeply and then also as women who in all cultures we are told to be the quieter half or the quieter demographic —

Layla: Yeah.

Reema: — and so we feel it in so many ways and then we're discouraged from taking up space or being too loud whereas a man's loud voice may be seen and encouraged as a voice of confidence.

Layla: That's right.

Reema: And how this can be so corrosive for the directly disenfranchised and the indirectly disenfranchised by those people who feel now through white silence or silencing of any kind, we then feel less encouraged to use our voice to stand up for justice.

Layla: Right. I think a huge part of it and sort of linking to, you know, what I was really struck by as I started reading your book was how uniquely unique your voice is. It was like I was reading and I was like I've never read anything like this. It's not even the story that's being told, it's the way that it's being told. It is not like anything else I've seen before and like you said, you are a writing coach, right? So you're working with clients who I'm guessing are learning how to develop that voice. You know, what are some of the pointers that you give them for really tuning into their voice? Because if I kind of hark back to maybe 10 years ago, 8 years ago and I was looking at certain writers who I admired and there is that desire in my heart, I wanna be a writer, I wanna be a published

author and I wanna be just like x person. I wanna be exactly like x person, right?

Reema: Right.

Layla: Then I'll be fulfilled once I'm exactly like them. How can I make my writing like their writing? How can I make my voice their voice? How do we switch that off, that voice off, right, and tune into our real voice and not the performance voice?

Reema: Yes. Oh, thank you so much, and by the way, I fall in love with books that are written by authors who have a very unique and strong sensibility and sense of comfort in their own voice and that's one of the main reasons why I felt you in the room with me, you were speaking to me and I think this is why your book is so beloved and it taps into people's hearts because you're speaking from your authentic being as opposed to, yes, you are teaching but you are holding our hand and sitting next to us while doing so and you're not putting on a performance of any kind and that gesture of trust put into the reader is something that the reader appreciates so much that I'm giving you my most intimate, authentic voice and so we willingly take the journey and want to take the journey with you because we feel safe to be just as vulnerable and intimate as you are being with us.

Layla: That's exactly how I feel about your book.

Reema: But I just wanna talk about your book. I think both of our work is love heals.

Layla: Yeah.

Reema: So why take on somebody else's voice or a performative voice or an affected voice or the voice that white education systems have told us we need to adopt in order to be heard? If love heals, let's speak from our most soft, tender space.

Layla: Right.

Reema: Yeah, and so that's the work I try to do with people who come to me for writing advice. The first thing I ask them is I send them five

questions to answer that are writing prompts for them to journal on and the first question is when was your first experience or memory of being silenced or witnessing someone else being silenced, and they're like I asked you for writing advice, why are you asking me about — why are you asking me about my trauma and wounds and I'm like because everything comes from there.

Layla: Right.

Reema: Because you already have an authentic voice. My job isn't to teach you a voice, my job is to heal the wounds that have been stuck on top of them so we can peel back to get to your most tender self.

Layla: Isn't it so interesting that we don't want that to be our voice, right? That we often don't want our real voice to be the voice that other people hear or see because we are so uncomfortable with our voice. We are so uncomfortable with those parts of ourselves that aren't good, aren't kind, aren't generous, aren't happy, right, all of those things, aren't confident, courageous. We don't want other people to see that. We don't wanna see it.

Reema: And it's about like addressing ourselves with enormous compassion and grace and to not shame and to realize we have all adopted different costumes and different performative voices or performative personas because as armor and so to answer your question, it's like how do we let go of the performative voice? Well, we first have to identify and diagnose and accept the specific wounds that led to that performative voice. Heal that. Figure out the real wound, roots of that infection, heal that infection, which requires courage. As you know in your work, everything is courage and love which is it is impossible to heal a wound until we garner the courage to successfully diagnose and accept the roots of that wound.

Layla: Right.

Reema: And then once we do that, then we have a strong enough foundation to step into our authentic voice. And then we do the actual like writing exercises to like learn style and finessing all the structure and all of that but that's — that can only come —

Layla: That's something —

Reema: — after we've finished healing.

Layla: That's right, because it's — you can know all the words, right, and you can —

Reema: Craft —

Layla: — and write all of that but if it lacks you —

Reema: Yes.

Layla: — you, that it's an energetic thing. If it's not there, it's not there.

Reema: It's not there, and I think when people say like speak from the heart, that's what they mean, but there needs to be like an entire book discussing what that means. Because it sounds so simple but it's not. It is the life's work. It is our life's work.

Layla: Yeah.

Reema: And then once you've gotten that, then you're like, oh, everything's easy breezy.

Layla: I definitely have found on my journey as a writer and an author that the work that it takes to produce this took all of this, right? To produce this one beautifully put together book took blood, guts, sweat, tears, but it takes so much of us and, you know, as I'm in the process of writing the young readers' edition for *Me and White Supremacy*, one of the things that I think — I think I said to a friend as I'm digging into — 'cause I have that same intentionality as you. I don't want my pain to be what's in here as someone reads it, right? I don't want that to be what's on the page, so as I'm writing — well, before I'm writing, it's like I've gotta do a lot of research and then a lot of processing, and I said to a friend it takes a lot of pain and violence to create something that is soft and loving and compassionate. We have to actually process a lot and I imagine as you were working through your memoir, not only did you have to go through those experiences but then you had to process them then you had to write them, right, and come to a comfortability within

yourself to reveal these things first to yourself then to other people. It's beautiful to me as I'm reading it, right? I'm just like this is so lovely and there's pain there but I feel very empowered and I feel — I'm inspired by this woman and all of those amazing feelings but the process is an alchemical one.

Reema: It is. It's alchemy, that's exactly, and the mantra I use and what I try to teach students is speak from the scar and not the wound.

Layla: I've heard you talk about this. Yeah. Tell us more about this.

Reema: Well, everything has a process. Healing is a process and so is self-development and first like identifying your voice, tapping into your voice, and then learning how to use it in a way that is never exploiting your pain or leaving your pain onto the page and in the process making others feel re-traumatized, because I believe all art is medicine and service and so that is our ultimate goal that we're trying to resolve, service.

Layla: Yeah.

Reema: And when I see people who are young in their path confused, writing with open therapy and just gushing on the stage or gushing on the page, I have immense compassion for it but it's premature public sharing because it is not proving any service to the audience which is the reader and it's only re-traumatizing the artist and the people in their vicinity, and, you know, there is like so much — you're right now in a creation season while also being public but the creation season and then when you hand your baby over to your agent and then your publisher while they take notes and they — waiting for weeks and sometimes months, everything requires patience and there are so many seasons to this growth process. The growth of a book but then the growth of a self too and to understand nothing can be rushed through. Yeah, so we can work at a disciplined clipped pace but at the same time, you cannot rush through the formation of your ideal voice, and then the final draft of a book.

Layla: And you can't rush the process of a wound becoming a scar.



Reema: Exactly. And it requires active participation in one's own healing. It's very rare that a family or a parent will teach a child how to navigate pain and discomfort without running away and dropping it like a hot potato. A dear close friend of mine went through a breakup recently and she was missing this person and I said, you know, it's okay, it's natural to miss. It's not a signal that you need to take action on it. You don't need to feel pain or discomfort and nor do you need to run into the missingness and wallow in that feeling or call him or do anything. It's actually a natural part of the process. I'm a practicing Buddhist and we speak a lot about like I see the sensation, I've registered the emotion, and I'm letting it pass. And with pain, we've been — yes, biologically, we're designed to feel discomfort in the presence of pain but so in *Paramita*, the dystopian novel, I did a lot of research into how fear and pain are processed in the amygdala and neocortex, so pain is a physical response and that happens in the neocortex but then the amygdala processes four parts of the neocortex and it processes memory, sensation — there's four parts, you'll read about it, but, anyway, so the amygdala is the one that tells us how dangerous the situation is and what we should do in reaction to the pain —

Layla: That's right.

Reema: — so anyway, that's all to say the presence of pain doesn't mean we need to run away or fight it immediately. Sometimes we can just experience it, learn from it, metabolize it —

Layla: Right.

Reema: — let go of the things we don't need and keep the things that we can learn from. And so I always talk about metabolizing trauma as opposed to like navigating or managing or releasing. Metabolizing it. And that's when we get into the scar tissue.

Layla: That's really beautiful and I'm really thinking as you're speaking the word that you said that really — or the phrase that you said that really stuck with me was exploiting our pain or exploiting our trauma, right? And I think always but especially this year and this time, black, indigenous, people of color are expected to exploit our pain and our trauma and to parade it out in the world to prove that we are hurting,

that we are scared, that we deserve, you know, equity, that we deserve dignity —

Reema: Right.

Layla: — and it takes a lot not to buy into that narrative, right? That that's what we should be doing, that that's the only way to get the people who have white privilege to care and I'm in a period right now where I'm actually drawn in because I'm in my wound. I'm not in my scar tissue, right? I just love how you spoke about it because it's about distinguishing, like am I in my wound or is this a scar that I can use to teach and speak from from a place of empowerment or is this me needing me, like I need me right now, right?

Reema: And a wound is a tender space. You know, it's like tender flesh right there and it's new and it's young and scar tissue, the actual science behind it is that it's skin or bone that has — the cells have regenerated with greater specificity and toughness and durability. It is there to help us stand stronger and to understand that there is a natural rhythm to that. Our bodies are scientifically designed and equipped to understand how resilience works. Our bodies will heal if we allow it to and if we're proactive in it and I love that you're allowing yourself to sit in that introverted, tender space because you also know that if you start picking at it, it will only get bigger.

Layla: Right, right.

Reema: You can't — don't pick at a wound, just let it be and do what you need for your own self and I love that we're sitting in this like narrative about exploiting our pain doesn't do us any service and then also I've seen so many well-meaning white saviors or white allies exploit our painful, victimizing narrative and that's what they're flooding social media and the news cycle with, thinking that they're showing up for us —

Layla: Right.

Reema: — but bombarding, especially the black community, bombarding the black community with horrific images after horrific images isn't

doing anyone any service and what does it say about us as a human race that we need to see people be brutalized —

Layla: Right.

Reema: — in order to tap into empathy?

Layla: Right.

Reema: Shouldn't we challenge ourselves to feel empathy in the presence of someone else's joy —

Layla: Right.

Reema: — or success?

Layla: Right. Why can't we reach empathy there, right?

Reema: Yes.

Layla: Why does it have to be in the presence of pain and violence?

Reema: You can be inspired by joy, by celebrating. Yeah, it's important to read the books of historical brutality but then also to celebrate each other's incredible accomplishments and joy.

Layla: Yeah, absolutely. I wanna end this conversation, before our final question, and I'm thinking about — when I read, like I said, when I read your book, it's an extremely intimate book. I felt invited into your story and I felt like I was witnessing the story of a single woman walking through her journey and reclaiming herself but as we go through the story, I feel like this is not a single woman, this is me. This is us. This is you. This is everyone. The times that we're in right now are unprecedented. We are facing a global pandemic, racial injustice, which has always been there, has risen to new heights, and not to get into politics but, politically, there's a lot of turmoil. As we think about reclaiming our narratives 'cause that's what I read in your book, that is the theme for me, it was reclaiming my narrative of who I am and what I want my life to be about. Collectively, we have this opportunity to collectively reclaim our narrative about what it is to be a human being,

right? What it is to — the joy and the responsibility of it, right? What do you want to see? What is that hopefulness that you're tapping into of, you know, our higher angels, our higher selves?

Reema: Right. I want people to feel inspired to be of service as opposed to burdened that they need to use their voice. It is a privilege to have a voice. So many of us have spent lifetimes and generations fighting to have the freedom to exercise our voice and so for those who have one, to use it with a sense of immense gratitude, to be inspired to serve instead of burdened to serve, which is to stop thinking about service as a burden, to stop thinking about helping each other as something to check off on a checklist of "Was I a good human being?" It's like I want people to feel called.

Layla: Yeah.

Reema: That is what I would love us to evolve into, where we are called out of love for each other.

Layla: What is love to you? What do you mean when you say love? What is your definition of it?

Reema: It's so simple to — equal opportunity for everyone and to fight for that right for everyone, you know? I don't think it takes much to love. I mean, I think it's the state we are born in. We are born into love, and then we're taught fear. We're taught hatred. So, maybe love is the most purest version of ourselves. And, yes, we think that it's easiest to love those we are safe with but what if we switched that and just realize that the lack of safety again comes from being told that we need to hate or be cruel or that others are — all of that, it's just — means love is purity, to have innocence.

Layla: Love is definitely the voice, the inner voice that I heard in your book throughout, the voice that is always there, it's constant, it's loving in a warm and kind but it also tells the truth.

Reema: Yeah, and have boundaries too, because it's — the same with like I believe in forgiveness but not by means of forgetting and not by means of not making amends and reparations and action to right historical wrongs and I'm also not of the school that says I will love

blindly, but I do think that we need to start challenging — like the people who are driven towards divisiveness and not listening to new voices, that's my hope for them is that they can put aside their fear and listen and engage with more love and courage, to expand, I think like right now it's such a — in this deep time of turmoil and unrest, maybe it also means it's an incredible opportunity for expansion and change.

Layla: Yes.

Reema: In the presence of any disparity is the presence of hope and we can hold hard truths and hope in the same hand because hope without hard truths is naivety and impractical and it's not specific and intentional hope and then hard truths without hope will kill us.

Layla: Right.

Reema: So we need both moving into the future and both require love and courage.

Layla: I love that so much. Reema, before our final question, I just wanna take a moment to thank you for your being, your presence in the world, for your incredible work, your book, your future coming book which I cannot wait to read. I wanna congratulate you — Yes, please do, I'll keep hounding you until you do. I wanna congratulate you on *I Am Yours* eventually soon becoming a movie and I cannot wait to watch it. Thank you for inspiring us and for bringing your full self to this conversation. I know that I am leaving this conversation feeling incredibly inspired and tapped into my own hope and a realistic hope, a real hope, and not just a fairy sort of half hope. It's real solid hope so thank you for helping me to reconnect to that place within myself and to our listeners too. I just — I cherish you and I thank you for being here.

Reema: I cherish you and I adore everything you are doing. I love that you are taking this season to be inward and to still be of service to so many people and keeping conversation and giving your presence to me and I'm just so grateful that you exist and that you have children so there are more of you because I love knowing that there are these two young people who get to like learn from you directly all day long because then I think about their bright, golden futures of how they will carry on your legacy. And I love that, yeah, you're in a loving marriage

and that you help each other become stronger and more confident versions of yourselves. I mean, I think some of my favorite parts of your book is when we get to peek into your home life and it's such an intimate gift you give us. I mean, every word of it.

Layla: Thank you.

Reema: Thank you.

Layla: Thank you. Alright. Our final question: What does it mean to you to be a good ancestor?

Reema: It's to continually show up and do the brave work. To continue fighting for equal opportunity for all human beings, that's the legacy my grandfather left for me, and to show up in all the different ways, you know, from reading *I Am Yours* and from knowing me personally that I segued into writing because I'm a trained actress and that was my profession for 10 years and I couldn't see any role that I fit as a Bangladeshi woman that wasn't a stereotype or a disempowering narrative and I didn't want to perpetuate misogyny and patriarchy and racism in order to get a check and I realized, well, then, the only way to change the paradigm would be to teach myself how to write a role I could be proud of and so I built this woman that people now know me to be. And I built someone who my daughter could be proud of and my son could be proud of in the future. And what's interesting is now, as we are in deliberation with Hollywood about how we want to adapt this into a movie, so many conversations begin with another person saying, "I just love the script. It is perfect for my — this actress of mine who has 3 million followers on Instagram and this is a beautiful, inspiring role, and I wanna give it to her," and it's such a meta journey —

Layla: Yeah.

Reema: — because being continually called upon to stand up for my value even when I have written a story about a woman standing up for her right to voice and then somebody is saying that they want to recast the woman with another, more famous actress, so that's what I mean but like to continue the fight will occur in any shape or form and in all forms and to be willing to endure and make yourself heard over and

over again in order to serve the larger message we were each born to ambassador.

Layla: Thank you. I, for one, am so grateful that you built yourself into the woman who I'm talking to today so thank you so much for your inner work that has led to this incredible outer work.

Reema: Thank you so much. Thank you, Layla. You are a gift in my life and a gift to so many people's lives and I am so grateful for the generosity and abundance with which you share your knowledge and self.

Layla: Thank you, Reema. Thank you.

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