

LOVE PERIOD.

WITH REV. DR.
JACQUI LEWIS

Loving Yourself Unconditionally
with Wajahat Ali

Jacqui Lewis: Hey everybody, Jacqui Lewis here. Welcome to the second season of Love. Period. This season we're focusing our conversations on my new book, Fierce Love. A bold path to ferocious courage and rule breaking kindness that can heal the world. Each of my friends will be helping me to think about the themes in each chapter, nine practical practices that can help us love ourselves, love our posse, and then love the world into healing. It all starts with you and we're going to give you practical tips to make these practices a part of your life. In order to kick us off, I invited my friend, Waj Ali to come and be with us and talk about the theme in chapter one, love yourself unconditionally. It all starts here. We know you loved Waj in the first season and I'm just delighted to have him back.

Jacqui Lewis: Hey, Waj Ali, hi.

Wajahat Ali: Reverend Jacqui, pleasure to be on with you again. I didn't offend or upset too many people last time, so it's good to know that you had... Or maybe you're really desperate and the person that you wanted on like Hasan Minhaj or Sanjay Gupta said no and so you went in your brown person Rolodex and just said, "Waj, get him." I'm like the Tony Randall. This is a deep cut, I'm the Tony Randall of Reverend Jacqui's podcast.

Jacqui Lewis: That is so [inaudible 00:01:27].

Wajahat Ali: Tony Randall used to just, like whenever Johnny Carson needed somebody, he goes, "Tony."

Jacqui Lewis: Let's get Tony.

Wajahat Ali: And he was just like sleeping under the couch. He goes, "What?"

Jacqui Lewis: You're just terrible and funny but actually you're my favorite Wajahat in the world.

Wajahat Ali: I'm the only Wajahat that you know.

Jacqui Lewis: That's why I called you. Tell me what your name means, what's that about?

Wajahat Ali: Wajahat is a name that you should probably not name your kids in America, you don't want them to be teased. But it is a Pakistani name but it's arabic root, and it means one of good face, one who's esteemed.

Jacqui Lewis: One of good face, one who is esteemed. And your mother and your father say it like with a rapidness and a certain kind of syllabic, go for it, say it one more time.

Wajahat Ali: Yeah, so it's like taking out a katana and just stabbing somebody, like, "Wajahat." In America though, for whatever reason, everyone has an accent, it's the language, in American we break it up and we go, "Wa-ja-hat."

Jacqui Lewis: Which makes me feel like a Star Wars character or something.

Wajahat Ali: Wajahat is it, the Wajahat are coming. Prepare the armada.

Jacqui Lewis: The Wajahat. They're coming right now. Exactly.

Wajahat Ali: What does Jacqui mean? Jacqueline?

Jacqui Lewis: Oh my god, well Jacqui means hip, pastor and a red lip, that's what Jacqui means, but Jacqueline is the female French of Jacob and it means heel grabber. What the heck, mom?

Wajahat Ali: That's honorable.

Jacqui Lewis: Did I seem like a heel grabber when I was in there? I didn't have a twin, I wasn't grabbing any heels, what's that about? I don't know.

Wajahat Ali: It means that if I was to put a very hallmark positive spin on it as a politician I wouldn't say that you're grabbing onto those that are moving forward and making sure that you're bringing along the rest who are marginalized, so you're the connector.

Jacqui Lewis: Okay, all right. That kind of satisfies, but mostly I'm named after Jacqueline Kennedy, and so was my cousin Jacqui, so that was just weird. We were two years apart. And whenever you're hanging out, your mom's like, "Jacqui?" And you're like, "Who do you mean? Which one of us?" But both of us named after Jacqueline Kennedy, two black girls.

Wajahat Ali: But Jacqueline, Jacqui has an energy to it, Jacqueline is just so regal. So both names are just really like, but Jacqueline, can you imagine someone being named Jacqueline in 2021-2022?

Jacqui Lewis: I don't know, I don't know, but I like Jacqueline I really do like it and I just don't love that it's associated with grabbing heels and stealing birth rights, I just don't love that part.

Wajahat Ali: You want it to be associated with fierce love.

Jacqui Lewis: Exactly, exactly. Great segue. So Waj, I'm holding my book while we're talking. I had it here as a prop so I could tell you, I'm holding it, I am.

Wajahat Ali: Look at that, look at that. That's amazing. It's the hard cover official copy of Reverend Jacqui's book that's out next month. And you're telling me that you just got it?

Jacqui Lewis: I just got it. As we're speaking, it's mid-October and they just came into the warehouse. You know, there's an issue with publishing, books are not coming. Mine are here. And my wonderful publicist, I'll say her name, Christina, she's great. She got a copy, wrapped it up in gold paper, and then she put it in a brown paper bag and messengered it to my house. So my husband thought it might be porn, but then he was like, "Probably not."

Wajahat Ali: He's like, "I won't judge, I won't judge."

Jacqui Lewis: Exactly. But we opened it up and we took pictures and it was very excited.

Wajahat Ali: We talked about this before, before recording, but we didn't get too much into depth about it, but when you held the copy of the book, was it like, because I held a copy of the galley of my book, my book's out in a couple months, and again for folks who don't know, the galley is like the unofficial version that the publicist sends to reviewers. If you review it, you're supposed to check for actual quotes, it's like 99% finished. But the real copy that you just had, that's what's going to be in the bookshelves, that's what people are going to see in like Hudson and Barnes & Nobles. Did you feel like when you held it it's like a child almost, like I'm holding my child close to me?

Jacqui Lewis: I really did. And by the way, I see your galley behind you, so let me ask you how that felt. That looks really good back there. I like the color, I like the text. I really did work on this book in different iterations for nine years. Nine. Is it going to be self help? What am I trying to say? What am I trying to do with it? And I really wanted, Waj, for us to just stop where religion is the weapon and the killer of people and the divider of communities and to get a different kind of feeling about God, which you and I both believe in God. But I realized that I wanted actually secular people too to find their way into the book. So I shifted to talk about love, fierce love. And I feel so proud of it, it took nine months to write, during COVID and post-fire. But it's out, it's here, and it does feel like it is my lifelong everything I believe in nine steps. That's how it really feels to me, like this is my sermon in nine steps.

Wajahat Ali: And you said nine months, but it actually more accurately took you nine years, because people sometimes forget that. Like I wrote a play back in the day, but if you measure how long it took, it probably took me four or five sittings, but it took me four or five sittings over two and a half years. So when people ask you like, "How long did it take you?", that's the gestation period. And for you, it's like your life. You could not have written this, I think we're talking about that, like you sit there and you think to yourself, "Well, people say it's just a book," and I say, "Of course, in the grand scheme of things, I have no delusions of grandeur, this is just a book. One of thousands of books that is released every week. And what does it mean? Nothing. What does it mean? Everything. Everything." It's because you would not have been able to write that particular book, Fierce Love, which is coming out, if you did not live your life and experience what you experienced.

Jacqui Lewis: That's so true. That's really so true, Waj. And my publisher was so, I mean my agent Todd was so great to kind of read the world two years ago and say, "Now's the time, Jacqui." Also, he just had his pulse on what was happening in the world and we all were suffering with all those tragic, horrible killings of black bodies. Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor and George Floyd. So he read the world and my publisher, Marnie, just was such a good midwife, is what I want to say. So that really does work in that metaphor with the baby, like she just helped me push it out with a light editing hand. I had such a good time writing, I really did. Did you have fun writing your book?

Wajahat Ali: You know? Yes, the answer to your question is yes. But I'm assuming based on what you've told me to get started it took years for you, right? Nine years.

Jacqui Lewis: Yes it did, nine years.

Wajahat Ali: And it's very interesting, I think that's almost how long it took me because my agent who's just a great guy, PJ Mark, he signed me like in 2011, and I was supposed to deliver a book to him in 2012, and I just couldn't crack it. I just couldn't start it, I didn't know how to structure it or frame it. I felt like there was a fire hose of information and year after year it goes, goes, goes. And then finally, it comes to a point where, and I think we were talking about this quote earlier, it's this great Miles Davis quote, "You have to play a long time before you can play like yourself." And I feel like you have to kind of ease into your skin through time, and you need the

mileage. And I felt like during COVID, during the pandemic where it seemed like everything else was falling apart, this was an act of creation.

Wajahat Ali: Like I felt like now is the time, just like you I felt now is the time, like I felt it. And once I was able just to crack my brain around how to structure it, I remember I started this book, the first draft in August, last August, and my editor was like, "Okay, well I'll see you in six months." I'm like, "No, no. I'll finish this before my 40th birthday in three months." She goes, "Ha. Sure." I'm like, "What? No." She's like, "Sure. When you come back in November, I'll expect an email saying three more months." But I did it and I just flowed and it was like 450 pages, don't worry the final book isn't 450 pages, but once I started writing it it just came to me, like it was there. But I said before, it's easier to sit there and say, "Oh, I wrote it in three months." That's incorrect. It's a 40 year journey. I would not have been able to write this at the age of 30, and I'm sure you wouldn't have been able to write this five years ago.

Jacqui Lewis: No, that's right, Waj. Such a similar experience, really. Sitting outside in my yard, typing, typing, typing, it did come out of me as though it were water or had already been written and I was transcribing, like taking dictation type of thing. That's how fast it came out, and it flowed out of my soul and I've read enough of the pieces that you're putting in the world about your book that your book flowed out of your soul, which is why I wanted you to come and talk to me about this particular part of the book, which is how to love ourselves. I just feel like you and I are, I'm a couple years older than you, I shall not say how many.

Wajahat Ali: But I look older than you, so there you go.

Jacqui Lewis: Do you look older? I don't think so.

Wajahat Ali: Absolutely. Black doesn't crack. Black ages regally. And apparently, asian doesn't raisin, but I'm like the outlier, so there you go.

Jacqui Lewis: That's so funny. Listen, I do think I look kind of close to your age, I'll give that to myself. But you and I have had such a similar experience, Waj, of what it means to learn to love yourself, what it means to learn to love yourself despite the container, the atmosphere, the environment, the crappy stupid words that you get told, the way the word treats muslims and black people, we learned how to love ourselves. But we really learned how to love ourselves. And I just wanted to make sure you and I had a chance to talk about why is it so hard? I want to put an F right there, but I won't. Why is it so hard to raise babies, to raise children, to raise adults in a culture that's just so full of hatred? Why are we like this?

Wajahat Ali: So it's coincidental that we're taping this podcast today, middle of October, and I really just had no idea, just last night I guess in the back of my mind I was like, "Oh yeah, we're going to do this podcast." To answer your question, late last night I tweeted something, a thread that kind of went viral. My daughter Nusayba, who's five years old, born and raised in this country, stage four cancer survivor, about two months ago she just told us, "I don't like my skin color, I want to be white. I don't like brown skin." And it was just like a gut punch and my wife and I were devastated.

Because you have to realize, we did everything in our power for the past five years to affirm her beauty and we got dolls of color and all the children's books an Moana and Princess and the Frog and affirmed her for her beauty, especially when she was going through chemo. And then she just said this. And we're like, "How could we have failed? What do we do wrong?"

Wajahat Ali: And we realized that the insidious reach of whiteness, not white people, I'm talking about whiteness, the narrative that centers white skin and blue eyes, no matter how much we put a fortress around our daughter and Insulated her and protected her and uplifted her, it still creeped through. It still creped through, through the narratives, through the dolls, through the images, through the social media. That this five year old beautiful girl, just stunning-

Jacqui Lewis: My gosh, she is beautiful.

Wajahat Ali: Would look at herself and say, "I don't like my brown skin." And so for the last two months, I was just like, "THere's no way in hell, man. There's no way in hell my daughter's going to grow up like this." So every day for two months, my wife and I, what I do is I'm like, "Nusayba, look at you. Nusayba, that skin. Oh, I wish I had that skin. Oh my god, look at that brown skin." But at the same time, while not either giving her a superiority complex over other people. And telling her and the brother and her baby sister that she's simply one color amongst the many beautiful colors. Allah made her this way. And other people are whiter or beautiful and other people are blacker and beautiful, but Allah made her this way, and she's stunning. And so yesterday, last night, randomly while looking in the mirror she goes, "I love my brown skin. You know? I really do." And then she puts on a little makeup, she's five years old, she's a little diva, she's putting on some eye makeup, she goes, "When I did that eye makeup, the white eye makeup on my skin, I look really beautiful, so I love my brown skin."

Wajahat Ali: And I'm telling you, the whole night I was on cloud nine. Like until 4:00AM I couldn't sleep. I exhaled, I was like, "Sarah we did it, my God." And I'm like, "May she Inshallah always consider herself valued and loved and beautiful." But thank you for letting me indulge in that story. But you asked me this question, and that's what we have to deal with. We have to deal with this, where my five year old daughter thinks she's less than simply due to her skin color. And so how do we protect our children? How do we protect ourselves? How do we tell them that, "Your nose is fine. Your eyes are fine. Your hair is fine"? How do you make them not hate themselves and their name, their multi syllabic name, their ethnic culture, their ethnic food? It is an act, it is an act of resistance, a daily act of resistance.

Wajahat Ali: And the thing is, resistance is exhausting, it [crosstalk 00:16:06]. People say, "Resist Trump. Resist. Resist." And I'm like, "Yo, I also got to pay my bills and I got climate change and I'm on the wrong side of 40."

Jacqui Lewis: I got to take a nap every now and then.

Wajahat Ali: I want to take a nap, I'm tired. What happens if my mask broke? Did I freaking wash my hands before I shook that person ... It's exhausting. And so, I think the flip side of that is also joy. And I think the power of joy and investing in joy. Because joy is also an act of resistance, to have joy in spite of thousands of years of narratives that make you hate yourself, the way you look, that make you hate yourself for the shape of your hair, that make you hate yourself

for the colors in your food. And I feel like this is one of those situations where you have to put in the work, because in the absence of the work, whiteness will win. And so the hope is, and sorry for my Ted Talk here, the hope is that I'm willing to put in the work so that my children inherit a different narrative.

Jacqui Lewis: Amen. Amen Inshallah.

Wajahat Ali: That's why I did the book. And honestly, the book is dedicated to my kids. It's for Ibrahim, Nusayba and Khadijah because I want them to write the next chapter, but I don't want to be saddled with all the crap that you and I had to go through.

Jacqui Lewis: Oh, my gosh. That is such a good prayer.

Jacqui Lewis: Waj, I want to pick up right where we are there about for our kids. I did not have babies out of my body, my eggs were old by the time I was happily married to John. They were like, "Nope, no thank you." But I have two grandchildren because in my marriage to John, I got a son. So people might get pearls, they might get cows, they might get a house, I got a son. I got a son that came with the marriage and his name is Joel. And I love him so much, he's sweet and we fixed him up with one of the young women in our church, Gabby. So I am a matchmaker, just in case you did not know.

Wajahat Ali: Oh, there you go, classic auntie.

Jacqui Lewis: Exactly, auntie Jacqui. And we have two babies, Octavius is 18 months and Ophelia's three. And so they're biracial kids, Gabby is Jamaican American. Do I hear little babies? Have them say hi.

Wajahat Ali: Nunu, come here and say hi to Reverend Jacqui. Come here and say hi, my beloved.

Jacqui Lewis: Hello beautiful.

Wajahat Ali: Say hi really quick.

Jacqui Lewis: Hi.

Wajahat Ali: Hear that? Say hi.

Jacqui Lewis: Who is this princess? Who is this gorgeous girl? Hi.

Wajahat Ali: Say Nusayba. Hi, .

Jacqui Lewis: Hi, Nusayba.

Wajahat Ali: We'll be right back.

Nusayba: Hi.

Jacqui Lewis: Hi. Bye-bye.

Wajahat Ali: Let's go. Let's go.

Jacqui Lewis: I just share your passion for thinking about how to create the world we want for our kids, and how to set a table for the kids to make the world better for their kids. And the thing that has to be absolutely named and addressed is all the ways whiteness, I call it that too, the white supremacy narrative, the junk that's in the universe about blondness and blue eyed-ness, the way the church, I'll critique it, has got all that stuff wrapped up in there. The white Jesus who doesn't exist and the white supremacy that pretends to be the way of God. I just throw my whole world at that, Waj. This is my work in the world is to dismantle racism, to dismantle homophobia, to dismantle Islamophobia and antisemitism so our children can be in a world that lets them love themselves. Like they have to have a world in which they can love themselves, so they can love other people, so they can love the world. Because if they don't, if there's a hole in their soul where love should be, what kind of a hot mess world is it going to be?

Wajahat Ali: Amen.

Jacqui Lewis: Right?

Wajahat Ali: It's so difficult, right? it's one of those things where people say, "This is just nonsense. Pie in the sky, airy fairy liberal talk." But you see so many damaged people. I have so many colleagues and friends my age who it took them years to love themselves. They changed their name, they changed their eyes, they cut their nose, they hit aspects of themselves that in no way, shape or form they should be ashamed of. They don't eat with their hands, they ridicule their ethnic foods, their mom's accents, because you were told that your stories don't matter, your stories don't have value. And it's not like your parents sit there and give you a lesson, it's like my daughter, where did she get it from? You just absorb it all around, it's all around you. It's like Coronavirus. It'll get you.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah, it is. It's in the air. And in a kind of psych way, me PhD's in psychology and religion.

Wajahat Ali: Oh, fancy.

Jacqui Lewis: This idea of the kind of container we create in which the stuff in it is harmful to the child. So the N word, the F word, Osama Bin Laden and the you're a terrorist and your story of being outside for how you look and how you believe. The weight consciousness in our nation, the decision about what's beautiful, the who fits in, the who's the norm, the who decides. And the ironic thing of how our nation is allegedly built by people who are looking for freedom but came here and created a culture that wasn't free for anybody but themselves, that really breaks my heart. Did I ever tell you the story about Lisa?

Wajahat Ali: No.

Jacqui Lewis: How I learned I was an N word when I was little.

Wajahat Ali: No.

Jacqui Lewis: I was in kindergarten living in New Hampshire with my mom and dad. I was not old enough to live by myself, so I lived with my parents because I was five. And they were in this white community in the Air Force. I was the only black kid in my class and I had two friends, Tommy, Holly, Tommy Hollister, who were my neighbors, we walked to school together, we walked home together, we took naps together, because that's what you did when you were exhausted from playing with blocks. And they were my buds. So then this little girl named Lisa moves to town from Mississippi. And she's a little white girl with green eyes and whatever how she looked. Stage whispers, sits between me and Tommy, Holly, and stage whispers, "Why are you sitting next to that nasty N word?" "Why are you sitting next to that nasty N word? And don't you know she gets chocolate milk from her mother's

tits?" What? I had never heard the N word from my black parents. And chocolate milk from her mother's tits. It was like, "What? Milk comes out?" I had no idea what she was talking about. But I knew she was being mean, I knew she was being nasty.

Jacqui Lewis: And it was a defining story, Waj, for me, of like before that I'm just Jacqui, Emma and Richard's kid. And after that, I'm outside, there's something wrong. And my mom greeted that story with, "Jacqui, that's so silly. Of course white people aren't better than black people." And helped me to pray about it. I'm praying, "God, let it be that no matter what people are, they feel loved." That was my childhood dream and prayer. And then my dad was like, "I'm going to the Air Force base commander and we're demanding reparations." And we got an apology. I think that's the beginning of my story of activism.

Wajahat Ali: But school is oftentimes where you learn your hierarchy in America.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah.

Wajahat Ali: It's the same with me. Because before that, you were at home, you were Jacqui, you were just a girl. And then I went to school, like you, and you realize, "Oh, not everyone else is brown. People are speaking this language called English that no one speaks in my home. People aren't eating with their hands. No one has turmeric stains on their shirt. I'm the overweight kid who wears Husky pants. I'm the token Muslim, I'm the token brown guy. I am mocked for my name. Why? What's wrong with my name?" And I remember, and look at this, it's stuff that, I mentioned this in my book, but now it just comes back to me, I remember I think I was seven years old in second grade, and I went home and I said, "Mom, can you change my name?" She goes, "What?" "Can you change my name to Walter or Wilbur?" Because I think it was like Charlotte's Web or something where there was a character Wilbur. I'm like, "Because those are American names that they like." And my mom was like, "Your name is Wajahat, we named you Wajahat."

Wajahat Ali: But even at such a young age, because something is wrong with me, my name is wrong, it's the wrong name. The other kids are named Chet and Travis and Kent, and I want to get invited to their house and eat something like meatloaf. "Let's have meatloaf, mom." And my mom's like, "We're going to have [inaudible 00:25:58]. No one's going to eat meatloaf here." And my first crush was Jennifer, this beautiful, white, blue eyed girl with golden curls, because that was the model of beauty that I saw around me. But you realize you're the outsider, you're the foreigner, you're the stranger, you're the other in your own country. And I think it's school, school's when we first learn tag you're it, you don't belong.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah, that's it. That's right.

Wajahat Ali: And it sticks with us.

Jacqui Lewis: Of course it does. And not for nothing, but I think all this uproar from the people who don't know what they're talking about about critical race theory is a way to have their precious white children, sorry nice white people, but their precious white children can't be traumatized by the story of race in America, or can't be traumatized by the history of the Holocaust. Or can't be traumatized by thinking about what we've done in the Muslim world to actually cause people to hate us. So there is this interesting space, Waj, in my mind of where is the acculturating of hatred? Yes, at school. And yes, in the sandbox. And yes, in the classroom. And then it ends up being the othering in the marketplace, it ends up being the othering on the subway. What we teach our children is what I'm trying to say is the way the world is going to be. They're watching us, they're paying attention to us. [inaudible 00:27:30] says it best, "Children will listen."

Jacqui Lewis: So what do we want to do? How are we going to create a world in which children learn to love themselves. Because here's what I think my friends, I think the white supremacists don't love themselves. I think the capitalists who don't think you should have enough food on your table, they don't love themselves. I think there's a hole in them where love could have been and they stuff themselves with all these ideas of hatred and bigotry because actually they feel like junk themselves. What do you think about that hypothesis?

Wajahat Ali: No, I think that's true. There's something missing in them that needs to be filled with hate and a narrative of hate that gives them the feeling of superiority. Make American Great Again made people feel great, it didn't make them great. Trump makes you feel great, he doesn't put food on your table, he doesn't bring back the coal mines, he doesn't help you with health insurance, he doesn't give you vaccines for COVID, but he gives you this feeling of superiority, a feeling of belonging, a feeling that you too can one day be great again. It's the narrative, this romantic myth that, "Ah, we can go back in the time machine to this mythical land and time when we were at the top," which never existed, by the way, and that feeling of superiority, which is an illusory, fickle feeling, comes at the expense of everybody else. And so you have to be missing something in your life that you are so addicted to a conman's narrative, that you're willing to literally die for this. You're willing to literally eat horse paste instead of take a vaccine. You're willing to sacrifice our children in schools and ban mask mandates. Like what is it inside you that is missing or that is so bereft that you need to indulge the worse demons of yourself just to feel, not be, just to feel great again?

Wajahat Ali: And so the unfortunate part is, yes we feel pity I do. Because if you look at white supremacists, especially those who are formers, I'm talking about people who are straight up in the KKK, Nazis, people who wore those Doc Martens and stomped on the rest, once those folks are reformed, every single memoir, "I was a broken person, I needed love, I didn't have a father or mother. No one uplifted me. I joined because I felt good. I was given order. I was given respect. Women looked up to me."

Jacqui Lewis: I had a feeling of belonging to this circle of hate.

Wajahat Ali: There you go. It filled something inside me. All of them, literally, just look at every single former extremist, you see it. And so the sad part is, if they can have an intervention with love, with joy, with kindness, but the problem here is, well not necessarily the problem, the challenge, this is the challenge, it's always been the challenge, the challenge is that people of color oftentimes who are suffering more than them are expected to not only nurture and fill ourselves up with joy but then also be their Bagger Vance.

Jacqui Lewis: Right, that's right Waj, yep. Oh my good.

Wajahat Ali: If you've seen the movie Legend of Bagger Vance, you're like, "Wait, you're telling me that Will Smith is this mythical creature, this angel, who spends the entire movie helping Matt Damon, who has a privileged life, just basically get a better golf swing so he can have sex with Charlize Theron." And then once he gets a good golf swing, literally the movie, Bagger Vance just walks away. He goes, "All right, bye."

Jacqui Lewis: Bye, see ya.

Wajahat Ali: It's like Queen Latifah in that movie Bringing Down the House with Steve Martin. It's

like that person of color, your job is to bring the funk, your job is to help the white person feel joyful again. But meanwhile, we're also supposed to protect our children, we're also supposed to tell our children, "You're beautiful." And so I remember when you invited me to your church, and Inshallah the church will be remade and rebuilt and even more glorious. I remember I made, this was like three years ago before the pandemic, I made the case where even though it's exhausting, we should still invest in joy and we should still invest in patience and we should still invest in forgiveness and do the work. And I remember I said that acknowledging the pain and the hardship, but also if you follow in the footsteps of the profits, the profits experienced all this. The profits went through worse, the profits went through all this, they did. And I know we're not profits, but we're supposed to model ourselves on prophetic conduct. And so when I see all this, it's easy to tap out, it's easy to be cynical, it's easy to be exhausted, it's easy to say, "F it all." But I think the book, your book, my book, why do we do it? We're not going to get rich off it. Inshallah if we get rich, that would be amazing.

Jacqui Lewis: That would be amazing, then we can do a whole nother kind of [crosstalk 00:32:28] together.

Wajahat Ali: But I think the reason why we did it is there's a need, right? This narrative, this story that is not told, the story that needs to be told, the story that our children need to read. An alternative story about the America that we have experienced that a very damaged, broken, powerful, wealthy minority wants to extinguish because it will expose them to hard truths about this country and themselves that they're unwilling to acknowledge. And the microcosm of that, the metaphor of that, the realization of that is this bad faith attack on CRT, it's right in front of us.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah, that's exactly right, Waj.

Jacqui Lewis: I love that you bring us back to joy, because what I believe is true is that this love of self is connected to joy and that joy builds love of self. So my daughter in law and my son have incredibly crazy senses of humor and they teach their children how to dance, they have Friday night dance outs, we laugh and laugh and laugh and laugh. The children jump on our stomachs, I'd have a better body if I played with the children more often, they climb on us like we're mountains. There's such a playfulness in the family, and those kids will I think have a reservoir of joy inside themselves as an antidote to the hate. It's kind of cyclical in my mind, Waj. Rumi says, "When you do something from your soul, it's a river. It's a joy."

Jacqui Lewis: So this idea of our calling to be prophetic, our calling to be revolutionary lovers, our calling to make the world a place where younger Wajes come along and don't get teased and told to go back home and younger Jacquis don't get called the N word and get to grow in a flourishing place. The joy, the play, the activism, the changing of the story, the love that is unconditional, a non-possessive delight in the unique particularity of the other, Jim [Loder 00:34:24] says. Non-possessive delight of the unique particularity of the other. That kind of love will lead to joy. And that kind of joy is self acceptance. And that kind of being filled with joy and light chases out the hatred in ourselves, and then pretty soon we're not building a bigoted world.

Wajahat Ali: No, absolutely. And we don't need then the affirmation of others, because we are complete.

That's the power, like you don't need the affirmation of others, and at the same time you're not filled with this anger and this rage of trying to prove to the world, "I made it."

Jacqui Lewis: I made it.

Wajahat Ali: Because oftentimes you hear a lot of athletes say that, like, "I'm going to show them." Who are you going to show. "I'm going to show them all." And you're driven by that. Wonderful. But there's also something, I think, damaging there, where you feel like you have to compare yourself to this mythic villain, which is very real by the way. Kind of this amorphous villain, let me put it that way, not mythic, very real villain that says you don't belong. And then you finally get there and you still don't feel complete. And what we want to do I think with these stories is inoculate our children, almost like a virus. There's a virus, you want to inoculate and protect your children. You want to give them joy, self-affirmation and love. And then simultaneously with the activism, you want to do the work to spread that inoculation so that you can limit and quarantine the virus.

Jacqui Lewis: That's right, a critical mass of people inoculated against hate with love.

Wajahat Ali: There you go. No, that's literally it. And then slowly but surely, that mass expands, expands, expands, expands, and I think the reality that we all have to acknowledge is that it's never going to be fully removed. There will always be forces of just pain and hate and anger and xenophobia, but if we can quarantine it, limit it, surround it with this critical mass of love, then for the majority of our children, they can be the co-protagonists of the American narrative. Not only that, they feel like the co-protagonists of the American narrative. It's not this mythical reach, it's not a fantastical dream. Oh, there was once an Obama. Maybe in 40 years there might be another Obama. Oh, Obama was just the outlier. It's one of those situations where like, "yeah, why not me? Why can't I be the president?"

Jacqui Lewis: And maybe I would want to add this into what you're saying, Waj, that the narrative that would be America, the promise that was the promise of America that actually never, think about Langston Hughes, was American every America to me and you fully? No. But maybe we can, if we stay with our metaphor of let's inoculate against hatred, maybe we build such love that there is a mutation in the virus that is hatred. And the result of it is a love that rebuilds the promise or takes us toward the promise of equality and justice. Like America's actually finally what she said she thought she could be, maybe.

Wajahat Ali: And I think the metaphor works because this whole concept of the American dream has been the American nightmare for so many people. It's never been able to be achieved by many of us because it's like a bag of lemons where if you are of the right cast, the right color, the right class, yeah you can achieve it. But you achieve it at the expense of the rest of us. And so I think the reason why, in particular, black folks, but also those who are marginalized in this community really understand this country really well, is we've seen all the sides. We've seen the joy and the pain. We see the warts. We have the good X-ray.

Jacqui Lewis: And we are not fooled or we are not in an illusion about what the warts are.

Wajahat Ali: There you go. Because you live through it, you experience it. And I think what the pandemic did is people say, "Oh, the pandemic flattened us." What I say is the pandemic flattened us, but it flattened us unequally. And what the pandemic showed was this brilliant, clear,

pristine X-ray of this country, all of it. The angels, the demons, the warts, the pains, the scars, all of it. You see it right here. Billionaires have made more billions, rich have gotten richer, black and brown folks because of systemic racism and inequality are dying at higher rates because they don't have access, disinformation. Men and women who are threatened by equality and by fierce love doing everything they can in this death march for whiteness, everything.

Jacqui Lewis: Oh my god. And it is a death march. It is in the death throws. Whiteness is dying. And it doesn't want to die.

Wajahat Ali: The death rattle becomes a death march.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah, exactly.

Wajahat Ali: And my fear is, and you've been saying this before and I said this, I believe, the last time I was on your podcast, is the reason why we can't give up the fight even though we're so exhausted is this death march is playing for all the marbles. And I remember I gave this analogy a couple years ago on MSNBC, I said, again, it's just an analogy, it's a metaphor, "If given a choice between renting a room in their house to a person of color or a woman or someone who was indigenous or someone who comes from the South hole countries, or burning down the house, they will elect to burn down the village. They will burn everything down, including themselves." And people say, "No, Wajahat." And I said, "I give you Trump, I give you the January 6th insurrection. I give you them literally removing all the water from pools and literally saying, 'We're not going to have the community pool if it means having black kids swim with you.'"

Jacqui Lewis: Because the black people got in there.

Wajahat Ali: Yeah.

Jacqui Lewis: Right, exactly.

Wajahat Ali: And so what more do you need to know? And so that's why in a way we have this moment, I always love these euphemisms, "We're living in a heightened moment in America." I'm like, "There's been a lot of moments. When will this moment become a permanent reality?" But we're in a moment, still, and we're seeing the backlash to the moment that we all predicted, but I feel like there is a moment that we can capitalize on as we emerge from this pandemic. I really do. I feel like if enough of us, just enough of us really work together and really try to promote this vision, this narrative, this "dream" of America, it'll be very hard for them to take us all the way back to 1953 again.

Jacqui Lewis: Yep. I think that's right, my friend. And one of the things that I have as a secret dream, don't tell anybody, this is a secret, oh I'm getting ready to say it. I hope one day that more of them, and we know who we mean, become a part of us because love just feels better. Because love just feels better. And they come to understand that this is actually what they want is this culture of love and justice. Can I ask you, what do you know for sure about love?

Wajahat Ali: What do I know for sure about love?

Jacqui Lewis: What do you know for sure about love?

Wajahat Ali: It's a profound question. What I know for sure about love is that if you are lucky and privileged enough to receive it, it is the greatest gift on this journey we call life. I do not take it for granted and I feel like you are the luckiest human being if even for a moment you are able to receive it and give it. And I know it exists, because I have received it from my family and my wife. And I know it exists because I give it to my children. And I believe it's one of the great tragedies in life, I really mean this, that if you go through this journey called life, which is oftentimes very painful for most people, filled with suffering, uncertainty, regret, hopes that are just crushed, stolen from you, but what makes it less lonely and worthwhile is if you're able to experience love, either to receive it or give it, it makes the journey sweeter. And it brings joy. And so I feel like that's the one thing at the age of 40, and they say in Islam, this is a famous saying that wisdom descends on the age of 40. Apparently for me, it's going to be 41, I'm delayed. But they say 40's when you become a mature adult, 40 is a very significant number in age in Islam. So if I have learned anything, it's that I know nothing, which is a sign of wisdom, number one.

Wajahat Ali: But I do know that on this journey called life, and I'll say that, I don't know if I shared this last time, but I mention this in the book, my decision to get married resulted from a near death experience. I was about to die, and just miraculously the drugs kicked in and I got saved. And during that near death experience, I went through all the states. The negotiation with god, asking for more time, the audit, regrets, what I should have done, all of it. I went through all of it, I discussed it in the book. And then I made peace. I'll say this, I made peace, two types of love, I made peace with my exit because I had faith that there was a loving God on the other side willing to embrace me. And people say, "Religion is stupid and faith in God is stupid." I said, "Sure, no problem. You're not offending me." And, "Religion's a crutch and faith in God is a crutch." I'm like, "Sure, but in those final moments, that faith and belief that there is a loving God gave me a peace that I experienced and knew to be real, that there is a loving God on the other side and no matter what happens Inshallah I will cross over and be embraced by a loving God."

Wajahat Ali: The second feeling was that if I do survive this near death experience, I made a mistake. My one regret that I had. That one regret was, this was the age of 31, I didn't invest in love. I didn't take the risk. I was so broke, I was so tired, there were so many challenges. And I said, "There's no way a woman would love me. I don't want to bring this baggage to a woman." All those thoughts, that's what kept me, the fear that I would be rejected. And then I swear to god I'm literally swearing to god, right when I had this regret I said, "Ah, I wish I just would have invested in love." That was my one regret, "I wish I had a family." And right then my heart stabilized. And then about six to eight months later, I got married. And so that's why when you ask me that simple question, what do I know about love? That's what I know about love.

Jacqui Lewis: That's what you know. Oh, Waj, I can't wait to read that. And I've got some juicy stories in my book about finding that love. And when I say fierce love, what comes up for you? Fierce love.

Wajahat Ali: Fierce love is to invest in love in the face of unimaginable horror, pain, backlash, suffering. And despite it all, you allow love to guide you through the gauntlet, with faith that

Inshallah, through the dark forest. Let's go back to stories. From the beginning of time, the dark forest. The forest is dark, filled with ghosts and goblins, the hallway of horrors.

Jacqui Lewis: That you walk through anyway.

Wajahat Ali: What am I armed with? I'm armed with nothing except faith and love. And that Inshallah is enough for me to get to the other side.

Jacqui Lewis: Waj, I love talking to you. Thank you so much for this conversation.

Wajahat Ali: Thank you for letting me blabber on and on. Please edit me and my verbal diarrhea.

Jacqui Lewis: No, it's so good.

Wajahat Ali: And most importantly, pick up Reverend Jacqui's book, Fierce Love, which is out in November. What's the date?

Jacqui Lewis: Yay! November 9th, coming right up.

Wajahat Ali: And apparently I'm honored enough that you asked me to help you launch it, that's going to be awesome.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah, we're going to have a great conversation on November 9th at eight o'clock on the Penguin Random House World. And Waj, when your book comes out I want you to invite me to come, I promise to be charming.

Wajahat Ali: You're always charming.

Jacqui Lewis: If you invite me to come talk about your book with you, I promise to be charming.

Wajahat Ali: You know what we'll talk about? We'll just talk about how we were these nerdy kids who were picked on and look at us now. And we'll just flex for an hour. That's all we'll do, we'll just flex.

Jacqui Lewis: And we can say, "If you could see us now."

Wajahat Ali: Hashtag it gets better. I'll throw the mic, you pick up the mic, then you throw the mic. It's all we'll do. People are like, "Uh, we paid money for this."

Jacqui Lewis: That's all, we're just going to stand there and preen, that's what we'll do. Thank you, friend.

Wajahat Ali: Thank you, thank you so much.

Jacqui Lewis: Thanks so much for joining us today. I loved my conversation with Waj, it is always a wonderful ride with him of laughter and truth telling. Here's some things I want you to think about as you leave this episode. One is, loving yourself unconditionally is absolutely a hard thing to do. We're just not trained to do it. We're told we're narcissistic, we're told we're self absorbed, but in fact, the command to love our neighbor as ourselves has to start with us. How can you make a daily affirmation that you are amazing, you are beautiful, you are gifted, exactly as you are? And try to delight in yourself. Secondly, if we're going to make a

world in which our children can love themselves, we've all got to do our part. And I mean all the children belong to all of us. What kinds of messages will we put in the universe for the children? Can we begin to paint a picture in which children see themselves as awesome no matter their skin color, no matter their religion, no matter their gender or sexuality? Can we begin to paint a picture in which they see themselves as beloved? Because when they do, they'll paint that picture for future generations. And this is our goal, is a healed world with people in which they love themselves and can therefore love the other.