

The Shared Mic: Conversations for the Ages

Episode 2: Nisha Patel and Michael Phair

Eric Storey: Welcome to The Shared Mic. I'm Eric.

Salima Suleman: And I'm Salima.

Salima Suleman: Today on the mic, we have Michael and Nisha. We gave them the topic of belonging. Just a heads up, this is a conversation between two adults, and they do use some language and talk about some topics that might not be appropriate for children.

Eric Storey: We'll chat with you after the conversation.

Nisha Patel: We had discussed a little bit about the idea of being a role model or modeling for people in different generations and different lifestyles and those people who look up to us, so I wanted to ask a little bit about what it's like to have the pressures of being a role model to individuals, especially those from marginalized communities.

Michael Phair: I think, for myself that it was a real challenge. I was elected in 1992 to city council and that was before same-sex marriage was there, that was before the province had included sexual orientation within their act and so I could be discriminated against like anybody else, it was a just a very different world at that time. The notion of being a member of city council, being gay and out and open, I felt was quite a heavy pressure on me. And I had people say to me ... some people who were part of the gay and lesbian community, but other people as well: you know, people think you're good and we look up to you, etcetera. And then I have parents tell me about that they were glad I was there because they had a son or daughter that was gay or lesbian. I wondered what it is they thought about me that they would want their kid to be like, kind of thing and that or whatever that they saw there. I'm not sure I felt that way about myself in particular. I think as time went on, I became a little bit more comfortable with it and also more comfortable with expanding who I was. So when different kinds of events came along that I might take part in as part of a member of city council. You know, the Chinese New Year's, I was The Money God and the big outfit that I loved wearing. In the holiday season I played Miss Claus. And so, I think that that part of that was trying to get past that notion of having to be exemplary in the way that people might think I would have to be, but it was taxing at the same time. When legislation changed and the days have changed, after a while people were used to me as Michael Phair, member of city council, whatever. And I think a lot of the pressure starts to disappear as time went on, but it is having to kind of prove yourself then. And you're in a public role. What do you experience?

Nisha Patel: Yeah, I think that the pressure of being a role model is actually quite distinct for myself. Growing up, I didn't have the type of representation I'm giving to people now. And that comes with quite a bit of responsibility. And so, when I run workshops, when I teach youth,

when I perform in spaces that maybe I haven't performed before or what I like to call non-poetic spaces where poetry is not something that people have seen before, I do have especially young women who will come up to me and tell me that they identify with my work or that they identify with some of my narratives, that they're inspired to see me perform. And I think that comes with quite a bit of responsibility, because now I'm not only trying to reach goals set for myself, but I'm achieving things and in so, paving the way for other people who will hopefully come up and do even better than me. You know, I want them to break the mold that I am creating, and also filling myself. I don't want to be in a mold, because there hasn't been a mold for me. And so a lot of it has been extremely interesting but definitely there has been an internalization of the pressure that I faced, sometimes to my detriment. You know, like some days have been harder than others, where I feel like I'm not doing enough for these people who are looking up to me and other days, I feel exhausted, I'm tired. I just want to be able to make mistakes again.

Michael Phair: So one of the things that I thought I might want to ask about is that the whole notion of finding and making a space in the public realm. How do you see yourself doing that?

Nisha Patel: Well, I think that for myself, I think of it as kind of like a clawing, you know, like I clawed my way into the public realm, through many, many nights of gigs and workshops and sitting in my bedroom writing poems that hurt to come out, but then were beautiful on stage. And this was all the process of entering into public life and becoming a poet laureate. Many people become a poet laureate as kind of a hallmark or a milestone in their careers, almost like a reward for many, many years of service and what we're seeing now is a trend in Canada where a lot of poet laureates are being chosen for the ongoing community work that they're doing now. So they're not necessarily people who've been writing their entire lives or have big huge careers to fall back on. If anything, again, I have just clawed my way into this position. I have created space for myself through literal blood, sweat and tears through the community presence that I have. And through all the work that I've done with countless different interest groups and individuals and youth, and I fear that, you know, the role of this public space being taken up by me, once I leave might be filled by someone else who doesn't look anything like me, you know, and they will also have to come into public space and claw their way in and create space for themselves, often at the risk and the expense of their own personhood.

Michael Phair: I think that my experience, my background, was much more as advocate of course, rather than being a writer, but that meant I was involved with a number of whose advocating for changes in both perception but also legal changes with the law and legislation. Speaking now on things publicly, I used to back in the in the early 1980s, I used to say that in Edmonton, there were only two and a half people that were open as gay or lesbian, I was the half. That's because I was reluctant but then became involved with it more and more. I have to say that one of the things that I'm pleased with, is I do think it did open the door for a lot of other people to begin to be more open, more involve, to make some changes and that. I was also at the time of the beginning of HIV/AIDS that took place in Edmonton. The first case was

1984, it was a terribly difficult period of time. I'll never forget it, everyone who was identified with HIV died within two years. I was involved with funerals, memorials for people, friends I knew that were dying. It was an awful period of time. And I think a number of other folks found the strength to take part in assisting folks that were ill, helping do funerals, things that we never imagined we would ever have to do. And I think that helped in that that whole sense of being in a public space, being part of the Edmonton, in a social kind of way. Being recognized that we existed, that we want to live in this city, we want to be part of it, and that we brought different skills and ability. And I like to think that we brought gifts to as who we were to the city and I think it's opened it for other folks to be involved and in a variety of ways, not just connected with the queer community, could be with other things that they're doing for sure.

Nisha Patel: I think the way that queerness takes up public space has definitely changed because of people like you who have paved the way or opened doors and now for me existing as a queer person in the public eye doing an artistic role that speaks to truth, that speaks to politics, that is itself political, because of the circumstances of my being. All of that takes up space in a way that I think is very complex, but I do have a faith in critical public understanding of that space and how we access it and what we ask of people in that space. There is more sympathy from some segments of the audience that maybe didn't exist for you, right? And so there is an understanding now of the histories behind where we come from, where my parents came from, the history that you as a queer person came from. And I think as well like when we look at people who are queer, and in public space today, there's this idea that many of us didn't grow up with elders in the community, we didn't have queer elders, because many of them died, many of them passed away, many of them are still closeted. And so there has been kind of a forging of a new queer identity at the same time that a lot of our elders are coming out of the woodwork and trying to access that same public space, that same discourse. And so there is a natural, I think, intergenerational empathy that is being shared just by existing in the spaces.

Michael Phair: Being part of the older generation, I also agree very much with you and I think personally, it's something that makes me quite pleased. I mean, I've had people that I know they're older sometimes say, well young people, they don't know what we've gone through. I'm glad they don't know. Why do you think we did all this? So that people would have to go through it again. When many of us became older, you begin to realize you're on the way, in a particular direction. And there's another whole generation coming that's got a lot to do. And you can see that that some of it is different than what you did. But it's a whole lot of stuff that is not easy to do.

Nisha Patel: Are you attached to the idea of legacy? Maybe for you as an individual or are you coming from a community then? What is it that you kind of want to leave behind?

Michael Phair: Yeah, I get asked about legacy all the time. And I have to admit, it's nothing that I really think about very strongly, very much either. And I have no idea. I mean, when I look backwards, I would have never identified that some of the things I did would ever mean

anything very substantial. You coast along and you know, today I go grocery shopping and tomorrow I do all the usual things one has to do to stay alive. And I don't think very strongly about that, I am much more focused on ... one of the things is with senior groups. I'm also involved with the issue around poverty in Edmonton, that really is where my head is at on most days, I suppose. I'd like to think that what that means is there's still some energy and some ideas I have that are useful.

Nisha Patel: It was kind of a sneaky question, because I don't think legacy is something that you could deliberately build necessarily right? At the end of a period of growth or whatever it's the stuff that you left behind. It's the stuff that impacted other people that I think they take away. So the idea of building a legacy to me is so disingenuous, right? But it's interesting, because you've had a very interesting career already. And I feel very new in my career, I feel like I'm at the start of a very long journey ahead, hopefully. And so, I kind of feel like we're at two different ends of a spectrum. And so, asking you to look back is the same as me trying to look forward and that there's a bunch of nothingness that we don't know will impact other people. So that's kind of where I was coming from.

Michael Phair: Yeah. And I would say, just to comment on that. I'm wondering a little bit about the internalization of your artwork, and whether you find a way to express that in the written form.

Nisha Patel: I would like to hear maybe like, what is your definition of internalization.

Michael Phair: Understanding who you are, the kind of person you are, how you see yourself in terms of gender, sexuality, race, is writing bring that out?

Nisha Patel: For sure, I would argue and sorry, the clarification is the part of me that did eight years of competitive debate. And so that was just me trying to put us on the same understanding. But I would argue that the core of my entire artistic practice is the outpouring of the way that I see myself and the things that I value as an individual. And so I used to think that there were these like, little compartments about who I was that, sometimes I could be a woman and other times I would only be queer and other times, I would be, you know, a minority and none of those overlapped or if they did, it was because I chose for them to overlap. And so I would have poems that maybe only spoke to one of those themes or spoke to the other and what I've learned in the five years that I've had an artistic practice is that it's all a circle. You are at all times all of those things and that your art is always a reflection of yourself because even the individual who goes around saying that his art is not political, maybe that his paintings are not political or that his poetry is just about the trees, like that is a choice, right? Like he's choosing to put that forward. And I do believe very strongly that there is no way outside of being political because every stance we take even one to choose to not engage is a political one. And so my identity is the core of my politics because all of the ways that I have faced difficulty have stemmed from individual aspects of my identity, you know, the barriers

that I've come up against and having worked in politics for three years before I became a poet. Those days, my identity was up against sexism and was up against racism. You know, when you're the woman of color, the young female staffer, the ageism. Walking behind, you know, the mayor that I worked for, or the politician that I worked, handling their notes, handling their briefcase. You know, there's a visual aspect to that, that was also part of my identity. And so the only difference between that and what I do now is that I get to put the words on stage, I get to choose which words I say when but back then people were still looking at me for who I was, you know, and they were still treating me as someone who was a reflection of who I was, but the only thing is now I get to have power over it myself.

Michael Phair: Yeah, I certainly would have in the early years taken the fact that I was gay and hidden it and certainly was finding ways to not express that in any kind of fashion and what I was doing and because I was pretending and didn't want anybody else to figure it out, although they did, which I didn't realize until it came out and someone said we figured that out a long time ago. I was like, what, how could you I was hiding it. I was somewhat successful in not ignoring it exactly but putting it on the side and moving along day to day and many people wouldn't have known one way or the other. It wouldn't have been part of how people would have seen me as it would with you. So certainly I would say that when I look back at that, I think that what I was doing and putting out there as an individual was only a part of me and wasn't as authentic as it should have been. I would say that that changed and over time, although there's always that little bit of a homophobia that comes back every now and then a little bit too that, you know, being a little careful. Like many people in the generation I grew up in, because I came out relatively early by the standards of those days. You know, I did run into people that, you know, told me that I should be shot or go to hell. A couple times somebody physically hit me. And one point I thought, I'm not going to take that anymore, but it took a while to get there.

Nisha Patel: Yeah, I've been pretty public about kind of the criticism that I faced. I did actually, very recently, I did a show in Montreal on Friday night and I received fat phobic, sexist, racist hate mail, right after the show, or actually during the show, I received it. So you know, like the idea that because I put who I am on stage, my poetry is confessional. My art is a reflection of who I am. It is me that is being attacked, right? There is no difference between my art form and who I am, these people are criticizing me. And so, I've had to develop, you know, a thicker skin than when I was a staffer, because as a staffer, I can at least hide behind a flawed institution. But as an individual who puts herself on the line, whose work is who I am, like, there's no one to hide behind. It's just me. I'm the front line.

Michael Phair: Some people I think it really undermines them over the long term. Sometimes I think many of us are able to kind of work it through or we make a change their life or people move to other cities as a result of that, they can kind of restart themselves or whatever, whatever term you want to use.

Nisha Patel: Yeah, I know we had talked a little bit about how to talk about difference in our emails, but I was wondering kind of in the context of belonging, what do you think belonging means to you ... like when you're presented with the word or the concept of belonging, what does that look like?

Michael Phair: It is in my mind, the notion that belonging has a sense of recognizing with dignity who I am. It also means participating and being engaged in a positive way with people. I think it also is a notion of that I bring some gifts and talents to there that are respected and are part of the engagement that goes on. It certainly for me is also being part of the queer community as such. I still find it important for me to do quite a bit of engagement with people who are queer, it's like getting recharged. I try to make sure that I still belong, that I'm not seen as ... even as a politician, you're way out there kind of thing. I really am just a person that like you want to be, have some dignity in their life and be respected and so I think that's what belonging means to me at that at this stage in my life.

Nisha Patel: I think for me, belonging growing up, I had confused it with sameness, or you know similarity to other people that belonging meant that I was the same as them and any opportunity for them not to see me as the same as them was a way for me not to feel like I belonged. And now as an adult, I think belonging is dignity. It's respect. It's an understanding that difference is part of being human, which is such a basic thing. But for so many children, especially like youth that I speak to, you know, their idea of getting along and making sure they're not bullying others or that they're being respectful is something that we teach people, that we that we teach them from a very young age and that now I've finally internalized in a way that is respectful of myself and respectful of other people.

Michael Phair: You need to, and I need you to continue to teach people as adults to be respectful as well these days, in my opinion.

Nisha Patel: Well these days, I just kind of demand it, you know. And luckily for me when I perform, most people don't speak. So you know, there is kind of an implicit respect that people are afforded. So even people who send me hate mail, do it after I'm done speaking, you know, and that comes with power. And I am addicted to that part of the stage where I'm like, I get to stand in who I am, and present who I am, and force people to listen, and not everyone will respect me for it. But at the same time, I still got to do it. And so that is a powerful thing that other people have given me the opportunity to do.

Michael Phair: I felt that when I was a politician, I remember listening to and people would say to me 'Oh, you're pretty respectful. You listen to people, their opinions' and my response, not to them at the time would be 'But I'm the one that gets to vote. In the end, I'll make that final decision.' So I have the privilege of listening to things that maybe I don't agree with, but you aren't going to decide that. I am in the end because that's what's been given to me as an elected person to do that. So is it a little bit of that, certainly at the time.

Eric Storey: I've never heard a conversation like that before between friends. What was interesting for me, was we think of public space as being limited. But both of them talked about the personal growth that they experienced by being in a public space and how that allowed them to grow.

Salima Suleman: And facilitated them becoming their true authentic selves, that it was through being in the public space and being in the public eye, that they really embraced who they were in their identities. I think that was really powerful. The part of that conversation that really resonated with me was about claiming space for yourself. I think that's something I'm working on personally right now, is holding space and getting others to hold space for me in conversations because I have so much to say, but I hold back and I'm working on stepping up and stepping into space because I know I belong there. And I know I have something to say there. I just don't do it and it's something that I am personally working on. So it's really great to hear people talking about that and how they navigate space.

Eric Storey: That's a wrap for this episode. The Shared Mic is produced by Age Friendly Edmonton, a partnership between the City of Edmonton and the Edmonton Seniors Coordinating Council. You can find us on Apple, Spotify, Google Podcasts, or wherever you subscribe to your favorite podcasts. Please subscribe, leave a review and let us know what you think about this episode. Thanks!