

The Shared Mic: Conversations for the Ages

Episode 4: Salima Suleman and Eric Storey

Salima Suleman: Welcome to The Shared Mic. I'm Salima.

Eric Storey: And I'm Eric. Today Salima, we've got two of our favorite people.

Salima Suleman: Well who might that be Eric?

Eric Storey: Well, it just happens to be Eric and Salima.

Salima Suleman: Today's our episode.

Eric Storey: Today we're going to talk about friendship.

Salima Suleman: Here we go. Alright, I already drew a question.

Eric Storey: Okay.

Salima Suleman: Are you ready?

Eric Storey: I am.

Salima Suleman: Eric, the first question: how did you navigate friendships in the workplace?

Eric Storey: That was a little bit of a difficult one because I was the boss. So my colleagues were my employees and I had to keep a certain amount of distance. And I learned pretty early in my career, to go to the Christmas party and leave after two drinks because if you left after, then things got a little bit more complicated. Didn't bother me, people got drunk and said things. It just made it really embarrassing for them, the next time they saw me. So that's the policy. I did when I started, I was in Montreal, and there were several different factories. So I had peers, that worked out well. I think the best for me, when I moved to Western Canada, and as I said that I was the boss, so people were working for me, the best thing I did was I joined the Rotary Club, so that I had a peer support network, and I could be friendly and tell jokes and all that sort of stuff with people in the office. But there was a boundary, that because I'm old school, that boundary had to remain. What about you? How do you negotiate friendships in the work environment?

Salima Suleman: This is something I am learning. So I was in university for a very, very long time. So my fellow PhD students and I were close, close, close, because we were going through something together. So those were my friends, but they were also my colleagues in a way because we were all working on projects and that kind of thing. Now that I'm out in the quote

unquote, real world, it's harder than I thought it would be. I think it's hard to find people I connect with because there's not a lot of people my age around and people who I share, kind of, my lifestyle with, like there's a lot of, you know, middle aged people with families, and they go home and have their family and do their thing. And that's not the way I live. I'm doing things and seeing things and going to shows and concerts and people don't share that lifestyle with me. And so the workplace isn't somewhere where I find friends, I have found some friends outside of like my immediate work environment. And that's been really cool, but it's not people who are working beside me every day. Now, I will say, when I was in Ottawa, I was working with the most wonderful group of people and we became really, really close. And that was really cool. But that friendship moved beyond the workplace. And it was really awesome because we were all so similar and different. It was just such a great group of people and that made the workplace really fun, maybe a little less productive. But I think it's still something that I'm navigating now.

Eric Storey: Productive peace, I think is negotiable. Because if you're on the same wavelength as your coworkers, which you develop by going out and doing social activities, then you're probably making a better connection at work so that, yeah, I don't know. I

Salima Suleman: It's like, if you're having fun, the works easier, right? But I think there's that that fine line of like, getting work done and like understanding those boundaries again. Hey, I gotta put on my headphones and I gotta buckle down and get this done right now and it's not that I don't care about you or want to hear about what's going on with you. I also got to work. So I think it's navigating that, when it's all fun and games, but it's also no, I got a job to do.

Salima Suleman: Cool, next question.

Eric Storey: Does it take time to form what you consider to be a close friendship? Or do you believe in friendship at first sight?

Salima Suleman: Hmm. I think you can, I think there are people who walk into your life that just have an energy that you just gravitate towards, and you just are instantly connected. And I think there's a couple of people that I've been lucky enough to have crossed paths with and it's just this ... I know you, I recognize you and I recognize myself in you and there it is. Someone said "friendship starts when it's like, oh, what you too. I thought it was only me" and I think that's what sparks immediate friendships. Some friendships take more time. I think some people need more time to build trust and I respect that. I'm a pretty open person so people just dive right in often with me.

Eric Storey: I'm, as you may have guessed, far more conservative, but I do see that I've met people who I know immediately this person seems to be on the same wavelength as me. So if that's the case then I will structure, you know, trying to get dig a little bit deeper into a friendship basis and that's usually how it goes. So yes I can I think, when I first meet somebody I

can say yeah, they are pretty much on the same wavelength as me. They enjoy working in the community or various ... their mindset, or whatever. And that's the basis for a friendship but it's not meeting somebody and saying, hey, let's go shooting pool.

Salima Suleman: I don't know about you, but I can walk into a crowd and there's always some people that pop for me, that I know I want to get to know you more, or you have an interesting something about you that I need to ... and I'm very curious about people. So I love meeting new people and just, even if I disagree with you, even though we have nothing in common, even if you have just a spark that I'm curious about, I will go out of my way to learn more about you.

Eric Storey: Yeah. And I am exactly the opposite, because I'm an introvert. But I know, what I focus in on is, this is a nice person. That's what gets me, when I just meet somebody and I say, this is a nice person, I should get to know them more. And that's the basis of friendship. And my immediate senses are also that maybe there's a few people that I want to minimize how much contact I have with in the future as well, and that impression is formed fairly quickly as well, unfortunately.

Salima Suleman: What is it that makes you step away from someone instead of step towards them?

Eric Storey: If they seem really self-centered, and aren't aware of what's happening around them, that other people may experience issues or problems different than they do. That's usually a big turn off.

Salima Suleman: For me it's someone who needs to be the smartest person in the room. That's a huge red flag for me, because usually they're not. You know, it's always the person who thinks they're the smartest person that's definitely not. And for me, that's always the ...oh, yeah, I'm going to stay pretty far away from you.

Eric Storey: Right.

Salima Suleman: So my turn?

Eric Storey: It's your turn. Pick your question. Pick a good one.

Salima Suleman: Alright. Do you think there is a difference between friendship and kinship? So, can family be friends? And can friends be family or are they mutually exclusive?

Eric Storey: I hear a lot about chosen family. I think that yes, so I think can friends can become kin. But you need to be careful because the blood bond isn't there. So what I've seen with people who feel that some people might be their family, is that when a rocky road in that relationship exists, those are the ones that are more likely to splinter. Whereas if it's a

disagreement between a brother and sister or you know that, there might be a cool period, but eventually they'll come back. But I have seen people with chosen families that had one or two major upsets and they were completely ... they never talked again, which is a real pity. So I think that's something that we need to be aware of. If you're saying that, you know, it's almost making a pact with, if you're going to be my chosen family, then we have to know that we're going to have to negotiate some rough patches because every family has rough patches. What are your thoughts on that?

Salima Suleman: So I was raised that my sister is my best friend. And it was drilled into us that at the end of the day, the only person who's going to show up for you is your sister. And I think I have been blessed enough that I have some friends who I consider my sisters. I know that at the end of the day, they will show up too. When I was little, my best friend and I used to fight all the time, like screaming at each other, we get mad at each other and then we wouldn't talk for a long time. And then we were still best friends. And we became grownups, we lost touch for a bunch of years. Then we got back together. And we talked about it as adults, about how we were such a volatile friendship as children. And what we realized is that, we treated each other like a sibling.

Eric Storey: That's why there were the conflicts.

Salima Suleman: That's we were free to fight. Which is something that you could only do with your true best friend, right? Because you can't have that blow up with someone who could walk out of your life and you're trying to maintain a relationship. But it was so guaranteed for us that we were going to still be best friends even though we were in grade four. We just knew it was fine. I could yell at her and she could scream at me and everything would be fine. And it was interesting to have that reflective conversation as adults where we both felt like we needed to apologize to each other but at the same time we did it.

Eric Storey: I think you hit the nail on the head, it's the reflective conversation. And that would mark a real friendship that moves into kin territory for me.

Salima Suleman: Alright.

Eric Storey: Do you believe that men and women form and foster friendships differently? Is friendship gendered? Yes, I do. And I see it, the men shed movement, which is, the phrase is "women talk face to face, men talk shoulder to shoulder." And I do think that that the fostering of friendship, sort of an alarm bell for me is when another guy is like right in my face and talking and not off to the side. I can't explain that. But it's a more indirect form of friendship, or an indirect form of creating a friendship. And I know this is rife with stereotypes, but women generally make friends easier, make social connections easier than men and have more direct conversations earlier in the friendship cycle than men do.

Salima Suleman: Maybe not more direct but more vulnerable.

Eric Storey: Yes, vulnerable. That's the word. Yeah, nobody gets to see me vulnerable unless they know me very well.

Salima Suleman: I could see that. I asked this question, because there's a lot of writing about this. And there's a lot of people talking about it. And there's this, this idea of the lonely man has been coming out. There are other podcasts that have talked about it, and I just, I wonder if we're limiting. So I guess in society right now, and we've known this for generations and decades that gender isn't binary. So now we understand there's this gender fluidity and gender spectrum. But we still talk about friendship in this very binary way about male friendships and female friendships. And I guess I struggled with this, but I also find that my male friends will be vulnerable with me but then when I see them with their other male friends, they're not.

Eric Storey: Yes, I agree.

Salima Suleman: It's interesting for me because I like watching people and I'm fascinated by watching my people who I know are very vulnerable and open and gentle with me, become someone else around their other quote unquote, friends. My entire existence doesn't understand this because I'm as vulnerable with a male friend as I am with a female friend as I am with a gender non-binary friend. And I guess I hold true to myself and I find that I see people shifting in and out depending on who their friend is, and I've noticed it ties to gender.

Eric Storey: Yeah. And I mean, this might be old school talking. But, you know, I think it goes to the toxic masculinity aspect that the way we grew up was "here is the definition of a man, venture out of outside of that paradigm at your risk." And, people don't like risks, so they don't venture out. So I think, again, stereotypes, crazy. But for an awful lot of men to be vulnerable with another man, that means that they are really good friends. That there is really a deep, long lasting connection between them, otherwise they would not be. Whereas I would feel very comfortable to be vulnerable with you, because you're not a guy.

Salima Suleman: I am not a guy. And there's this movement right now, where there's these men's groups, where men come together, and they have really vulnerable conversations with other men. And it's filmed and it's on YouTube and I'm watching these and I'm fascinated by it because I guess it's that they're not limited. Men can do this vulnerable exchange but it's so rare and it showcased and it's brought up in this way that it's like, look at these men's groups where they can have these vulnerable conversations where that's every Thursday night for me. You know, where I'm just sitting down.

Eric Storey: But they're only vulnerable with that group of people in that setting. So here's a historical reference for you, that you should look up some time. The radical fairy movement of the early 1970s, which was primarily gay men getting together naked in the woods and dancing

and being vulnerable and all the rest of it. It's fascinating, absolutely fascinating. You need to read up on it but the whole thing with it was, to me it was, and again, with these men's movements, it's a little bit deceptive, because it means I'm going to go and be vulnerable on Thursday afternoons with this group of people at this setting, but the rest of the time I'm going to put on my armor. Maybe it's an exposure issue, maybe you need to do that with enough people enough times, that you realize that you can start to be vulnerable with other men when you're not in that setting. I don't know.

Salima Suleman: In a heterosexual relationship, I think what I found is that as the woman in the relationship, I have to do a lot of the emotional lifting because I am also their friend, I'm also the space where they can be vulnerable and there's nowhere else for that to occur. And I've heard this from my other friends where they have that same experience, where I am your safe place. And that means I have to be everything. I have to be your friend, I have to be your support, I have to be your partner, I have to be all of the things. And I think carrying that for a woman is a lot. Whereas I can, you know, be in a relationship and I still have my emotional supports and emotional vulnerability outside of that. You know, and I think that also shapes relationships in another way.

Eric Storey: And again, I mean, I don't know that many younger people, but I would say, of the older people that I know. Yeah. A friend of mine, I won't use any names, but she's happily married, been married for 50 years. But she needs to go out and talk to her best friend, in order to have an emotional support that she's not getting at home and I know this couple very well and they're wonderful, caring, lovely people. It's not like there's, not that I know of that there's frictions underneath or anything like that, but it's just the way we've been also, again toxic masculinity, the way we've been socialized. Not only the way the man has been socialized but the way the woman has been socialized. So you look at a stag party, guys get drunk and say horrible things, stagette, well yeah the women get drunk and say horrible, but it's different. With a stagette, there's more emotional sharing. The emotional moment at the end of a male stag party is to put your arm around somebody, "oh love you man"

Salima Suleman: Vulnerability at its finest.

Eric Storey: At it's finest. It lasts 30 seconds. Then we move on.

Salima Suleman: That was a good conversation. I like that one. Alright. The dark question. Have you ever banished a friend, that is to say cut them out with no plans of ever reconnecting?

Eric Storey: Yes. I just felt that I was doing all the lifting. And I was in trouble, emotional trouble. And I had been there for this person for so long and done so much lifting for them. And I called and said, hey, I really need some support here and got nothing. And I just said, you know, that's really okay. You know, you've got your life to live and you need to live your life. But really, that doesn't meet my criteria and have never talked since. I don't hold any real grudge. If

we're not going to have an equality of emotions and balance goes back to that categorization, should they be a friend and acquaintance or nothing. And I would even expect more from an acquaintance than I would have expected, you know, that I expect from that person.

Salima Suleman: Did you have a conversation with the person?

Eric Storey: About six months later.

Salima Suleman: Oh, interesting.

Eric Storey: And I ran into that person. And I just said, you know, what's the deal? You know, I was hurting you knew, you knew I needed support. Just said, well, I didn't have the capacity to give or it didn't seem that, you know, like, I couldn't understand why it was such a big deal for you. The voice inside my head is always running, by the way, the voices inside my head said, good on you, Eric, you made the right decision. Move on. I just said good to see you again, take care. And that's it. And I don't really hold any animosity. It's only now when I'm thinking about it I can, you know, I can sort of re-experience some of that emotion. But I don't actually hate the person. It's just, I don't have any use.

Salima Suleman: Yeah, I've struggled with this. So I know about myself, I am slow to anger. But once I am angry it is very hard to make me un-angry at you. Write that down. I'm very logical in my anger, I think is the best way to say that. So I will flow chart why I'm upset with someone. And I will draw out all the facets and I will have a thesis statement. And once I've reached that thesis statement, there's something inside me that turns off and there's almost no going back. Once I've realized what it is about you, so I had one person who I did walk away from ... I did actually show them the flowchart of why this wasn't going to work.

Eric Storey: And you accuse me of being ...

Salima Suleman: There's a wavelength here, but there was like, yeah. He hurt people I loved. And for me, that was that was it, you're done. I can't be around you. I also can't pretend to like someone I don't. Because I'm an open honest, clear, like, you know me. If you're sitting across from me, you know what kind of mood I'm in. If I don't like you, I can't be bothered. Which is, I do need to learn how to fake it a little. It's a skill, working on it. But yeah, once I've reached a thesis about someone, and if it's something I can't bounce back from, like hurting people I love, that's it. But there are people I have walked away from and I've just said, you need some time. I'm not getting what I need and I'm not able to give you what you need right now. Which kind of applies to your scenario, you had no more resources to give this person and so for me, it's often a walk away and I've been lucky that there have been a few people who we've had to walk away. But we've come back together and had that conversation again, very vulnerable, very challenging. hurtful things were said. We sit down together, and we can say hey, you know what, like, I was in a really bad place, you were not a great place. We're both in better places

now. And I really love you and I care about you. And I want you to be well. And so we're better together now.

Eric Storey: And I think in my lifetime, there's only been that one person that I've walked away from and the rest, it's more, you know, just let's take some space and maybe we'll reconnect or maybe we won't, but it wasn't a firm break. This one was memorable because it was a firm break.

Salima Suleman: Wait, I have a question for you. So people that you've walked away from, have you reconnected?

Eric Storey: Yeah, people that we just didn't seem to have anything in common anymore. And then a year later, five years later, just sort of ran into them or, you know, gave a call said, hey, I was thinking about you and thinking about, you know, something that we had done and just wanted to see how you're doing and made that reconnection that way. Not really consciously. It just sort of bubbled through. And then there's other people that, you know, maybe we were involved as friends or acquaintances because we were involved, we were working on a similar project or that sort of thing. And just there was nothing, there was no friendship there. It was the common things that needed to get done. Yeah, but not a bond of friendship there so that we just, you know, people that I've worked on projects with or you know, helped ... no animosity, there didn't need to be any formal goodbye. It was just, if we see each other again, we'll have a have a coffee and move on.

Salima Suleman: I don't know, I do believe that people come into your life, right when you need them. And there's always something about whoever's in my life right now, there's something I'm supposed to be learning. There's something I'm supposed to be growing. There's something we're supposed to be doing in this moment together and to me, that's friendship. And that friendship comes and goes, and it's all around the world. And I cherish that time I have with people right now.

Eric Storey: Yeah. And I think you've chosen a good point to end because that is friendship. And it's messy, and it's complicated. But what the hell would we do without it?

Salima Suleman: Wow, that was unlike any conversation you and I have ever had. My takeaway from that conversation was that one, we are truly friends. But I also think that because we already have this foundation, and we already knew each other pretty well, we were vulnerable in that conversation and we went really deep in a way that I don't frequently do with people.

Eric Storey: I think it was that deep dive, that reflective conversation that is rare for me to have with a friend.

Salima Suleman: And also interviewing your friend. Yeah, like it's not just talking about tangible events that have occurred. We were talking about our philosophies and our views on the world. And I think it was really an in-depth conversation that I really enjoyed having with you.

Eric Storey: Yes, I enjoyed it as well. Those were the takeaways, what we'd like to ask our listeners is, what were their takeaways? What did you think about this conversation? Do you have reflective conversations with your friends? How do you show vulnerability in friendship? All sorts of questions that we'd like to know from you. So please leave us a comment and we'd like to hear it.

Salima Suleman: The Shared Mic is an initiative of Age Friendly Edmonton, which is a partnership between the City of Edmonton and the Edmonton Seniors Coordinating Council.

Eric Storey: What we'd really like is, if you would subscribe, maybe leave us five stars. That would be wonderful. And listen on Apple, Google, Spotify or wherever you get your podcast.

Salima Suleman:

We're hoping to leave another episode with you in two weeks. Stay tuned.