

## Transcript of Interview with Joya Ahmad by Kit Heintzman

**Interviewee:** Joya Ahmad

**Interviewer:** Kit Heintzman

**Date:** 06/25/2021

**Location (Interviewee):** Brooklyn, New York

**Location (Interviewer):**

**Transcribed By:** Angelica S Ramos

### **Some of the things we spoke about included:**

The pain, strife, stress of the pandemic, as well as awe at humanity and all that we did right  
Healthcare as bureaucratic to its detriment; American healthcare as broken beyond repair; health as a for-profit business. Distrust in the healthcare system as a patient and as a provider, being a queer woman of color receiving healthcare. Working as a medical scribe and volunteering at rape crisis support worker. First hearing about the pandemic through friends in China. Cruise ships as an early indicator of crisis in the USA. The emotional need to help during the pandemic; deciding how to best help. Volunteering in the emergency COVID morgues in March and April; helping find and deliver PPE. Mr. Rogers, a Quaker education, Zakat, and parents as activists and influencing ideas about donation, charity, and service. Having people's lives depend on you. Tutoring online. Giving up public transit. Moving in with partner during the pandemic in a studio at first, and then moving into a larger apartment. Friendships changing during the pandemic over ideas about safety and care. Comparisons between experiences working as a street medic at protests pre-pandemic and mid-pandemic. Militarization of the police and police brutality. Working in the morgues in trucks. What homelessness looked like during the pandemic with reduced shelter capacities. Losing work during the pandemic. Struggling with self-care, guilt. Being disabled and in community with disabled people and people who are immuno-compromised during the pandemic. CDC guidelines in theory and practice. Pandemic fatigue and watching people move from being quite cautious to less cautious over time; hearts and wallets closing. Universal compassion. Putting down roots. The danger of living in the USA 2016-2020, escalating racist harassment; the attack on the capital. The impact of trauma and anxiety on the experience of the pandemic; fight and flight responses; panic attacks. Rape culture. Saying goodbye to a dying friend. Pride weekend in New York 2021 and concerns about safety. Having friends and family in India and Bangladesh. Vaccine patents. Adopting two cats: Pesto and Gnocchi. Scientific vernacular and exclusion of many people; ivory tower; expertise and ego; poor science communication kills people. Marginalized people showing up over and over again to help not just their own communities, but also people in more privileged positions who haven't showed up for those more marginalized. Donations; how far money goes in non-profits; money saves lives.

**Kit Heintzman 00:01**

Hello.

**Joya Ahmad 00:03**

Hello

**Kit Heintzman 00:04**

Would you please start by telling me your full name, the date, the time and your location?

**Joya Ahmad** 00:10

Yeah, my name is Joya Ahmad. It is Friday, June 25 8:36pm. Eastern Time, and I am in Brooklyn, New York.

**Kit Heintzman** 00:18

And do you consent to having this interview recorded, digitally uploaded and publicly released under a Creative Commons license attribution noncommercial sharealike?

**Joya Ahmad** 00:29

Yes, I do.

**Kit Heintzman** 00:30

Thank you so much. I just want to start by asking you to introduce yourself to anyone who might find themselves listening to this. What would you want them to know about you and the place that you're speaking from?

**Joya Ahmad** 00:43

So I think the most pandemic relevant thing about me is that I run a national nonprofit called Med supply drive that does PPE donations across the country, as well as doing health equity education for high schoolers. So I'm one of the national logistics directors. I've been in that position since April of 2020. That I started working with the organization in March. So I've been in this seat for kind of as long as the US has been experiencing the pandemic. The other kind of hat that I wear that's been particularly salient is that I'm a medical student. I'm a rising first year and have been operating in various healthcare roles, or healthcare adjacent roles. I was a scribe, I've been a street medic, I'm a crisis counselor. So I've spent a lot of time in healthcare space and a lot of time in nonprofit PPE donation space.

**Kit Heintzman** 01:34

Can I ask what the word pandemic means to you?

**Joya Ahmad** 01:39

That's a great question. That stumps me immediately, which was funny because I ask it to my high schoolers when I teach health equity classes about the pandemic. It means to me in the love logistical sense, something big enough that everyone's affected. And it also a disease specifically, in the emotional sense, it means. I guess like, if you can imagine the Loch Ness Monster, deciding that it lives with you, one day, that emotionally, it feels like I am now the home for a Loch Ness Monster of various things. The pandemic is so broad of a term that it becomes almost meaningless. But then every now and then it has moments where it means just so much that it is overwhelming. Most of the so much that it means is pain, strife, stress, and then a little like glimmer of it is all at humanity and the stuff that humanity did, right. But mostly, it's the pain of strife and stress.

**Kit Heintzman** 02:55

To the extent that you're comfortable sharing, would you be willing to say something about your experiences of health and healthcare infrastructure prior to the pandemic?

**Joya Ahmad** 03:05

Absolutely. So healthcare infrastructure has never been something that particularly impressed me I have always found it to be unwieldy, and in many ways like bureaucratic to a fault and on purpose. I've never really felt as a healthcare worker that the health care system serves me, I've never felt that it served my patients, I've never felt that it served my co workers, I've really always felt like it was this Byzantine system that like some French existentialist author dreamed up after a bad glass of absinthe, like, that's always what it felt like. And I felt a little bit distant from people who had still hopes and dreams about healthcare being a safe and functional space. And then after this all started, I think that's become more of a mainstream view that the system is broken beyond repair, and maybe never worked to begin with, or maybe worked in some really awful ways to begin with. So I've never, never had a lot of trust in it. I've always had a lot of respect for people who work in health care, along with a healthy dose of mistrust. I'm someone who works in healthcare, but I'm also someone who's been a patient in many contexts. I am a queer woman of color. That means that I don't usually get treated well and healthcare contexts. So I don't trust anyone without reservation, especially in healthcare. And I expect that that is how I am received as well. So when I enter a space as a provider, I'm always expecting someone to distrust me a little bit and willing and able to work for that trust, which I also don't think is a particularly mainstream view in healthcare. I definitely work with people who feel insulted when a patient doesn't trust them. I tend to feel honored that a patient is willing to trust me with letting me know that they don't trust me. I think that in and of itself is an expression of trust, but don't trust the healthcare system. I don't trust most systems, but I have a lot of respect for the people who work with them.

**Kit Heintzman** 05:03

Staying in the pre pandemic world, what was your day to day looking like?

**Joya Ahmad** 05:08

Oh, God. That's a fantastic question. What did my day to day look like? At the kind of right before the pandemic started at the very beginning tail end of 2019, early part of 2020, I was working as a medical scribe in an outpatient cardiology clinic. So that was my full time job. I was tutoring a million children in New York, which was an in person thing I kind of ran all around the city, seeing kids, different neighborhoods, different homes, I was always in people's homes, tutoring, I was still doing nights as a crisis counselor, I'm a rape crisis and domestic violence counselor with a nonprofit in New York. So I kind of meet people in the ER after an assault, and serve as whatever they need me to be in that moment. I don't do any medical care in that role. But I'm usually a liaison between the patient and the medical team. Sometimes I'm a liaison between the patient and the police. And mostly I'm emotional support. So those were all things that I did. And I was finishing my post baccalaureate program to apply to medical school. So I was finishing like organic chemistry, and studying for the MCAT. All of those things happened very much with other people. And we're in person. So I very much was a study group kind of person, I was always with my classmates, it was always with my peers. So my prep and Demick, life was really full of people, and really full of going into a lot of different spaces, like I would leave the clinic and I would go to someone's house, and then I would go to someone else's house, and then I would come back to my own apartment. And so it was very, there was a lot of space sharing in my life. And what are some of the ways that you had to adapt with all of those different parts.

**Joya Ahmad** 06:52

I don't share space with people anymore. Not like that, at least, my role as a scribe was furloughed almost immediately when the pandemic hit, because that was very much a non essential part of health care. So that became the space that I had there kind of became filled by running this nonprofit and by volunteering in a few city

marks, so that was something that happened in New York City, there were sure there have been many news articles about the giant refrigerated trucks full of people's bodies. It turns out that more staff is usually five to 10 people, even in a major hospital, they don't tend to have that many people on a daily basis. So there is a Medical Reserve Corps in most states, I'm a member of my states. And so when that kind of wave of deaths hit, one of the first calls was to the volunteers in the Medical Reserve Corps. So I became a more volunteer in end of March, early April, and kind of went to the morgue every day, instead of going to the clinic, which was very odd for my brain because it was the same hospital, there was the hospital that used to go upstairs in and then I started going downstairs. And so that was a very big shift in my life. And then with teaching, I kept tutoring, most of my students actually needed much more support when school went online. And I started doing it like this on Zoom, which in some ways was a blessing. I think zoom for one on one teaching has a lot of benefits. There's a whiteboard feature, you can screenshot the notes, you can work on a doc together, there's a lot of things that are very conducive, especially for you know, middle school and up I think is very conducive to one on one learning via zoom.

**Joya Ahmad 08:30**

Little kids, there's a limit to what you can do with a second grader on Zoom. So that definitely changed. And then I really just stopped going to people's homes, which was the biggest change for me. And it was weird because I hadn't considered how much people's security guards and front desk people and janitors were like a part of my life. But I gotten really used to seeing some of these people every day, or at least multiple times a week. These are people I knew, like I didn't just pass them in the hallway. Many of my tutoring students I've had for years on end. So I know the guy at the front desk, who's always there, the time that I get there, I know his wife, I know his family. I know his birthday, like we're friends. And so that was very odd to suddenly lose, not just my students in person, but all the people around them that I had come to know and realize how much I cared about the bus driver that I was used to. I used to take Crosstown bus to this one student like four times a week and the bus driver was someone that I talked to, like I talked to her every day almost and it had been three or four years. And it was very odd to suddenly realize that I wasn't going to do that anymore. So I had to adapt to feeling my circle shrink in ways that I didn't even consider my circle could shrink because I hadn't consciously realized how many people that I just said hi to or had brief conversations with in passing. I didn't realize how much that impacted my day to day routine until they were all gone all of a sudden. So that was a big shift for me. And then I took the MCAT. So that large amount of time left my life after I finished taking it. And then I started working at a tutoring company teaching for the MCAT. So the MCAT didn't really leave my life. But it took on a very different weight in my life because it was no longer something that was horrifying to me was something I was trying to help other people be less scared of, because I had taken it I was done. So that was like, it was a weird time to apply to med school for sure.

**Joya Ahmad 10:30**

Yeah, I think a lot of like space and time reallocation. And also my partner and I basically moved in together unexpectedly into my studio apartment. So we got real close, really fast, and had to navigate, both of us working remotely in a one room space, which meant we took a lot of calls in the bathtub. Let's call partnership meant to you over the course of the pandemic. Oh, it took on such a new meaning. My partner and I had been together for a while prior to the pandemic. And we always use the word partner, because that felt the most accurate. But then we started working in a nonprofit together. And we started running a central chapter of a national group together. And then they came on the board as well, just actually very recently. So now we're like on the board of a national nonprofit together, which is not something either of us thought we would ever do in our lifetimes. And now we're

partners in a very literal sense. Like we coordinate things together, we delegate tasks to one another, we manage a chapter of volunteers, and set up drivers and ship things from Canada and call logistics people in Kansas, I did not ever think I would have the names of this many people in Kansas, but I do there's a lot of great logistics companies that run out of Kansas, they do a good job. And that to me, partnership means something very, very different to us. We've never worked together before. Not in that context. Anyways, we coach a slam poetry team together, that also went on Zoom. And so that wasn't a space that we were very comfortable in coaching together. But we'd never like run a thing, we never run a thing that people's lives depended on like slam is beautiful. And art is very much life saving for many people. But it is not the sole purpose of an artistic group to save lives not in the same way, like getting the hand sanitizer to Missouri today was literally gonna save people's lives. So it was like a very different level of intensity. I'm really grateful that I had a partner who was willing to do this with me.

**Joya Ahmad 12:38**

They're not a health care person. They've never been to health care persons them is not their world. They were an English major in college and are thinking about applying to law school. So very much different circles. And I kind of woke up one day and I was like, I got to do something like I can't. It's been a day and I can't take it. I can't take not helping I have to do something. And I found this group that was looking for a New York chapter lead and was like, I'll do it, what do I have to do and started cold emailing the whole world, asking for masks and building a fundraising strategy and building a, you know, strategy to get space to store inventory. And within a week or two, they were like, Okay, I don't know anything about these things. But I can Google and I can make phone calls. So what can I do? And that I think really shaped my understanding of them as a person, I did not expect that I wasn't asking them to do it. They were dealing with, they were still in school, still filling, finishing undergrad, I was very much expecting to like let them do their thing and have me do mine and support them as they got through the end of that and they had lost their job. And then they just showed up in a way that I'd never expected anybody to show up and took leadership in a way that I just never expected to see that in my like life partnership. And it was really beautiful. I'm really grateful. I think it's been polarizing for a lot of couples. I think a lot of people find out things that maybe they didn't want to find out about their partners or, you know, living in that small of a space together is a great recipe for a disaster and it wasn't a disaster.

**Joya Ahmad 14:17**

And I'm still a little shocked that we lasted that long in a studio, we did move when my lease ended, we were like not staying here. So we moved in our when we're in a larger place where we can have doors that shut which is beautiful. But I think we could have stayed I think we would have survived if we had stayed in a studio forever. And that was the first time the idea of if you were stranded on a desert island and you could only have one person to talk to for the rest of your life. Who would it be? I think the romantic answer is to always say your partner but I got proof that it is in fact them.

**Kit Heintzman 14:54**

I'd like to ask about sort of call to do something that you described. In the last example, I'm wondering if that feels similar to you in terms of the morgue work.

**Joya Ahmad 15:06**

Yes, it all kind of happened at the same time. I also feel like that was not a new emotion. For me as a person. I grew up in an activist family, both of my parents have been activists and use the word activist to describe what they do for a long time. I'm from Philadelphia, originally, there's a lot to do in Philadelphia, there's a lot of work

to be done. And I did a lot of it growing up, I went to a Quaker school that really instilled in me this value of service. I didn't love everything about my quicker education. But it did love that. And so to me, doing community service in some way, is equivalent to like, paying rent, it's like a thing that you do in order to live in the place that you live. And for me, when the pandemic started, that was just the natural impulse like that is what I did, when the first wave of like large black lives matter protests started years and years ago, the first time we saw those uprisings get that big. My first instinct was like, Okay, how can I help? What do I do here? What are my skills? And how are they useful to another person and I became a street medic, then. And then when the kind of wave of uprisings happened last summer, that exactly what I did. I was like, Okay, I have my kit, I have my jacket, I have a helmet, let's go. And then, you know, the NYPD started really targeting medics, and we all stopped wearing identifying features after that, but that's very much who I am. And so it was not unexpected for me to have that feeling of like something awful has happened. And I need to act right now. And it needs to be useful. And I think that's the biggest thing that I watched people struggle with in the pandemic was, I want to help but I don't know how, and people diminishing the skills that they did have, and wanting to act in capacities that they actually just weren't suited to do. And there are just some things that I'm not going to be good at. So I'm not going to do them right now. Like I can learn in a less pandemic time. But I kind of took inventory the way that I always do, like, what can I do what is needed? Where's the overlap, and I saw it in someone who can deliver things, someone who knows enough people in health care that they can get contacts, because the larger systems, we're not accepting things were banning people from bringing their own masks or telling their nurses to wear trash bags. So we had to give things directly to physicians and nurses and techs. And that is a network that I have. So I was like, right, this is the right match for me. And in the morgue. The call was actually are you relatively small, have good upper body strength, and they're not afraid of the dark. That was the language in the email, because the trucks are very narrow. And so what they were realizing is the larger people who worked typically, it's larger, stronger, people with very big muscles who work in the morgue, and they physically weren't fitting properly. And it was becoming dangerous for them to walk sideways and try and carry someone in those very narrow aisles. So they were physically looking for people who could fit in that small space. And I was like, That's me. small, scrappy, not afraid of dark. And that kind of all was basically like the normal version of myself with like the volume turned up in terms of urgency.

**Kit Heintzman** 18:27

I was wondering if you would talk a bit more about what it meant to be a street medic in the context of a protest during a pandemic.

**Joya Ahmad** 18:38

Yeah, it was new. I'll tell you that. I street medics. For anyone listening who does not know what that means street medics are people with medical training, who give first aid on the street, pretty much they do not belong to any organization. They are not paid by anyone. They are volunteer people who show up and help when help is needed. That's kind of the point. Street medics exists in some more official manners in terms of like street medicine, outreach programs exist, there's a lot of homelessness care that goes on through street medicine outreach, those are typically not the same people who would call themselves a street medic, a street medic is usually just like a person. There are some unofficial groups that exist to keep us together. There are, you know, group chats, but that's about as far as it gets, because the majority of the care is done at protests, and the majority of the organizing is done around protecting protesters and helping survivors of police brutality. And so it is decentralized on purpose. That is the whole point of the network. And so being a street medic in New York in protest situations is not new to me. The level of violence was new. For me. I had not. Seen, I had not seen such malice and pre

determined violence. Because in you know, so seven years ago in 2014, seven years ago, they a there was a curfew was a very new institution. For my experience in New York, that kind of curfew was new. And the purposeful trying to keep people out after curfew I had never seen before. There was a lot of like blockades on protest routes so that people couldn't leave. And then they would be forced to be out after curfew. And then the police would cattle and like, crowd everyone and make mass arrests. And so that was something I had never seen in America before. I definitely seen it. Definitely heard of and seen it in Bangladesh, which is where my family's from. But I never seen it done hear quite like that. And so that was very new. The level of mental gymnastics we had to play about risk assessment got infinitely more complicated because of the pandemic. And because, okay, yes, we're outside, people are breathing hard and shouting, and we're wearing masks, but not everyone is and testing has never been enough. Like we've never done a good job getting wide coverage of testing. A lot of police officers did not wear masks, and they like to get in people's faces screaming with spit as one does.

**Joya Ahmad 21:30**

So that that added a very new twist to like how we were deciding how close to get to people and what we were going to do and say and how much we were going to keep our distance and instruct people to do things and walk them through things versus go and give hands on aid. There were also just a lot more weapons that were used in these protests than anything I've seen before. It was a lot more tear gas, there were a lot more pepper balls, there was the L they brought the L rod out which I was not expecting. And I don't think people realize that a sonic weapon is as damaging as it as it is. So I definitely cared for a lot of people who didn't realize how much and they didn't run, because they were like it's just sound, what can it do. And then this massive, like wave of sound can really hurt you.

**Joya Ahmad 22:17**

It was a very, it just added a lot of layers of complexity to what is typically a very straightforward job. And we also saw people getting hurt, much worse. And so that added the next layer of complexity of Do you go to the hospital? And if you do, where should you go? Are they going to follow you? Are they going to find you? Where can you go to get help? And so that became a very difficult set of questions and conversations to have and there's no perfect answer. And some people chose to go to the hospital and risked being arrested if they were found there. And some people chose to go home with injuries that they probably shouldn't have gone home with. And then on top of that, a lot of the protests came through many areas where there were a lot of homeless encampments. And in New York City, the shelters went to 30% capacity in I think late March, early April. And that meant that in a city where 95% of the homeless people in New York do have shelter, cutting shelter capacity to 30% meant a lot of people were suddenly homeless and unsheltered, which is not how New York's homelessness typically looks. And it's very different in New York than it is in LA, for example, because this is a right to shelter state. So losing that shelter capacity really changed the dynamic on the physical streets and in the parks. And protests often overlapped with those areas, especially because there are a lot of homeless encampments right around where central booking and the kind of One Police Plaza area is in Manhattan. And so that was also an area of worry of, we need to also attend to the community members who may or may not be a part of the protest, but are here and they live here. And they were also needing extra care. So we kind of split into two groups where we had people who were running at the protests and people who were sitting and taking care of both protesters and community members who were living in or around those parks. And that became kind of an auxiliary arm we started doing a lot of jail support setting up 24 hour shifts to wait for people being released, because people would come out with a lot of injuries or just disoriented. And so that really changed the dynamic of street medic gang because I started to see people repeatedly as opposed to buddying up with a stranger for a protest and then never seeing them again,

never knowing their name. And it really changed the dynamic. I now know many of my fellow medics much better than I did seven years ago. It was weird to reconnect with people in the same chats after seven years and be like hey, I remember you we Bronx, Manhattan, Queens, where were you which I'm trying to place you but it really changed what street medic work looked like. Because usually shelter. Were there. And then all of a sudden, they weren't.

**Joya Ahmad 25:06**

Or they were for 30% of the people, but it got much more stringent. And rules about belongings often also got much more stringent, which meant a lot of people would choose not to go to the shelters because they would have to lose 50 60% of their stuff. And sometimes they lost it anyways. But that was definitely different. And I had a lot more interaction with police, as a medic, because I did a lot of the jail support work where I was just sitting there and like cops couldn't see me with her eyes. And so I definitely interacted more with police than I would have in a more like protest only anonymous setting. And that was uncomfortable to say the least they were not happy with our presence there, they did not want that care to be present.

**Joya Ahmad 25:55**

I did not ask them why I chose to let them make their statements. And I did not really respond. But there was a lot of animosity towards the presence of people doing things like patching up people's bruises and cuts and offering people food and coffee. And that was really not was not smiled upon.

**Kit Heintzman 26:17**

Would you tell me a bit about what you remember about first hearing about the pandemic, sort of what initial reactions looked like and felt like?

**Joya Ahmad 26:27**

So it's interesting, because I heard about it first, very early. I have a lot of good friends in China, and or here with family in China. So the sources of information I had, and have had, in general have never been exclusively American, which means that they look very different from a lot of what I see on American news. And so I was kind of bracing for it. By mid January. I was like this is coming here. It's coming here and it's going to be bad. I did not think it was going to be this bad. But I was like, I I don't see this ending Well, I just don't see this ending well. And so it was not a surprise to me. I think the first thing I heard was like a article that someone sent me like a translated article, someone sent me about one. And seeing that and being like, feel like this is how the plague started. feel I feel like this is I just feel like this is how the plague started in the 1300s. Like it, it feels very familiar. And the first like, American freak out, I remember was I think it was one of the cruise ships that I knew someone who knew someone who knew someone, like one of my co workers knew someone who many degrees of separation, he was on one of the cruise ships. And then people were like, Oh, this is gonna get really bad. And then some group chat informed me of the first New York City COVID positive patient because 85% of my circle is in health care. And then I got the email from my post bacc program that, you know, if you feel sick, stay home. And then like two days later, in March was like the lockdown where they were like, nevermind, everyone go home.

**Joya Ahmad 28:13**

We're going online for the rest of the year. And and then like, everything happened really fast after that. So that was I think like March 13, or 12th, or something like that. And then like two days later, my MCAT day got



canceled. And then two days after that, my scribe job evaporated. And then two days after that I was running the New York City Chapter of med supply drive. Like it all happened in the span of like a week. But I think I felt less taken by surprise than a lot of people in my life because a lot of people called me the day that everything shut down. And they were like, what's going on? And I was like, I mean, nobody ever reads the articles, I send them. But that's fine. It's a plague, y'all like it's a plague. This is a plague. And we live in it. And those of us who are in New York City, we live in it like this is the epicenter of the epicenter, and it's not going to be fun. So like, buckle up, buckle up. It's the apocalypse, I think is an actual phrase that I uttered in a conversation with someone who was like, it's gonna be fine. Like, I'm not going to cancel my flight in May and I was like, You should cancel your flight in May, you should get your refund now.

**Joya Ahmad 29:28**

I felt very much like Cassandra at the beginning. I was like, no one's listening. I'm telling the truth. But I think my perspective is also informed by the fact that I have a lot of friends who are disabled and immunocompromised. And they were looking at this with a much higher level of urgency than people who felt themselves to be invincible people in their 20s and I myself have a lot of health issues. So I was looking at this like, very suspiciously from the get because I don't trust this country to Take care of each other at all. I do not, I did not at that point, and I still don't, but slightly less, I really didn't trust our government then to do anything, right. And so I think the level of like heightened vigilance was different. And it always has been different in disabled communities than it is enabled ones, it's always going to be that way. If you know from the get that you like, can't trust the world to take care of your body or to treat your body with respect that you are going to view things with a lot more scrutiny. And so that is very much the perspective that I was coming from. So I think it was not a shock. I was a little shocked by how poorly people responded. I more so than the beginning of the pandemic. I remember the first like anti mass protest I heard about, and I was flabbergasted. I was I was beyond bewildered. I was like people are protesting what they're going where to watch like i, i, Pretty sure I like laughed, cried for a while. The first time I heard about one of those I was like this is we're doomed. I was like, we're we're like humanity had a good run, didn't have a good run, humanity had a terrible run. And it's, it's over, like pack it up, guys, if this is what we're doing. Wow. That was the thing that I think hit me like a ton of bricks, the actual announcement that we were in a worldwide pandemic, and that it was going to kill a lot of people did not surprise me, it scared me. It made me very sad. I mean, very worried. It made me very inclined to action, but it did not surprise me.

**Joya Ahmad 31:42**

The sheer levels of selfishness that I shouldn't have been surprised. I've lived in America long enough. And and yet, a little piece of me was like, we could be good to each other. Right? And then we couldn't. And I was like, Oh,that one hurt.

**Kit Heintzman 32:09**

Would you talk a bit about how some of those reactions have changed over time? And or and or how they've stayed consistent?

**Joya Ahmad 32:17**

Yeah, I think I think it's gotten more confusing people's reactions now. And I think some of that is the guidance from the CDC being like, you don't need to wear a mask if you're vaccinated. And then a lot of businesses have taken that to be like, no more masks. And I'm like, that maybe isn't the greatest idea. But I've seen a lot of people

who took it very seriously early on, starting to not take it seriously anymore, and not wear masks and fly for non essential reasons and go and eat indoors. And like lots of things, a lot of people that at the beginning were like, very, very stringent about following the rules, like the people who were sanitizing their Doritos are now like sharing bowls of Doritos with strangers and bars again. And that has confused me a lot. But I think I overestimated the lesson learning that was going to happen. I thought once we got to everybody knows somebody who's died points in a pandemic, that there would be a collective like this is very serious. And we need to start being overly cautious as opposed to hedging our bets and kind of winging it, like we need to be willing to be called over reactors now that we've seen this.

**Joya Ahmad 33:38**

And I think I overestimated people's ability and willingness to learn from that. I think I also overestimated how people whose circles were very small and privileged, I overestimated their ability to like, understand outside of their circles. And I think it's just really different. I don't think there are a lot of people outside of healthcare, and who get what it looks like inside hospitals. And even within healthcare, I think there are a lot of people healthcare, maybe is the wrong group to say here because there's a lot of outpatient practitioners who were like my, my practice is online now and I'm fine. I think hospital based practitioners, and mortuary workers saw something that no one else saw. I don't think it's possible for me to take it lightly anymore. Now that I've carried so many people's loved ones in a bag, like you don't forget that. And I've dealt with death before I've handled decisions before but the number of bodies that I moved was overwhelming. And stalking people people these were people to to a shelf in a truck that doesn't leave you Ever, and it puts everything into a very serious light. So that I find myself feeling very at odds with people who are like, it's time to open up again. And I'm like, why are we so eager. There are also just like, from a scientific perspective, there are variants, we do not know how these variants are going to respond to the vaccine, we do not know if the vaccine is even going to last very long. It's a new vaccine, the tetanus vaccine needs a booster and we've had that forever. So like, maybe just slow your roll. And people are like, it's time, we need to have fun again. And I'm like, I don't know that my ability to go to a bar is worth whoever's Grandma I carried into a truck last year. And I am going to keep wearing masks. And I'm going to keep not eating in indoor restaurants. And I'm going to keep seeing people in parks, which I actually have really enjoyed that most of my interactions with my friends are now very outdoors based. I think that's lovely. But I think the group of people who now don't wear masks and do whatever has broadened to the extent that I can't tell them apart anymore. And that's confusing.

**Joya Ahmad 36:14**

A lot of people have talked about pandemic fatigue, and the like quarantine fatigue of like, a have just been inside too long, I just have to get out, and I don't get it. I intellectually understand how one could become fatigued with that. And I understand how monotony can really wear on the soul. And from my perspective, if you had the privilege to genuinely just be in one place, and not have to move and not have to go outside not have to do anything. You're living a charmed life. And I wish everyone could just like come sit on my shoulder for a day. I, at the beginning of my tenure as the New York manager before I became part of the national group. We didn't have volunteers yet. We had me. And so I didn't have a car. I don't have a car in New York City, most people don't. I was running with boxes of masks, like I was taking backpacks of masks and gloves and running to Queens, like I was running 1520 miles a day to frantic healthcare professionals who were on their last mask or who had already gone through, you know, six reuses of the same one. And then someone coughed on it. And now they couldn't use it anymore. Like I was meeting people in tears outside of their hospitals at four o'clock in the morning, like, I was running like people's lives depended on it. And they did. And I just I was tired. I was very

tired. I was so tired. I got a city bike membership, because I was like, this isn't sustainable. At a certain point. I was like, I can't run this much. I will break. So I biked that much instead, which was also very tiring. And I woke up most mornings in the middle of a panic attack. Because I was so afraid I had slept through a phone call. What if somebody called me in the middle of the night, and they needed my help. And I didn't pick up what if, and that tortured me for months. And I'm a lot better now. Our structure as an organization is much bigger, which has really taken a lot of the load off of me, but Nanos, that first summer, I felt the weight of New York on my shoulders every minute of every day. And so I found it really hard to understand what people meant when in still 2020 Like in the fall, they were like, I'm too tired of this, I have to, I have to go on vacation, I need to fly in a plane and I was like, need, oh my god, we have very different understandings of the word need. And I try to like, Hold compassion for them in my heart, because I know that their perspective is not my perspective and their experience is not my experience. And some people are just selfish.

**Joya Ahmad** 39:00

And I don't try to spend a lot of energy parsing out who's who I'm just like you're doing what you're doing. I don't love it and there's nothing that I can do to change your mind about it right now. So I'm just gonna keep helping who I can help and hope that you make peace with whatever you believe in one day but the thing that you believe in is clearly not make sacrifices for the greater good. And that is foreign to me. It's like it doesn't it doesn't mesh with my worldview. And so it mostly just makes me really sad. It makes it made me so sad to hear people be like, I need to go and danger a bunch of people and myself to like, go on vacation.

**Joya Ahmad** 39:50

And I just like I could never and I still can't really wrap my head around that like need and maybe I just use the word need very, very. Literally, but I think there's some distance that grew between me and my friends who operate it that way. There are some people that I just don't really know how to relate to anymore. I don't really know what to say to them.

**Joya Ahmad** 40:18

And I don't think I want I don't think it's a conversation I want to have with these people, none of the people who I feel that distance with are my very close friends, all of my very close friends, I realized they're very different from one another, the thing we all share is the I will sacrifice for the greater good vibe that I found, finally, the unifying feature of my incredibly disparate group of friends. And it's that, so I'm grateful for that, that I didn't lose any central friendships in my life. But some of the peripheral ones I was, like, keep you at an arm's length for I don't really know how to, I just don't know how to talk to someone who was so cavalier about other people's lives.

**Kit Heintzman** 41:03

2020 and 2021 have been big years within the context of the pandemic. They're also big years at another at a number of other intersecting issues. I'm wondering what some of the bigger issues of the last two years have been that have been on your mind?

**Joya Ahmad** 41:22

Absolutely. I think the 2020 election was a big one. I think being living at the intersection of a lot of marginalization meant that 2016 to 2020 was just, it just felt dangerous. Everything felt dangerous all the time. And I have a very significant amount of privilege in terms of education and access. And I still felt like I was in danger all the time. And I was like, in a very concrete sense, like I got followed, harassed, screamed at spit out

more in those four years than ever before. And that includes right after 911. Like that was the last time I remember being hated that much, and being afraid of everyone on the street.

**Joya Ahmad 42:12**

I hadn't felt that way since I was nine. And then the 2016 election happened. And I was like, Oh, I don't, I'm not American to most Americans. I was born here. I was raised here, pay my taxes here have been serving, not just living in but like I've been actively serving my community in America for 28 years. And I think at this point, the majority would probably look at me and be like, go back to where you came from. And I got a reprieve from hearing that language consistently. After, you know, I think maybe like 2003 2004, the anti Arab sentiment had kind of chilled a little bit. I'm not Arab either, which is irrelevant to racists, but 2016 hit and it all kind of came flooding back with a twist, which was that people started to think I was Mexican, which was fun, because then I got to for the price of one in terms of racist slurs. At this point, I've developed a sense of humor about it. Like when someone would call me an Arab related slur, and I let the next related slur in the same breath. I'd be like, You got to pick buddy, which one is it? And they'd be like, huh, and I'd be like, Wow, it's a game show. Don't you know, guess the immigrant.

43:27

But I was exhausted by the time the 2020 election came around. I was genuinely devastated. In January when the capital attack happened that I'm glad that it didn't spark a series of things because that was my fear that day. I was like, this could be it. This is like, this is how the purge movies start, I think. And I felt very scared in that moment. But I'm very grateful that it didn't go much further than that. So I think that was one just like Trump's presidency and all of the things that happened and all of the kind of ripple effect things that happened as well, aside from just policy and the truly unprecedented amount of anti trans legislation that's been just flooding every state and the scary amount of anti choice legislation as well like, all of that, aside, the like larger cultural currents that began to feel a lot like riptides. Those were the things that I think shook me the most, because I knew that they weren't going to go away when he lost. And I was not sure that he was going to lose either. I was up all night for many nights, and I felt like Steve Kornacki by the end of it. I never resonated so deeply with a person on television than him like madly scribbling on his maps. I was like, Steve, you understand me? My partner. I like doing math on index cards were freaking out. And that really felt like life or death at that. And it was. And so that was a big thing. And then not just George Floyd. But the series of kind of high profile murders that happened or were discussed all at the same time, like Ahmed Aubrey died many months before, but kind of became part of that conversation. And same thing with Briana Taylor becoming part of the conversation like that series of uprisings was a huge cultural moment, I think for everyone. And for me, it was a very concrete reality because I was there, like I was wiping up blood on the sidewalk by day one, and that I've never trusted the police. I did not I didn't like even as a child, like I didn't grow up being told, if you're in trouble, find a cop. I was told if you're in trouble, find a woman with a stroller. Like find a mom with kids. That's who you trust, trust no one in uniform, any uniform, because they are more their uniform than they are the person inside of it. That was what I was taught from day one. And so I never had any trust for the police. But they became like cartoon villains. In the summer of 2020. Like I saw someone get dragged off of his own stoop, and arrested for being out after curfew. It was his property. And they just walked up the steps and dragged him away from his screaming wife and children. And everyone was just like, what is happening here? Like, there was just no, there was kicking delivery drivers, they were punching people in the face, like it was insane. It was it was like something out of a horror movie. And that I think changed the way that I operate in the way that I moved through the city now, because there are cops everywhere the police presence in the city has never gone down from last May. And I have always been wary of

cops. I'm way more wary of cops now. I think there's a lot, there was just a lot of a lot of very graphic violence that I saw up close, and a lot of moments where I made a split second decisions to risk my life and go in after someone who was clearly visibly injured. And every time I did that, because I was applying to med school at the same time I was having this like fear of like, What if I die? What if I get blinded? Because they were blinding? A lot of people this last year, I don't know when they started doing that. And what if I don't die or get blinded, but I get arrested. And I lose? Ever I lose my everything is very, very difficult to get into medical school with a with a criminal record. And I was terrified the whole time and kind of had that conversation with myself every time I was taking a shift that was at an active protest was like, am I going to do this? Am I not going to do this? Why are you doing this? Is this a good idea? You know, are you going to be more useful to someone in another capacity. And the answer kind of every time was I'm small, I'm non threatening, and non block that gives me power in that space. And I have to use it. I couldn't live with myself if I didn't use it like that is those moments of going in and trying to take people out of a violent situation. Those moments were all decisions that I made because I had the privilege to live long enough to make them I had the privilege to stay out of jail long enough to make a decision to decide to put myself at risk instead of just having risks thrust upon me. And that I couldn't, I don't think I would have been able to face myself or any of my students ever. If I hadn't gone in and helped people I would have, I would have betrayed the actual community that I'm a part of. And I think for me, as a transplant to New York, I'll always say that I'm from Philadelphia, but I've been my entire adult life in the city. And these this is where my adult roots are. And turning my back on protests, given the privilege and access and physical ability that I had, would have made me feel like I was ripping up those roots.

**Joya Ahmad 49:21**

And that was part that was scary. That was really, really scary. And I think that really changed a lot. I think it also made me read a lot more and listen a lot more and ask a lot more questions about abolition in the concrete. I've always been a prison abolitionist, as person in theory. I don't really know what it meant, besides like, the concrete actions of like divesting from private prisons that I've bothered my own college about for years on end until they did like, but I never really sat with any groups that were talking about. How do we make that a reality like what will it look like to keep communities safe. What does this non carceral care look like? I had heard the phrase like health care is carceral many times and I'd seen ways, especially in mental health where it is, but hadn't given, like concrete specific thought to a lot of these things. They were things that I knew and believed and supported. But I hadn't seen them come into concrete reality before in front of my face. And like, the street medic and jail support collective became a very great example of non carceral health care, and presented us with a lot of challenges. A lot of like, I know that this person is making a decision that I don't medically agree with, and I cannot force them to do something. What does that mean? How do you negotiate with that?

**Joya Ahmad 50:46**

I think I learned more in the last year about healthcare than I will learn in four years of medical school. I think systems and theory wise, I don't think I'm gonna learn more than that. I think I'm gonna learn physiology. I think I'm gonna learn pathophysiology and anatomy and all the really important stuff it takes to be a doctor. But I think the really formative healthcare experiences that I had were on the street this year, for sure.

**Kit Heintzman 51:15**

Would you tell me what health means to you?

**Joya Ahmad 51:19**

It's a thing, insurance companies can charge you to try to keep a tenuous grasp on, I think health. Health means ideally, health means maintaining a body that is safe and comfortable to live in. In reality, health is a commodity health is a construct and health is a business. And I think disability complicates what health means. And on learning, the idea of normal or baseline is a very core part of what disability justice is. And I am entering healthcare as a profession, with an understanding of health as a construct on purpose as a person who believes in the tenants of disability justice, and will act on those also, as a person who is disabled and will live like that. So I think health means almost nothing. To me. As a word, I think it's become meaningless. I think the words I'm more interested in asking people rather than like, Are you healthy is like, Are you safe? Is there anything that I can do to change? That if you feel unsafe? Are you comfortable? Is there anything I can do to fix that? If you're not? Are you fully embodied? Like, do you have access to the parts of yourself in a physical way that you want to? Can I change that? If not, like, I think that's, that's the set of questions is, are you this? And can I help? Those are the two questions that I want to ask. And I don't think I've ever had the desire to ask someone like, so are you healthy. And I think that's been interesting, because that's become everybody's sign off in emails now is like, be healthy. And I'm like, never have been never gonna be. But like, it's, that's a weird thing to say to your boss. So I don't, but I always sign off with Take care. Because that's what I mean is like, I hope that you take care of yourself, or receive care for yourself in whatever way that looks. But I'm not healthy. Most of my friends are not healthy. And most of us are never going to be healthy. But I'm safe. And I'm as comfortable as I'm going to be. And those are the things that matter to me. I'm very connected to my body, like it or not, it exists and I'm able to access it, and fight with it and nurture it or not, and have complicated discussions with myself and my own doctors, and my own therapist and my own partner about like what taking care of a body means when that body's never not in pain. I have a just chronic pain all the time. And so I don't think I've felt well, ever, which is both exhausting, and kind of liberating. I think it's been.

**Joya Ahmad 54:17**

I was talking to a friend of mine who, like me is a very anxious person. And we were like, This is our time to shine, man. Everybody's anxious for the first time we've been here. We live here. This is like you're in our neighborhood now. And that was a joke, but also true that I was not fazed by needing to suddenly be constantly vigilant about everyone who came into my space. That is what having anxiety and having trauma means. I've always scanned every room for the easiest way out. I've always known exactly which thing I would reach for a weapon first, like that is how I exist as a person who's survived many things. And so I think there was a level of liberation and a level of pride that I took in having a disabled self. Because it gave me a perspective and a resilience that I wasn't expecting to need. But then it kind of came through for me. So all the things that I was like, Oh, I'm so frustrated, but my body's always in pain. I kind of was like, Well, I mean, I do know how to live with it. And that is something that a lot of people are learning for the very first time and a lot of people aren't learning and are choosing not to be alive to learn it anymore. And I think there was a readiness, both physically and emotionally. That was not a pleasant thing to come by. But I ended up deciding to be grateful for it because what other choice did I have?

**Joya Ahmad 55:47**

Yeah, so health means nothing.

**Joya Ahmad 55:51**

safety, comfort, autonomy and embodiment mean everything.

**Kit Heintzman 55:58**

Would you tell me what safety means to us some of this has already happened but just inviting you to dive into it.

**Joya Ahmad** 56:05

Safety means I can sleep with both eyes closed. Yeah, that's my definition of safety is when I can go to sleep and not have whatever Sentinel part of my brain is awake scanning, when I can fully go to sleep, that safety. When my cats like roll on their backs, when they feel really safe, they let you see their like soft belly, that emotionally is also safety. I think being with someone that I can roll on my back in front of that safety. In a larger state, like living somewhere where I do not fear violence would be safety. But I've never experienced that. I have never walked on the street and been like, I'm not afraid of being assaulted. today. I'm like, I walk past men every day. And a fair number of them say something, do something or say and do something. And that's just my reality. It's been my reality. As a child, it's my reality as an adult, like, as soon as you're identifiably female from a distance, there are people who will harass and attack you, I have learned a lot of defense mechanisms. I'm very grateful that I have the physical ability to fight I did martial arts for a very long time, at a competitive level and boxed and I do actually feel confident and have proven to myself in dire situations, I can fight my way out of something if I need to. And I became a distance runner for a reason. If I can't fight you that I'll run away from you, those, those are the options. So big picture, I would love for safety for me to mean, I walk down the street, and I'm not using my phone as a mirror, I go somewhere alone at night, and I don't share my location with anybody that would feel very, that would be safety. It is not for me, for me, the closest I get is in my own home, in my own space with my cats with my person. That's safety. I think safety in my body would be believing that it's not going to fail me or break or dislocate or collapse. And that's a more tenuous relationship, there are times that I feel safe and like I can trust my body to support me. Running is a really big part of how I access that it's both something I love and something that has been clearly supported me in my health, whatever that means. But like, there are many times I've had physicians tell me like, I'm really glad you're a runner because XYZ probably would have happened if you didn't have that stamina if you hadn't developed your cardiovascular system in this way. If you didn't build the muscular girdles around your joints this way you would probably be a lot worse off. So safety also means running for me. I think I feel safest when I'm in motion, which is something to unpack in therapy probably. I feel safest when I'm running I feel safest one. And with my cats I feel safest when my partner's home

**Kit Heintzman** 59:10

With that beautiful and capacious framing of safety. Under COVID-19, there's been an incredibly narrow idea of what safety means. And I'm wondering within that narrow framework, how have you been negotiating those kinds of particulars with people in your life around you?

**Joya Ahmad** 59:35

Yeah. I would love to be named an overreactor. At the end of all of this. I've never ever been afraid of being called someone who took it too seriously. I'm like, great. Bring it because you know what that will mean? It will mean that you just weren't at risk. That sounds great. So in the in the very literal sense. I don't have a problem with masks. I don't. I think I might like them. Like I think I genuinely enjoy them. I find it nice and no one can see my mouth. No one tells me to smile. They do tell me to take my mask off. And I don't but it's like there's a protectiveness about it in an emotional way that I love. But I wear masks. I don't go indoors with people who are not my partner. And if I do for any reason, we are also masked the only people that I spent time with unmasked. I lost a friend in this this April. And she was she was dying of brain cancer and kind of did a last hurrah drove her family drove across America to go be in Colorado with where she kind of grew up with her extended family. And she asked me to come out and kind of be for her at the end, and we did not wear masks in the house. And that was

that felt safe. And we had kind of made that decision together as a group, that by the time I got there, they would have all been just with each other for several weeks, I quarantined in a hotel before I went, I was tested, they were tested, we were all vaccinated. And for something like that is where I'm like, this is where I'm, I want to take that risk. And that's why I'm so much of a not risk taker in every other space in my life, that if the moment comes, that I need to be present at somebody's deathbed, I want to be able to take my mask off and give you a kiss goodbye. And so I keep my mask on everywhere else, just in case. There are elderly people in my neighborhood that I interact with when I deliver food. And so I'm very, very conservative. I am not hugging people really, because I know that there's a chance I'm going to interact with a patient and have to touch them. And I don't want to be bringing anything with me. Hitting especially because I work with a lot of people who are homeless, they're already at risk for so much. I just don't want to be another risk factor. I don't want to be a vector. And I just think it's considerate to do that. So the particulars of safety, I've just taken the most extreme version of most of them. So that when I need to bend that rule, I can and not feel worried that I'm introducing something that's kind of my most important thing is like there are enough people in my life, who something could happen to that, I need to know that I've done everything outside of that, to keep myself as germ free for them. I also really like not catching colds anymore. So that I'm going to keep I also think it helped my lung capacity I ran with a mask on and still run with a mask on for over a year now. And I really think it helps. So I'm a fan of it.

**Kit Heintzman** 01:02:50

How are you feeling about the immediate future?

**Joya Ahmad** 01:02:53

Immediate, like tomorrow or immediate like the next couple months, either. Tomorrow, I'm feeling stressed about its Pride weekend in New York. And I love my glittery queer brethren as much as I possibly can. And I really don't want everyone going out to bars. I'm so freaked out by all the pride events that are happening. I don't want to go to the parade. I want to sit in a gay circle 20 feet apart and yell bad Tumblr memes at each other. Like that's it. I'm I'm a bad example. Because I don't like parties. I didn't like them before. I don't like them. Now. I like relationships that are based on conversation. I like to talk to my friends. I don't like to be in loud places. But I'm extremely stressed about pride this weekend. I'm a little frustrated. Like I understand like I'm I am also gay and want to go celebrate being gay loudly in the streets. And I'm like, really? The bars, please don't go No. It just like that I have so much anxiety about like all my friends getting the Delta variant this weekend. That that's my fear. The next few months, I am cautiously optimistic about I start med school in August. I'm excited. I've wanted this for a long time. I am shocked that it worked out this well during this cycle, which was both awful and very competitive, like more people applied to med school this year than ever before. And that happens every year. But this year, The jump was like 40% It was absolutely bizarre. And so I'm very excited about the program going to I excited to be going to med school in the neighborhood that I live in and be like really embedded in my community and excited to live somewhere for more than a year at a time. I've moved every year for the last 10 years. And this will be my first home that I signed a two year lease on this place. And that's like that feels like like root roots. So I'm very excited about that. And I'm nervous. I'm nervous that we are going to get slammed with another wave. I am nervous that I'm going to get another email asking for small, scrappy people who aren't afraid of the dark. I am nervous that it will feel routine by then. And I'm nervous that the goodwill that we relied on so heavily to save so many lives last year won't be present the second time around. I'm worried that people's wallets and hearts will be tapped out. If we have a surge the way that we did last summer and I don't want that to happen. And I am genuinely powerless. change whatever outcome is going to happen. I'm disappointed. I'm disappointed that people are so quick to forget. And I'm more disappointed that the CDC couldn't play strict parent just once, like, come



on, you're the CDC, you could say things like, You do still have to wear your masks until we know what's up with this variant like they could have. They wanted to be the cool parent. And then they played, they were like, really cool. You can take your masks off, and I'm like, Oh, my God, first of all, half the country has been taking them out, stop anyways, so don't really know which kid you wanted to like you better, but I am. I'm like extremely stressed about that. And that's something that I think about a lot that the structures of mutual aid that became very robust during the height of things last summer, a lot of them have dwindled, rightfully, because there is less work to be done right now. But I'm like, This feels like right before the other shoe drops. And I hope that I'm wrong. But I'm, I'm very nervous. And I'm also just like, very pained looking at what's happening in India and Bangladesh, where my entire extended family is. And knowing that I can't help, like many of them, luckily, can stay inside. But if they get sick, there's no oxygen at the hospitals, there are no beds at the heart, there are no peep, there are no doctors, there's nothing, it is a deathtrap there, and I can't do anything. And I can't even send stuff because it would get stolen, or broken or take a month to get there. And all we can do is send money. But when you can't find the oxygen to buy all the money in the world won't help you. And so I'm, I'm we're all kind of like waiting to see what happens in Bangladesh and India and South Asia in general world, my whole family's just kind of like, how many family members will we have this time next year? We have fewer now than we did this time last year? And how many fewer is it going to be? And that's just like, I can't think about it too much. Or I feel completely desolate. I've been trying to focus on the things I can do. And the people that can help. But it feels awful that the people that I can help the least are like my family. And they're completely out of reach. So that's like, yeah.

**Kit Heintzman** 01:08:46

What are some of your desires or hopes or longings for longer term future?

**Joya Ahmad** 01:08:55

Oh my god, erase patents on vaccines, all of them. Just give everybody the recipe. Oh my god, like I I was I felt physically ill when I saw the way that every company handled that. I was like, so you want to kill everyone in the Global South, just say it. Just like just we got honest in America, about just wanting to kill all people of color. So can you just be honest as a world and be like, we don't just want to kill the ones here. We want to kill them all. Just say it. Just say with your chest and go It pisses me off that there's this like, conversation about you know, intellectual property and whatever. I'm like people are dying. Could you just shut up? Like, oh, God, that's my big dream is just like erase patents from existence. No medicine should be allowed to be patented. That's ridiculous. That's why he sold the patent for insulin for \$1. And now of course, it's not anymore. But like, decades ago, people understood that life saving medicine should not be a commodity to be bought and sold. Like that's my one, one longing, my pipe dream. My smaller pipe dream is that the level of flexibility that's been had with a lot of nonprofit regulations stays so that we can start doing more abroad. We're technically not allowed to yet. All we can do right now is like direct people to nonprofits that are working in India and in Bangladesh, but my hope is that we can find a way with legal help to finagle a more direct point of access. I'm hopeful that a large enough mass of people we vaccinated that spread is just not as high. I'm praying that the vaccine does work against the Delta variant, at least in preventing, like severe hospital needing symptoms? Hope there are some nice people in med school, that'd be cool. I don't need that, though. That's not a need. I have people I'm also just confirming non traditional students. I'm not depending on medical school to make my lifelong friends, I have my lifelong friends. It'd be nice if I made new ones. But like, I don't need that. I mostly just there is an article in Huffington Post years ago, that was titled, I don't know how to convince you, you should care about other people. It was a great article. And it was someone basically pulling their hair out for the reasons that I pull my hair out every day being like, I

just don't know how to get through to someone who doesn't care about other people's lives. And I have a dream, a hope, a wish, a want that, like some gas is released that envelops the entire world. And suddenly everybody begins to care about other people. That's like, my dream scenario is like everyone wakes up one morning and it's like, I think I'll make a decision based on the collective good today. Like that. My utopia, I think people don't realize it. But that's everybody's utopia. If everybody behaved like that, I think we would all get pretty close to our utopia. Yeah, my concrete longings are that we get more donations this quarter than we did last quarter. That we that Walmart stops raising its food prices, I work with a food distribution, mutual aid group, and prices are just been rising. So I hope that they stop. And I hope that all of my friends live to see another terrible year. I hope that my cats stop pooping right next to the litter box instead of in it, which is something we've been doing lately. Those are the little things. And I hope, I hope at some point, it feels safe enough to have a wedding. I would very much like to have a non pandemic wedding.

**Kit Heintzman** 01:13:08

I'd love to hear anything that you have to say about living with the cat during the pandemic.

**Joya Ahmad** 01:13:14

There is so great. Let me see if I can show you one. She says the foot of the bed there. That's neoci She looks like a blanket. But she's the little black blob. She's very sweet. Oh, and there's pesto. She's the tabby. They're sleeping. They are the lights of my life. And I never understood the phrase like natural antidepressant until I got cats. And I still don't believe that they take the place of like an actual antidepressant. But they do help a lot. They are sisters. They are from the same litter. We got them from a rescue in the Bronx that found a mother and an entire litter living with under a car. They took them all in and adopted them out in pairs that were kind of like naturally bonded pairs. So these two already kind of liked each other. They were gravitating towards each other. So they were adopted out as a unit. We adopted them in January. And we named them pesto and neoci. Because food names for animals brings us both joy. And pesto is a little spicy and yolk is a little dumpling. So we felt that it suited them. They are they're unnecessarily cute. It's adorable and wonderful. And they don't know there's a pandemic, or maybe they do I don't know, do you speak English? No, she and I don't think they speak English. But they're just so good. And they are totally chaotic and, and self centered as All cats are. But it doesn't hurt the world when they are self centered and chaotic. And so I love it. They sit on my feet while I do things and they try to eat my headphones so I don't use them. They are a really great reminder that there are like good innocent things in the world. And this is our first parenting experience together. So that's very exciting. They're just like I don't know a lot of people got pets during the pandemic. And we waited a while. We had the thought early and we waited because we were like okay A lot of people get pets during pandemic, but then the rates of return to shelter have also gone up. And we don't want to be those people. So we have to wait until we're like ready until we're really ready. And we waited. And then we were really ready. And then we got two cats. And they're just like really sweet little angels. They're incredibly social. They really like us. They really like other people, I've let them meet a couple of people. They're very confused, because they've never seen anyone who they've met so far, they've never seen their face. So we're the only people besides the people who rescued them, who they've ever seen a full face up because they were fostered in homes of the people who work for the rescue first. So they saw their faces, and they've seen our faces. They've never seen anyone else's face. And so they're very confused by masks. But they're, they're very well adjusted. It was kind of the ideal situation that they were raised by their own mother for the first two months of their lives. In a foster home all together, they got the normal kitten socialization of being in a large litter of learning how to do all the cat things that you're supposed to learn with other cats. And then they got adopted out together and they liked each other like this. You can see them they're like cuddling

together. That's how they sleep. They play together, they amuse each other at night, they squabble a little bit, they have no desire to eat out of separate bowls, they want to eat out of the same bowl, it's very cute. They like each other. And it's, it's really, really lovely to see two little animals thriving. They're very shy when we first got them. And now they're not now they used to hide under the couch all the time. And now they just like are out sitting on the bed, sometimes one of them will like pop their head up, like right here, and just sit on a zoom call with me. And it's just like, if the world completely implodes tomorrow, at least I got the last six months with two of the most perfect beings on the planet. I'm biased, and I love it. And they're perfect. There's nothing wrong with either of them. And the number of ridiculous nicknames that we've invented. For them, it also brings me a great deal of joy, pesto, became pesto westoe, which became pet study West city. And then when she's being bad, it's just Weston. And I don't know where that came from. But that's the evolution of her name. And then neoci is also neoci boki. And there's also milks and yolks for books. And I don't know what any of those things mean. But they respond to all of them in equally variable levels of consistency. Like we don't know if they know their names. I think the no tone, but they're perfect.

**Kit Heintzman** 01:18:41

Self Care has been a really prominent part of the pandemic and 2020-21 narrative more broadly. And wondering if you'd be willing to share some of the ways that you've been caring for yourself and also struggles with self-care.

**Joya Ahmad** 01:18:56

I'm so bad at self-care. Oh, no, I'm in this in the process of this interview. I like registered how many things I've been doing, as I said them out loud, because I don't, I try not to tell a person, all the things that I do at one in one shot because it sounds insane. It's, it's overwhelming, even to me to consider it. I can't look at my calendar, all in one shot. I have it today mode. Because if I look at my whole week, it's scary. It's very color coded. It's like it's a machine. But I'm very bad at self care. I feel very guilty about stopping to do things. And I have heard many times the old adage you can't pour from an empty cup. But I haven't ever reached the point where my cup got empty. So I have this like weird feeling of like, the limit does not exist, of I have yet to reach a point where I am so tired that I'm not helping anymore. And I'm extremely self critical. So I would pull myself out probably before someone else would tell me to sit back and I've never reached that point. So it's very challenging. I have gotten better at sleeping, because I started taking a lot more melatonin. And that's been good. But it's really hard for me because I am so aware of the things that need to be done, and the ways in which I could be doing them. And it's much easier for me to do things that amounts to self care if there's someone else involved in them. So like when the cats get on top of me and I can't move because they'll cry. That's a very easy time for me to take a rest because it's for the cats and that's much easier mentally for me to comprehend. Running is a really really big part of my life. At the risk of sounding like one of those runners, I totally am. But I do try not to. I try not to foist it on other people. I don't think running is the issue, I think I think everyone in their life should have the experience of traversing a distance under their own power, whether that's running, walking, crawling, wheeling, rolling, I don't care. But I think everyone should have the experience of moving themselves, or moving themselves with the assistance of another person, but like not a car, some distance, there is some kind of accomplishment that feels like primal. It's like instinctual that feeling of I went somewhere today, on my own, there's something irreplaceable about that sensation. And running is also something that is very mine. Like, I think there's a lot of a lot of my life that has felt guided by controlled by or overwhelmed by other people's expectations and goals and desires for me. And running is a thing that no one in my life ever thought I would do. And in fact, many people told me, I would be very bad at it. And I didn't have the right body for a runner, and it would never work. And I turned myself into a marathon or mostly out of spite. And I love it so much. And that is a big part of my self care. But I also think that

the reason I'm able to do it is because it feels like a very functional skill to develop. And so I circumvent the guilt of doing something meaningless, because when push came to shove, last March, and a bunch of gloves needed to make their way 14 miles from where I was, it was because I had spent years running that I was able to be like, I'll do it. I'll do it, and they'll get there in time. And a lot of my running is, I only really race for charity reasons. All the races that I do. I run the New York Marathon every year. Last year, it was canceled. I ran it anyways to fundraise for med supply drive just by myself, and added an extra mile for every person who donated over \$250, which meant that we raised \$15,000. And I ran 40 miles, which was in retrospect, I don't know how I did that it started raining at mile 26. And I ran 14 miles in the rain. And I felt great. I felt great. I went for a run the next day. I was like what? Sometimes I think I'm an Android. Like I joke with my friends. But sometimes I sit and I'm like, am I a robot? Was I grown in a lab? Maybe I asked my mom and she always just goes, Oh, please, which makes me think that maybe I was engineered.

**Joya Ahmad** 01:23:28

But the self care that I do is easiest when it's for someone else or like feels like it serves a greater purpose. So that's been a challenge. The one big step that I took towards real genuine, this is just for me and it's not about serving the greater good is I joined an acapella group. I did acapella in middle school, high school college, and after college was the longest period of time I went without having a group of people to sing with. So I auditioned for and joined this, like semi professional, acapella group in New York City. And that I'm really excited about, there's a hint of like, it has to be for a greater good because we do a lot of charity events. But I think it's as close as I've ever gotten to just like, just something for me. And I think the time I spend with my partner is also a genuine real unwind where we like watch a lot of cake decorating video compilations on the internet. And Soleil Wally, from previously from Bon Appetit now of her own empire is a chef that we both like to watch do things. She's very talented and a little wacky. And she does a show with the History Channel. And those are things that I think are like, true unwind activities. But it's something that I struggle with. It's something that I also feel has been discussed in a very not nuanced way. That pains me sometimes, where a lot of people with a lot of privilege have taken the dialogue of self care to mean that they don't ever have to do anything for anyone else. And like all that matters is I'm doing self care right now. And I'm like, but could you do a little other care? Just a little, like a tiny bit. And I think the people who needed to be helped with self care the most are not the people who actually end up being the target demographic of self care conversations. And the people who could maybe care about themselves a little bit less are the ones who take to the movement with gusto. Which is like always what happens right? Is that like the people who need the thing the most are rarely the people who get it. But self care is hard. I've never been good at it. I used to joke with my friends that I would be like, at my peak in the apocalypse. And then it happened. And I am and all my friends were like you weren't joking. And I was like, I wasn't joking. There is nothing that feels more fulfilling than being useful. I just want to be useful. I don't need to be famous, I don't need to be loved, I don't even need to be happy. I just need to be useful. And that is, maybe not giving enough credit to myself. But that's the honest truth is that there is nothing that feels better than knowing that I did something that helped someone, even if it was just even if it was tiny, even if it was just I dropped a bag of groceries off at my neighbor's house today like that, that is more fulfillment than I think I feel with anything else. And it sounds cheesy, and like cliché to say that it was really hard to write my applications for medical school as a result, because you can't just say I just want to help. In reality, what it is, is like, I want to help, but I want to help in ways that are helpful. They don't want to be the kind of person who shows up and it's like, I can help but then actually make things worse. I hate that. That's so frustrating. So for me, it's it's a triangulation process of like, what am I good at? What is needed? And what do I like? And that's probably the least important part. But like, what am I good at and what is needed, that's the mesh that if I can make that happen, then I'm good. Like, I could

live on that forever. And sometimes I feel very strange saying that, because I don't know a lot of people who feel that way as strongly as I do.

**Joya Ahmad** 01:27:42

But that is how I feel that like, I took Mr. Rogers like really seriously as a child, like, maybe too seriously. But he was like, go be a helper. And I was like, okay, Fred. And then 25 years later, that's like, the guiding principle of my whole life is just like, be useful for someone, be better, just be better. And I read a great book about the history of CrossFit many years ago, CrossFit didn't used to be what it is today, the behemoth it's become, it was started by a French Navy officer. And he wanted functional fitness to be a part of the Navy training routine, because he noticed, there were all these men who could do like a million pushups, but they couldn't lift a body and he was like, That's dumb. You should be strong to be useful. And that was his motto be strong to be useful. And that was the official motto of movement. And that's allowed, which came to be CrossFit. And I remember reading that in high school, I think and being like, yeah, that's, that's the motto. That's the thing to live by. But that is often at odds with the ideas of self care. I think I'm never gonna subscribe fully. to that. I don't think there's really anything wrong with choosing activities that are like personally fulfilling and also do double duty. Like, I don't think that's a bad thing. I went through a phase this last year of feeling like I should have something selfish in my life that I do just for me and no one else. And I just don't have anything like that. And I think that it's just not natural. For me. I think that there are things that people need that are just for them. But all the things that I have in my life that are just for me, are inherently also links to other people. And I think that just might be who I am. And I'm okay with that. I tried to shoehorn running into like, this is just for me, and I was like, No, it's not, though. Like it's just not. It never has been. And I'm just like a very, I'm just a mushroom person. I'm a rhizome. I want to be connected underground via root system to as many people as possible. But it's a weird time to be a person who feels that way.

**Kit Heintzman** 01:30:10

I'm at the penultimate question. So we know we're in this moment where there is a kind of omnipresent flurry of biomedical research happening right now. I'm wondering what you think people in the humanities and social sciences can be doing right now to help us understand this moment that we're living for.

**Joya Ahmad** 01:30:32

This. First of all, I think these kinds of conversations are integral, I think. I think humanities and social sciences and specifically communications people need to be more forceful. And and make scientists communicate legibly. I think one of the biggest problems we've always had as a world not just as a country is, the sphere of science is so linguistically cut off from the rest of the universe, that it is almost impossible for anyone without a certain level of access or education to comprehend what's going on. And that breeds alienation, isolation and then animosity, right. That's the next step. Once people feel cut off from something, then they're angry that they're cut off from it, and then they're very oppositional towards it, even when those people are right. And I think there are a lot of communications experts in the humanities and social sciences, who are not being treated as experts who should be. And I think there are a lot of scientists who are up on their high horse. I am a neuroscientist, I know the neuroscientists are the worst. They're like top of the line, self aggrandizing jerks, brilliant jerks. But as a field. Neuroscience likes to ensconce itself in an ivory tower, as does every science, especially the hard sciences, we just need to throw that delineation out completely. I think we should just split it into like science where you have to use a pipette and science where you don't, that I think is a much more useful and less value judging thing because it actually separates by something meaningful, which is a skill category. Whatever. I hate it. I hate hard

science versus soft science so much. I think it is just I think it's just misogyny is what it is. I think it mostly boils down to like, those are the girly sciences. So let's disparage sociology and psychology. Grossly. But, but I think that medicine and public health and all these fields that are very important right now, in terms of the subject matter, they need to go ask for expertise from communications experts for people who know how people work, because epidemiologists know how diseases work. And doctors know how individual body systems work. But it is the social sciences and humanities people who know how communities of people work. And I think even beyond just humanities and social sciences, the people who really need to be upheld are grassroots organizers, or mutual aid people are the people who have been actually working in their communities sounds ivory tower this entire time. I think there's a lot of I don't know the polite way to say this. There's a lot of appendage measuring that goes on, if that makes sense. There's a lot of car engine revving in the intellectual sphere, that people are just like trying to one up one another with who's more of an expert and who's more qualified and who has more whatever accolades. And I think we need to dispense with ego, it needs to go away. From the point of from the side of like medicine and biomedical sciences, and then humanities and social sciences, people need to be there as experts, because we are not doing a good job communicating. And it's having concrete effects on people's lives, people died, because conversations around masks did not happen in a conducive manner people died, because conversations about vaccines did it happen properly, people are currently dying because of those things. And in a perfect world, everyone would be able to like shut down the part of themselves that feels disparaged when they're talked down to and just do the right thing. But that's just not most people. Most people will do an oppositional and sometimes like, anti survival thing, they'll build the side to go against what they're being told simply because they do not like the attitude of the person who was telling it to them. And that's just where we're at as a species, it's a very terrible way to be. But if that's where we're at, then we just need to meet it there. And the right people need to be given some some power to talk about how we communicate these things, because we're doing a terrible job of it.

**Kit Heintzman** 01:34:57

And this is my last question. So this is an oral history interview. And I carry with it some of the assumptions of any historian trained in my particular moment in place. And one of those is that it's really important to me to take note of what my historical actors valued and thought was important. So that doesn't necessarily mean agreeing with them. But if a historical actors saying this really mattered, going in with an intention to think with that mattering. And I'm wondering if you could speak to a historian of the future, one who has no lived experience of this moment, and you wanted to talk to them about what what matters and what you want to be sure doesn't get forgotten to that for them. What would you what would you say to them?

**Joya Ahmad** 01:35:58

I think what will be mainstream history is that people were way dumber and more selfish than we ever thought possible. The thing that I actually want a historian in the future to remember and know and honor is that people from the most marginalized communities from the most oppressed from the most impacted, communities, got up and took care of not just each other. But everyone. The people who showed up the most were the ones who were thrown under the bus time and time again since time immemorial, and showed up over and over and over again, that there were people in Native American reservations, offering PPE to the communities around them that were not indigenous, that were actively oppressing them, they were showing up to help that communities in Brooklyn right now that are losing their homes to gentrification, are still showing up to contact trace, to deliver groceries to their neighbors, to ask people and each other what they need for help to create language access across all languages, and not just a few commonly spoken ones. Like you, people who are devastated are the ones who keep

showing up the queer communities that have been absolutely maligned and criminalized and murdered by every country ever have shown up over and over and over again, for people who did not give a damn about them. And if nothing else gets remembered, I need it to be remembered that there was a lot of bitterness and selfishness and awfulness. And when it counted the most, the people who had earned the right to be bitter and selfish and just absolutely say screw everyone else, the people who earned that right, did not choose to act that way. No one would hold a grudge. If marginalized communities especially mostly marginalized communities have decided to be like, screw you all, I'm going to hold up with my people, and we're not helping you. And that would have been valid. And I would have supported them and maybe even applauded that and been like, you know what, it's about time. But we didn't do that. And I say we because those are my communities, too. And we showed up for people who will never show up for us. And that was not because we thought they were going to turn around and return the favor. It was not because we were expecting some kind of moral dessert at the end of it. People who will never have the world looked kindly upon them chose to look kindly upon other people, because there is a little bit of good left in humanity, and it's there.

**Kit Heintzman** 01:38:40

I want to thank you so very much for everything that you've shared here today. And at this point, I just want to create some space. If there's anything that you would like to say that my questions haven't given you the opportunity to say here is that environment.

**Joya Ahmad** 01:38:58

I think we didn't really talk about money. And that is something that I've been thinking about a lot that we currently still rely on it to function. And I really just hope people keep giving money away to things. It is truly shocking what a budget can do for the impact that you can have when you're trying to help people. We are a tiny little entirely volunteer run nonprofit where nobody gets paid 100% of our fundraising goes directly to providing either the actual goods or the shipping for them. Like that's all we spend our money on. And up until November of 2020. We were operating off of like small individual donations. And then I ran this ridiculous ultra marathon and got some press coverage and money started flowing in and the way that changed the scale of our operation, and made us so much more efficient in our spending. Because we could finally buy in at these higher quantities of goods that we couldn't otherwise. We were able to give away so much more stuff, because people gave us money. And we were able to help so many more people and shipped to more rural places that we couldn't afford the shipping to otherwise like it changed the game for us. It's the reason that we were able to go from like some smaller chapters doing individual donations within their cities to making big purchases and dividing them up across the country and making it to over a million pieces of PPE that we donated by like last December. And I don't even know where we're at at this point. But I think a lot of people for whom \$500 doesn't make or break their life. I think a lot of people forget how much \$500 means and or \$100. But I noticed the sad thing that I, I say it a lot in the queer community, we all Venmo, the same \$20 in a circle. And the people who were showing up donating multiple times were the people where I was like, you don't need to be donating, like you probably shouldn't be donating. And I will probably Venmo you this \$20 back in like a week. And that's beautiful and fine. But for the rich people out there for people who have things like trust funds, and big stock portfolios, and stakeholders and businesses who could blow \$500 on a pair of shoes tomorrow, like I really hope people start embedding, donating into their lives a little bit more, I think there's been more kind of publicity around smaller, grassroots orgs and donating directly. And I think a lot of conversation around supporting black owned businesses really came up soon, some of it in a super performative weird way, but much of it in a very sustainable way. And I just hope people realize that, like money matters a lot. And it might feel better as the donor to be like, but I gave

some thing I wanted to give my thing you know, it feels more personal, like I don't really care about personal from a fundraising perspective, from an organizing perspective, your money means so much more to me than your leftover can of beans from 2016, nobody wants that no one's gonna eat it, you wouldn't eat it either. So don't donate it, give somebody 20 bucks. It's life changing. And I always knew that on a personal level, like how much sums of money that meant nothing to the parents of the kids that I tutor meant to me, like, they thought nothing of spending \$500 a week, during finals, and I was sitting there like, Oh, my God, this is gonna change my month, this is gonna completely change everything. And I'm a person who has fun, like donating to fundraisers embedded into my budget, like, that's something I do. I'm not Muslim, but my grandmother was. And so I grew up knowing the tenants and one of them is Succot, where you give 10% of your income to people who need it. And if you can't afford to give 10% of your income, then you probably should be receiving it. And the idea is that you give what you can. And if you can't give, that means that that's exactly who the community is supposed to be supporting. And so I've always had a lot of donating embedded into my life. And I've noticed more and more people starting to pick that up. And I want it to stay, I want that to stay because all of the things that made certain communities, particularly vulnerable to COVID, those things still exist, and will continue to exist, even ones COVID is hopefully a blip in the past. And I just really hope that we see that become a mainstream normalized thing, where people just put their money where their mouth is, but like all the time.

**Joya Ahmad** 01:43:50

And also, hopefully, we dismantled currency. And, and just like, I would like us to get rid of all of it. I had that conversation recently with someone where I was like, you know, we don't need money. They were like, what, and I was like, we can make all of these things without money. There's no reason that we need money to build factories and produce masks. The only reason we do that is because there's someone else who needs money. And someone else who needs money. And we created a system where we all need to, but we could just be like No, and make stuff anyways, we could like we do have the capacity. So I hope people start seeing that it's all fake. And we should just help each other. That's what nonprofits do. We just gave people stuff for free. That was the entire model. That's the whole model is we ask people to give us money expecting nothing in return. And then we give people stuff expecting nothing in return because they need it. Like it. That's the whole that's the beginning and end of the conversation is do you need here. And I would love for people to find that all the way radical dismantle the economy. But in the in the interim, I would be happy for us to just have that be a very normalized part of people's lives. Like I want that to start being a row in the budget planners that you buy from Staples. It's like rent and utilities and tuition and blah, blah, blah. And at the bottom, I want there to be a new thing that's so mainstream, it becomes embedded into our planners that we buy online donations, I want that to be commonplace, so commonplace, that it's the kind of thing that is assumed that everybody does. That'd be really cool. hate money. And money has helped me save a lot of people's lives this last year.

**Kit Heintzman** 01:45:437

Thank you so very much.

**Joya Ahmad** 01:45:39

Thank you. This was wonderful. And thank you for giving me a chance to share and speak about these things. It's all very, very It all overlaps a lot