

# Interview with Dina Nayeri

**Allison Duvall** 00:10

Why do you support refugees?

00:12

I support refugees because my family were refugees.

00:15

I support refugees because we are all God's children and we all deserve a safe place to grow in God's love.

00:21

I support refugees because God made us all in God's image.

00:25

I support refugees because I'm a legal guardian of a minor asylee named Carol from Burundi.

00:32

I support refugees because my Lord was a refugee.

00:36

Because I welcome and I love my neighbor.

**Kendall Martin** 00:40

Hi, and welcome to Hometown, a podcast from Episcopal Migration Ministries, the refugee resettlement and welcome ministry of the Episcopal Church. I'm Kendall Martin.

**Allison Duvall** 00:50

And I'm Allison Duvall. We are joined today by Dina Nayeri, the author of *The Ungrateful Refugee*, which was our October Partners in Welcome book club pick. Her essay of the same name was one of the most widely shared 2017 long reads in *The Guardian*. Dina Nayeri is a 2019 Columbia Institute for Ideas and Imagination fellow, a winner of the 2018 UNESCO City of Literature Paul Engel prize, a National Endowment for the Arts Literature Grant recipient, a recipient of the Oh Henry Prize, Prize for Best American Short Stories, fellowships from the McDowell Colony, Bogliasco Foundation, and Yaddo, her stories and essays have been published by *The New York Times*, *New York Times Magazine*, *The Guardian*, *Los Angeles Times*, *New Yorker*, *Granta*, *New Voices*, *Wall Street Journal*, and many others.

**Kendall Martin** 01:40

Her debut novel, *A Teaspoon of Earth and Sea*, released in 2013, was translated to 14 languages. Her second novel, *Refuge* in 2017, was a *New York Times* editor's choice. She holds a BA from Princeton, an MBA from Harvard, and an MFA from the Iowa Writers' Workshop, where she was a Truman Capote Fellow and Teaching Writing Fellow. She lives in Paris.

**Allison Duvall 02:02**

We are so excited to share this conversation with you listeners, I was speaking just the other day with a friend about Dina Nayeri's book and I think one of the most important things she gives to us through her book and also for this conversation that you're about to hear is a really powerful critique of the narratives that we as a society almost demand and require that immigrants and refugees portray, like narratives of gratefulness. And we have this inappropriate desire almost for people to perform the stories of the horrors they faced as migrants and refugees. So I think what she has to say is really important for all of us to hear.

**Kendall Martin 02:48**

Yeah, I'd absolutely agree, Allison, I remember reading the article in The Guardian and feeling really touched by what she had to say. And then upon reading the book, having to really rethink the way that we frame refugees, when we're trying to gain support, I think that we tend to feel like we should just lift up all the accomplishments that refugees have, and that we should just talk about, all the ways that they benefit us or that they contribute as though they have to earn their place here. So I really appreciated her breaking that down for us. And I think our listeners are really going to enjoy this episode.

**Allison Duvall 03:23**

I do, too. It's really powerful. And listeners, we'd love to hear from you. If you read her book and your thoughts about this conversation. Well, listeners, we are so honored to have with us today, Dina Nayeri, the author of The Ungrateful Refugee: What Immigrants Never Tell You. Dina, thank you so much for taking time to be with us today.

**Dina Nayeri 03:45**

Oh no problem, thank you for having me.

**Kendall Martin 03:47**

So we're so excited to talk to you because we had originally at EMM, we had circulated your article Ungrateful Refugee from The Guardian, and really been touched by the things that you said. And it really struck some chords. And so we were really excited when you had a book out. And we got to read it in our book club. And so I'm just curious, like, what, what brought you to the point where you realized you had to tell your story and the story of other refugees?

**Dina Nayeri 04:12**

iWell, you know, I've been telling you in one way or another, my own story for so long, you know, and mostly it's been veiled and, you know, fiction, and fiction, it's just, it's such a wonderful way of expressing, you know, everything that I went through for me because on the one hand, I have all of the, you know, personal resources and all of the lived experience that I have, but I also then have all the freedoms of creating something new and, you know, all of the resources of my imagination. So it's been that was it has been really nice, but you know, there was a point in, in my life and in my career where, you know, I kind of things sort of pivoted and I don't think by my own doing just, you know, they sort of forced a pivot on me. Because, you know, of everything that was happening in the world and you know, just because I had was I had a daughter, myself. And also, I had written a couple of novels and a lot of fiction. And all of those things just came together to make me think, Okay, you know what, first of all, I need to focus on other people's stories, I am a little bit sick of myself and just

my own story, it doesn't really matter so much what happens to just one person if you can't go outward and relate it to what happened to other people. You know, there's only so much impact that you can have. Also, you know, what happened to me is no longer with the refugee experience is exactly things have changed so much. Our country has regressed a lot of, you know, other countries in Europe, they've regressed this conversation has gone backwards instead of forward. How frightening is it that you know, in the 1980s, your typical American in Oklahoma and the Midwest would say things like, you know, well, you know, they might say things are a little insensitive, but their notion of what America's duty was, was very firmly in place, you know, whether or not we like these people or not, it's this is America, of course, we take the outcasts of the world, of course, we take the broken of the world, we are, you know, a Christian nation, and we understand what Christianity needs, you know, and said, that whole thing has been has been lost. And for me, you know, I'm no longer very religious. But I grew up a very faithful child, you know, I was Christian, I believe some of this stuff. And the way that I was taught, it was very much what most Americans seem to believe, you know, about, we didn't use the word privilege, then. But that's what it was about the privilege of being an American and being born safe and being born in, you know, among people who thought about these things. Now, though, it feels very much like Christianity has been tied to this way of thinking that doesn't at all square with what, what is what the teachings of this religion are, it baffles me up baffles me how people reconcile that people can call themselves, you know, Christian people, and then advocate for things that go completely against the teachings of that particular religion. I mean, it's baffling to me. So given that the conversation has regressed in this way, you know, I felt like I needed to come out from behind the veil of fiction, I needed to say things that I think are true as me from my own voice in essayistic voice. And then you need to lend I guess, my talents, my creative talents to other people's stories, because another thing that I talk about a lot in this book is that you come to a new country, and you come through the asylum process, and there are so many things that impede you from telling your story. Well, you know, that storytelling is cultural storytelling is affected by trauma, by shame, by the circumstances, you know, like the different levels of power that you're dealing with, like an asylum situation where the person is deciding your entire fate, you know, the stories that you hear along the road, and all the fears that you have, and what might happen, if you don't get it, you do get it. And then you take that story. And you tell it so many times and you mangle it in so many different ways. And then when you reach the other side, the story just becomes like a husk of itself. You know, so and then of course, there's you don't know how to tell it in the Western way. Because that's not what you've been trained. Iranian storytelling, Eastern storytelling is very different from American storytelling. So I thought, okay, here I am, with my mind relatively fresh, having studied Western storytelling, and I can learn those talents, people who maybe can't tell their stories as well. And they were so generous with me to give me their stories to do that with so so, you know, all of that sort of came together to make me turn my attention to to a little bit more journalistic work, essayistic work, nonfiction and and also just maybe a way from 1980s and 1990s Iran, which has been preoccupying me for so long.

**Allison Duvall 08:33**

Well, in one thing you said a moment ago about the regression of kind of the American notion of being a refugee really stuck with me. Could you talk a little bit more about something you say in the book is that refugee is today's battle, but dignity is tomorrow's something along those lines? I'd love to hear you speak more to that.

**Dina Nayeri 08:52**

Yeah. Well, so here's the thing. I mean, I think there's this kind of like, I see myself on this road, this conversation, you know, and there are places where I feel like it needs to go and it is headed in a much, much longer term. There's places where I feel like people kind of turned around in this little loop. So it's I feel like

people have regressed. I mean, like, you know, we were at a certain place in our thinking, where we were talking about whether or not to open our doors, what we owe to each other what we owe to the world, right? And, and we should have moved out from that. But unfortunately, we haven't, you know, maybe in the very long term, of course, when you look at the way conversations go, they always include progressions and regressions, and all of that stuff. And so we're in a moment of regressing back, but I think in the long term, the forward motion of this, that this conversation is, you know, it continues past what we owe to our fellow man, because that's obvious. You know, we we are not entitled to everything we were born with. We have the resources that we have been raised with as children of the West come from other people's suffering, you know, and even if they didn't, what philosophy says some people are entitled to more because of their parentage? You know, it's a very hard thing to reconcile with any kind of higher level thinking, like philosophically, right? So in the long run we move past that, and then the question becomes things like, well, first of all, how do we use resources to make everyone in the world better off? How do we use people's talents? How do we how do we make our country's more proved fruitful? Do we even need borders? Well, how do we read them and things like the Geneva Convention, these agreements, this agreement that we've made has been interpreted in very strange ways. So in the decades since we, you know, signed it, how do we return to that and see if it's still what it needs to be? And then there's the question of what do people suffer as they wait, you know, what happens to the very, very important but less tangible part of part of them? Like, for example, we think, right now we think you know, about food and shelter, and, you know, giving people answers when they're waiting, and they're displaced, and they are kind of in limbo, right. But we don't think about the fact that sometimes it takes two years or three years, and children are utterly changed in that two or three years. You know, if you've been a very joyful, very, you know, involved kid who studies and does sports and you spend two years idle you become a different kid, you know, sometimes you become a teenager, and you are different. And that's the kind of the period of idleness and uselessness that changes your worldview. And it leads to things like radicalization, right? So we need to address that, right? And then, on the other hand, what happens to the adults, you know, why is it okay for someone to be idle for two, three years, lose their identity, to lose their purpose, to lose their skills and talents, to lose their profession? Why don't we allow people to work? You know, during this time of waiting, why don't we allow them to go to school? Why don't we put some of our resources in, you know, making this time less horrifying for them, because after all, again, they were displaced because of larger historical things that, you know, the wealthier more privileged countries have done for resources, you see, so and this is a whole other conversation. But my point is simply that I think the conversation should be headed in that direction. So when I say dignity is tomorrow's argument, I think at some point, we're going to be done with this whole Should we open our borders thing? Because it's a very primitive question to be asking, it's a very selfish question to be asking. So So once we move on from that, and we start to see that, you know, refugees and displaced people as fellow human beings, then we would ask different questions and it would become humiliating for us to watch our fellow man be humiliated. You know, how can we live in a world where we allow that to happen? How can we watch doctors and and and and, you know, professionals and craftsmen and artists, and really anyone wither, you know, people who had a place in this community? So, you know, maybe it's very easy, given how the news and how, you know, certain stories are crafted to just say, Okay, well, let's focus on saving like saving lives. But once a life is saved, we live in modern times, there's certain levels of indignity that are not okay, that we can't be okay with.

**Kendall Martin 13:00**

So and given that you like now have all this life experience and education and have moved around and, and taken time to go back and really go through your journey as a child and your mother's need to escape like, what was

most revelatory for you and combing back through your childhood experience? I mean, there was a lot of trauma.

### **Dina Nayeri 13:20**

Yeah, I think there was a couple of things that some of them are easier to realize than others. So for example, for me, I always knew that I struggled with shame and embarrassment to kind of a sense of the person that I am good enough. And that's what made me this overachieving person. And, and actually drew took me down the wrong path sometimes, you know, I went down the whole like business path when I knew all along that I'm a creative person. I knew from the time I was a child, that I'm a creative person, simply because I didn't want the shame of being poor anymore, you know. And so going back and seeing other people in that particular moment, I got made, watching them being remade watching children react to their environment. I mean, it was it was very, very shocking for me, because I saw like, in children my own age, that transformation happening as an adult, I could see it in ways that I couldn't see in myself, and it was very heartbreaking, I suddenly could pinpoint exactly what happened to make me this person. Right? On the other hand, there are other things that I think maybe they were easier for me, but they weren't easier for my relationship with my mother. So for example, realizing all that went into her conversion. So as I started to dig, you know, through the psychology of this and and dig into the question of, you know, when people when asylum seekers especially converts are asked to explain their conversion, you know, how very, very difficult it is for them to do that, because it's such a personal, deeply spiritual thing, and they don't all live in societies that are as self examining, as we are, you know, like so for example, somebody in a free country decides to convert to another religion. I mean, that's a big decision. Why did you put in all that time and effort when you didn't have to, there's some reading involved, there was some, you know, like, that, something that drove you and you have to ask yourself these questions because the world is forcing you to. But when you're living in a country that persecutes, you know, pretty much everyone. And when you are living an unfulfilled unhappy life, when you are always living in fear with very little lack of hope, or lack of future, sometimes there's not room for that kind of self examination, there's just this pent up anger and dissatisfaction that makes you just reach for a hand, you know, and sometimes that is the hand of I don't know, Christ or some other. And and you grab on to that, and that becomes your rescue. And you are just as faithful and just as devoted, and maybe more so than anybody in the West could be. But maybe you're not as well read. And maybe you haven't really thought about why, you know, you became an apostate and why you became a Christian. And those things didn't happen far apart, you know, as he they always expect the process, those things could have happened in one day, suddenly, you're not a devout Muslim anymore, suddenly, you're a devout Christian, that is possible there, you know, and I wanted to look into how that could be possible and try to explain it in my book. And as a part of that, I got to really thinking about my mom's conversion, which I had always thought of as very, very pure, and it is pure, it is pure, and that she is she was as Christian as a Christian person can be. And she continues to be that and faithful and practicing. But how can she really answer the question of how much of that was from fear? How much of that was from lack of hope? How much of that was from being, you know, stepped on by men again, and again and again, and not allowed to realize all your potential? And because you are a woman being disrespected, and suspected and humiliated again, and again and again, in that culture, right? How can we separate all those things? We can't, you know, and so if I can't do it, you know, and I'm a very, like, I'm someone who's read, you know, a lot of things and studied, then you know, what, I'll tell you that your average asylum seeker, asylum officer can't do it. Right. So trying to make sense of all this in my book, I think really made my mother upset because for her, it was, you know, a very pure thing and not up for analysis. Right. So the long answer to your question is, I think that was one of the most difficult discoveries for me to just understand that these moments of great light, epiphany of spirituality, that I

had kind of believed that I'm actually just really complex, psychological, you know, deeply rooted. I read this essay a while ago by one of my old teachers that I called *Against Epiphanies*. I think I wrote about it in the book. And he talks about how companies are always false, because when we're adults, we don't have these moments of great, you know, wonder and realization things happen slowly they happen because of everything we've lived in the psyche. And a part of me always kind of said, No, but you don't know what it's like to be a convert to in Iran you do do it that way. You know, it does happen in a moment of great light. But of course, it doesn't even there it's melo--it's melodramatic to think that it does, it's all a part of a long, long, you know, psychological process, right? That was a part of the the research into this book that made me most interested and a little bit afraid and afraid to talk about with my family.

**Allison Duvall 18:13**

That's powerful. One of my reactions to the book that I take as like a very, I'm grateful. It's a reaction that I've had that I'm grateful for, was feeling regularly indicted, and convicted. For a lot of stuff. Is it okay, if I read a portion of the book and then ask a question about it? So you write in conversations about the refugee crisis, educated people continue making the barbaric argument that open doors will benefit the host nation. The time for this outdated colonialist argument has run out, migrants don't derive their value from their benefit to the Western born and civilized people don't ask for resumes from the edge of the grave. And that, oh, it does now, like I said, sends shudders down my spine because of some of the language that we as advocates for refugees and for refugee resettlement in the US often use the language we use, especially in this current political environment. It's almost like a utilitarian consumerist language. And so I'm so interested to hear from you, Dina, if you were speaking to a room of advocates, in the US context, what would you say to us?

**Dina Nayeri 19:23**

Well, you know, I think, yeah, we need to be very, very careful with our language. The other day, I was in a, I was doing an interview with someone at major international magazine, who still kind of asked to mix this up, like he said, You know, I kind of feel like we should you know, you we should be talking about this in more humanitarian terms and not economic terms. And he talked about it in terms of refugees. He said that we should be talking about refugees in humanitarian not economic terms, and I said, Wait a minute. Let's, of course we should, but even you are mixing migrants and refugees in a way that we shouldn't. And I think my perspective on migrants and refugees are we talk about both in the wrong ways. But it is important to really be clear. So there's this whole spectrum, right? Of who moves, you know, who goes to another country, right? And on the one end of the spectrum are refugees, you know, refugees who are forcibly displaced, who can't go back to their country because of fear of persecution and death, right? Who are, who never wanted to leave. Right. Okay. Now, the most strict definition of what a refugee is, is established by the Geneva Convention, which was, you know, the Refugee Convention of 1951. And we call it the Geneva Convention. And you know, what the definition there is, right, is that it's not just that your life is in danger, that your life is in danger, because you were born, because of five reasons because of race, religion, nationality, the political belief, and membership in a particular social group, right. Now, in my opinion, the membership in a particular social group was put there as a catch all for everyone else who might be persecuted because the Holocaust that just happened and these were people who thought of that as the biggest reason anybody would persecute you, because you were Jewish, because you were Gypsy, because you were all the things, you know, you were, you know, you know, you were gay, or something like that, right. But over time, that definition has narrowed, has narrowed more and more through like statutes and, and, and, you know, kind of conservative court cases where they feel what that person is, that's not a social group. This is not a social group, who was the Attorney General general in the US?

**Allison Duvall 21:33**

Jeff Sessions.

**Dina Nayeri 21:35**

Sessions, he tried to narrow it, so it doesn't include battered women, you know, you know this. So my problem with this end of the spectrum is that the definition of refugee is far too narrow. The intention of the Geneva Convention was not to say, oh, let's nitpick about why you're going to die. It was to save you from dying. That was the point it like. And it's such a simple, simple thing that we've gotten wrong, you know, if you've become so mangled and errant in this, like, attempt to be humanitarian, right, how can you send back someone to the gang that was pursuing them, and planning to kill them? Because they were just trying to kill you for money? You know, they weren't trying to kill you because of a political opinion. That is vile, right? It's utterly vile. But so on this end, you've got the refugees, right? Yes, we need to talk about them in humanitarian terms, it is absolutely disgusting to talk about what they might contribute to our economy. It's not about that it's our humanitarian duty to see them saved. If they, we save them, and they come and contribute absolutely nothing, that is fine. Because it is not preferable for them to die. You know. And many of them, of course, will have trauma, and will have years of needing to resettled in, you know, to a new country to have medical care, psychological care, help with housing, because they have been tortured, because they've been raped, because they have been hurt in 100 different ways. Okay, now, continuing down this track, right, then you've got people with kind of more gray gray area sort of stories, even if we expand the definition, there are ways that a life can be in danger, but not so immediately in danger and so on. In my own opinion, we need to open the doors for those people too because we just don't know what will happen next in a country at war, and a country about to go to war, you know, in families that are that are, you know, mired in a culture that is maybe sexist, violent, etc. All of those things should be included. Now, on the other end of the spectrum, right? You've got people that are just moving around, they're economically fine, they've got many passports, etc, we call them expats, you know, and then somewhere in between, then you've got migrants, you've got, you know, migrants who leave for reasons other than danger. They didn't have to necessarily leave, they leave for work, or for some other reason. We are including too many people in that group. People who come from El Salvador and Honduras, right, are not coming for work. They are coming because the gangs are killing everybody. Right? Okay. So we can lump people into that group. If, you know, there are many complicated, you know, life endangering reasons for people to come through. And one of those reasons is work, right. I also wouldn't include anyone in that group if, yes, they're coming for work, but they're starving at home. And they're not coming to like better themselves, or to make life easier or more luxurious, or to start some sort of entrepreneurial program. They're coming because if they stay that their children will starve, that should also be, you know, a reason that is about you know, the endangerment of life and not about improving your economic position. So across the spectrum, I have a problem with definitions, right. And I have a problem with what we think we owe. But even if we got the definitions exactly right, we need to draw a line somewhere where it's like on this half of the spectrum, it's a humanitarian conversation, on this half of the spectrum, it's an economic conversation, economic conversation that has to do with merit and how much people can give us should only apply to people who got a house and a life in this safe country, and they want to come and have a house and a life in this other safe country. It's, to me, it's not a conversation about a person leaving Honduras to come to the US.

**Kendall Martin 25:15**

That's incredibly helpful. One of the things I really love about your writing is the emphasis on words and storytelling and getting it correct. And so I kind of want to move into talking about how you talk about how charity and welcome are different things. And so as one of the nine faith based agencies, the work that Allison and I do is really engaging churches and individuals of faith and working with refugees. And so I'm curious what exactly you mean about that?

**Dina Nayeri 25:45**

Wbout, you know, welcome versus charity?

**Kendall Martin 25:48**

Right. Yeah. So there was this part in the book that on page 318, you wrote, they need friendship, not salvation, they need the dignity of becoming an essential part of society. They have been so often on the receiving end of charity that when faced with someone else's need, their generosity and skill shines. Now and then they will fall short, their wounds will open, they will have too many babies who might misstep and cause harm.

**Dina Nayeri 26:11**

A lot of a lot of Christian organizations, and a lot of the helpers that I've met along the way they were so well, meaning they were so kind they wanted so much to to give, you know, and I think there was just something it wasn't that they wanted to withhold welcome, it was that they hadn't really examined their motives enough. And none of us do, we don't examine our motives, enough, you know, and so a little bit of the things that they secretly wished for came out, and I think that need to be thanked, to be acknowledged, to be seen to be doing something monumental, or maybe you're ever in a particular crossroads in your life, and you want to be validated to be shown that you know, what, you are a good person. In camps and things I see a lot of, you know, people coming through at particular moments of personal change and crisis, you know, children going off to college, and people after divorce, people, you know, entering middle age or retirement, these are moments where really reflect on who we are, you know, and, and maybe charity is a part of that. But the reasons we're giving it is still just about us. And so everything that we do will reflect that, you see this in the eyes of a lot of people giving charity in the in the in the camps, you know, they, they give it but then they have this longing look in their eyes, they're almost like they want something back from these people. And they can see it because they've seen it so many times in the course of their lives, and in the course of their displacement, and they become more sensitive to it. And it hurts, you know, because it hurt, it hurts because it robs you of your dignity, because it's obviously charity, that person isn't looking to create a long term bond with you. Right? And I think for when you are in a place that you are going to be permanently that difference we welcome and charity is so very vital because because as refugees as displaced people you're looking to see are these many my friends? Is this going to be the person that I go to, you know, in two years, if something bad happens? Or you know, is this person's door whose door I'm gonna knock on when it's their birthday? And I'm gonna bring the cake? Or is this just the person giving me charity? Now, what they crave most is this community this home. And so the question is, how do you give welcome and not charity? Right? Well, the way you give it is that you think about them, not as displaced people. But as a new neighbor that comes in you think about what you what you would want the memories to be if you're going to be friends with them in the long term, you know, you think about their dignity, right? You don't draw attention to all that you're doing right now. Because you're thinking there will come a time when maybe they'll be doing more for me, you know, and there's always that, you know, we had a family of sponsors who sponsored us when we were in Oklahoma, they were elderly couple, and they did so many things for us in those early days. But there came a day when they were at the end of their life, and my



mother was there for them. You know, and at that point, my mother was a settled person and she was still strong bodied, and they were elderly. So tables turn constantly in long term relationships, because that's what long term relationships are for. They're about reciprocity. They're about not drawing attention to what we do, because we understand that it will be repaid, that this is part of a constant lifelong exchange. We are not people living individually in this world, right? Okay. A person giving charity doesn't think that way, a person giving charity thinks oh! I'm doing something good for you. Points for me right now. I'll never see you again. So often, it's just it's grossly done. Like that story I said about how when we were in the refugee camps in Italy, you know, that camp in Italy, they would often dump clothing into the courtyard, we'd have to dig through them. You know, when I was thinking about our dignity, they were just thinking, Okay, we need to get rid of these clothes. Here are some faceless people who need clothes. You know, I think when people arrive, often, you know, they will go knocking on the doors of churches and go knocking on the doors of religious organizations looking for ways to be involved, you know, and the programs that really work are the ones that are based on particular interests. You know, unfortunately during when I was in when we were refugees, it was all based on sharing our story. So the church would like you're welcome. Why don't you tell these 10 groups the story of how you escaped from Iran and how, you know, that was like, the first time it was actually kind of fun. By the 10th time, it was humiliating. I was like, You know what, but, you know, I had a really nice life, me, I'm really good at math. Do you want to hear more about like, this thing that, uh, you know, it would have been so nice if there was just like, hey, come to this, like, you know, 10 year old girls who love math group, you know, or, or, you know, how about how about, you know, this particular sport group or something, you know, in the end my own kind of becoming, I suppose, a fully realized person happened through sport, and it happens through sport, and through various other interests for a lot of refugees. So the key is, draw them in as you would any new neighbor, you know, and also, I'll just finish on this, I think being a fully realized human being is something we should always focus on, because we expect that for ourselves, when we meet new people, we show all sides of ourselves, you know, and then migrants and refugees want that too, you know, they want to be seen as a full human and not just as an escape story.

**Allison Duvall 31:07**

So one of the things that was the one of the indicting, convicting things about your book was becoming more aware of, I'll use this word and then if you want to push back on my use of the word, please do, but kind of the the requirements we place on newcomers, either refugees, immigrants or asylum seekers to perform in certain ways, be it gratitude, deference. But also one other dynamic that I've witnessed in just my work and going across the country is that some folks who are newcomers to this country or their second or third generation immigrants, there seems to be amongst some this sense that they have to perform an anti immigrant posture, like my grandfather came here the right way, we came here the right way, there seems to be this interest almost in performing Americanness.

**Dina Nayeri 31:58**

Yeah.

**Allison Duvall 31:58**

By wanting to exclude any newcomer, who might follow after them. And I wondered if you could speak to those different requirements for performance that we place on people?

**Dina Nayeri 32:07**

Well, I mean, before I say that, I want to say this is another area in which people need to be a little bit more tight on their language, because what is the right way, you know, coming into the country to seek asylum is not illegal, right? The fact that we slap the term "illegal immigrants" on people who have done something very legal, entering a country to be safe, and then and then requesting asylum, right, that is not illegal only in the Trump administration hasn't been made to seem that way. So that wasn't the wrong way for them to come. Also, you know, I think it's, it's awfully presumptuous to take, you know, a sin of one person that we can see clearly now, but then look at your grandfather's story through the rose tinted glasses of the future, and maybe give him all of the credit of never having done anything, you know, to help himself in a new life. Everybody has everybody's got those, you know, sins of the things you need to do in order to rebuild. So, so there's some inconsistency there and we need to work that out. But in terms of posturing, you know, I think you're right. I think one of the things that's happened now, and it's happening more and more that really alarms me is that we are kind of going into these tribal modes, you know, this tribalism is taking over so we mimic the language of the tribe, it happens in all of the levels, like in politics on the left on the right, people are afraid to say something that's slightly different. And of course, what does that do but kills original thought? Right? And it's exactly the kind of thing that has caused people just Christian people to stop questioning is this room this is really square with Christianity, they just say the things that they're told to say, because it's easier, it's easier not to think it's easier not to challenge these big, powerful people who are telling you Well, you know, our way of thinking includes these five or six things, right? And so, so yeah, for many of those issues, they posture, one of the things that somebody told me when I was in my 20s, when I was first starting to become I guess, semi interested in, in politics and various issues was, if you see yourself fully 100% on every single issue, agreeing with one group of people that you're most affiliated with, beware, right, because you haven't really thought about them. A thinking person would agree with different people on different issues that I mean statistically speaking, what are the chances are you think exactly like this other person, right? Get and yet people have come to think exactly the same way on on many things. So this is why I think, you know, immigration is one of those issues where I maybe use it to see if people are have have really, I guess, given thought to their own faith, because there are few faiths that say we should close the doors to refugees, right? But there are political political belief systems that say that, but they're not religious faith. So but I think you know, performance just in general comes down to to not really being authentically something, to just wanting to belong to a tribe, I think that's why I say, you know, like, we're also asking refugees to perform assimilation before they're ready because assimilation is something that happens in the long term. So at the beginning, when they feel pushed to just be American as quickly as possible, all they can offer is theater, you know, a performance, and it's them being fake, it's them not really being themselves, right. And it's the same way on the other side, too. You know, people want to be compassionate, they want to be loving, but they, they just perform the tropes of their particular political parties. And, and that makes them feel accepted, you know, but that also is not real. And I think that gives me a little bit of hope, because the thing is that people want again, like I said, People want to love each other, right? This is human instinct, one of the some of the my favorite moments or when, you know, somebody comes to one of my events, and they're very hostile, usually, it's like, an older man. And then you people start telling stories, and they tell a story about, you know, someone who came into the neighborhood, and usually they want to show how great they are. But they tell a story about how, you know, an immigrant came to their, their neighborhood, and they formed a friendship, or they did something loving, and they did something loving back. But that person was an exception, you know, but really, I guess what they're revealing is their great capacity for understanding someone of a whole different culture, their great capacity for love and friendship, right, that person was not an exception, I don't think it's a very, very far jump from showing them that that was a true real friendship that didn't need much cultural intersection. In fact, all it needed was a shared humanity. Right. And that that person wasn't an exception, that

story wasn't an exception. And if they allowed themselves to have more of those stories, they would live a much richer life, you know, because, frankly, my father in Iran, you know, like man in his 60s in Iran has so much more in common with a father in his 60s in Oklahoma, than say, an 18 year old girl in Oklahoma has with a man in his 60s in Oklahoma, you know, what we relate to each other based on the moments in our life, based on what we've lived, you know, we've fallen in love, we've gotten divorced, we've had children, we've had disappointments, those are the same no matter where you live. So those two people will have many, many shared experiences, even though the landscape of those experiences is different. So I think what's authentic, is when that person comes in is like, Well, you know, my friend, my friend, Mohammed, or my friend Massoud, or my friend, you know, Jose are these people. The that guy's an exception because of this story. And I just want to say no, no, that's just that's very unexceptional humanity, you know. And that's, that's, yeah, what's more exceptional, I suppose, is that we're in this moment where we closed off, where we're closing ourselves off, to having those kinds of rich encounters with each other. This is actually this brings me to why I one thing I got excited about when you guys wrote is, you know, when I was when I was first writing this book, I wanted to write it for the people in the churches. And I think you can read this, you know, as you've read it, you know, but I'm in this very liberal bubble, this literary world, and my writing has been read by like literary people who are left leaning. And you know, over the course of this book launch, I felt really just incredibly moved by all the wonderful response. But still, the majority have been on the left, you know, like, the reviews and things, New York Times left, left left. And I just think when I wrote this, for people who go to church in the Midwest, the people who helped us who were there for us, you know, the people who were wondering what more they could do, who maybe didn't have access to that many refugee stories, you know, so I'm kind of delighted that you guys came along.

**Kendall Martin 38:44**

I'm so glad to hear you say that. I mean, our our book club conversation was really fruitful. And it was, you know, folks around the Episcopal Church, and I mean, we all were holding our books, and we've all underlined a ton of things. And it's given a lot of perspective, because so much of what we do is education and advocacy. But reading your book made me really aware of the language that we use, because we're so focused on trying to change hearts and minds. And, and, and make people want to welcome newcomers to their community. But, but it made me reexamine, like, where we put our focus when we're trying to do that. And so I'm just really, I'm really thankful for, for this book, and your writing is absolutely beautiful.

**Dina Nayeri 39:25**

Thank you so much. Well, you know, I think I think that the way that you guys can, you know, do really good work is to bring in, like, just bring people face to face with each other, just through shared interest, you know, and just let them discover all this stuff for themselves. I think some people are really prone to trying to discover it in like kind of intellectual ways by by like reading through ideas, like in the book or stories like in the book, and there's others who will not be convinced until the moment they like kick the ball around with someone from another country, then they're like, okay, you know, I'm good.

**Allison Duvall 39:55**

Well, thank you so much for giving us time and for giving the world this book, thank you for your work. Thank you so much listeners for joining us for today's episode,

**Kendall Martin 40:09**

And we want to give a huge thanks to Dina Nayeri for talking to us about The Ungrateful Refugee. Make sure to pick up a copy at your local library or bookstore.

**Allison Duvall** 40:17

Follow EMM on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram where we are EMMrefugees

**Kendall Martin** 40:22

Join in the work of welcomed by making a donation to Episcopal Migration Ministries. No gift is too small and all are put to use to welcome our newest neighbors. Visit [episcopalmigrationministries.org/give](http://episcopalmigrationministries.org/give) or text Hometown to 91999.

**Allison Duvall** 40:38

Our theme song composer is Abraham Mwindi Ikando, find his music at [abrahammwindi.bandcamp.com](http://abrahammwindi.bandcamp.com).

**Kendall Martin** 40:45

Until next time, peace be with you and all those you consider home.