

When it Mattered

Episode 53: Asra Nomani

Chitra Ragavan:

On January 23rd, 2002, Asra Nomani was waiting at her home in Karachi, Pakistan, for her dear friend, The Wall Street Journal correspondent, Daniel Pearl to come back from a reporting assignment. Pearl and his wife, Mariane, who was pregnant with their first child were staying with Nomani while he was investigating the Al-Qaeda networks that had conspired to pull off the 9/11 terrorist attacks on U.S. soil just a few months earlier. But Danny Pearl never returned home. Pakistani militants kidnapped and held Pearl hostage before murdering him a week later. His captors then released a video of the beheading, shocking the world and galvanizing Nomani in her long and difficult quest to identify Pearl's killers and help bring them to justice.

Chitra Ragavan:

Hello everyone. I'm Chitra Ragavan. Welcome to When it Mattered. This episode is brought to you by Goodstory an advisory firm helping technology startups with strategic brand positioning and narrative. I'm joined now by Asra Nomani. She's a journalist, author, activist and co-founder of The Pearl Project, a 31,000 word award-winning global investigative journalism report identifying the network of militants who perpetrated the heinous. Asra, welcome to the podcast.

Asra Nomani:

Oh, thank you so much, Chitra. I feel like I'm with such a good dear friend going into one of the darkest moments of my life, but I hope we can share some light with everyone.

Chitra Ragavan:

It's been 19 years, almost exactly two days shy of that fateful day, January 23rd, 2002, when your world and that of Danny Pearl and his whole family turned upside down. Tell me when you found out that something had badly gone wrong.

Asra Nomani:

Well, that day began like any other day for journalists in, posting overseas. We all wakened, Danny and his wife Mariane were visiting a house that I had rented in Karachi, Pakistan. And Danny, went about the business of all his flurry of interviews he had planned for the day. I found a car for him and we stood outside this home that I'd rented and waved goodbye to Danny. And I said, "See you later, buddy," because it was just an interview like any other that we go off to do and then come back home and write down our notes and write our dispatches. But that night, Mariane kept calling and calling Danny's phone number and he never picked up. We just kept hearing this operator that said, "The call couldn't go through."

Chitra Ragavan:

And when did you realize something was wrong?

Asra Nomani:

So we had a dinner plan that night and we'd gone off to get all of the preparations. I had ordered beer because Danny enjoyed his beer. We'd called a bootlegger whose number I had gotten. And everybody had dinner, the folks that we had invited, but nobody was answering Danny's phone. He was never answering. So at 10:00 finally, Mariane and I went and sat in front of Danny's computer, went into his inbox, didn't password protect it. And there I saw the email from the young man who had set up the interview. That's when I just knew something was wrong because the email address was nobadmashi@yahoo.com.

Chitra Ragavan:

And why were you concerned by the email address, "nobadmashi?"

Asra Nomani:

So Chitra, you know your Bollywood movies? You know what a badmash is, right?

Chitra Ragavan:

A rascal?

Asra Nomani:

Yeah. A rascal. So why would anybody in their right mind write, norascal@yahoo.com as they're setting up a legit interview with a sheikh cleric? And I just knew that something was wrong because nobody would write that. The badmaash is the bad guy in every Bollywood movie. And I just felt and knew in my heart that Danny had walked into trouble.

Chitra Ragavan:

Now, you yourself were in a foreign land. You're also an American journalist. You are a writer working on a book project in Karachi. So when this crisis began to unfold, you yourself weren't really in a great position to know what to do and to respond. I mean, what did you do next and how did you even know what to do? What was that like, that moment?

Asra Nomani:

Oh my gosh. It was so clarifying. I wish for no one a January 23rd, 2002 moment, but that was the moment when I was trying to find every bit of courage and capacity and capability within myself to try to save Danny. And so, what I knew how to do as a journalist was investigate. So immediately I got on the phone with other journalists to find out if they knew who this Sheikh [Mubarak Ali] Gilani was that Danny was about to meet. I found out then that another journalist locally had gone missing. I called relatives that I have in Pakistan. I called sources.

Asra Nomani:

And through the night we worked at, called the consulate, called The Wall Street journal office. Did everything that's like old school reporting, called trusted people, called the neighbor, went over right next door to the neighbor when she awakened for the dawn prayer and begged people to help. And it was just a response like I never would have ever imagined. Everywhere I turned they said they couldn't get involved.

Chitra Ragavan:

Were they afraid?

Asra Nomani:

They were all afraid. And that was the moment when I really realized what happens in a society to the citizenry when you don't have a rule of law, when you can't trust the police, when you have an intelligence agency that you're afraid will come knocking on your door, they were all afraid to get involved. And finally, we got the police and two police officers came. A guy that we called Captain and then another police officer named "Dost", which means friend, as you might know, in Urdu. And so, we got them, the house was overrun with police officers and intelligence agents.

Asra Nomani:

And the other thing that I had to do, Chitra, that I bet you can connect with is, I was born in India and I was born into a script, right, for many women and many girls in our culture. When I was literally eight-years-old growing up, I went back to India and a cousin of mine had written into my autograph book "silence is golden" because we were to be good girls. Right? We were supposed to tow the line, don't challenge authority. And of course, I became a journalist and I learned how to raise questions. But in my own culture, I still thought that I had to tow the line. I got to wear my proper salwar kameez the long tunic and the baggy pants, wear my dupatta, the scarf over my head when I talked to the religious leaders.

Asra Nomani:

And at that moment, January 23rd, 2002, it was like all of the voices inside of my head that told me to be quiet or tow the line, just went out the window because I was laser-focused that I had to do everything that I possibly could to save Danny. And so, Mariane and I would joke, we had these boots that I had gotten to go hiking through Tora Bora to find Osama bin Laden. And every morning then I would lace up those boots, we called them our jihadi boots because we were on a jihad or a struggle for truth and for finding Danny. And there was no more compromise on my identity, no more second guessing myself, no voice within my head telling me to be quiet because I had to do everything strategically and intelligently to try to save Danny.

Chitra Ragavan:

So, all of your efforts though were unsuccessful, when did you find out his fate?

Asra Nomani:

Five weeks then into the search for Danny, all of a sudden I couldn't get any of the police officers or the U.S. Consulate officials that had been a phone call away, they'd all disappeared. And I just didn't know where they were so Mariane and I laced up our boots. We walked to my front door and that exact moment standing at the door, as I opened it were the Pakistani police officers and the U.S. Officials and the FBI agents.

Asra Nomani:

And Chitra, oh my gosh, these were grown men who would have seen the darkest of the dark. And they just stood there, just their faces is crestfallen, as if they had seen a ghost, as if they had seen the worst of the worst. And they had. That's the moment when this police officer named Captain looked at Mariane and said, "I'm sorry, I couldn't bring your Danny home."

Chitra Ragavan:

And what had they, had they seen the video? What was it that made them look like ghosts?

Asra Nomani:

So that night, the FBI agents and Pakistani police officers had gotten a video and they had watched this video. That was the "slaughter" of the journalist Daniel Pearl. And in that video was documented Danny's last words. My father is Jewish. My mother is Jewish. I am Jewish. And then those horrible, horrible last seconds. So in that video then, they documented the Knife being put to Danny's neck and his head being severed and held then by his killer as if it was some great prize in this jihad that the militants had launched upon with Danny as their victim.

Chitra Ragavan:

What was the reaction on your physical on mental health and emotional health and that of Mariane's? And how did you recover from it in the coming weeks? And what actions did you take after you learned of the video?

Asra Nomani:

I really had never, ever understood trauma. I didn't understand the reactions that our body and our minds have to trauma, but I immediately, I did learn that there is no atheist in a foxhole. And I sat outside Mariane's bedroom saying my Muslim prayer for protection for her and her baby in her belly, because poor Mariane, rushed into her room and you just had a blood curdling scream, like I'll never forget. Of course, as the world knows, as everybody knows, this was the worst, the worst, the worst of humanity. And I learned that our brains feel this tragedy and trauma and then something happens also to have us survive. Because even now 19 years later, I cannot even believe that this happened and that this is true.

Asra Nomani:

And I learned in those moments afterwards and the days afterwards and the months and years, honestly, afterwards, I learned that we hope by doing this thing that's called

dissociation, separating our own, our own minds and thoughts and brains from the horror of a trauma. And on one level it's hoping and it's healthy. And in another, you have to be careful because it can remove you from the emotion and tragedy of grief, which was some of my challenge. But oh man, Chitra, literally going into the abyss and figuring out how you will ever emerge again, that's what those moments and days were like.

Chitra Ragavan:

And your life was further complicated. I mean, you're a Muslim woman but a non-traditional one. You were married once in the US very briefly, divorced very quickly. And so, you were in Karachi, a single Muslim woman with a boyfriend when Danny was kidnapped and murdered. And then even as you were finding out the terrible news about him, you also, were about to get some very personal health information about yourself. Tell me about that.

Asra Nomani:

Yes. In the fourth week trying to find Danny, before we knew his fate, I realized that something was awry with my body. And I got in a car with police protection and went to the 24-hour pharmacy across the street from the Karachi Sheraton and got not just one pregnancy test but a few. Returned back to my home and there took one test after the next, with each one coming back positive for being pregnant. And it was shocking to me because this wasn't my plan. This was not what I was expecting in this struggle to try to just find my friend.

Asra Nomani:

And there we were now, two pregnant women under one roof. I also I had this realization, I knew, I mean, the extremism problem in Pakistan is rooted in a very ultra-Orthodox fundamentalist interpretation of Islam that also says that a woman is illegal or criminal if she's had sex outside of marriage. And in the case of pregnancy, your own baby can be used as evidence against you. And so, I just thought, "Oh my gosh, what am I to do?" So we kept it a secret. I found a doctor quietly, but I was afraid that even my blood tests would be used as evidence against me. And so, there was this secret, this fear.

Asra Nomani:

And then on top of it, then when I told my boyfriend, he just bailed on me because he was already afraid of Pakistani Intelligence, and now to get wrapped up in this soap opera, forget it. And so then, a week later we learned that Danny had been murdered. I just don't know, you don't know sort of the, you can have different levels of feeling, spiritual, religious or not. Just as if life came to me as a way, as a course for me to survive and to live in the midst of that darkness. So this was the double experience that I was having, to process and figure out answers for this brutal, brutal murder of dear Danny, and then this question within me of what to do with this life within me.

Chitra Ragavan:

So what did you do next? How did the Pearl Project come about?

Asra Nomani:

Well, I chose life because I had amazing, and I have amazing, amazing parents. They are conservative, but they are humanists. And when my mother learned that I was pregnant, she said, "You must have this baby." And my father, oh my gosh, my father sent me an email, literally, just that said, I love you. Because you know, dads, and I know your dad loved technology, too. And yeah, my dad used an email to communicate that unconditional love that's so important. So I chose life. I chose to come back to America to raise my son as a single mom with my parents support. I had him in my hometown of Morgantown, West Virginia, where I'm talking to you from today. And I tell you, I had my first birthday party for Shibli, that's my son's name.

Asra Nomani:

And then, like, the second one. And I chose to live, I chose to live and raise him with love and truth and honesty. But there is this question, all these questions still lingering about poor Danny's murder. There was a network of people who were involved in propping him, and there were so many questions about how they worked, how they operated and I had to get the answers. And so The Pearl Project began as a investigation at Georgetown University with students, to find the truth left behind on the streets of Karachi.

Chitra Ragavan:

And what was your goal?

Asra Nomani:

Well, the actual goal was to discover every detail in the plot to kidnap Danny, and in the captivity, the investigation, the court case, every little detail. That was the external objective, right? But clearly there was this unfinished business within me, this grief still not processed. And I came to really understand my brain a little bit more too, because not immediately, but later I knew that I had to know every little fact in order to be able to process then the grief. And that was just my path.

Asra Nomani:

And ultimately the external reason that just stayed with me through every moment of, and twist and turn was, just wanted to do right by Danny in terms of the truth and justice for him, so that there would be no stone unturned. And that we could send a clear message as journalists that we stand with our fellow journalists from the newsroom, that we will not allow anybody to get away with murder. And I just really felt, no, we couldn't save Danny, but we needed to fight for the truth and for justice.

Chitra Ragavan:

Well, as we mentioned, this is the 19th anniversary almost to the day that we're recording. This is January 21st, and he disappeared on January 23rd. And interestingly, there have been a lot of recent developments that are also coming to a head this

coming week. Talk a little bit about that with respect to the lead culprit and the court hearings and what's likely to unfold.

Asra Nomani:

Well, what we discovered was that nobadmashi@yahoo.com was an account run by this British-Pakistani young man named Omar Sheikh. And the Pakistani police successfully prosecuted him in 2002 along with three co-conspirators. That was very satisfying because this is a man who is an extremist and a danger to society, along with his co-conspirators. But as COVID was sweeping the world in April, 2020, we got this shocking news from Pakistan that judges in the Sindh High Court in Karachi, had decided that Omar Sheikh and his three co-conspirators were going to be freed from jail.

Asra Nomani:

But they ruled that the three co-conspirators were innocent and that Omar Sheikh was only guilty of abduction, not even kidnapping for ransom. And they ruled that it wasn't even terrorism. So it was such a shock. It was just unbelievable, but it was just like that moment, January 23rd, 2002, when, you have to just kick into action. We learned that we have 30 days to file an appeal, that in the Pakistani courts, the victim's family can file an appeal. And so, I talked to Danny's dad immediately, and his sister Tamara, and they decided they were going to appeal.

Asra Nomani:

And we got to the business then of powers of attorney, finding a lawyer in Pakistan, filing the papers, just doing all of the work in the midst of COVID. And we did it, Chitra, we filed the appeal and that appeal has been going through the Pakistan Supreme Court for almost all these months now, right? And any day now, we're expecting a decision. We hope, we pray that Omar Sheikh and the three co-conspirators will remain in jail. We feel confident, we hope, hope, hope that that will happen.

Chitra Ragavan:

And the U.S. Justice Department has raised the possibility that if Omar Sheikh is allowed to be set free, that he could potentially be brought to the U.S. and tried here, which could potentially be good news even if it falls through on the other end. Right?

Asra Nomani:

Yeah. They have this warning they've sort of issued to the government of Pakistan. A message, let's say. That if you can't keep Omar Sheikh in jail, we can take over the case. Because Omar Sheikh was indicted in U.S. Courts in 2002. So he could be extradited and tried in court in America. We feel like the government of Pakistan and the Supreme Court will do the right thing. They have definitely listened carefully to the arguments of the family's lawyer, Faisal Siddiqui and the government case also. And so, we're really hopeful that they will be able to do right for Danny, but the U.S. Government has fortunately supported the family.

Chitra Ragavan:

Now, in the years since Danny died, you've become an activist, too in addition to being a writer and a journalist. You've taken on the Islamic communities in the U.S. On a number of fronts notably on Islamic terrorism, extremism, the rights of Muslim women. You've talked openly about Muslim women and sex and other topics that were taboo. One of your books *Standing Alone: An American Woman's Struggle for the Soul of Islam*.

Chitra Ragavan:

And *Tantrika: Traveling the Road of Divine Love*. You've written some controversial articles, including *Islamic Bill of Rights for Women in the Bedroom* and *Islamic Bill of Rights for Women in the Mosque*. How did the events in 2002 shape you as an activist and getting in touch with your voice, and what has been some of the response to your positions and your writings?

Asra Nomani:

Well, I just love the concept of your podcast and the kind of reflections that you have us even think about, even that I thought about. Wondering about the issues of leadership in my life, but Chitra, there we were in the trenches, right? In this horrible, horrible moment. And I couldn't agree to the voices in my ancestry or my upbringing that had told me to be quiet or sit in the back and stay compliant and be a good girl. And there was so much clarifying during those five weeks for me, first, I had to decide whether I was going to carry this life into the world. Was I going to defy the shame, the taboos, the laws even that criminalized bringing a baby into the world without a wedding ring? Then I realized in those weeks, extremism, what is the claim that they have on our communities?

Asra Nomani:

The men who dropped off the photos of Danny in captivity, had done that in a mosque in Karachi that women weren't even allowed to enter. Well, how could that be? I knew about the extremism problem within my Muslim communities since I was a girl. Because I was born in 1965, I grew up with it through the '70s and '80s as Saudi Arabia and Iran were fueling it to out extreme the other country. But I never reported about it, Chitra. As a journalist, I never wrote one word about it. Danny wrote more about the extremism problem within Islam than I did. And when this happened, and I also realized the life within me was literally sacrificed in this debate. I thought, I have an obligation to speak up. And that was when I first decided to move from the news pages to the opinion pages and write columns.

Asra Nomani:

And my first column was about *The Right of a Muslim Woman to Bring a Baby into this World, Even if she Wasn't Married* because a woman in Nigeria was about to be executed because she had had a baby outside of wedlock. And so that's where I found, I think this concept of thought leadership, thought leadership was an idea that I never even contemplated. And then when I went to my mosque in Morgantown, West Virginia

with my little baby, this elder stood in front of me and said I had to take the back door and go into this back balcony. And I wasn't even allowed into the front room. And I thought, "Are you kidding me?" So the extremist can lay claim to our mosques and our pulpits, but I as a woman have to take the back door by the garbage can.

Asra Nomani:

And so, that was when I become an accidental activist. And I didn't know how to be the kind of "leader" that galvanizes people and convinces the other women to go into the main hall with me. But I went on my own and I had my mom with me. So that was my greatest joy. My mom would literally put on this Brooklyn hoodie, it had Brooklyn across the front and she would use the hoodie as her headscarf. And she went in with me, Friday after Friday, my son on my lap. And I sat and I took notes on what these men were saying, and I took notes on their extremism and I challenged them on their orthodoxy. And of course that won me great popularity contests right, at the mosque. Not at all.

Chitra Ragavan:

You've been taking on Islamic extremism ever since Danny Pearl was kidnapped and beheaded and you've gotten a lot of pushback. And some even here in the U.S. In various communities have attempted to malign you as an extremist when in fact the opposite is true, and has been well-documented that you are very much against extremism. How do you counter though that kind of destructive counternarrative and keep working?

Asra Nomani:

Well, I became a volunteer in Morgantown for the rape and domestic violence shelter at one point. And I learned about this thing called the power and control wheel. And it is the sort of analysis of the dynamics that are used to assert power and control over women in the case of domestic violence with men. But even it can happen anywhere. It can happen men on men, women on women. And one of the mechanisms is abuse, emotional abuse, verbal abuse, economic abuse, right? These are all the levers of power that can be asserted over somebody to get them to be compliant with authority. And so, I just started to understand the character assassination as just that, an effort to discredit me so that I'd have no authority, right, in my community.

Asra Nomani:

Then I followed the money, of course, the journalist in me, and I saw the trail of organizations that are in this network trying to do the bidding of governments that want the status quo to exist like governments in the Gulf countries that believe in this interpretation of Islam, and their actual, it's been existential battle for them because that's how they keep power and control over their people. So if you start giving women rights, if you start allowing people to speak up with ideas of free speech then they're dictatorships are challenged. So I got to really understand that, it felt really personal but it wasn't personal. It's just the dynamics of power and control.

Asra Nomani:

And I just can't even underestimate just how much love matters when you have battles like this because my mom was going into the mosque with me. My dad lost all his "power and control" in the community on the mosque board. They out voted him about issue of women's rights at the mosque, but they [my parents] stood by me because they knew the clarity of the issue, right? That fundamentally, we all have to stand up against extremism and we have to stand up for human rights. And so, that's what will always be in front of me, along with this clarity of that January 23rd moment.

Asra Nomani:

When I last saw this great human being, Danny Pearl, on this earth just fumbling with his notebook and his technology, getting into that cab to go off for an interview. And that's so clarifying when people try to confuse you with all their drama and all of their name calling and death threats even, the things that are meant to get you to just go crawl into the woodwork. So that love and friendship just was clarifying to me. And made it so that even not winning any of these homecoming queen contests at the mosque, didn't matter. It didn't matter. There's a bigger battle to win and still on that effort because it isn't over yet.

Chitra Ragavan:

And in November, 2016, you wrote an op-ed in the Washington post saying that you, a Muslim woman, a progressive feminist, a registered Democrat had in fact cast your vote for Donald Trump. And you raised this issue of Democratic pandering in your words to Islamic extremism as one of the reasons for voting for Trump. Can you clarify a little bit what that was about?

Asra Nomani:

Yeah. I know it's confusing how a Muslim feminist could vote for Donald Trump. But what had happened is that in the years before, I had seen this encroachment of the powers within my Muslim community that we call Islamists. They are the Muslims who believe in Islam, in political governance. So organizations like the Muslim Brotherhood, for example. And unfortunately, they had figured out a way to connect their very illiberal ideas with the liberal establishment of the Democratic party, basically, running Muslims into a race that needed to be protected. So they would really use the minority status within United States to argue that any criticism of issues of women's rights or extremism was Islamophobic. And I could see through it because I knew their values and their tactics, but unfortunately I was increasingly frustrated that the Democratic party was getting hijacked really by this agenda.

Asra Nomani:

And so, I made that really, really difficult decision to vote for Donald Trump in 2016. But the op-ed that you talk about that I wrote, I wrote it after the election. And I didn't write it because I wanted to convince anybody to support him. I just wanted folks to understand that it was a complicated vote, those people that had voted for Trump. And I grew up in West Virginia, like I mentioned, I knew many people who voted for him here. And they

weren't just this white, trash, racist image that would then being discussed on CNN to break down who the voters were. And I really wanted to bring humanity back to the conversation, but of course, that went really well, right?

Chitra Ragavan:

And looking back now, though, given that he himself aroused a bunch of extremists to actually descend on the Capitol on January 6th, and the incredible impact that the devastating impact that had on U.S. Democracy. How do you what you had hoped to with what actually happened?

Asra Nomani:

Well, one more disappointed voter, right. I mean, I voted for former President Obama twice and was disappointed in how he handled the Islamic extremism problem. And with President Trump, former President Trump now, disappointed of course, in the way that he just couldn't get it together. Right? Then of course, everybody saw the signs and I saw the signs. Chitra, I worked at The Wall Street Journal so I didn't cover him, but I covered his buddies. So I knew they were what they are. The kind of rogues of Wall Street, right, that they famously had become. And it's a shame. And still, of course, we're also processing what happened on January 6th.

Asra Nomani:

The journalist in me, the human being in me, I still see the same challenge that we face as a society. That people feel any level of oh, we have to understand where Muslim extremists come from. There's a lot of analysis in among progressive politics who understand the socioeconomic condition, the this and the that of Muslim extremists, that has to be understood to, right? About the people who decided to do this thing that we could never have imagined of, rushing the Capitol, running through the halls and with zip ties and the rest. But in both situations, the answer has to be some understanding, right?

Asra Nomani:

We have to get to it and then we have to it, and then we have to, just like I argue in the Muslim community, we have to challenge the extremist ideology, if it works on both sides. It works on the right. It works on the left. It works in Muslim community, Jewish, Christian, all communities. The answer still has to be the same where we have to choose a path of civility and moderation and human rights and self-determination that's dignified, and within some high level of rule of law. And never could I have imagined too, as most of the world is reeling, that we would have faced that in America. But that is what happens when we lose control over moderation, right? And it certainly becomes the defining characteristic of society

Chitra Ragavan:

You've taken on another difficult challenge, now, countering what you believe to be toxicity of political correctness in our public school systems and the dropping of academic excellence standards by some of the most rigorous academic public schools

in the country, including Thomas Jefferson High School here in Northern Virginia and even some colleges such as Harvard University, as a means to combat systemic racism. Briefly, what are your concerns about that? And what are you trying to do about it and what has been the response?

Asra Nomani:

Well, we've talked about what made me a mother, the circumstances that brought to motherhood. Well, that little boy became a student in Fairfax County, Virginia. And he like many other kids passed this test to get into Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology. He was into LEGOs and robotics and I was LEGO coach. Being a single mom, I straddled all my life and work so that I could be there for him. And we got the good news one day that he was accepted into the school. And I did everything I could, right? To be able to afford to live in Fairfax County, to shuttle him to different activities, keep him on the straight and narrow. And then one day after the tragedy, tragedy of George Floyd's killing, we got a note along with all the parents and students at TJ from our school principal.

Asra Nomani:

And she said that we needed to check our privileges. And I just thought, are you kidding me? Do you have any idea what any of our lives has been about? How can you sit there and lecture us about our "privileges" on what we were or we became the fodder in those new politics in K-12 Education of this ideology that's called "critical race theory" that brings a new extremism, I would argue, to school children. And so, there is a very parallel journey that I've been on in trying to challenge ideology. The ideology of critical race theory is one that creates a new hierarchy of human value among people. So that at my son's school, we're mostly Asian and our mostly Asian families are considered "white adjacent." And so we lose our status, "status as minorities," as people of color because we've "succeeded." But we're complicated families.

Asra Nomani:

We have complicated stories, I'm first-generation post-colonial in my family from India. And so, I just couldn't accept that kind of tyranny, honestly, and started speaking at my school board meetings. And again, it became accidental leadership and finding other families, organizing and we've challenged the school system in Fairfax County, Virginia. We've gone to school board meetings. I've helped parents learn to deliver three minute speeches. And we just learned today that we've won standing in court so that we can challenge Fairfax County's decision to eliminate that test that my son took to get into TJ because they argue that it's a "racist test" because we have too many underrepresented minorities from the black and Hispanic community.

Asra Nomani:

But our argument is the argument of the American dream, which is that we work hard. We have to make opportunities available for all people, but ultimately we shouldn't just be striving for equal outcome. We have to really strive for equal opportunities and those opportunities have to be made available fairly in society, but you can't just create new

targets and create new problems by doing things like eliminating the test, putting a hit on Asian students. You have to go about this with real wisdom.

Chitra Ragavan:

As we wrap up Asra, have you had what I called "viral insights" in the wake of COVID-19, that moment of clarity that's often brought upon by a crisis?

Asra Nomani:

Well, my son and I, when remote learning happened, move back home to Morgantown, West Virginia where my parents are in their '80s now. And we live with them. My son helps my father bring dry wall down the stairs for the basement that my dad's been finishing. Have a cup of tea with my mom in the morning. And I just value life. I mean, it's the same way that when I sat in Karachi and saw how life can just be taken in an instant, in a way that you can't even imagine, that's what COVID did for me also. It just made me realize that this is a gift, every breath that we can take, literally, and I just every morning try to wake up with a reflection on my intentions for the day and really try to do good.

Asra Nomani:

Definitely go to bed at night, always thinking I could have done better, but wake up again, make my bed so that I can feel like I've accomplished one solid thing for the day when I returned back to the bed. But that's really my epiphany is that, we have to really just keep doing that constant daily reflection so that we stay true to our inner values and our inner most important motions, really, which is friendship and family.

Chitra Ragavan:

Looking back at that young woman who was waiting in Karachi for her friend, Danny Pearl, to come home and only to find out that he had been kidnapped and murdered. What would you say to that woman about the journey that you've been on, and what would you say to Danny Pearl if he were here today?

Asra Nomani:

Oh Danny, poor thing. Maybe, I still have the survivor guilt because I would tell Danny, "I'm so sorry that I couldn't save you." I mean, I have dreams where I say that to him sometimes. But if Danny were here, oh my gosh, if he were here and he were alive, first of all, he would be the most fun, right? Now, during quarantine, he would always have entertainment in any household in which he was living. But this is the same message that Danny gave to me too in life. And this is the message that I would give to that younger woman that I was, which is, live unapologetically. Don't live with shame, every voice that you have within yourself that questions you and second guesses you, just talk to that voice. Talk to that and get the bottom of it, but don't let it define and dictate your options in this world.

Asra Nomani:

I have learned that courage can be lonely, but it's also contagious and you will find your community. You will always find your community because for all that you are feeling, there are so many others. And that's what I try now to communicate in my writings. Also, because I always think about my younger self, that had questions, that doubted myself, that thought I needed to live the life that I should live, not the one that I wanted to live. And I want to help others live self-actualized lives from a real place of authenticity and truth. And I would tell that younger woman, you're doing well, love yourself and trust yourself.

Chitra Ragavan:

Asra, thank you so much for joining me on When it Mattered.

Asra Nomani:

Thank you so much, Chitra. Your honesty and clarity help others see themselves with a mirror that is the best of ourselves. So thank you. Thank you.

Chitra Ragavan:

Thank you very much. Asra Nomani is a journalist, author, activist and co-founder of The Pearl Project, a 31,000 word award-winning global investigative journalism report, identifying the network of militants who killed Wall Street journal correspondent, Danny Pearl. This week is the 19th anniversary of Pearl's kidnapping and subsequent murder. Pakistani prosecutors are still struggling to keep his killers in jail and bring them to justice. This is When it Mattered. I'm Chitra Ragavan.

Chitra Ragavan:

When it Mattered is a podcast from Goodstory, an advisory firm helping technology startups with brand strategy, positioning and narrative. Our producer is Jeremy Corr, founder and CEO of Executive Podcast Solutions, with production assistance from Kate Kruse. Our creative advisor is Adi Wineland and our research and logistics lead is Sarah Möller. Don't forget to subscribe to the show on Apple podcasts or your preferred podcast platform. And if you liked the show, please rate it five stars, leave a review and do recommend it to your friends, family and colleagues. For questions, comments and transcripts, please visit our website [@goodstory.io](https://goodstory.io) or send us an email at podcast@goodstory.io. Join us next week for another episode of When it Mattered. I'll see you then.