

Redefining Health & Wellness

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Featured this episode: Shohreh Davoodi & Parisa Zaeri

Shohreh Davoodi: Welcome to episode number 54 of the Redefining Health & Wellness podcast. I'm super excited because today I get to share my lifelong bestie with you, Parisa Zaeri. Parisa is a conductor, coach, and collaborative pianist who also works in arts administration. In our conversation, we chatted about the limitations of narrow definitions of success, the positive impact of arts education, the experience of being a woman in a male-dominated field, and more. To access the show notes and a full transcript of this episode, head to shohrehdavoodi.com/54. That's shohrehdavoodi.com/54.

[Music plays]

Hey y'all! Welcome to the Redefining Health & Wellness podcast. I'm your host, Shohreh Davoodi. I'm a certified intuitive eating counselor and a certified personal trainer. I help people improve their relationships with exercise, food, and their bodies so they can ditch diet culture for good and do what feels right for them.

Through this podcast I want to give you the tools to redefine what health and wellness mean to you by exposing myths and misconceptions, delving into all the areas of health that often get ignored, and reminding you that health and wellness are not moral obligations. Are you ready? Let's fuck some shit up.

So today y'all are getting to hear from my OG bestie and the longest-running friendship in my life. I have literally known Parisa since she was in diapers, because our parents have known each other since before she was born. So, what is up bitch?

Parisa Zaeri: Oh, you know, just hanging out. Quarantine style.

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- Shohreh:** Love it! Hanging in L.A., doing the thing.
- Parisa:** So fancy!
- Shohreh:** Well, this is really fun for me, because this is our professional worlds colliding since we've been personal friends our entire lives and now we're both adults trying to do adult things, mostly poorly, but you know—
- Parisa:** Trying, we are trying.
- Shohreh:** We are, and that's all that we can really ask of ourselves. So, we're here. But everybody else doesn't know you as well as I know you, so let's talk about you and your career path, and you can take it back as far as you want. You can even go back to my mom forcing us to play piano and oboe duets at Sunday School if you'd like.
- Parisa:** [Laughs] Oh my god. Okay. Yeah. So, I am a musician and arts administrator by trade. I got here...I've been playing piano since I was five, so that's, I guess, where it all began. And I remember really hating piano as a kid. And it was just another thing that my parents were forcing me to do. I never had put in my own initiative into it, but I practiced and did the thing. And then in middle school decided that I hated it so much that I was gonna quit. And so I quit and then took up French horn, which I think is where our band days coincided.
- Shohreh:** They did, but I had totally forgotten you played the French horn until this moment, so...
- Parisa:** It was a brief stint in my career. But yeah, actually when all was said and done, I realized that I had participated in choir, in band, and in orchestra 'cause I ended up joining orchestra in high school as a violist, and did that for a handful of years. So I kind of did all of it, and I'm glad that I did

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because I ended up working in orchestras, and operas, and everything, so it's nice to have that experience with all of the instruments and seeing all of the different perspectives.

So I got two piano performance degrees in college, a bachelor's and a master's. It sounds like overachieving, but I can guarantee you that playing piano for me is still very hard [laughs]. I thought it would get easier after the second degree, and it didn't. So it's still a struggle. I'm glad I did it.

But yeah, now I kind of divide my time between gigging in the opera world—mostly I work with Pacific Opera Project here in Los Angeles—and I also do arts admin for the Colburn School, which is a music and dance conservatory in downtown L.A.

Shohreh: I also want to let our audience members know that biology is working against you, because Parisa is not even five foot and she has small hands, and yet she somehow manages to play the piano professionally.

Parisa: It's so true, yeah. I do not have the right hands for this job, but [laughter] it is what it is!

Shohreh: And she plays beautifully, as my mom has been telling her her entire life [laughs].

Parisa: Too kind.

Shohreh: Thanks Margie!

Parisa: Oh goodness.

Shohreh: Oh man. Yeah, you have been through a lot. 'Cause when you were talking about all of that, of course I'm thinking about everything that was happening behind the scenes. You know, that's your professional bio, but

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of course, I know everything that was going on in your personal life at the time with Zack, your husband, and with your parents, and just with the difficulties. I mean you lived in a bunch of different cities over the last decade, and it hasn't been easy for you to get to where you are now, even though on paper you look like this super fancy, successful musician, right?

Parisa: So polished, yes.

Shohreh: [Laughter] And we're gonna get into that, because one of the things I wanna talk to you about is this fine line you have to walk when you're getting paid for things that you're really passionate about. Because for me, you know, music has always been a huge part of my life to the point where I have a music performance degree. But I was miserable getting that degree.

Because I had to practice all the time, which at UW Madison I had to practice in this, like, shitty basement. The building was awful. Our humanities building was really horrifying. So it's like you're always freezing when you're in there, and there's like weird water coming down the halls. It was not fun. But that was your life, you know? You spent hours practicing in this space, while my friends were like, "Oh, I do my homework, and now I'm done." I'd be like, cool, well there is no done when you have a music major, because you just constantly have to keep getting better and keep chasing the perfection of it 'cause that's such a big part of music.

And, you know, I was miserable. I didn't want to be doing it, and that's why I ultimately chose a different career path. But I think some of it was just that pressure too of, if you wanna make a living doing this, then you've got to be really, really good and you have to make reeds. Which for anyone who has never played a double reed instrument, like literally they're like, here's some tools, and you're gonna whittle some actual ass wood, and you need

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to be able to play from that. Why didn't I pick the goddamn flute or something? Like just take it out of its case.

But anyhow, the point of all of that is that I didn't feel that pressure when I was in high school and I was playing the oboe. I didn't feel it when I was in middle school. Like, music was just something that was fun for me, that I could rely on, that I was good at, and when I went to college that changed to a point where I was like, I can't do this, this is the wrong career path for me. But you ultimately have decided that you did want to make this your career path. So I'd love to talk to you about kind of how you've managed to strike the balance between passion and also needing to get paid.

Parisa:

Let's see. I think about all of the non-music jobs that I have done up until this point. I have worked in retail. I worked at Target, stocking milk and dairy for a brief moment in time. I worked in the mall. I got this weird job off of Craigslist when I was living in Colorado doing tax resolution. So for all those people who are behind on their federal and state taxes, I was on the phone for them vouching that they would pay their monthly payment and pay off this debt, whatever.

And I think every time I got into one of those positions, I was like okay, I did the thing, landed the interview, even if it wasn't a super complicated interview. Could I see myself doing this long-term? Like if none of my music things panned out, could I see myself doing tax debt resolution for the rest of my life?

And I think specifically with that job, I really wanted to say yes. Because like the commute was less than 10 minutes from my apartment at the time, I had already gotten the job. Everything was just really easy. And I so badly just wanted to be like, yeah, I could totally do this forever, and then it'll be fine. And I was there for 10 months, I want to say. And at the end of the 10

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months, I ended up quitting so I could do a summer opera festival in New York.

And I think having those things happen back-to-back just made me realize that I can stick it out for a while, but I can't stick it out forever. And that's where my decision to stay in the arts ultimately comes from. Like I know I am capable of other skills and doing other things, but what makes me feel most at home is being an active advocate and participant in the arts, and that's how I've chosen to lead my career.

And I think the other thing that ties into that is this concept of balance. Coming from music background where you go to college, and you do the thing, and you are practicing for hours and hours on end to get degrees, all of my major mentors and professors were always like, it's an all or nothing kind of thing. Like, either you use this degree and you perform 100% of the time and 100% of your income comes from this, or it's a waste. And that's just such an old-school vantage point I think. And especially with today's economy, I'm certain that it's gonna change even more now that Covid has changed everything.

But that kind of lifestyle doesn't exist for, I'd say, 95%, 97% of artists and musicians in the world. It's just not a viable thing to be able to live off your art 100% of the time. And for me, as I was trying to figure out what I could do to supplement income and figure out how to live, I realized that I still wanted to be very heavily involved in the arts. And that's why I ultimately chose to go into arts administration.

And when I was in Colorado for the last four years, I ended up working with Opera Colorado for three of those four years in their education sector, and got to do a lot of grassroots, on-site, in schools work, which was really exciting. And now that I'm here in L.A., I'm continuing that work with the

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Colburn School in their community engagement side of things as an analyst.

So it's a different kind of creativity, and honestly, I think my brain appreciates that. It's nice to not have to think about the nitty gritty musician's point of view from behind a stand all the time and get to get outside of that box and do something different that still promotes the arts as a very important thing in our society.

Shohreh:

Yeah, and it's unfortunate that this very singular definition has been developed of "making it," or success, because like you said, that's not realistic for the vast majority of people. Whether we're talking about musicians, or we are talking about other kinds of artists, or even in my line of work, just as an entrepreneur. Like not every entrepreneur can completely live off their income that's coming in. You know, the only reason that my business is still afloat is because I have the privilege of having a partner who has a very secure job, who makes sure that our bills get paid as I am growing and building my business.

But not everybody has that. If I didn't have that, I would have a 9:00 to 5:00 job in addition to trying to do this. But, it's seen as like, oh, you've only really done it, you've only really made it, if you can have everything coming from whatever this main trade that you have is. And it just sucks!

Parisa:

It does suck, and I think [laughs], weirdly, part of that is like, okay, all of your income is coming from that, but also this idea of having to suffer for your art. I don't know if there's like an equivalent in the entrepreneurial side of things?

Shohreh:

Yes there is!

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Parisa: Like, oh, you have to make zero dollars for five years, and you have to only eat ramen, and like all of us did this, and yeah, you should have to do it too. But yeah, just this fact that like I had this experience, so you have to have it too in order to reach this weird perception of success that I have imposed upon you.

Shohreh: It's called hustle in the entrepreneurial space, this idea that you have to constantly be hustling, working around the clock, devoting your life to it. I mean you see this in like the tech sector too with people as they start businesses, is just like this unhealthy work ethic, and it's seen as like, that's the only way to do it and to be successful, whatever the fuck that means.

Parisa: Yeah, and I think that's just so...depressing? I don't know [laughs], it's just—

Shohreh: Yes, it is!

Parisa: You know, why would I want to put myself through that if there's a different option for me? And that's me saying there's a different option for me that doesn't necessarily line up with what would work for you in a similar position. But if I have the opportunity to take advantage of that, why wouldn't I? I don't feel like I should sit here and be sad about how many concerts I do or don't have booked and worry about where my next meal is gonna come from if I don't have to do that.

Shohreh: Well, and there's a clout piece to that, right? Part of it is just being able to say that you did. That you did the thing that is so revered and being able to separate yourself from that is, I think, the fastest way to find peace with whatever choices that you make. Because if you live according to this ideal that somebody else thrust upon you, of course you're always gonna be disappointed instead of taking the time to say, "Well, what do I actually

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want? Is that the thing I want? Has that gotten me where I want to go? And if it hasn't, what would I like to do instead?"

Parisa:

Exactly, and I find that like, as I was trying to maneuver my own path to what success looks like for me, I realized that as I was checking off the boxes according to what other people said I should do, it wasn't fulfilling. I did the thing, I achieved the thing, but why does it have this kind of tinge of emptiness associated with it? 'Cause ultimately, it wasn't really what I wanted, you know. I kept getting travelling gig after travelling gig, but if I hate travelling, that's not gonna be exciting for me [laughs], that's gonna be really stressful. And just weeks and weeks of me living out of a suitcase, which I don't want to do.

Shohreh:

Right, and I know that you, like me, experience performance anxiety too, so a life of performing 24/7 is probably not the ideal situation for your mental health.

Parisa:

God no, no, and as a 29-year-old who has been playing piano since I was five, so a solid 24 years there, I'm just now starting to figure out how to maneuver myself around my performance anxiety, 'cause I've just come to terms with it, that it's never gonna go away. And it's just part of me and part of who I am as an artist, and I can share that experience, but I'm never going to get rid of it. And yeah, just the emotional toll that it has taken on my mental health over the past decade, and it doesn't need to be an added part of my stress. I can make a living being an artist in a different way that doesn't consist of me performing 100% of the time and being stressed 100% of the time.

Shohreh:

Right. Well, and I think the problem is that we're gonna keep seeing this issue coming up because we are in a hyper-capitalistic society, right? And so, I'm seeing pressure on everybody to be productive in anything you do,

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especially on the creative side. So like, if you're not making money through Etsy, or shows, or whatever, then your creative hobby is a waste and you shouldn't be doing it. And that squashes the joy for people. This idea, again, that you have to make money off your passion. Because you can, if it's something that you're doing well and you've found different ways to do it. But I think that we have kind of moved away from this idea that you can have a hobby that's just for fun, and you don't have to be so good at it that you get paid for it in order for it to count or be worthwhile in your life.

Parisa:

Oh yeah, 100%. I think especially as an artist we have to take time outside of our money-making ventures to let loose and have something that we create not depend on us having a next meal. 'Cause it just gives you that flow that you otherwise don't have when you're under the strain of a deadline, of needing to make that paycheck, of, you know, everything else that comes with being an artist. All of that comes down, and you can actually create what you wanna create, what is inside of you. All of that hippie-dippie stuff that, I don't talk a lot about, but, you know, it's there, for sure.

And I totally agree with you, not everything has to be a money-making venture. And I think if it ends up being that way, that's where you get a lot of the jaded musician type people, where the gig doesn't pay enough, and I'm still gonna do it, but I'm gonna be bitter about it, and that kind of mentality. 'Cause what started out as something very creative and joyful is no longer that. And it's now just a job, which is, I think, exactly why all of us went into the arts as a career, because we didn't want it to be just a job.

So yeah, it can very easily cross that line of, this is something I have to do, but I think it's very important that everything we create not be reliant on whether or not it's gonna propel us forward. Sometimes art is art, and it's

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neither good, neither bad, and you just sit there, and you create it, and it's just out there.

Shohreh:

I totally agree with that, and it resonates with me too as someone who has not ultimately gone down the path of arts as my career. Certainly, I have a lot of opportunities to be creative in my work because I run my own business, so that is a nice advantage. But also, one of the reasons that I think I took to doing trapeze so strongly was because I was missing having a creative outlet that was just for me. Like, I'm never gonna be a professional trapeze artist, right? I'm not going to be in Cirque du Soleil. That's not happening. But, I still love performing here in town. I love the process of creating a piece and letting it flow out of me.

Kind of like what you were saying. Like, there's something that is so amazing to that for people who are creative souls, and artists, and musicians, and things like that. Just that experience of like you said, it's like unfettered. There's nothing that's really relying on it 'cause it's just something you've decided to do for yourself.

And that's how I feel about trapeze, right? No one is telling me, "Hey girl, you gotta do this performance or you're not gonna get paid," or whatever. I'm just like having fun with it. And there's pieces that come with that, like my piece doesn't get chosen for the show or whatever, and that's certainly disappointing because it was like my personal creative endeavor, but that doesn't take the value out of just having done it. And knowing that yeah, this isn't perfect, it isn't professional level, no one is paying me for it, but that's not why I'm doing it.

And I think we all need those outlets in our life, like you said, that aren't, you have to get paid to enjoy it. Because exactly, then you get to this question of like, what happens if you stop getting paid? I'm thinking right

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now about all the gigging musicians who are stuck at home right now. Where is your identity coming from when you've lost not only your passion, but the thing that was paying you?

Parisa:

Yeah, I think so many people are struggling with that right now. Myself included, but I think in a slightly different way. But I have plenty of friends who are full-time performers, and they are now sitting around, twiddling their thumbs, wondering when the next time they get to perform live is actually going to be.

I'm sure you've seen this, but as a result of so many cancelled concerts and venues not being able to be open because of social distancing, we've seen the wave of online, virtual artistic experiences. And when those first started coming out back in late March, early April, I was like, okay, I see the value in this. I see why people would want to do this. And I get that, but at some point, I have just stopped watching those. And I feel a certain sense of guilt about it, because one, I am an artist, and two, I'm trying to support a lot of other friends who are participating in these. But I feel overwhelmed.

It's like all of a sudden, all of these performances that I would not necessarily have gone to, I now have access to. So should I watch all of them? When else am I going to get to see the Met's performances from a decade ago of Carmen or whatever they're putting out? When else am I going to have that opportunity to see that for free and to interact with their audience base who is all tuning in live? So, there's the opportunistic aspect of it—when am I going to get to do this again?

Going back to the whole mental health aspect of it, I just can't do it. I think we're all struggling because of identity. We don't know what to do with ourselves now that our way of expressing ourselves is no longer viable at

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the moment. But I don't really have an answer. it's just my thoughts on this. I feel like I wanna support people, and I understand the need for continuing to put out content and provide an artistic outlet for those people who still want to create, but I've found that me personally, I need to figure out where to draw that line, because otherwise I feel like I'm getting bombarded with content.

Shohreh:

Yeah, I think that feels true for a lot of people right now with everything having been turned virtual. I know for myself and a lot of my fellow business owner friends, it's just like this constant tension between okay, I need to put out content, but what kind of content? And especially towards the beginning of the pandemic and the shutdowns, no matter what you put out, people were shitting on it, because it was like, oh, this isn't appropriate, or like, how dare you try to keep making a living even though this pandemic is happening. Or like, why are you doing your regular content, you need to talk about the pandemic.

There was nothing you could do that was the right choice. And that's eased a little bit because we're so deep into this now, two months at least, but there's still a lot of that, of just, do I need to make new content? What do I need to put out there? Seeing what other people are doing. So, it's great because you have this innovation, which is really cool. I think we're seeing some amazing innovation in every career field right now, but it's also really tough, and the mental health piece of being in the midst of a pandemic is exhausting. And doesn't feel great every day. And those of us who are expected to keep showing up, and being on, and being the same, it's just a difficult thing to do.

Parisa:

Yeah, for sure. I know we've shared this offline, but I know that both of us have gone through days at a time where we just feel low. And I have to

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keep reminding myself that that's as a result of the pandemic. I'm just not used to feeling that. It's weird that life has continued to keep happening, and work has, in its own weird way, continued to keep happening. But you go through these weird bouts of feeling really low, and helpless, and hopeless. And I think it's great that art can help alleviate some of that, but I think we have to understand that it's not always the right choice for everybody, even as artists.

Shohreh: So with everything changing due to Covid-19, and kids being out of school, and what does that mean for music and arts programs, that also made me think about just in general how we've continued to see funding cut for music and arts education. And even though I didn't continue on with my music as a career, my own music education had such a profound impact on my life and who I am. From a young age it gave me a community of people, it taught me a ton of valuable skills that I'm still using today, and it's just been a really big part of my health and well-being, and particularly mental health, like we were just talking about.

And I'd love to hear about how music has been a part of your own health and well-being, and what concerns you have if we keep losing funding for arts and music education and what people will be missing out on if that happens.

Parisa: Yeah, that's such a loaded [laughs], loaded question.

Shohreh: I know.

Parisa: Oh man. I think effects of music education are just vast when it comes to my own life. I remember growing up very shy, you probably remember this too. I hated being the center of attention. I hated my own birthday parties because I didn't want people to sing to me [laughs]. Yeah, could not

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handle large groups of people. I felt most at home if I was with one or two of my closest friends, honestly.

And music, I think it didn't really happen until high school/college, so when I was a considerable bit older, but music gave me a space to be a leader. And I always had a lot of self-doubt when it came to academics or anything at school. I was good at school. You know, got good grades. But I was never the one to raise my hand first to answer questions. I didn't feel like a leader in the classroom. And the only time I started feeling like a leader was in my orchestra class in high school. And that was when I started saying, you know, this feels good. I could maybe do this as I get older and start thinking about career paths.

And then as I got into my undergrad and decided that I wanted to go to the conducting route, that's like the ultimate leader of leader positions in the music world, right?

Shohreh: Oh yeah!

Parisa: So I remember one of my first conducting lessons in undergrad, my teacher sat me down and he was like, "So, how comfortable do you feel talking to people?" He was basically asking me all of these social questions, just trying to get a read for how I am in front of people. And I think what he deduced from that conversation was that I ended up scoring very low on the confidence spectrum [laughs] and also very low on just like wanting to share my ideas with other people.

And he was like, "Okay, well if you're gonna be a conductor, that has to change. And I don't have any concrete ways of telling you how you need to change that, but just know that that needs to be a subconscious thing in the back of your head that you're constantly working on. Constantly

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working on your self-confidence, constantly working on how you present information and material to a mass of people.” And I think that if I had not gone that route, honestly, I probably wouldn’t be able to have this conversation with you right now, and just work at my public speaking skills, social skills, all that kind of thing.

So it really brought me out of my shell, and I don’t know...I’m sure there’s maybe another career path that would have done wonders for me as well, but I’m so thankful that I happened to fall into music, because it was just a natural fit. And while it was really hard for me at times because I was constantly having to push at my comfort zone, was what it came down to, I’m so glad that it ended up being what it was. And that it pushed me, and it challenged me, and it made me cry sometimes and made me wanna quit. But yeah, I wouldn’t be here, literally, if that were not the case.

And as far as arts education and funding being cut in public schools, I think a huge example of that is right here in L.A. In a recent survey that was conducted, I think it was saying that 10-15%, don’t quote me on this, I don’t know, but a very small percentage of LAUSD students regularly interact with the arts in some capacity. So that includes not only music, but dance, theater, anything you can think of. I wanna say it’s 10%, but I don’t know. It’s a very small amount. And that’s not even during the school day.

So that’s saying that there isn’t a professional, a teacher dedicated to this subject who is coming at it from a place of deep knowledge, deep understanding, and who quite honestly, this is really important to. Which I think makes a huge difference when you’re teaching kids about the arts. It has to be important to you personally. And so these kids are seeing the arts maybe once or twice a month after school with an after-school

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caregiver who is maybe not super well versed in music, or dance, or creative outlets like that.

And I think as a result, we're seeing kids suffer behaviorally, we're seeing kids suffer mentally and emotionally, and I also believe that we're seeing kids suffer academically. Because I think that the same kind of tenacity that is required of someone who is learning piano or learning a string instrument for the first time, directly translates into how they're going to treat their schoolwork. It doesn't necessarily mean that they're gonna be making all As, but it certainly means that they're going to try. And I think it's a real shame that the arts aren't being given more credit for the enrichment that they're providing for these students.

Shohreh:

The arts are seen as something that is not as important, right, as math, science, English, whatever—these “core” subjects. But when I think back to my education and arts classes, I'm sure anyone who is listening who was a theater kid, or a dance kid, or any of these other things, when you think back to your schooling and having the opportunity to take those classes, be a part of those clubs, like, that's the part of the school day that you look forward to. That's the part of the school day that is so different in structure, and vibe, and everything else from all of your other academic classes. You know, it's the one time you're not just like sitting in a desk and learning.

Like, there's so much more of a community impact, the learning to work together, like you said, seeing leadership represented to you, not just from a conductor, say, or your theater director, but also from each other. Like the leads in the play, or the section leaders in the band. There are so many skills that are translated. Like, to me, that was a core subject. That informed so much of everything else that I do.

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But again, as a society, we have just decided that the things that are valuable are these certain things that have to be tested in a very objective way. And that's really fucked up, and it's really sad. And I'm certainly not saying anything that many musicians and artists haven't said before in saying this, but it does make me really sad when I think about that, and I think about the people who are missing out on such an integral part, or it can be an integral part, of growing up.

Parisa: Yeah, that STEM versus STEAM, right? Is that what you guys do in Texas? I can't remember.

Shohreh: I don't remember if that's what we called it.

Parisa: Basically like you take the A out of it, we take the arts out of it and—

Shohreh: Right.

Parisa: Yeah, some schools operate on the math and sciencey part versus integrating the arts.

Shohreh: Which is also funny 'cause I think back to everything that I learned in high school, say, right, like the history facts I had to learn, the math equations—most of that shit I could not do today. But the things that I learned in music? I can still do. I can still apply. Not just like the actual reading music or picking up an oboe and playing it, yeah, I can do that, but the skills that I learned there have been long lasting compared to, like, the facts that I was like, okay, you have to learn these for a test. So, just this idea that they're not as valuable is just tragic, honestly.

Parisa: Yeah, and I think, not only that, but also giving the more artsy-minded kids a place where they truly fit in, that was super important to me. I always felt like a misfit in public school, only child and that kind of thing really made

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me stand out I feel like it. I had friends, but I just never felt like I gelled with them until I got to orchestra class. Those were the people who understood why I would practice three or four hours a day for this one 10-minute slot in a competition. They understood why I would stay after for a 90-minute rehearsal when I'd been in school until 4:00/4:30pm already. They understood why I would practice even if I had homework and sometimes I would pick practice over homework.

And I didn't really feel that kind of thing outside of that. And of course, it got strengthened even more as a music major when you're just surrounded by people who are doing what you love.

Shohreh:

That's such a great point, because the arts are kind of like a nice little holding place for all of the misfits, especially when I think back to high school. Because that was one of the only places where, like you said, you could feel like a leader, even if you weren't in other spaces. Or for me, where I felt like I was respected and felt like there was a big contribution to play there. I was seen definitely as, not cool or popular, but like *more* cool and popular in the band hall [laughter] than I was in the whole school. And I think a lot of people felt that way.

Parisa:

Yeah, for sure. That's super funny.

Shohreh:

Oh, good times. But I know there are a lot of people working on solutions to this, right, programs, trying to deal with costs and access, so it's obviously a huge topic that we don't have to go into any further. But I felt it was worth mentioning at least, considering your career choice.

Parisa:

For sure.

Shohreh:

Yeah. Alright, so we've talked a bit about capitalism. Now we've talked about accessibility. We have to talk about the patriarchy, because how can

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we not? So, obviously, for those who don't know, the professional music world is still very much dominated by men. And I was thinking about how if you ask a random person on the street, like all or most of the professional composers, musicians, conductors that they could name would be men, because those are the contributions that we valued in that space. And for you in particular, conducting is even more male-centric than the profession as a whole. So—

Parisa: Oh, isn't it though?

Shohreh: Yeah! So, what has it been like for you as a woman in such a male-dominated space?

Parisa: Well, I have to say that when I can make the choice to not think about it, I don't. Because I find that when I place too much of an emphasis on me being a woman in a male-dominated career, that just puts unnecessary strain where there doesn't need to be unnecessary strain for my mental capacity at the moment. So, like, I find that I just need to focus on the work. And of course, I'm going to run into some weird, sexist things every once in a while, but if I'm not running into them at that moment, I choose to not focus my concentration on it. Because I find that it takes away from the energy that I have to put into the work.

But yeah, I have to say, I feel pretty lucky that the run-ins that I have had with somewhat questionable or sexist comments have not been *too* many up until this point. But they always do make me stop and think. What would the scenario look like if I wasn't who I am? If I was a man? A white man? Or even a woman who looked older than 13 without makeup on [laughs]? Yeah, what would that look like? Because...

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I guess people aren't seeing the video on this, so I should describe myself. When I'm not wearing makeup, I look like maybe a 13-year-old girl. [laughs] And I'm five feet tall, as Shohreh mentioned, so you could easily mistake me as a middle school student if you saw me on the street. And it's hard to be a leader when that's what you look like. Forget the fact that I'm also a woman, it's hard.

I remember I was leading an orchestra rehearsal. It was the kind of program where I wasn't the only conductor. There were several conductors on the program, so we were switching back and forth and sharing the rehearsal. And I finished conducting my little spiel, and we went to a break, and one of the orchestra members came up to me and was like, "Hey hun, that was really cute!"

Shohreh: Ooh!

Parisa: I think just based on his tone inflection and based on how he looked, I actually don't think he meant it poorly. I truly think that he meant it as a compliment. Like that was really cute, I mean I can't even make sense of it saying it with my own mouth, but—

Shohreh: Right.

Parisa: —I think that he meant well.

Shohreh: Don't they always, though?

Parisa: Yeah, don't they always? But yeah, so that happened, and I was like, okay, that was kind of weird, whatever. And I didn't think much more of it until my male counterpart finished conducting his part of the rehearsal, and after he came down and we took another break, that same orchestra player got up and shook his hand and said, "That was a pleasure."

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Shohreh: Ughhhh.

Parisa: I was like [laughs], wait! Of course, when I run into these scenarios, the first thing I always do is reflect on myself. Like, did I come off as a child? Did I wear a really cute outfit and that's all he was looking at?

Shohreh: How dare you!

Parisa: I don't know, right? So, what did I do that didn't deserve a handshake and a, "That was a pleasure" kind of comment? And luckily enough, actually, that rehearsal was recorded, so I went back and looked at it. And I was like, no, I held myself in the same kind of leadership role that my counterpart did. I didn't speak really cutesy, I didn't use weird words. It was me as the consummate professional that I know I can be. And yet I got this comment.

And it's things like that, they keep me in check more than anything. They let me know that the patriarchy is in fact still alive. And I like to think that it's dwindling a little bit with the good work that we're all doing out there, but ultimately, I don't try to let it take over what I do artistically. I'm mostly aware that it exists, and I'm aware that a lot of my female colleagues and counterparts struggle with it much more than I struggle with it. And I try to be there as a support system, as a sounding board, and just trying to do my job.

Shohreh: Yeah, and I'm even gonna take this opportunity to probe the patriarchy a little further, because there's somebody out there listening who when they heard you say that story, before you mentioned it was recording, that the first question that popped into their head was, "Well, did she just not do as good of a job as the other guy? Could that be what it was?"

Parisa: I also thought that!

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Shohreh: Yeah.

Parisa: I thought that about myself.

Shohreh: Exactly!

Parisa: Yeah, and I was like, "I just did a bad job. That's what happened."

Shohreh: And that's that internalized misogyny that we all have within us, because we were taught, like oh, this must have been a thing on merits, like I just wasn't as good, this guy is better. And that is how I so often hear other people say too, is they play that devil's advocate when someone else is sharing something that happened to them. They're like, "Well, but what if it was this?" or "Are you *sure* that you did your best that day?"

And this is why like we gotta believe people when they say hey, this thing happened to me and it was sexist. This thing happened to me and it was racist. Because they're the one who has experienced that. They were the one who had the actual thing happen to them. And so, it's important that we don't jump to, "Well, what if it was this?" and instead say, "I'm hearing you. That's awful that that happened to you."

And I love that in this case there just happened to be a recording, because I'm sure that confirmed for yourself too, it made you have that light-bulb moment of like, damn, I also doubted myself, and it wasn't me. Like you've gotta trust your gut that like you did awesome. That guy was just a jerk.

Parisa: Yeah [laughs]. What a weird scenario that I happened to have a recording. I think that was the first time that something like that had happened to me just very much in my face. And what a funny thing to be able to have a recording to fall back on, and just go and review, and be like, "Nah, I was good [laughs]."

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Shohreh: Mmhmm. Well, I also wanna point out what you said about how you try not to think about it other than just having the awareness that it exists. Because I think that's important when you think about the fact that men aren't thinking about the fact that they're working in a male-dominated field, right? And I ask the question not to fall into that trap, but because I think that it is important to talk about it, and also recognizing that, like, you being a woman is just a part of who you are, right? You're obviously a kick-ass musician, conductor, having nothing to do with you being a woman, but as a result of that, you've also had some different experiences, to clarify.

Parisa: Right.

Shohreh: Alright, well we have come to our final question of the podcast, which is, how do you define health and wellness for yourself at this moment in your life?

Parisa: Ooh, with pandemic things into consideration?

Shohreh: That's right. We're talking this moment specifically.

Parisa: Oh man! This moment specifically. So, health and wellness, I think this applies for all the time for me, but especially now. I have put extra care and extra time into making sure I show up for myself before I share myself with other people. So that means making sure I get an adequate amount of sleep. Making sure that I listen to my body if I need to get out and go for a walk, I do that. Or if I need to do a strength workout at home, I do that. Or if I'm tired, I just don't do either of those things.

Because I find that you can't be 100% if you don't give yourself 100% to begin with. And that's proven especially true now with just being at home

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and trying to keep up connections with other people virtually. God, I got to tell you, all of these Zoom meetings—not this one, of course!

Shohreh: Aw thanks.

Parisa: All of these meetings that I've had for work have just been so much more exhausting than they would be in person. You know, like an in-person one-hour meeting is so different. It takes a different kind of toll on you than a one-hour Zoom meeting. And I've just found that investing in myself in the evenings and early mornings and making sure that I get what I need in order to be able to carry on with my day in the most normal way possible has to come first.

Shohreh: Yeah, I agree with that completely. I think that's especially important right now, and while I think most people know that, not everybody acts on that. Because it's really easy to get caught up in the things that you owe to other people. A lot of people are people pleasers, that's how they were raised, and learning that you do come first because you can't show up for other people if you're not showing up for yourself. So that is a great note to end on.

And thank you so much for being here and making time for this one more Zoom call in your sea of hundreds of Zoom calls [laughter]. If people want to see what you're up to, how can they find you?

Parisa: Yeah, so they can go to my website, www.parisazaeri.com. I'm sure you'll spell it out for all the good people out there.

Shohreh: Oh, I will. The non-Persians [laughter].

Parisa: Yeah, or you can check out my Instagram. The handle is @pzconducts.

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Shohreh: Oh, and you know what, this is actually worth saying as well, because again, not everybody knows you, is that Parisa is Asian—she’s adopted—and she had Persian parents. She’s actually more Persian than me, just based on the way that she was raised [laughter]. But, so that’s another intersection that people might not know about you that I think is worth mentioning because you’ve had multiple cultures at play in the ways that people think about you and interact with you.

Parisa: Yes.

Shohreh: Amazing. Well, you’re the best. Thank you for doing this, and I hope you have a wonderful day.

Parisa: Thanks for having me.

Shohreh: Of course.

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