

**A Quest for Community By Ali Shaheed Muhammad and Courtney Martin**  
**End Well Symposium, December 7, 2017**

Start of Transcript

Courtney: Ali, you grew up in Brooklyn in the 70s and 80s, take us back from the first time you were ever aware of death. What was your first experience?

Ali: My first experience with death, actually you just asked me that and there are two memories. The first was in an older great aunt that had passed away that had helped to raise my grandmother in North Carolina. So we got on Amtrak, I was 8 years old, I think, at the time, and left New York on an Amtrak, went to North Carolina, to the funeral and at that age, it was just a — I guess a reunion of people that I had never met before and seeing my grandmother her old stomping grounds and engaging with people from her past and that was really the **[00:01:00]** most of it. I remember the viewing of the body and I'm really wanting to be a part of that. And then it was a train ride back to New York City where I met this little girl in the train and she was cute, blah blah blah...

[Courtney Laughing]

Ali: ... exchanged numbers but we never kept in touch.

Courtney: Wow.

Ali: The next experience was with a salamander that I was giving care of within the same year for the summer. It was the class pet... and I was given the responsibility of caring for the pet over the summer, to bring the pet back but my mom decided that there was a little unexpected vacation that was going to happen and I didn't know about this and we flew to Virginia to visit grandparents and this salamander got out on the airplane and someone stepped on it...

Courtney: Oh no....

Ali: and broke **[00:02:00]** its tail and... I forgot about it, I completely forgot about that til' right now. [Chuckles] Coz right now you guys are taking me all the way back to it in the year of 8. So anyway the guy who stepped on it was spooked by it, and he had given it to me and I think that the salamander lived maybe three days. I did my best to take care of it and I had to bury the salamander coz it passed. And buried him out in my grandfather's yard and that was it.

Courtney: Wow...

Ali: Yeah.

Courtney: It's interesting you bring it up because a lot of people's first experience of death is a pet, right? As a child, some sort of beloved pet that you take care of and we're gonna talk about education in children and death later but I think it's such an important point. Now you mentioned seeing the body, being worried about seeing the body of your aunt and I know — I want you to talk a little bit about your faith, I know that you feel very strongly about the body as the sacred **[00:03:00]** vessel now. Can you talk about, were you raised Muslim? Did you come to become Muslim and just educate us a little bit about how you think about the body.

Ali: So yeah, I did not see the body because I don't know, something within me did not want to and the one beautiful thing about my mother is that she pays attention. She paid attention to

my sister and I, our emotions and our feelings and she was wholly supportive of them so when I said I didn't want to do it, she was like, "Okay." You know? And she respected that but I was born and raised as a Muslim. And one thing I wanna say in answering or giving/sharing about me is I wanna preface it by saying that the depths of context sometimes overweighs the detail of what you're trying to speak to. So I say that because I'm born Muslim and that therefore is the context of my entire being [00:04:00] and how it is for me as a person, from a boy to man, an artist, as a creative person, as someone who wholly consciously when I'm making music I feel that it has to serve a purpose and a purpose to serve my own desire to know more but more importantly to serve humanity and to enshroud it in love. And so that's my music interaction as a producer, a songwriter, as an artist, and when people come into my world, they get that bigger context of my faith. So I had to preface everything with that. But through Islam, it's a — it teaches a great meaning of things and things that's not spoken about especially in this political climate, and it is about knowing that everyone will pass on [00:05:00] and when it comes to those who are there and you're leaving them, in their final resting place, death in that base on Islam, is about those who walk away because you can do what that person cannot do. It has to make a difference to change whether it's an internal transformation or something on the communal base. And so, with that comes a whole bunch of other things, it's knowing that you're gonna pass, preparing for it, literally by buying your own grave plot. Bringing the families and friends together as one is transitioning. There's just so many different things and I don't wanna go into the depths of that context but it definitely helped and shaped me and so my father who intro [00:06:00] -duced my life to Islam was — had a stroke and it was a second stroke and was the one that took him out, as I say. Took him out of the game. My father, just to give you a little background about my father, my father was Imam, chaplain in New York state prison system, so he did that for 20 years and making sure that prisoners were cared for and treated with humanity and respect. And the funny thing about him was he could go into any room and have a conversation whereas I cannot. I'm extremely shy and introverted and it was something that one of the speakers said earlier that made me think about my father where he would say when he's talking about Islam, is not to indoctrinate, it's just to educate the beauty of the faith [00:07:00] and he would say, "Well, I'd start a conversation by saying 'Hey, what do you think will happen to you when you die?'" He would always start a conversation like that. And as a child...

[Crowd Laughing]

Ali: I thought that was insane.

Courtney: Yeah.

Ali: And I see now 12 years later after his death, the wisdom, and it's such a icebreaker, he would love that. And then that would allow him to get into other conversations coz he'd based off from what the answers were then he can talk about his belief and his faith and so on and so forth. But the beauty of that is that in the faith, it talks about being mindful every day that one day we won't be here so how do you manage your life to prepare for that point in time.

Courtney: Right. And when — the details are so important, I think it's actually really profound what you said about buying the burial plot but that is like [00:08:00] because that's a logistical moment when you have to consider your mortality, right? So is that — are you saying that that's actually part of the Muslim practice?

Ali: It's part of this. There's a whole lot that comes with the lifestyle but yeah it's part of it, being mindful that it's clearing your debt, making sure that you know, like at all times, possible that you have no debt that especially if you feel that your days are near, you get information that time is not on your side, to clear your debts.

Courtney: And does that mean financial and relational or?

Ali: More financial I actually spoken to, because of the burden that's left someone has left behind when you know, someone has debt and then the family has to manage that and that's heavy.

Courtney: Which we've heard from many speakers this morning and talk about the things that's heaviest on people's minds, that's what's interesting.

Ali: The will is enforced that you make your will and it's something that people put off, you know? And making sure that you **[00:09:00]** put one to your side at least if you have not gone to physically make the purchase of the plot but to put money aside for it. So just little, small things.

Courtney: Yeah, but moments that allow for that deeper consideration of what's coming. Now you talked about quite beautifully that when someone else dies, it's a moment for the living to say, "Okay, I have to do more. I have to live up to what I'm put here to do on this earth." You experience death — I mean obviously we're just talking about the death of your father but recently the death of your beloved collaborator, Malik Izaak Taylor known as *Phife Dog*, well, tell us a little bit about what did his death motivate in you in that regard. I mean, what did it inspire for you?

Ali: I can tell you that in his memorial, there was not one bad words said about him **[00:10:00]** and that's because he engaged with people that have come into his life very deeply. He was in touch and always, if he came into town, and he knew he only had 10 minutes, he'd give you 12 minutes. He constantly checked up on people, he was a little phife with two person, he says that in his lyrics but he...

Courtney: Oh, I know that [Courtney Laughing]

[Crowd Laughing]

Ali:... he roared like a monster and he was always considered the underdog and we like to root for the underdog and so in his passing, where people that I've worked with, they might not have shiny endings. And you may have whisperers about — because people may be kind when they're lights on you in the darkness, the truth comes out. And his truth was nothing but love and beauty. And so **[00:11:00]**, that made me feel like he's with his transition of — just to give you a little information on Phife, he was diabetic and had been battling with it. He spoke about it a lot and his music, he was an advocate for diabetes and finding some cure and it's the thing that ended it. And to try — this summer we tried to go on tour to promote the record that we have of his last record and it was extremely difficult and what helps me is actually to see the strength of his wife, someone who gave him a kidney to give him another few years of life. And her strength **[00:12:00]**, and saying that he was okay, he died happy. And he died happy because she was there and the environment was very supportive of just him as a person and giving him love, so I don't know, I'm still dealing with that. It's — as we all know some passings can be harder on you than others in that way. It's tough for me.

Courtney: Yeah, thank you. I wanna talk a little bit about hiphop because I think you know in some ways, one could argue that hiphop artists have talked about death more readily than most other artists, that there's a way in which — a lot of artists within hiphop make death a central part of their lyrics, etc. and another sense which could be healthy an in other sense, it's almost a sense that death is glorified, right? There's sort of a cheapening of what **[00:12:00]** it

actually means. How do you feel about that grappling with thinking about hip-hop and how it deals with death?

Ali: I think it's foolish to not take life seriously, even with artistic license. I'm an artist who believes there are boundaries. Some of my friends in contemporary field that they can do and should be able to say anything without any consequences. I don't believe that. I think that there are a lot of rappers who sensationalised or romanticised the idea of dying. And it is a way to maybe immortalised who they were, if they can die a magnificent death. And I think unfortunately the way that it comes out is very destructive and not constructive, and **[00:14:00]** it's again one of those things wherein people come into my studio, I challenged their lyrics, like what's your purpose? What's the end result of these words and this feeling that will live on maybe another hundred years beyond you, what value do you think they have now, what value do you think they will have then and people who come into my studio with that sort of approach, hate when I asked those questions because it's challenging them, their artistic whatever and this delusion of grandeur given by "I'm an artist." We're human beings and we're community and these buildings one day will crumble and dust will cover them and someone will uncover them and wanna know something about their past to understand how they **[00:15:00]** can move on as a society and grow. And so, to sensationalise and take breath, death for granted in that way is nothing to be learned from that I think, other than you guys were foolish in 19 or... 1990, 2017, so I'm making an effort to try and challenge and because I'm older, when a 19-year-old come in with green and "I'm feeling this and I don't care about anyone else." I'm not gonna curse you.

[Crowd Laughing]

Ali: And that expression from that perspective I tried is just educate them and challenge them in a healthy way so that they can value life and speak about the idea of dying in a different way.

Courtney: That's amazing. So you know, one of the things that **[00:16:00]** we're talking about here today is how do we get people who are afraid of talking about death, to talk about it and you mentioned if we could get rappers to do psychedelics it would be very popular so I'm thinking like from your perspective as an artist to have spoken to millions and millions and millions of people who knows how to message to the popular audience beyond healthcare, beyond all of the folks in this room, how do you — what's your advice to us about how to get regular people to talk more about death and dying?

Ali: Well, I think because now — I mean rap as a genre was a young genre and then now though the original or what we call the foundation of hip-hop rappers now are close to 60, and are seriously...

Courtney: I know, it's true. We're all getting old. [Laughing]

Ali: We're getting old and so if not though parents, at least in personal experience. Not that they're any 60 year-old rappers **[00:17:00]** who are making records right now from the old school but the relationship between the older generation or younger generation, I should say, is close enough that as you hear stories of someone passing and having cancer or something or having a heart attack, I think as this happens, begin a conversation that at some point when someone is not glorifying death or speaking things that are quite ridiculous and frivolous, we began to speak about the real aspects of life, I think, that conversation is going to happen now especially again with Phife passing, he was young, he was 45 and my own personal experience with my father in having to watch him fade **[00:18:00]** as he was in the hospice for 10 days and he had to decide to take the food tube out, like who talks about that, but I'm keeping it real like, ugh, that's keeping it real. And so as more people began to — more artist, began to have

those sorts of experiences, I think it will again be woven into the fact with their music and artistry.

Courtney: Yeah.

Ali: Yeah.

Courtney: And it's interesting striking up balance between the glorification and the sense of invincibility that are just a part of you know when people see Phife for other people dying that they have to reflect on their own vulnerability to all that, right?

Ali: Yes.

Courtney: Give us a final word about your father coz he just sounds so special. I think he would be so proud of who you are and the way you're talking about these things today, like, what is his legacy in your life?

Ali: Wow. His legacy for anything is that my parents were divorced when I was two years old, so I didn't spend a lot of time with him [00:19:00], and it wasn't until later on in my life like in my 20s, I would see him throughout you know, maybe once or three times a year from divorce to adulthood but I will say, and it was a period when my mom — I hate to put this out there publicly, I'm sorry mom — where she was like he owes child support. [Chuckles]

Courtney: Hmm... real talk. Yeah.

Ali: But my father was an activist and one of the reasons they split was because he was always in the community and my mother loved that about him, respected it about him and she was like, "You should go do that coz you had the family thing. We need you but you're not gonna shift that." And he had a calling, he fulfilled it, and one can look at the "didn't pay child support" in a way of "that was non-supportive." But I'll say this, my father prayed for me every day. And so, the fruits of his prayer [00:20:00] have manifested because of what I've been able to do. And I know he pray for me and pray for everyone else and so when in saying what my great grandmother who lived to be 106, you know, they're sorting people in your life and your family who you know from a spiritual basis, they vibrate high and when they're no longer, they're that beacon is like its darkness. And so once I'd given it a financial means is giving in something else, that can — it's not tangible. You can't feel it. But it's here, and it transcends in other ways, and so I know that about him who knows how I feel about him and the legacy is just me and my abilities as an artist and as a quiet and shy artist, to find a way to say, "So what do you think's gonna happen to you when you die?"

[Courtney Laughing] [00:21:00]

[Crowd Applauding]

Courtney: I love that. Thank you so much. So beautiful.

[Crowd Applauding]

End of Transcript