
Jerry: Hey Bijan it's so good to see you. It's really, really good to see you again.

Bijan: Great to see you too Jerry.

Jerry: Yeah, yeah. So I'm, I'm gonna go ahead and, and, uh note that, uh, you're, uh, wearing a turned around baseball cap.

Bijan: [laughs]

Jerry: And, um, I'm gonna retell a quick little story that, uh, the first time Fred Wilson and I ever met, he came to my office, which was at Likost and, uh, he walked in and, um, I was sitting there with a ripped t-shirt and a turned around Yankees baseball cap ... although I don't think that's a Yankees cap. And, uh [laughs] he looked at me and he said "okay, I know that, that's my partner for me.

Bijan: [laughs]

Jerry: Because I looked like a guy who would be involved in the internet, so ... you look like a guy who would be involved in the internet.

Bijan: [laughs] I knew I liked you. Uh, man that's great.

Jerry: That's funny.

Bijan: That's great.

Jerry: Um, so thanks for agreeing to come on the show again. You know, often times, uh, folks ask to come on the show and sometimes, uh, I ask people to come on the show and in this case, I asked you Bijan to come on the show because I was really moved by the piece that you wrote on Medium.

Bijan: Thanks.

Jerry: Which we'll circle back to and I want to bring people's attention to the last podcast conversation you and I had, which is kind of funny in hindsight when you think of the title. Because the titles was "Investors Are Human Too".

Bijan: [laughs]

Jerry: Um, and I bring that back because, in reading this piece ... which we'll have a link to and everything and obviously we'll talk to, um, I was struck by the humanity in the piece. And so, you know, why don't you tell us a little bit about what is in the piece. What prompted you to write it? And then, and then we'll sort of dive in a little bit.

Bijan: Yeah, well, I, um, I was actually surprised at myself that I, I wrote it. Um, maybe it will be apparent, um, why or very revealing as we talk about it, but I have just felt,

um, well I guess let me step back. The piece I basically wrote is kind of, recounts how I ...

Jerry: So let me jump in.

Bijan: Yeah, yeah, by all means.

Jerry: Yeah, the piece is called "Not Alone Anymore".

Bijan: Right.

Jerry: And it was published on January 29th on Medium.

Bijan: Right, right. Yeah, so basically I'm an American citizen, I grew up in New York, I'm a Yankees fan, although my hat right now is not a Yankees hat. And, uh, you know, I grew up as a first generation American. My Mom is from ... uh, immigrated from Korea and my Dad immigrates from Iran and, you know, in, in ... growing up, they both really did their best to, you know, maybe this is a bad word, but assimilate. I mean, I didn't learn any real culture from their native lands, I don't speak a lick of Farsi, I don't speak any Korean. I can count to ten in Korean only because I took TaeKwonDo for many years, so I just learned how to count, but I, uh, that was not my Mother's doing, it was just, you know, kind of one of those things.

But, um, so anyway there's this real attempt to get Westernized quickly and just fit in, I was baptized, I went to Catholic school, I went to a Jes ... I mean, it was on hand I was kind of had a good American life and, um ... and so anyway, the thing I wrote about was I kind of felt just like everybody else until, you know, I was about seven or eight, maybe a little older and then in the late '70s in the United States or, you know, there was this situation with Iran where, uh, the American hostage crisis happened. You know, many listeners are probably quite young and entrepreneurial so like, 1970s feels like a hundred years ago, but [laughs] and uh, maybe it was, but at the time ...

Jerry: I was in high school.

Bijan: Yeah, yeah, look and so at that time the US relationship with Iran when from reasonable to toxic. Because before the revolution in Iran, the US and Iran were allies, then there was a revolution over there and then part of that effort, the, uh, American diplomats and civilians were taken as hostages. Horrible. And, um, and then the relationship between the two countries naturally became, uh, very very intense and toxic, um and I kind of heard about all this as a young person only because my Dad was, you know ... he still had family there, but you know, it wasn't like we were that close, they didn't come here.

Uh, but suddenly I felt different ... at that moment on, in some ways I was forever

changed because suddenly my name went from being just different to weird. I, I had a group of friends that were still my friends but the older kids in particular, uh, decided I was the punching bag, either verbally or physically. Um, and, it was you know, a period of, of embarrassment, a little bit of ... it's a little weird to say shame because I don't really know where that would come from but that's a word that comes to mind. Um, sadness, um, and ...

Jerry: I want to, if, if you can maybe we can go back to that for a moment. Um, you don't have the piece available to you, do you?

Bijan: I don't, but I wrote it so I remember pretty well, but I can certainly pull it up [laughs]

Jerry: Yeah, because I think it would be helpful is perhaps you read, rather than me read to you.

Bijan: Okay. Um ...

Jerry: Yeah and you just took a deep breath in ... a little scared?

Bijan: A little bit.

Jerry: Yeah. Okay. So, if you've got the piece in front of you ...

Bijan: I do.

Jerry: If you don't mind could you read from the paragraph "Some of my earliest memories"?

Bijan: Sure.

Some of my earliest memories of elementary school were super positive and happy. Playing anywhere we could find a ball, stick ball, lunch, soccer on the field and football any time in between. I never thought twice about my name being different, until the fifth grade. Then I realized I was different. It was the start ...

Jerry: Yeah.

Bijan: Yeah, go ahead.

Jerry: Uh, we just hold there.

Bijan: Yeah.

Jerry: Could you read that last line again?

Bijan: Then I realized I was different.

Jerry: What did it feel like to be different?

Bijan: It, it wasn't good. I, I remember it felt, um, pretty, pretty bad. You know, I, I want to, uh, to be anything but different. Because it wasn't different for being the strongest, tallest, smartest, it was different for a reason well beyond my control and in a way that felt like unbelievably, um, scary and, uh, inferior and um, you know, um ... uh scary.

Jerry: Yeah, yeah. You know a lot of times we talk about the three deep, deep wish we all hold. Which is for love, safety and belonging. Love, to give and receive love. We want, we need to be able to give love and we need to be able to receive it. And we need to know that we're physically and emotionally in psychically safe. And a core component of that is a sense of belonging. See if belong ...

Bijan: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Jerry: ... I know I'm safe.

Bijan: Right.

Jerry: To belong, I can feel and give. I can receive and give love and so belonging is this, this wish to belong is this like deep primal, primal wish. And, uh, when we realize we're different, however that difference it is laid upon us and in this case, you're just a kid who wants to play stick ball.

Bijan: Right, right.

Jerry: You're just a kid who has a funny, different name.

Bijan: Right, right.

Jerry: Who's skin color is a little different than everybody else.

Bijan: Right.

Jerry: It's all because of this exogenous event that you had nothing to do with.

Bijan: Right, right. Yeah and then in some ways, I don't know if this fair to, to describe it this way, but I almost feel like, if I had grown up in a world ... like there are plenty of people who came from other countries where their culture was maintained, you know what I mean? Or, or, not maintained, but they kind of came with their own tribe so to speak.

Jerry: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Bijan: Like if I grew up in like, let's say, um, in a strong community of Koreans or Iranians like, but it was very odd because I literally felt no difference than anybody else. Um, until I didn't. [laugh] If that makes any sense, I ...

Jerry: Yeah, yeah. I mean you had a tribe.

Bijan: Right, right and ...

Jerry: And if I remember, it was Long Island right?

Bijan: That's right. Exactly.

Jerry: And so it was Long Island in the '70s and the tribe was like, you know, playing stick ball and running to the school playground and you know, getting on your bike and ...

Bijan: Right.

Jerry: You know, the suburbs.

Bijan: Right, right.

Jerry: The tribe wasn't Iranian immigrants or Korean immigrants.

Bijan: Right, right, right.

Jerry: And all of a sudden you were told, "you're not part of the tribe".

Bijan: That's right, that's, that's well said. I'm trying to figure out how to best say it, but that's exactly right. And it was, it was over night. It really was over night. I went from being, uh, you know, it went from being a "we" situation to a, to a, you know, us and them ... and I don't want to overstate it because I clearly still have close friends that treated me no different. So it wasn't all of a sudden me against the world, uh, literally. Um, but, in some sense it felt that way.

Jerry: Sure because the title of the piece is "Not Alone Anymore".

Bijan: Right, right, right.

Jerry: Yeah.

Bijan: You know and that feeling suddenly in fifth grade kind of never went away because

I remember even when I got to undergrad, the world, you know, changed, time, you know ... what happened in the '70s moved on and, um ... But you know there were times where, you know people would say to me "Hey, where are you from?" And I would say, "Oh, you know I grew up in New York and my Dad's from Iran and my Mom's from Korea" and that would ... and then they'd be like well "Wow, that's weird. How'd that happen?" And we'd talk about it. And then there were some cases where, just people in passing they're like "Oh are you, are you French?" Because the name Bijan ... like if you say it in a way by looking at it, you could, you could draw different conclusions or something or maybe the way I was looking at the time or maybe I had new wave haircut. Who knows, but, um ...

And I remember there was definitely more than a few occasions where people would make an off comment like "Oh, you must be French" and I kind of didn't correct it. And it's horrible to kind of say it out loud ... I don't even know if I wrote that in the piece.

Jerry: You didn't.

Bijan: Yeah. And, um, its, its, highly, um, you know embarrassing to actually admit that all these ... you know a few decades later, but I think it came from the same rude sentiment, you know, like that same, you know, kid who in fifth grade felt this way ... that's, that's why I felt like ... you know, if I could kind of have that same attitude in undergrad and it's still sitting there somewhere, you know, even as a 48-year-old guy, um, you know, there's something happening here. [laughs] There's something going on.

Jerry: Yeah, yeah. Well I want to bring you back to the feeling of the embarrassment.

Bijan: Right.

Jerry: That you even felt just now.

Bijan: Right.

Jerry: And I'll say a word or two about shame. Shame is, uh ... shame is such a powerful means for the collective, whether it's our family, our parents, our religion, our country, to keep in line those who would celebrate their own difference. Shame, which you still feel, right? Because I feel embarrassed that I did not own my own difference.

Bijan: Right.

Jerry: Right?

Bijan: Right.

Jerry: Its a kind of damned if you do, right? Deny the fact you are the child of immigrants and damned if you don't and, so become ... feel ashamed of being complicit with people misunderstanding and maybe you come from a good country.

Bijan: Right, right.

Jerry: Not a bad country.

Bijan: Right, right, right. Yeah and looking back on those days, I, I, I ... not ... I don't remember those conversations, but I remember those moments. You know I don't remember the exact people that this, you know, happened with or whatever, but I remember just feeling so lousy that like, "I can't believe I did that, again". You know, and, um ...

Jerry: Being complicit in making yourself the other.

Bijan: Right. I mean looking back I get why it happened considering the whole history ... the experience from when I was a child, but, it doesn't feel very good. It, it, um ... acknowledging it or reliving or, um, um, yeah I mean it just, it feels, shame is a great, is a ... yeah. It may be a painful word, but its an accurate word.

Jerry: Yeah, yeah. Um, so I have a shameful feeling as I read your piece, I, I, I nearly cried and then I thought about "why was I so moved?" And it was aside from the obvious connection, you know, you write about the executive order that went out in January and we'll talk about that and I, I, you know ... But then I remembered something and I'm feeling shame as I share this with you. So, I'm going to go ahead and lean into it.

Bijan: Okay.

Jerry: So, when I was in high school and Iranian crisis happened, I was scared. It was the, you know, uh ... to tell ... we really have some young listeners, so talk about ancient history.

Bijan: [laughs]

Jerry: I was ten when Saigon fell.

Bijan: Mmm.

Jerry: I had, uh, a brother who was not drafted, uh, but just barely. And there were many of my brother's friends who were drafted to Vietnam and a few didn't come back.

Bijan: Right.

Jerry: And the memory of that stayed with me well into high school and as some folks may remember, the '70s were really, a really challenging time. We had an impeached president or a president who was about to be impeached, who he then resigned rather than go to jail. Um, and the, and the country was in turmoil and when the hostages were taken, like a lot of people, I didn't really have any clues where Iran was or ...

Bijan: Right.

Jerry: ... or their history or how in a sense the CIA had supported the Shah and it installed the Shah in the 1950s. And that the revolution was in effect, certainly a large part of the population trying in effect to take their country back and that there was no simple black and white, in that revolution.

And like, this is the shameful part. I had a small little gray binder. Do you remember those binders?

Bijan: Of course.

Jerry: They had the little fabric, loosely binder ...

Bijan: Yeah.

Jerry: ... but it was a small one.

Bijan: Yeah.

Jerry: And I'd written on the back of it. And now I'm going to cry. "Fuck Iran."

Bijan: Right, right.

Jerry: And I came home and my sister said to, "Jerry what are you doing? That is the wrong response." And, um, she then explained to me, what was actually happening. And, I remember tearing up the binder and I've never told anyone that story.

Bijan: Isn't it amazing the stuff that we, we, we lock away. I mean its, uh ...

Jerry: So ... but I want to say to you.

Bijan: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Jerry: I'm sorry.

Bijan: Oh Jerry, come on are you kidding? No, no need for sure. I mean, without, without

... I can see the pain in your heart and your face as we're talking here but there's, there's 100% no need and given the context and the history and the people and the loved ones, I mean its not ... Look, I saw my parents, their response to 9/11, I mean they wanted to bomb everyone on the planet.

Jerry: Right.

Bijan: You know, I mean ... They, we feel it as, as, as American. I mean, it's not, um ...

Jerry: Right.

Bijan: It's not a, um, surprising response. You know? It's um, its heartfelt.

Jerry: But ...

Bijan: There's a, there's a ... hey, its we feel wronged, you know. We feel ...

Jerry: I appreciate that and, and I want to ... I want you to know, that I can touch that chain too.

Bijan: Mmm.

Jerry: That we can be brothers.

Bijan: Isn't that amazing?

Jerry: Right, and the truth is we're all impacted by these exogenous events that ...

Bijan: Right.

Jerry: Like, how can I as 14-year-old feel responsible for the upsurge of fear and aggression. Which is perfectly human. Or how ... as you would say is seventeen or eighteen year old going off into college, being complicit and denying your own true heritage.

Bijan: Right.

Jerry: Right? So just as you can release yourself from your embarrassment, I'll release myself from my embarrassment. How does that sound?

Bijan: It sounds like a deal.

Jerry: Yeah.

Bijan: Yeah.

Jerry: Yeah. So, tell me, tell me why this piece this time ... I mean you reference it and, and you and Lauren, um, your wife Lauren, uh, raised some money for the ACLU, but tell me about the response. What was it that you ... that caused you to, to sort of reach into the past and write about this?

Bijan: Yeah, the, the thing that happened here was, um ... So there's a happy ending to this, to this ... [laughs]

Jerry: [laughs]

Bijan: Um, beside this powerful connection that, you know, Jerry and I continue to share and, um, little did I know that went back decades now, um, but I knew we had some old souls here. But, um, you know, the thing that really pushed me to write all this stuff down is that when, President Trump ... that's so hard to say out loud, but when the President, um, issued this executive order, this Muslim ban, um, I expected the country not to really ... I mean aside from my fellow Progressors out there, I didn't feel like there was going to be an outcry because this is a candidate ... you know, before there was President Trump, there is a candidate Trump who promises the Muslim ban. I mean, its like, its well accounted for. So, it's a person who was elected, who basically made good. You know? On his promise and I felt like in the grand scheme of things there's a million things for Americans to worry about. And this is a President who got elected and, um, and made good on a promise.

So on a Friday afternoon, he issues this executive order, um, and I remember being heartbroken, but not surprised.

Jerry: Right.

Bijan: Um, but I was heartbroken about it and I felt like after eight years of President Obama, "Wow, what is going on here?" I called up my wife, I said "You know, we've got to do something, this feels wrong. Um, I don't know if anyone's going to give a shit, I don't even know if it matters, but, lets launch a fundraiser. Let's go try to raise \$50,000, let's do \$25,000." Lauren said "no brainer, lets do it." And on the campaign, on the post, I said "Hey we're going to do this for ... it's going to expire at the end of February, so I basically thought it was going to take two months to raise the money, because I really didn't think that ... you know, there's a lot of stuff to worry about in this world.

And, and we raised the \$25,000 from the community in less than a day. Um, nevermind two months and putting aside our little fundraiser, which I'm deeply grateful to all the who contributed and I know most of them and I don't know plenty, which is also moving. The outcry around the planet against this executive order was unbelievable considering the countries involved. It wasn't like he banned

France, you know ...

Jerry: [laughs]

Bijan: Great Britain. He banned countries that, you know, for good reasons and whatever reasons has history with the US that's not positive and so why would the average person give a shit? Uh, I don't know if I'm allowed to use profanity on your show?

Jerry: Absolutely.

Bijan: Oh okay [laughs].

Jerry: I thrive on cussing.

Bijan: [laughs] Excellent. So, I just felt that even though I was heartbroken, I just felt like he kicked the dog that nobody liked anyway. So why would people care? And the response was unbelievable on both coasts, within the tech community, outside the tech community, in middle america, around the world. It was in western countries, it was, it was, um, unbelievably moving and at that point it wasn't that we just hit the campaign, it wasn't that, that weekend the ACLU raised 25 million dollars, which is 10x their annual budget. It was, it was the outcry, it was the global outcry from people that really, I, I never would have predicted would have cared and that to me felt like "hey, I don't feel alone anymore". It was, um, something felt like it changed back. All of a sudden that bit that flipped in fifth grade, it flipped back. It really flipped back.

And I, I, I'm uh, I, I, I feel like in many ways, something, you know, something landed for me and I, I had to write it down.

Jerry: Yeah. Yeah, I, you know, I'm so moved by that and I'm grateful that you had that response. Um, part of what, what happened for me was the realization that people that I did not even know ... didn't even realize would be affect were being affected. Um, because of course you're Bijan, I never saw you as anything other than ...

Bijan: Right. You're that French VC [laughs]

Jerry: I didn't even see the French ...

Bijan: I'm teasing, I'm teasing.

Jerry: I mean like, to me, you're the other guy from Long Island.

Bijan: Right [laughs].

Jerry: You know? [laughs] Like that's the way I think of you. And, and, who like me loves

photography. Right?

Bijan: Right.

Jerry: Like, and, and, and, and, you know, one of the things that's happening here is this profound realization that, um, you know ... when I step into organizations and we do organizational work, one of the most important messages I send is, that there's no them, there's only us. And if you think about the complexity of organizations, we other people, all the time. "Oh you know the [seas?] sweet". Well, guess what, they're made up of broken hearted human beings. "Well, you know those guys on the west coast" or you know, "The women in engineering" oh you know, "the guys in marketing". Everybody's the other.

Bijan: Right.

Jerry: Until we realize, "wait a minute, there's just us." Like one big fucking us. And there's just us. And some of us do things that hurt others of us. Some of us knock down the tombstones in Jewish cemetery and some of us are Syrian refugees who go into those cemeteries to pay respect and right them. Some of us strap bombs to our body in response to the pain and some of us put uniforms on and kiss their spouse and kids and go defend a country some other place. There's only us.

Bijan: That's right.

Jerry: And, and I read your piece and I said, "this is the story of my Brother and his having been "othered" and his having come home".

Bijan: Now you got me all choked up.

Jerry: Well you know, you know what I do right?

Bijan: [laughs]

Jerry: But, but, but the, but our mutual choking up stems from the fact that, um, you know, I have the grace and good fortune of, uh, looking like the majority of Americans. Well let's put it this way ...

Bijan: Yeah.

Jerry: Actually, I have the good fortune of looking like the old majority of Americans.

Bijan: [laughs]

Jerry: I have the good fortune of looking like ... I have had the good fortune of looking like what people believe to be Americans, but the truth is, there are more Americans

that don't look like me, than there are Americans who look like me.

Bijan: Sure.

Jerry: And I still feel like I belong.

Bijan: Right.

Jerry: And, and so, I'm grateful to you for your, for your authenticity for your leadership, for your leaning in, uh, for your willingness to share that experience. Um, you know, I think that us being able to, to, to ... you know you have a line in here, people everywhere taking a stand against hate, against fear mongering, against bigotry and against racism. And I think this is a stand as powerful as your donation, yours and Lauren's donation.

Bijan: Yeah, I think that's right. I think that's right. Well, I, I can't imagine sharing this, uh, in any, in this kind of, uh, honest and direct way with anybody else, uh, and this kind of, um, you know, format. I really can't ... I kind of, there's a, um, you know, maybe there's some level of bravery in writing the words down for anybody to see, if they stumble across the post, but um, its another thing to talk to an old friend and, uh, and, and really kind, you know, get into it. And I appreciate that, you know ... I'm grateful for our friendships that I can actually, um, say these thoughts out loud and get my arms around them because its, its, um, its, it means a lot. It really means a lot to me.

Jerry: Well, well, I ... you're welcome in, in that regard and now that you're getting close to 50.

Bijan: [laughs]

Jerry: I'm going, I'm going to consider you one of the elders.

Bijan: Yes [laughs]

Jerry: And, um, one of things I often say, um, is that you know we have a responsibility as elders in our community to model a way of being. You know, we often, we often speak of that when, you know, Brad Felton and I are talking about being honest about our struggle emotionally and mentally and psychologically. But it, it applies here as well. Which is that we have a responsibility to, to model, uh, a way of being with the issues that really drive us. Um, so that the next generation right behind us, that, that path is clear and you know, just before getting on this call I was replying to an email, um, from a young woman, from, um, she identifies from Asia. Its not specific about which country and this is you know a week after two Indian engineers were attacked in Kansas City.

Bijan: Right.

Jerry: And before one of them was shot, was told to go back to their country, right? And, um, she spoke about the fact that she feels like she should, she should move back home to her country, her original place of birth to do her start up. And, um, I think that you telling your story makes it possible for people like that woman to know that, um, she is home.

Bijan: Mmm, yeah, I agree. I agree.

Jerry: And that's really just about playing stick ball ...

Bijan: Right.

Jerry: ... in the late afternoon.

Bijan: Right.

Jerry: And again and there again is a whole bunch of people on this who are listening in this audience who have no idea what stick ball is.

Bijan: [laughs] Stick ball every day.

Jerry: We'll have to include a link to a website that explains what stick ball is so people know what it is.

Bijan: Yeah, Elder team, uh, elder, you know stick ball for old times sake.

Jerry: That's right, that's right. Well thank you so much for this conversation my friend and, uh it really ... as I say, this is the kind of thing that we all can do and can contribute in our way.

Bijan: Yes.

Jerry: So ...

Bijan: Thanks for the opportunity. It means a lot.

Jerry: Right.