

Interview with Dr. Wendy Pearlman

Allison Duvall 00:10

Why do you support refugees?

00:12

I support refugees because my family were refugees.

00:15

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

00:21

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

00:25

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

00:32

I support refugees because my Lord was a refugee.

00:36

Because I welcome and I love my neighbor.

Allison Duvall 00:41

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

Kendall Martin 00:50

And I'm Kendall Martin. We're joined today by Melissa Coulston, contractor for EMM's Partners in Welcome online learning community.

Melissa Coulston 00:58

Thanks, Kendall. Today's interview features Dr. Wendy Pearlman, author of *We Crossed a Bridge and It Trembled: Voices from Syria*. Our January Partners in Welcome book club read the book. And it's a collection of first hand testimonials that chronicles the Syrian rebellion, war, and refugee crisis exclusively through the stories and reflections of people who have lived it.

Allison Duvall 01:18

Wendy Pearlman is Associate Professor of Political Science at Northwestern University. She earned a PhD from Harvard, an MA from Georgetown, and a BA from Brown University. Her research focuses on the comparative

politics of the Middle East social movements, political violence, refugees and migration, emotions and mobilization and the Arab Israeli conflict.

Kendall Martin 01:40

Wendy is the author of four books in addition to *We Crossed a Bridge and It Trembled: Voices from Syria*. Wendy has authored *Occupied Voices: Stories of Everyday Life from the Second Intifada*, *Violence, Nonviolence*, and *the Palestinian National Movement*, and co-authored with Boaz Atzili *Triadic Coercion: Israel's Targeting of States That Host Nonstate Actors*.

Melissa Coulston 02:00

We were so glad to host Dr. Perlman on this episode of the podcast. We had a really wonderful conversation with her about a really powerful book that she's put together,

Allison Duvall 02:09

The interview with Wendy was deeply moving. I think I'm gonna be thinking about it for quite a long time, just as I'm still reflecting and processing the book. What moved me so much about reading the book, and also speaking with her was the extent to which I had never fully understood the experience of Syrians who worked so hard to lead the revolution, who are working so hard to promote a Syria that was democratic, and that honor, human rights, and dignity. I think all that I'd ever known about the Syrian conflict was flattened to the refugee crisis that followed. So it was really important. It's a really important book that everyone should pick up to learn more about the revolution that so many Syrians continue to hold and carry in their hearts.

Melissa Coulston 02:58

We hope you enjoy today's episode.

Melissa Coulston

We are so excited to talk today with Dr. Wendy Perlman author of *We Crossed a Bridge and It Trembled: Voices from Syria*. For listeners who may not have read your book or know about your work, could you tell us a little bit about the book, your goals in writing it, and how it all came together?

Wendy Pearlman 03:21

Well, great. So I'm a political scientist who focuses on the Middle East, I've been studying the Middle East for over half my life and wrote several books about Palestinian politics in the Arab Israeli conflict. And a lot of my research focuses on issues of political conflict and social movements, specifically in the Middle East, but, but also more broadly. So in 2011, when the protests began, that we came to call the Arab Spring, as a regional specialist, and someone who studies Middle East politics, you know, I was captivated and fascinated, along with all of my colleagues and most people on the planet probably at the time. And as somebody who studies social movements, I was especially interested in this question of how people muster the courage to go out and protest when there are enormous risks. And as we all watched protest flow from one country to another, from Tunisia, to Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain, and so forth, many people looked at Syria and said, Syria is a place where the regime is so strong, where it has a history of state violence, and people have been intimidated by this history of violence. And people might revolt everywhere else in the region, but not Syria. And when Syrians really defied those expectations, and they went out and protested anyway, at enormous risk of enormous cost, I really wanted to know what it felt like to go and participate in those protests, and what was driving people and how it

was transforming them as individuals and how it was remaking this country. So my first opportunity to go and talk to Syrians was in fact Summer 2012, I figured that there's no better way to find out about this human experience of protest than to go talk to people themselves who'd had this experience. So my first chance was summer 2012, about a year into the protest movement. And I went to Jordan, and did interviews with essentially any Syrian refugee, I could find. I chose to talk to Syrians who've been displaced from the country, just because it was too dangerous to go inside Syria itself and do these types of interviews. Or at least it was, I felt like it was too dangerous and scary for me to have kind of frank conversations about politics and protests in a very authoritarian and violent setting. So I began interviewing Syrians who had fled to Jordan. And I started with a few contacts and those snowballed, and I collected many, many stories, not just about protests, but about life under authoritarianism, about people's experiences of war, and about people's experiences fleeing the country, which was then a relatively new and fresh experience of their becoming refugees in Jordan. And I got hooked. And I've been doing it ever since. So in 2013, I returned to Jordan and then I moved on to Turkey. And then I went on to Lebanon and and Europe as the large wave of Syrian refugees and other refugees and migrants came to Europe, in 2015, and before and after, I also started doing interviews in in Europe. And I collected and collected and from the start wanted to write something that could convey this human experience of the Syrian revolution, war, and refugee outflow and wanted to write something that would put these interviews in a form that others who want to learn about Syria but don't know where to go, where to get started, feel overwhelmed by the news, where they could go for a book that would be accessible, but very human, and would help explain the Syrian conflict, but also give a sense of what it felt like for these real men and women who've experienced it and been transformed by it. So after experimenting with various different forums about what to do with this sort of mass of interviews, I finally settled on a form, which is the current book, which is essentially a curation of excerpts from the interviews I collected, arranged in a chronological format. So if you open the book, it goes name story name story. Some are short as a sentence or two, some are as long as a few pages, beginning with stories and memories and reflections about what life was like in Syria before 2011 to provide the context for the current conflict, people's memories and stories about what it's like to be in an authoritarian political system of this sort. Then moving through stories about how the regime changed as power went from Hafez al-Assad, who seized power in 1972, to his son, Bashar al-Assad, in 2000, the current president of the country, then about how the protest movement began, on the backdrop of the Arab Spring, how it spread, the regime's response to peaceful protests with violence, how the opposition took up arms, how this conflict evolved into this very complicated multi-dimensional war, the experiences of civilians living war, and finally how people came to flee the country as refugees and something of their new lives as refugees. And then with passages that have people reflect on this on this journey. So it tries to give a kind of People's History of the Syrian conflict, told through this mosaic of voices and stories that offer I hope, background, so so Americans and others can have a better sense of what's going on in Syria and what's at stake, but also be moved personally by the courage and the resilience. And the hope in spite of it all of a country and a people I find to be tremendously inspiring myself.

Kendall Martin 09:02

Well, I definitely think you accomplished that with this book, I have to say that the first person narrative was really accessible for me. And it felt really intimate and raw and honest. And I felt deeply impacted by it. And so I'm curious how you were able to build trust with the people you're interviewing, especially if they were coming from such a, you know, authoritative, terrifying place of not really being able to trust and then having you as an American woman asking them questions, how that how that worked for you.

Wendy Pearlman 09:33

Yeah, so the first is that I've always reached new interviewees through other people of trust. So I began in Jordan when I first did with the context of a few Jordanian journalists who had done stories about Syrian refugees and they had built up their own networks of trust with Syrians with whom they had worked and they'd interviewed and they gave me basically the contact name of one person who agreed to talk to me. And through him I met others. And along the way I've you know, I've never sort of cold interviewed people on the street, or I met in settings where people say, oh, like just hearing, will you talk to me? It's always been slowly building up a rapport with one person and then asking that person, are there other people you think you could introduce me to? Do you have any friends or family who might be willing to speak? And then those usually that person then asking somebody else and then I follow up a couple days later? And the person says, Yes, a person says no. And then, and then I make the contact saying, you know, so and so, your friend, your cousin, a mutual contact, told me that you'd be willing to speak with me and can we set up a date and a place that works for you? So working through those relations help that I'm not approaching somebody, as a stranger as much as approaching them through someone else they already trust. That's been incredibly integral to my work. And I and I couldn't really imagine it doing it another way. Another technique that I've had is that I don't have any set list of questions. It's not a survey, and never want to put somebody on the point of asking them something specific, I essentially open up the interview with a very general sort of prompt, like, tell me what this has been like for you. Or you know, I'm so grateful to be able to hear anything that you want to share with me. And that puts the interviewee in a position where they're essentially steering and I'm along for the ride. And I have the sense that anything this person tells me is going to be fascinating, it's going to be interesting, and it's going to teach me something and expose me to something new. And I'm going to be grateful for what that person shared. But the person can decide what he or she wants to share. So that also creates something of an atmosphere where the interviewee is sort of in, in charge. And that's important, because as we know, that even asking questions can be painful. And it could be re-traumatizing for someone. Or even if you ask a question and say, you know, you really don't have to answer some people might feel pressure that they have to answer simply because it's been asked because they don't want to disappoint, you know, foreign guests or whatever. So it's, um, so that's one way I've tried to structure things where people can first only are sitting down with me if they agree to, and they want to in a non pressured way, because I haven't asked them to put them on the spot. And, and then they, they take the lead and talk to me about what they want to talk. So that those are some of the techniques. The fact that I speak Arabic has also been totally integral to this work. It symbolizes the fact that I have a long term relationship with the region and investments in the region. And you know, spent years and years and years, trying to study the language. And I think that helps a lot with people. It shows a kind of seriousness and investment and commitment, that that many people appreciate, that I'm sort of in the in the region for the long haul. And otherwise, you know, you tried to be a good attentive listener, demonstrate empathy, and really read people's body language and cues. You know, there are times I've started an interview when somebody agreed to be interviewed, and then started talking, and I could tell that she didn't want to continue, that she maybe thought she did, but really actually didn't, didn't want to talk about these types of things. And as I read her eyes and read her language and listened carefully and brought the interview to a close after just a matter of minutes, because I could sense that, you know, she didn't, she didn't want to continue. So those are all the types of this. And then there are many, many other sorts of tips and techniques that one learns over the years, after doing many interviews about how to do it in a way that's ethical, and that's sensitive. And that always put the interest and the safety and the well being of that other person first. And remembering that the this person is doing me a favor, not vice versa. And it is a privilege to be able to interview people, it is a privilege to when people choose to share their stories with you and and that it's then our job to honor that privilege to remember it's a privilege as much as possible and and not lose sight of it. And of course, we all make

mistakes and it's easy to get caught up in things and and perhaps, you know, not in every setting, conduct yourself in the work the way you wished you had but but you learn from it and are humbled by it and and try to keep the sort of the sort of ethical imperative, first and foremost in your mind.

Melissa Coulston 14:53

I think that's so important to talk about and to recognize that you know, we've all as we learn, we can look back on our past and see where we have failed or, you know, misstepped, or something like that. And I think one of the things that I really appreciated about this book is how you prioritize the voices of Syrians and those stories, and sort of got out of the way. So I wanted to ask you, you know, how you came to that decision and how you decided how best to tell the story how how you walk that fine line between amplifying and lifting someone up versus using them or exploiting them, or you know, how to avoid that, that dynamic of you know, how to how to tell someone else's story in a way that is responsible and ethical.

Wendy Pearlman 15:42

Yeah, I mean, it's a, it's a constant sort of struggle. I mean, one thing, you know, that said, and sort of introducing how I came to this project is, you know, I studied politics for a living and a focus on social movements and movements for liberation, movements for justice and movements for for political change. So when I began studying Syria, I didn't study it as a refugee crisis, I wasn't actually interested in refugees at all. And most of Syrians I talked to, even though they were outside the country didn't even see themselves as refugees. They saw themselves as people who crossed the border, in a temporary way, because there was bombing and they were going to return home at any moment, they had themselves no idea if this would become such a long term refugee crisis. So I was really interested in the politics of it. And I was interested in how people came to do the amazing courageous thing, risking their lives to call for freedom and justice and dignity. So in that the people I talked to, especially in the beginning, most many were thrilled and excited and enthusiastic to talk about that, that they had just participated in something amazing as a political act. And I was asking them to tell me about it. And for some people, it was the first time they were narrating that experience. It was fundamentally and remains a revolution for freedom and political voice, for people's right to be able to tell their own stories, and to be political beings and to stand up and say, I have an opinion, I have a point of view, I have agency, this is who I am. And this is what I want. So in some ways, putting on an a tape recorder, and creating a space for people to do just that was for many of the Syrian activists and supporters of the revolution I talked to, was a continuation of their political activism, to speak, was another way of being political, it was another way of participating in the revolution. So in that sense that the project was couched in a way, and it was kind of like a political act of solidarity with this political uprising, which doesn't say there can be aspects of exploitation and so forth. But it was, I think, part of the political nature of the project, as an act of political solidarity and a space for political action, might be a little bit different than, than coming at it at the angle of I just want to document stories of victimhood and in torment and agony under war, or the hardships of being a refugee, which are also things I absolutely came to record over the years. But I never lost sight of the political nature of the project. And as it that's what it meant to me and I think what it's meant to so many of the people I've talked to, who still hold to this dream of creating a free Syria.

Allison Duvall 18:43

So one thing I was really pondering Wendy, as I was, I both read the book as well as listen to the audiobook, and I felt that the experience of hearing people read the words of the people with whom you spoke, was poignant. And I told Melissa and Kendall that I needed to take breaks from it at certain point. So I don't even

know the right word for it, but it was stirring like it's stirred up things in me, I'm gonna like, I would need to walk away. So I was pondering and wondering how it was that you like what emotional and psychological tools do you have in your toolbox as an interviewer who went into this project and had what I can only imagine were deeply raw conversations that were themselves political acts as you said, like what emotional psychological tools did you take in your in your toolbox, if you will, to work through this project?

Wendy Pearlman 19:39

Yeah, I really didn't take any so I like fell into all sorts of emotional landmines because I don't think I was terribly well prepared. You know, I have a PhD in political science, whatever that is, that does not prepare, prepare me for or anyone I think for these types of, as you said, the rawness of what war really means about what it means to be a prisoner to be tortured, about what it means to lose one's family, one's country. Yeah, these are tremendously painful topics. So I don't think I came in unfortunately, very well prepared. But I hopefully figured out a few tricks and tools along the way, because I've needed to. So after my second summer of interviewing, the first, the first round of interviews, were still relatively optimistic. People thought they were gonna go home, they thought this political struggle would succeed. There was still a lot of pain, but there was, there was also hope. And by the second summer, a lot of that hope had had disappeared. And the I spent about three months interviewing in which I just sort of gathered, gathered, gathered, and was not necessarily feeling because I had limited time and resources. And I had the summer to travel before I had to go, come back and teach and I just interviewed, interviewed, interviewed and what did not really emotionally process the horrors of things that I was being told. And then I came back to Chicago, and it was like, I hit a wall, and was like, oh, my goodness, what, what have I just heard and what is happening to these people? And yeah, it was really, I didn't have never heard the term, secondhand post traumatic stress or compassion fatigue. That's nothing quite known in the psychological field, or among journalists, or humanitarian workers. I'd never even heard those concepts until a friend said, I think this is what's happening to you. I was lucky enough that I put the entire project aside for about three months. Because I, you know, I had a mission that I was gathering this material, not for the sake of gathering it, I wanted to put it together in some type of format, that would teach others about Syria. And I could not work with this, quote, unquote, material as material, it was too emotionally raw, it still had the faces and the voices of the real people I had just sat down with, and I just put it aside, I worked on something else. And after about three months, I had enough distance, so that I could come back and work with it. So that was what worked for me was to give it some time, and then and then come back there are probably more healthy ways of pacing oneself along the way. So they don't just go all in and all out. But it was years later, I came to think of the challenge in in these terms, that you doing this work, never want to be so emotionally distant, sort of scarred and cold, that you forget that these are real human beings, and begin to see it as words on the page, or material. But you also don't want to be so emotionally close, that you are immobilized and incapacitated and can't do anything, because then you're no use to yourself, or to the people who've entrusted you with their stories, because they hope you're going to do something good with it. So there's a kind of a sweet spot, which is distant enough to function, but close enough to always have human empathy be infused in the work itself, and what you do. And I wish I knew the formula to always find that sweet spot, there are times I've tipped too far in one direction or the other. But at least I keep in mind that for me, that's the ideal place to be, and, and try to be cognizant of, of getting there. And being aware, if I'm not there that I need to get back into that spot.

Kendall Martin 23:35

I think that's such a fine balance. And especially anybody working in a humanitarian field and being an empath, being able to do your work and still feel but not be too close. Man, as we were reading through the book, and

Melissa and Allison and I were having conversations about sort of what our preconceived notions were about Syria, and the conflict and how people were affected, we realized a lot of what we understood was from the media, which really just felt so distilled compared to what you had written in the foreword of your book. And so I feel like your book is really helpful for giving people that connection and human side of what happened. And I wonder, other ways that we could effectively communicate the complex situation that's occurred in Syria for so long, while also not taking away the humanity of the people who have been affected.

Wendy Pearlman 24:34

Yeah, yeah. I mean, I guess yeah, that's exactly what I was trying to do in the in the book. And I think that there are lots of other books out there. There's, there's writing that's more journalistic and blogs and videos and so forth that come out really continually. There's amazing films, documentary and otherwise. And I don't know if there's a single formula on how to communicate that as much as I would say, remembering that as a principle, exactly, as you said that when there's only focus on human suffering, that decontextualizes it from the political and social and historical and economic context that causes that suffering, then people might be moved, but they don't understand. And they're not moved enough to, to act on it, because it's just suffering for the sake of suffering. And that's the beginning and end of it. And if there is too much focus on historical facts and timelines, and maps, and naming groups and actors and ISIS and Russia, and Iran, and the US, and, and so forth in the geopolitics, Shi'ite and Sunni and Alawite and ethnic groups, and so forth. That is that loses the human dimension, you don't see feeling in there, you don't see real human beings, you can't empathize. And a viewer or listener can't put themselves in the shoes of anything, because it's too distilled, and you miss the human element. So I'm not sure if there's a particular strategy or key way, as much as the both both together, really, they count and they help each other and they interact. And they facilitate, they both facilitate a grounded empathy, or an understanding that that understands both both the context and what's at stake in human terms, we can't understand Syria without this type of context that has created this conflict. And Syrians themselves they don't want want people to lose sight of that, that context, there are reasons and there are facts, and there are actors and there are decisions and there are processes have created the suffering. And to just attend to the suffering and not what creates it is not going to lead to solutions. But to only think of theory in terms of politics and geopolitics. And forget that these are there millions of men and women and children and families whose lives are being destroyed as we speak because of these geopolitics is also not to be talking about war in a way that that really understands what war is.

Allison Duvall 27:18

I don't remember the the gentleman who who said this, in the interview with you, but there was something that just it hit me in a way I didn't expect. And it was the notion that the revolution has been buried. And I think he said something along the lines of like, and we've buried it. And I don't know why he felt complicit in that. But everything that you just said struck me that the Western media or American media in so many ways just flattened the entire experience of the Syrian people into making it just a story of suffering without context without meaning. And in that way, we I think, are complicit in burying the revolution. But I'd love for you to speak a little bit about I don't know if you remember that gentleman who who said that. But why was it that he felt complicit in that burying.

Wendy Pearlman 28:02

So that is a passage, he's actually a young man who was seeking asylum in Germany, and he was talking about the process of his asylum interview, and saying that he sort of community of, of, of, you know, the hundreds of

1000s of Syrians who are seeking asylum in Europe, in this case, Germany come in for their asylum interviews, and he said that many felt the pressure or the sense that it would be better for them in terms of their chances of asylum would be higher if they didn't mention any sort of political activity, if they basically stuck sort of stuck to a narrative that was like, bombs were flying falling from the sky, and we had to flee for our lives. But if they mentioned political engagement and protests and so forth, that the German asylum authorities would wonder, oh, were you with this group or that group? Or do you have an affiliation with an Islamist extremist? Or did you see any ISIS people or politics itself could be incriminating, and for their own interest, it was better not to mention anything about politics and just say they were fleeing violence, totally decontextualized. And he said, This itself, is forcing us to to create a narrative in which we forgot, which we bury in which we don't talk about what you can't mention what this whole conflict was about in the first place, which is a popular uprising against a brutal authoritarian regime. So he was talking about it in that particular context, but I absolutely agree that that either media reporting that has, you know, visions of crying women or men fleeing or bloodied children, but doesn't explain what this is about. Or even well meaning efforts that that tried to draw attention to suffering and alleviate suffering, but depoliticize and decontextualize it or actually doing harm, and maybe even with the best of best of intentions, and I think one sort of culprit of that is even the term refugee crisis. The Syrian refugee crisis, there is an absolute refugee crisis. Over half the Syrian population has been forced from their homes, there's something like 7 million internally displaced, over 5.6 million Syrian suffering as refugees in the Middle East over a million seeking asylum in Europe, you know, horrifically small numbers being allowed in the United States. So there's no doubt this is a refugee crisis. But Syria is not only a refugee crisis, the refugee crisis is the outcome and the consequence of a political war that's much more complicated than that. So many people have their best of intentions, we're worried about refugees and should be one to help refugees. That's fantastic. But it is not only a refugee crisis, so even that terminology can vary the revolution, as a young man said,

Melissa Coulston 30:46

This book was published in 2017. So you would have been working on it in the years prior to that and finished it, you know, well ahead of that. So, you know, as we have lived through the Trump administration, and all of the the changes that have come from that, what has it been like since the book was published? And and where do you turn to for either information or for hope? I just, I guess I'm just curious, like how how your experience has been having done all of this work in the years leading up to this.

Wendy Pearlman 31:18

So one of the I continue to do these interviews, I haven't stopped at all in that respect, I might, I guess I finished the final edits on the manuscript, probably spring 2017, before the book came out, Summer 2017. But I've done interviews 2017, 2018, 2019 summer, I took a break, I'll be back in Germany 2020. So I'm continuing to collect the interviews and then continuing to sort of analyze all the interviews I've collected as a as an archive, and I'm working on a second book that uses the same material, I'm still kind of figuring out what the focus will be and what the format will be. Because I can't do We Crossed the Bridge twice. But I'm still committed to collecting these stories and trying to communicate them some way that, that that creates empathy and an understanding. I personally worked on other things too, I still am close to finishing a process of working with a young Syrian woman who fled Syria as a 14 year old, who's writing her memoir for kids as a book for middle schoolers. And I've been working with her and writing up her middle school memoir. So there's still lots of writing and I do various academic writing, too. So my own personal life in terms of researching and writing, Syria has not changed at all, it just the document changes on the computer. But I just go from one thing to another because there's still so much left to say and to do. As an observer, it just continues to be more and more heart

wrenching, and frustrating and infuriating. On the Trump administration angle, I think the most horrible part in that while there are lots of, I guess, horrible parts, but but one is the what we're seeing is the kind of dismantling of the refugee resettlement program, historically low numbers of refugees being admitted. And as you guys know, refugee resettlement organizations that are then you know, having to fire staff or closed down. And I worry that we're seeing a long term, not just low numbers of people being admitted, this year and last year, but a dismantling of the program, which is so integral to the United States, and its history and its identity and what we strive to be in the world, which has, you know, hit Syrians, as well as other people needing to flee violence and persecution. Of course, the travel ban singled out Syrians, Iraqi, Yemenis and, and others from Muslim majority countries and banning them from coming to the United States is another shame, I think on America's record vis a vis this part of the world, Trump administration's announcement that you last fall about removing our US troops from northern Syria, which were a very small number of US servicemen essentially able to, to hold a kind of equilibrium in that area, once that announcement was left was made, you know, Russian Federation, coming back in to the Kurdish autonomous areas and leading to death and destruction and a new political sort of status quo there, which I think is has is horrible. And a great mistake. So yeah, it's one terrible sort of policy after another and as we speak, Russia and the Assad regime are bombing Idlib Province in northwest Syria. So the last rebel controlled chunk of of the country and people are fleeing, people are dying. And the last holdout of land that was that the regime essentially ceded to opposition forces is something that the regime is, is brutally taking back through all military means. So yeah, it's a situation on the ground in Syria just continues to, to get worse and worse, and Idlib and the area where there had been. It's a complicated area where al Qaeda linked forces also gradually rose to prominence, but where there had been at various stages over the last nine years, real experiments of self rule and educational centers and free media and women's empowerment and local councils elected to govern in villages and towns that had thrived in various areas of this province, which is being bombed as we speak, and people are being forced to flee. So the numbers of internally displaced and refugees continues to grow. And the dream that people had of a Free Syria, all the work done to bring that about, you know, continues to take one horrific blow after another. So it's tragic on so many levels, including the level that most people around the world don't seem to care very much, there's not that much attention. Syria is not in the news anymore. People forget that there's even a war going on there. The suffering hasn't ended. But the attention span of most people around the world, who have the privilege of looking away, to live in comfort and freedom and can forget, is also very, very disheartening. And I think that's a theme that comes through quite strong and in the book is Syrians' desperation with what they see as international indifference to their place, complicity in their plight, the kind of apathy and lack of humanitarian solidarity. Syrians say again and again, but they'd hoped the world would be better in that sense and stand up for their supposed values of human rights and democracy and, and humanitarianism, a lot of those values seem to have been abandoned or shredded in Syria, and that's something that I hope the world will grapple with eventually, but it is a, you know, a dark stain on on history.

Allison Duvall 37:27

I remember another interviewee in the book, who said something along the lines of I'm not saying it's a like a lapse or a failure of conscience, I'm saying that the world has no conscience at all. And one thing I'm still wrestling with, and I think I will be for quite some time with this book is, as someone who's cared deeply about the resettlement program for a while and been involved in this work, I've had varying degrees of anger, and just being the mostly angry, anger at what's been going on our policy space in this country. But reading the book, in a new way that I've never really felt before. I truly just felt a deep sense of being ashamed because your interviewees articulate, like this amazing revolutionary impulse for democracy, for freedom for dignity, for

human rights, which is what illuminates revolutionary impulses the world over, it's what illuminated (in some tellings of our nation's history) our own revolutionary impulse. And so it seems to me just the most deprived evil, that we have not only turned our backs on people who are suffering, but we've turned our backs really on the very impulse that gave birth to our nation in the first place.

Wendy Pearlman 38:41

I completely I completely agree. So I'm actually I'm writing an academic essay right now, that looks back on the question of the 2013 President Obama red line and whether the United States should have engaged in limited strikes against the Assad regime after the chemical weapons attack in August 2013. And the essay uses parts for my interviews, as well as other numerous essays and articles and interviews that Syrians were getting at the time, which so many Syrian critics of the Assad regime were calling for those strikes, wanted US military intervention, and they were calling for it not because they were eager to have the United States bombed their homeland, it was with a very heavy heart that they were calling ultimately, for this measure, but doing so in the sense that they could not imagine any comparable way to hold this regime accountable, to communicate that governments can't kill their citizens with impunity, and for perhaps changing the balance of power in the war by weakening the Assad regime from within because there were all sorts of indicators that, that in within the army and in the political structure, people were beginning to get to defect from the regime once the West talked about bombing because they were so afraid, it was changing the equation on the ground. The regime acts in one way if it thinks that nobody will do anything. But once the United States talks about perhaps bombing, it changes things. So there were many people at the time, including people I was interviewing, exactly at that time, that we're saying, Please strike. That doesn't mean boots on the ground, it means enough military pressure to put this war in a different direction that could come towards closing it. And and it is, it's hard to wrap your head around the fact that that Americans went out into the street, some of them at the time calling for hands off Syria, and no war in Syria and maybe calling you know, wanting hearts were in the right place. We don't want these you know, quote unquote, endless wars. But there are are times when action, even military action might be necessary, or could have been necessary or could have helped to bring a war to a close that wasn't starting a war, there was already a war that was ongoing, and it's a question of how to bring it to a close. But that's not to be a warmonger and and call for military intervention. But the various steps along the way, there are questions of what the United States could have done differently, or other countries could have done differently, that might have made a difference that Syria wouldn't be where it is today. And where were we as American citizens during those moments? What were we calling for what we're not calling for? Were we just not even paying attention and not calling for anything, because we weren't paying attention to the scope of this humanitarian crisis. So as we look back at that history and evaluate policy, I think we have to ask ourselves, as citizens as well, where was I? Was I paying attention? And if I was not, you know, what, what part do I play? What responsibility do I also bear in, in this tragedy?

Allison Duvall 41:58

That's something I felt quite strongly as I was reading the book. So I wonder if is there anything that we haven't touched on today that you would hope that our listeners would hear? And that you hope that your readers would glean from the book?

Wendy Pearlman 42:13

Well, no, I guess it is just to say that there are lots of other great books out there. So for example, I'd be happy to to name various different types of titles and authors of people that have taught me so much about Syria. So

for example, I am a huge fan of many people are of the Syrian intellectual and activist, Yassin al-Haj Saleh and he is a Syrian now and in Germany, who spent 16 years in prison as a as a political prisoner. He's also a tremendous intellect and writer. So he writes very frequent columns that you can find on online. He's involved in the website, which is available in an Arabic but now also in English called Al Jumhuriya that has continual, very insightful essays. And he's the author of a book called The Impossible Revolution, which I would recommend to anybody who might want more background and hearing from you know, Syrian voice, self and someone who has tremendous integrity and experience, but also a true intellectual brings a lot of insights to everything he he writes. I'm also a fan of a book Burning Country, by Robin Yassin-Kassab and Laila Al-Shami, which is a great overview of various parts of the Syrian revolution, and war, a new book by the journalist, Sam Dagher called Assad or We Burn the Country is a tome filled with information and insight about the the Assad regime itself and the kinds of violence and strategies it's used against its its citizens. There are websites like Syria Direct, Al Jumhuriya that I mentioned, The New Humanitarian, which covers humanitarian crises around the world, but has been very active on on Syria, among others, where you can get firsthand perspectives by by Syrian writers themselves, and get continually updated information and reflections and hear Syrian voices. Of course, the number of documentaries and movies out there are amazing For Sama, which has been nominated for an Oscar as has the movie The Cave, we have two Syrian documentaries that will bring you the feeling and the emotion and the intensity of being able to engage with actual voice and and picture coming from Syria, and there are many others. So there are lots of ways that that people can continue to become informed. And I would be thrilled if people engage with my book, but also know it's just the tip of the iceberg.

Allison Duvall 44:55

Oh, Dr. Pearlman we cannot thank you enough for the work that you dom for sharing these stories with the world, and for giving us so much of your time today. Thank you so, so very much.

Wendy Pearlman 45:06

Thank you for the opportunity. It's really been a pleasure.

Allison Duvall 45:12

Thank you for joining us for today's episode.

Kendall Martin 45:15

And we extend a huge thanks to Wendy Pearlman for talking to us about We Crossed a Bridge and It Trembled: Voices from Syria. If you haven't read the book yet, we highly encourage you to pick up a copy at your local library or bookstore.

Allison Duvall 45:27

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

Kendall Martin 45:32

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

Allison Duvall 45:48

Our theme song composer is Abraham Mwindi Ikando, find his music at abrahamwindabandcamp.com

Kendall Martin 45:55

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