

127. Holding Histories in Poetry w/ Glendale Poet Laureate & Educator Raffi Wartanian

[00:00:00]

Daniel Dissinger: Hi, everyone. Welcome to another episode of Writing Remix. I'm your host, Dan Dissinger, and today I have a really special guest with me. Um, we met at an April Poetry Month event here in West Hollywood at the WeHo Library, hosted by Jen Chang, the poet laureate of, of West Hollywood. And my guest here is the poet laureate of Glendale and a lecturer at UCLA, UCLA Writing Programs, Raffi Wartanian.

Raffi, thank you so much for being here.

Raffi Wartanian: Thank you, Dan. It's a pleasure.

Daniel Dissinger: Yeah, I mean, I... You know, like in the beginning, like I just said, like you were at this amazing event with Jen Chang and Camille Hernandez as well, poet laureate of Anaheim, which, you know, it's so funny as I was realizing as I was preparing and talking to you before.

Like, you know, episode 113, Jen Chang was on that episode, and then episode, I'm looking at it right now, um, episode [00:01:00] 119, where Camille Hernandez came on as well. And it's just like this amazing streak of poets that I'm having on this podcast and I'm so happy. And poet laureates, which is so amazing to me because, you know, that idea of the poet laureate has been, um, for me as a writer and a poet, been a really special, uh, idea and I'm like, oh wow, now I'm talking to all these poet laureates.

And so but thank you so much for being on the podcast.

Raffi Wartanian: Thanks for having me. Yeah, and, and kudos to you and your team for this incredible podcast. It's such a gift.

Daniel Dissinger: Yeah. No, I'm... Y- you're welcome. I'm... A- anytime someone says that, it's like the awkwardness of taking a compliment. I'm like, "Okay." But no, I'm, I... It is my pleasure to, to create this platform for everyone.

And, uh, so yeah, why don't you tell the audience a little bit about yourself? I know you have something that, in a way, that you'd like to do that, so please. Now the floor is yours. Yeah.

Raffi Wartanian: [00:02:00] Well, sure. You know, we were chatting about what would be a good way to, for me to introduce myself, so I thought maybe the best way to do that would be to share some poems.

And I really try to put my heart and soul and, and who I am, and the questions I think about, and my family's experience into my poetry. So I thought maybe I'll read about three poems that all take sort of different approaches, touch on different topics. They have some common denominators. So the first one I'm gonna share, uh, is a sort of a stylistic experiment in a way, and you'll see what I mean in a moment.

Daniel Dissinger: Yeah. And for everyone listening to the podcast, like if you go to the Substack link, you can watch the, the, the video and... 'Cause Raffi's gonna share the poem so you can visually see it as well. So definitely check out the Substack link so you can watch it as well.

Raffi Wartanian: All right. Yes. Here we go. So I've got it here.

Can you see it? Nice. So this one, uh, is [00:03:00] called True Rapture, and the stylistic experiment of it is I put it on sheet music. So I've, you know, I also compose music, and I do have an album of oud compositions coming out, hope-I- probably in the fall. And, um, so I've been doing a lot of, like, um, composition on sheet music.

So I thought, oh, wouldn't it be interesting to write about music on sheet music? And so then the question was like, well, what about music because there's so much to say. And this one kind of became about, uh, in a way, about my relationship with my father who, you know, im- immigrated from Lebanon. He's the son of Armenian genocide survivors.

So for him, music and art was always, like, a luxury, and, um, I think he always had a lot of anxiety about devoting too much of one's self to art because, you [00:04:00] know, can you s- can you live off of your art essentially. Um, so this poem is sort of grappling with that. And, you know, for anyone who, who knows about, uh, rhythm, I put it in 10/8 rhythm, which is a very common rhythm in, in Western Armenian folk music.

Now the meter of the poetry is not in 10/8. I didn't go that far.

Daniel Dissinger: I was gonna say.

Raffi Wartanian: I didn't go that far with it, but if I were to revise it, that might happen. So, uh, here we go. It's called True Rapture I see you dance in the key of E minor. Wrists twirl like the decrescendo of her lips diminutive. In the second system, you told me music makes no money because markets don't value it.

Even though when you listen to Anoush opera for the thousandth time, you can't stop weeping. I couldn't stop the music, though I tried. She never let me go. That's how I knew it was real love, true rapture. That's how I knew it was yours, too. Honest, unrequited. [00:05:00] There's one thing you were right about. How this potent love diminishes.

How the music hears, feels, plays me. Yet I could never mirror her virtuosity. Just lingers instead on the tip of my finger, grasp, heart, gulp of empty air, gasping for apotheosis, the arc that modulates tension toward harmony. What would life be without that ache? That constant sense of near arrival. Is that what you wanted to protect me from?

From the absence of your father, the cobbler who survived genocide, had nine children he could hardly provide for. To protect me from the absence of money. To shroud us in certainty's opaque translucence. Like all fathers, like me, composed by evolution to protect progeny from a love so fierce I forget to eat, forget I exist, uprooted, unmoored from time and place, suspended in rhapsody, spurned but fair, [00:06:00] fuel, tender in her distance, her breath I cradle, lips I hear, eyes I taste, seeking epiphany just around the bend

So that's the first poem. And the next poem is about my brother. And this one was, um, yeah. So this one is called Portrait of a Capgras And, um, yeah, for those, if you don't know, a Ca- a Capgras delusion is essentially a delusion where, uh, I believe it's, we believe that you think that there's, like, two or three people playing the role of the same person.

So I think the po- the content of the poem will, will say more about it. So the last one was about my father. This one's about my brother, who's a- who's also a veteran [00:07:00] Portrait of a Capgras I don't know how to write about schizophrenia, so I'll write about my brother. I don't know how to write, write about my brother, so I'll write about schizophrenia.

During a Capgras delusion, I'm a CIA agent wearing a costume to mimic myself, and with a voice modulator amplifying my vocal cords, I give the aura

of a self that I am not. My brother informs me that I'm in on it, that I am it. It being the project, the project being the nightmare, the nightmare being, being, being like this.

I don't know how to dream anymore, so I'll write about the nightmare inside which I'm trapped. The nightmare goes, boil water, grab tongs, clutch device, dip into boiling water, place on cutting board, hoist hammer, swing. The nightmare continues. Mute voices you hear, hidden [00:08:00] shadows you see, the chip implanted into your brain.

I cannot save you. You remind me I'm human. I send you a poem about the name you erase, and you won't read it. I share Esme Wang's book, and you said you might get around to it. I can't read you anymore because I glued you to a pedestal so tall that looking up at it made my neck snap. Head hung on a thread of veins, empty eye sockets spitting optic nerves that tether my retina to the only view remaining of the pedestal's underside.

Meditate twice a day, hope for survival. Medicate twice a day, survival is victory. Maybe we're all just trying to survive. Schizophrenia is your shadow. I don't know how to write about your shadow, so I'll bask in your light

So that's the second poem. And I think I'll do one more. [00:09:00] And I think what I'll do is I'll pick a work in progress, which I read at the, um, at the West Hollywood event. And let me just share my screen for this one. It's a different window. I think it's over here.

Daniel Dissinger: Mm.

Raffi Wartanian: Yes. Okay.

Daniel Dissinger: Oh, after Jose Rivera. Okay.

Raffi Wartanian: Yeah Uh, well, yeah. Actually, I was not gonna read that one, but I can- Oh, read it. I could. It's a short one. I could read that one. No,

Daniel Dissinger: no, no, read the one you wanna read. I just saw that it, uh, it, it...

Raffi Wartanian: Well, can I read both? I-

Daniel Dissinger: I, I'm all for you reading-

Raffi Wartanian: I'll read it. I'll

Daniel Dissinger: read it. I'll read both ... whatever you want.

To me- This is- ... I love hearing the poets read poetry. I ha- not to go on a, like, a small tangent, but, like, I had a great poet, Tanya um, oh, God, what's her last name? Anyway, she wrote these [00:10:00] beautiful, heart-wrenching p- poems about the, uh, Korean comfort woman, women during World War II, and they are heart-wrenchingly beautiful and h- and just, like, sad.

But, I mean, she's an unbelievable poet. I didn't know she was gonna read any poems, and she just started reading them and talking about them and reading them, and I was like, "We need more poets to just come on and read poetry." I was like, "This is 100%..." So go ahead. Do what you want to do. Thank

Raffi Wartanian: you. Thank you.

Well, I'll, I'll have to check out Tanya's work. That sounds awesome.

Daniel Dissinger: Oh, I'll send you the episode.

Raffi Wartanian: Please. Thank you. Well, yeah, so Jose Rivera is an amazing playwright, Puerto Rican, and a big i- inspiration to me, uh, and for a time was a mentor and I learned a lot from him. And he has this poem called References to s- sorry, he has a play called References to Salvador Dali Make Me Hot.

So when I was writing this poem and I was trying to sort of piece it together, that line th- came to mind, and so the, the second line of this poem is sort of a, a riff off [00:11:00] of the title of Jose Rivera's play. Um, and this poem and the next one I'm gonna read, they're both about Lebanon, where, uh, I have a lot of family.

Both of my parents are from there. I am a Lebanese citizen. I have an expired passport, which every time I talk to my family about, like, "Oh, I, should I get it renewed?" They always answer, "Don't even bother. That passport isn't worth anything." Which is not about their feelings about Lebanon. They love Lebanon, but it's more about just how difficult of a political situation and environment that Le- you know, Lebanon is in for so many different reasons.

Daniel Dissinger: Right.

Raffi Wartanian: So anyways, I've been thinking about Lebanon a lot recently because, you know, Israel's, the Israeli army has been bombing, uh- Mm-hmm ... Beirut and Southern Lebanon has essentially been ethnically cleansed. Mm-hmm. So, um, so anyways, this first poem is called Baba's [00:12:00] Home. "Baba's home is the sound of a distant thundering.

References to Adana make me hot for Wahagn shaking his fists at the heavens, stomping shrapnel until the dirt was soaked crimson. That might convey to the creatures in the clouds that they were demons, not deities. If hemen- heaven is occupied by multinationals constructing harbingers of sanctified annihilation, then the relocation orders Will direct you toward the outskirts of hell.

Cheap land, food desert, bring rugs to protect your soul from charring flesh. No, paradise is love even as it's immolated under streaks of white phosphorus streaming from the sky like a perpetrator's tears stifled by hate-laced Captagon. I've got to hand it to you, even your sleep is implicated And then the other work in progress is this one.

It's called [00:13:00] Survivor's Guilt, and it's also about, you know, Lebanon, and here we go. Th- this is basically about, um, okay, your, your relatives, your, your cousins, uncles, aunts, people you grew up with. I, I spent a lot of time going to Lebanon growing up and in my adulthood just to spend time with family and, um, and it's like, well, when your loved ones are being bombarded, what does that even mean?

What do you do? How do you express your concern without being overbearing? Um, and I know certainly I'm not the only person wondering about this. There are sadly way too many contexts where this, these questions are coming up. So this is called Survivor's Guilt

I can no longer... And sorry, one last thing I'll just say is that [00:14:00] these, these last two poems are works in progress. So you'll s- you'll, for those who are able to s- watch, you can see that I've got notes and comments, and things are crossed out. So here we go. I can no longer ask you how you're doing as bombs blanket Beirut.

Inquiries have a quota, I learned. It's as simple as counting poppies. Is this how numb feels? Apathy, nihilism, ignorance, consumption blissfully brainwashed into an incoherent stew. I'd like to look at numb like we look to butterflies fluttering through camellia gardens that don't resemble mushroom clouds billowing over an urban graveyard of the living.

: “Tantig, Amoindeghan, Baghdadian, Vartan- Vartanian, Parseelian.” Say names muted in American cities. Say elders waiting for their leg to heal as wayward munitions dust embeds into soft tissue. Say children selling Chiclets. I can't ask you how you're doing after ricocheted shrapnel erased Uncle [00:15:00] Messia smoking on the balcony above rail lines, swallowed by asphalt.

After the bombs of 2006 gave Uncle Sarkis a fatal heart attack. After the first port explosion, when you told me it was the most horrifying sound you'd ever heard, and a virus kept me from sweeping glass. After the time we thought it couldn't get worse. I can't ask you how it feels when my government bombs your city.

I didn't authorize this, but I paid for it. We all did. After, after, after, before, before, after, before, before. So much so that we lost track, and it became as normal as counting until numbers couldn't compute. A 401k line graph carved by mortars piercing clouds. A bead sliding from one side of the abacus to the other.

Each rock a breath, a hope. And then you take another bead and you slide it, and you're still alive, wondering. Then the next bead, hexed need because we are turned against each other by the warp speed war game [00:16:00] of divide, conquer, suppress, destroy, deny. Don't discuss genocide. That's anti-Semitic. We're crushed into the grand struggle between mongers and lovers.

It's never about the surface. It's therapy. It's s-- it's subtext. It's the implications of the subtext. It's broken people breaking people. It's the unspoken words that I swallow because I can't pick up again to ask you if your child was allowed to go to school today. I don't want to know the answer. I don't want to know if you're still alive because what if you're already dead?

I want to keep tricking myself into believing we can salvage something from all this, perhaps our love, because I don't want to carry the weight of knowing what to share or swallow. I don't wanna have to destroy my son's innocence, that his favorite cousin can't go to school because of a mullah in Washington weaponizing industry and a capitalist in Tehran distorting religion and settler colonialists in the West Bank seizing land and a [00:17:00] limbless beggar in Beirut counting flies that swarm around his head

So that's, that's the poem there.

Daniel Dissinger: Okay. Wow.

That's the-- So I've done this podcast for six years. I've, um, spoken to so many people and, um, that's the-- this is the first time a, a, a poet has, or anyone has, um, read poetry as they're, as they tell the audience something about yourself, and I, I loved it. To me, that is... It, it, it tells us so much. And first of all, I wanna thank you for also sharing the visual to see the words.

It, it brings it so much more to life. Um, but, and at the same time, the, your, your reading was just [00:18:00] great. I... W- So let me ask this. Um- When we were talking about thinking like, okay, I'm gonna ask you to say something about who you are, tell the audience about yourself, and you asked me, like, can I read poems?

What, what was the, um, what w- what was the instinct to do that? Like, wha- or what was the, the drive to kind of go, I ne- I'm gonna say something about myself. I wanna do it by sharing these four poems and reading these poems. Like, poetry as the bio almost. Like, how, why, how, how do you come to that choice? I mean, it, and it's, you know, a large question obviously, but like, yeah.

Raffi Wartanian: Yeah. Um, to answer your question, could I read another poem? No, I'm kidding.

Daniel Dissinger: I would be like, yeah. No. I, you know what? I almost in my head I was like, yeah, just let him do it and read a fifth poem. That's why

Raffi Wartanian: I was being This whole, this whole interview is gonna be me deflecting questions with

Daniel Dissinger: poems. That's- Deflecting the poems and just be like, "Hey, you know, I have this question."

[00:19:00] You know what? I got a poem for that.

Raffi Wartanian: Yeah.

Daniel Dissinger: Yeah. There's a

Raffi Wartanian: poem for that question.

Daniel Dissinger: Exact- exactly. Yeah. Yeah. For people, that references There's an App for That, that, that reference.

Raffi Wartanian: I do have a poem that I wrote a long time ago- ... that ended with a bio that was like a critique of bios in the form of a bio.

Daniel Dissinger: Sure.

Raffi Wartanian: Because-

Daniel Dissinger: Mm-hmm ...

Raffi Wartanian: I find that bios are, you know, they, they can be so kind of formulaic and predictable- Mm-hmm ... and, um, sort of like status signaling and virtue signaling and all these things. And- Mm-hmm ... I feel like it can, a, a bio is very limited in what it can reveal about the person who the bio is about.

What a bio do- can do is tell us, okay, t- uh, let's say a typical bio in this sort of hyper-capitalistic, hyper-consumeristic, dystopian, uh, reality that we're currently in-

Daniel Dissinger: Yeah ...

Raffi Wartanian: a [00:20:00] bio, um, does succeed in letting us know typically where a person works, what they do, some of their sort of like institutional stamps and, and all of those things.

Okay, that's fine. I, you know, I'm, I'm as guilty as anyone of, you know, using that, but the, but in this context, it wa- it was just actually something I w- um, I don't know. It just came up on the spot. I just thought, you know what? To tell, say more about myself, I think the poetry is where I try to be much more Myself, uh, and to be transparent about the questions and the concerns, the hopes, the inspirations, the, the culture, the history, the memory, the art, um, all the different things that, uh, compose who I am, I try to put into the poetry.

So I just thought [00:21:00] to answer a question about my bio and my background with poetry could perhaps offer a more nuanced and layered representation of who I am in this moment

Daniel Dissinger: I mean, it's in-- it's-- I love that because even as a poet myself and the-- when I write in that, like, and I'm writing something right now about, like, genre being this, like, weird cage that we are all sitting in sometimes, like whatever genres we're writing in.

Like, a bio is a genre of writing basically. It is just like this is the, the genre of bio writing. But, like, what happens, like, it's, it's-- I like to-- the idea of, like, flipping it on its head and being like, "Well, what if the poem is the bio?" Like, you know, I'm always thinking-- I had a teacher at, uh, Naropa, uh, Bhanu Kapil.

And Bhanu Kapil was like, "Why can't the poem be the essay? [00:22:00] Why is, like, an essay have to be what an essay is? Why can't poem be essay and essay be this?" And, you know, we start-- we get really into, like, the structure of, like, what each of these genre spaces are. A-and even when you're reading, I, I start thinking, like, especially in "True Rapture," right?

Uh, you're reading it, I'm looking at the music, uh, page. Uh, being someone who's, you know, plays music not really well anymore but can read music and everything, I'm like, "Oh, wow." There's so many things that I'm drawn to by seeing that, the crescendo, the decrescendo, the, the tying of two, of two letters together almost like in like a, a slurring of, of notes, right?

Like, and I'm, I'm like, "Wow, I wonder how, you know, that can change if someone reads it, like their mi- what their brain does," right? But then I'm also sitting there going, "I wonder who Raffi reads as well." And, and I'm like-- 'cause I immediately saw that piece and I was like-- and I'm listening to you read it, I'm like, "This reminds me of [00:23:00] Ilya Kaminsky, like, 'Dancing in Odessa.'"

I'm not sure if you have ever read that book, but you should look. Ilya Kaminsky is a Russian poet, one of the-- He wrote another book called "Deaf Republic," and it's one of the greatest books. And I met him in Naropa, and when you were reading, I was like, "If he's not read 'Dancing in Odessa,' I need to tell him to," because this is so-- the, the relationship, even in the style of the way you, you were reading it.

But it tells me, it tells me so much the way you-- th-that poem, the, the, the way you kind of get in the, the, the destruction of genocide but into the family relationship and into family lineage, into masculinity, into this. I was-- It tells so much more in bio, so thank you. Like, that's a long way of saying that's, uh, really beautifully amazing.

So yeah, I'm-- It, it-- That was great. Um, what can you- [00:24:00] When you sit down to write, and what's interesting is because we got to see a poem in process and we got to see two more finished, like finished pieces, what is the process that you go through? Do you sit, do you write it, it like planned out kind

of going this poem has, you know, at, at its core is gonna be this and then you form around it?

Or are you kinda like writing and be like the poem kinda shows up and then you kinda go back and kinda like work it into an idea?

Raffi Wartanian: Yeah. Well, thank you. You, you mentioned a few things, and I wanna just sort of respond to them, and then to answer this question. Yeah,

Daniel Dissinger: go ahead. Uh,

Raffi Wartanian: I, you know, I appreciate underlining tr- you know, transcending genre spaces, and just thinking, uh, inter- in terms of just intertwining genres or, and, or how all genres can inform each other.

Like, you know, poetry can be very autobiographical, nonfiction can, can have elements of [00:25:00] fiction, fiction can be very poetic, et cetera. So, um, I, I think that all, you know, fiction, nonfiction, and poetry can mer- can definitely inform each other, and they can exist within each other as well. You know, you can have novels that have poetry in them and so on, but it doesn't just stop there.

So, like, that poem, True Rapture, is also trying to draw from the world of music. And, and for me organically, that's what I am thinking about, especially as I'm, you know, working on this album, and I've been using this software called Sibelius to learn how to, um, put notes on the page and all of that stuff.

Um, in terms of who I'm reading... Oh yeah, and just one other thing about music and language is that I find, you know, language is very musical and music is a language. So, so I think there is an important relationship, things like phrasing, for example. Like, when we play a musical phrase that we put emphasis on certain notes in the phrase, and some notes are shorter, some notes are longer.[00:26:00]

Uh, there's a rhythm and a meter to different sections, and they, you know, and, and, uh, there's repeating refrains, and I think there's a lot of interesting overlap. I know that it, you know, in history we've had many writers and musicians. I think Hector Berlioz comes to mind, among many others. Um, who I'm reading.

I mean, I've-- Right now I'm reading this really great book called, uh, Stateless by Talar Chahinian.

Daniel Dissinger: Mm.

Raffi Wartanian: It's, uh, the politics of the Armenian language in exile. So-

Daniel Dissinger: Oh, wow.

Raffi Wartanian: Um, it's basically about Western Armenian, which is the dialect we speak. It was the dialect spoken by the indigenous Armenian, uh, groups that lived on their land in what is now Eastern Turkey before the genocide for millennia.

After the genocide, Western Armenian essentially became a language in exile. Uh, in the Republic of Armenia, they speak the Eastern dialect, which is the same language, but it's different. It's... I, I don't know. I [00:27:00] think the best, maybe a good parallel might be, like, British English versus whatever, American English, for example.

Sure. Same language, but there are different nuances that contain cultural idiosyncrasies. So Western Arm- so that's one thing I'm reading, um, Stateless, and it has a lot of really... It's like i- I might describe it as in the world of comparative literature. uh, thinking about how diasporan communities write in their language or don't, and, and the sort of tensions around that.

Um, in terms of other things, I'm, I'm reading, you know, I'm reading parenting stuff as the- Mm-hmm ... I have a five-year-old, almost five-year-old, and an almost five-month-old baby. So there's a book called How to, How to Listen So Kids Will Speak and How to Speak So Kids Will Listen. I'm, I'm paraphrasing, but something like that.

It's great, a great book. Um, in terms of poetry, I'm reading Hala Alyan, Mosab Abu [00:28:00] Toha, Palestinian poets, uh, Peter Balakian, of course. Um, you know, I, I have, like, a giant stack of books that I'm trying to work through. I have a piece, I have a book by Thich Nhat Hanh. I'm a big fan of Thich Nhat Hanh.

Daniel Dissinger: Yeah.

Raffi Wartanian: Um, that one is about the inner child.

Uh, Esme Wang, The Collected Schizophrenias, which I- Mm ... referenced in one of the poems. Um, so, you know, those are just a few Yeah. So those are some things I'm reading. Uh, I'll definitely check out Ilya Kaminsky. And then

in terms of when I sit down ... And, and I've heard of him, of course. He's, like, such a major and important poet, and I've just, like, he's been on my mind, so thank you for mentioning him.

Mm. Uh, and my process, you know, every poem is different. Every, and every moment is different. So I think step one is typically, like, capturing the idea, which really it [00:29:00] starts with a feeling. So the first thing is, like, am I feeling something? So what is that feeling, and what's the, what's the right way to sort of express it?

And sometimes it's, it's through music. And, and so that's not necessarily gonna become a poem. But if it's like, if I have an argument that I wanna make, I might try to write an op-ed. But what I love about poetry is how immediate it can be and how sort of self-contained, and I've spent a lot of time writing essays and longer projects, and those are great, but, you know, these past few years I've really enjoyed diving into poetry.

So it starts with a feeling, and if I'm, like, walking or driving and I can't write something down, I might turn on my audio recorder and I'll just say it. I'll just say as much as I can. [00:30:00] Um, then I'll basically transcribe or I'll, like, get the transcription of the audio recording, and then I'll just start looking at it and trying to sort of refine it and revise and

You know, it's all about revision, so I try to revise as much as I can. I, I don't think a work is ever done, um, but I do think that there comes a point where it's time to sort of let go and move on.

Daniel Dissinger: Mm.

Raffi Wartanian: Um, sometimes that decision, it helps when if I know something is gonna get published, then I know that there's a concrete endpoint.

But if something's not getting published and I'm just working on it, and then maybe I wanna send it out later, then I, you know, it- It starts like a blob of text, and there's like lines crossed out and, you know, things are not quite put into a structure yet. But, uh, over time I try to think about like, okay, what's the best [00:31:00] structure to serve this piece?

Um, for example, with True Rapture, it was like, oh, maybe that one would go well on sheet music because it's about music. Um, whereas ... And, and also like I, I'm not a formally trained poet, which I think is an advantage because I'm not thinking to myself like, "Oh, I need to write a sonnet. Let- where's the volta?

You know, did I put in a volta?" Or so there's a lot of instinct and, you know, that might be a good thing or a bad thing, I don't know. Um, but essentially it's, it starts with a feeling, try to get the ideas audio recorded or written down wherever I can, and then put it into a document, type it out, start to think about structure, revise, refine.

I'll try to read it to people, you know, just especially for a work in progress. I like to read works of progress at readings- Hmm ... so that I can get a sense for what's landing or not, and [00:32:00] then I'll try to take note of that. And then, um, from there make further revisions. And then just start, at some point it's like, okay, I, I wanna start sending this thing out.

I think it's in a good place. And then see what happens from there. So that's in a nutshell-

Daniel Dissinger: Hmm ...

Raffi Wartanian: the process.

Daniel Dissinger: I love it. Yeah. Can I ... So it's interesting the, um, how you put it, "I'm not a formally trained poet." And I always think in my head like, what is a formally trained poet? But I mean, I did do an MFA, but I did it at a, at Naropa, which is like the most informal place to do anything.

It was just like, "Here, do what you guys wanna do. Here's a bunch of wild, weird professors." And, um, but I never took creative writing class in my undergrad. Like, so when did you start writing? Or, you know, you're a musician, so was like writing poetry kind of this like part of your life in a different way, like parallel to [00:33:00] your music, and then it just became much more prominent?

Or was it like a good, like an easy transition? Like when does poetry become part of Raffi's life in this way?

Raffi Wartanian: Yeah. Um, well- Um, so I, I think it goes back to cr- the origins of, of an individual's creative journey. And so for me, like, my aunt was a classical pianist. Mm-hmm. So she would come over to our house a lot and play all this beautiful music, and I would sit there and listen to it and be like, "Wow."

Um, my mom loves art, and she loves paintings and, you know, like, sculpture and, and interior design, so I think I have a lot of appreciation for, like, visual

art and beauty. And even though my dad was... I think my [00:34:00] dad I- had a few things that he really loved, one of which was Anoush opera. Mm-hmm. Uh, he also is, like, loves history.

Uh, so... And the thing about the writing of history w- is it can be very poetic. Like, a great historian, you know, someone like, um, Ron Chernow, you know, or someone like W- Walter Isaacson. I mean, I'm thinking of biographers, but biographers are historians. Or even, um, the documentarian Ken Burns, for example.

Mm-hmm. He, his, his work is very poetic. Um, so anyways, so, so I had that foundation early on, and then, like, my bro- older brother and older sister took music lessons. They started with piano. They both went to guitar. I followed in their footsteps. I started doing plays at my Sunday Armenian school So theater was part of it.

In high school I was doing theater, and I started a [00:35:00] band. I got really into guitar because, um, with piano I struggled to read music, so guitar was much more... Uh, it, it uses a tablature system, and you can read chord diagrams. So if, like me, you struggle to read music, uh, fluidly or fluently, um, guitar has this, these alternative systems that are a little more user friendly.

And so that really unlocked a lot for me in guitar world. So I had a band in college. We were writing music, listening to all sorts of things that involved poets, including The Doors-

Daniel Dissinger: Mm ...

Raffi Wartanian: uh, of course Led Zeppelin and The Beatles and, you know, what you would expect, I suppose. Um, and then, you know, and then in college, I essentially...

I, I like to say that I, I Montessoried my college education, meaning I just took whatever class seemed interesting to me, [00:36:00] and then by senior year I was like, "Uh-oh, I need to graduate. What degree am I closest to getting?" And the answer was history. So I ended up with a history degree, but I didn't really declare it until senior year.

In my first three years of college, um, I took... I didn't take any poetry classes, but I did take screenwriting. I think I took a fiction writing class. That I loved. I took theater classes, like in acting. I did a lot of acting and s- um, sketch

comedy in college, and I was part of the sketch comedy group, and I was writing sketches that we would perform.

That was really big for me to just, again, like creative writing and seeing your work come alive and thinking about how something is... The way something is read and articulated can add so much. That, you know, that's... And I credit a lot of my, like, training in theater to reading. You know? I, I think that, w- I mean, s- life is a stage, right?[00:37:00]

I mean, we're, we're constantly performing in different ways. So, like, when I'm teaching, I feel like I have to put on some kind of a performance, and I don't use the word performance to suggest it's artificial. I s- I use the word performance to say that there's a certain register that different occasions call for.

So whether you're teaching or you're reading a poem or you're speaking to, like, 100 people or you're speaking to a s- you know, a, a baby who jos- just woke up, you know, we need to sort of modulate and shift our registers. So- Um, so college was a time of great creativity, and I would say that poetry really emerged for me thanks to travel and adventure.

So, um, when I was in college, I, I rode a bicycle from Baltimore to San Francisco as part of a ca- cancer fundraiser ride. Wow. Wow. And, and I loved it so much I ended up doing it a second time. So I did it in 2006 and 2009, and in both occasions [00:38:00] we basically just had a backpack with us. It was me and 25 others, and Basically all I had was a notebook.

So I just started... A- and postcards. I would gather postcards. I would, I wrote a lot of postcards to my friends or to, like, you know, girlfriend at the time or, like, p- someone I was courting, and I would s- and my, my family. Just postcards galore. And then having really intense experiences bicycling 80 miles per day.

Sure. Um, bicycling down the Rocky Mountains during a hailstorm.

Daniel Dissinger: Oh my

Raffi Wartanian: God. Having bicycling through, like, fog and having, like, an out-of-body experience. Uh, bicycling and watching a f- my, my, one of my best friends fall and s- almost get a concussion. Like, watching a lot of people fall off their bikes in really terrifying situations.

Um, creating really intense friendships with people because you're, like, 24/7 together for two months. So [00:39:00] my journal and my postcards became really powerful ways to sort of capture that. Mm-hmm. Those feelings. Then after I graduated from college, I was like, "I need to travel." Like, what... And I had a high school religion teacher.

My, my... I went to a Jesuit high school, and we studied, uh, religion and philosophy and not j- many different religions. And anyways, I had this religion teacher in, in high school, and he just said something that always stuck with me. Mr. Regis. He said, "The, the meaning of life is what gives your life meaning."

And I was thinking about that a lot, uh, when I graduated college. And I was like, "Well, what gives my life meaning? Travel and adventure." So I was, I was g- able to get this fellowship with a group, wonderful organization called Humanity in Action to research human rights in France. So that got me to France for six weeks.

Then, um, I did this program called Willing Workers on Organic Farms, [00:40:00] WWOOFing, and, uh, you can basically volunteer on a farm anywhere in the world. So I went to Portugal. From France, I went to Portugal. I volunteered on a farm, then I went to S- and I did that for a month, and then I went to Spain, and I hiked on the Camino de Santiago.

So I walked across Spain for a month, and then I just went. I was basically backpacking. I visited my family in, I have family in Marseille, Cyprus, Lebanon, Kuwait, UAE, and I went to these places, and I just stayed with loved ones. And every step of the way, I was writing a lot in my journal, and that's where I think I really started getting into poetry, was just that was sort of my big creative outlet as I was backpacking and traveling.

Um, and yeah. Then so that, that's where, um, so that's where poetry started for me. And then I knew sort of I, I wanted to do an MFA, but I didn't quite know which [00:41:00] discipline, and I really struggled with that because what I learned about myself- But I had s- really struggled to accept it because I think I was trying to internalize how the world was telling me, "You can only be one thing."

What I noticed about myself was, um, I just have a lot of different things I enjoy and I'm interested in. Music, poetry, screenwriting Uh, essays and family narratives. Like, human rights and, and social justice. You know, like, all these different things. So, you know, it took me some time to figure out where I

would eventually go to get an MFA, and I think what eventually helped me sort of get over the hump was having a specific project I wanted to work on.

And, and essentially I ended up doing creative nonfiction because I wanted to write a memoir about my family's experience with my brother joining the Army, with, you know, my grandparents and great-grandparents surviving the Armenian Genocide. [00:42:00] It's essentially about intergenerational trauma and resilience.

I wrote many chapters. I wrote a book proposal. I was sort of pitching the book proposal when, um, all, uh, when a lot of poetry stuff picked up. So then I've sort of put that aside, that long-term project. But the thing is that what I've noticed is, like, the themes and the characters and the settings and the concerns in that nonfiction project are very much alive and well in, in the poetry I'm writing.

So, um, you know, so that's how poetry sort of came into my life. And then once I became, you know, Glendale's first poet laureate, that's when I was like, "Okay, well, time to... Ti- uh, let's see what happens." And so basically it just became like a, a c- a crash course in learning a lot about all the amazing poets in Southern California.

There's a really amazing poetry scene here. I [00:43:00] met so many great poets, and I got to hear their work at a lot of wonderful readings, and that really felt like a great education. And I try to bring more and more poetry into the classes that I teach. Mm. So that's what it is.

Daniel Dissinger: Wow. I, I have so many questions. I

Raffi Wartanian: Sorry, I went in 50

Daniel Dissinger: different directions.

No. No, I, I... But w- that's, f- for me, ugh, there's a lot of things. One, I just wanna say, I wish that, like, we, the higher ed system could be more like, "Don't claim your major yet. Take a whole bunch of classes, and then see where you're at in senior year. Re- like, reflect, where are you, what are your interesting, what have you been taking the most of, and, like, then claim some sort of major or whatever," right?

Because what you did was able to experiment. When you claim a major, you actually can't go outside a lot of those [00:44:00] courses, because it's only for

majors in certain areas. Like, you can't, you can't really spread out as much. I mean, i- it's a shame because there's so many things that I would have loved to have taken as a, as an undergrad, but- I think that's just a amazing story.

I mean, just that we should do one whole podcast just on your travels because, like, I feel like there's so much in there. The, the, like, how you did it, like, the experience of travel. But I, I wanna, I wanna, like, almost come all the way to the e- tail end to what you said, like, coming into being, like, the poet laureate of Glendale and the first poet laureate, and, like, this, this...

Do you have a sense-- Is, is there a large sense of responsibility in terms of when you're like, "I'm the first poet laureate of Glendale. How do I, how, how do I approach this now? Like, what do I do? How do I bring this city-- How do I, how do I show this city, like, poetry is, you know, going to become, is, is, like, this [00:45:00] energy that can bring the community even closer together or invigorating community or..."

I don't know. Like, maybe my question's like what do you feel the responsibility was as being the first poet laureate there in, in Glendale?

Raffi Wartanian: Yeah. Thank you for, for that great question. And I just wanna echo your sentiment about making higher education more holistic and ma- and making the sort of restructuring and revising how the college experience, and also even gra- maybe graduate school experiences.

I, I just think different, like, pedagogical models would benefit from revision in different ways. Like, the way medical school is structured, I think- Hmm. Hmm ... it's like, and even pre-med education. This idea of, like, pushing people who wanna become doctors to the brink of their mental and physical energies in a country where we have a shortage [00:46:00] of doctors, like, is not the way to go, and not giving them any agency about where they're going to set up their practices.

And then, you know, then of course the role of insurance companies gets tied in, and-

Daniel Dissinger: Oh, God ...

Raffi Wartanian: you know, that becomes a bigger, bigger issue. Of course, we need, like, we need universal healthcare. We need universal baby bonding leave. Like, the way our education is structured, I think is a microcosm of how, um, the, uh, is a microcosm of the inequities in our economy and the way that

people are just being placed into, uh, easy-to-identify categories so that they can be s- you know, advertised to in very predictable ways and- Mm-hmm

um, they can be sold things and, and often, uh, be told to not, not follow their instincts. I mean, I think as children we're all very, we all contain multitudes. I think Whitman said that. You know? Mm-hmm. I contain multitudes. As children, we all contain multitudes, and then as we grow older, it's slowly socialized [00:47:00] out of us in, in explicit and implicit ways.

And, um, you know, I don't, I do wanna say, like, of course, for people who know what they wanna do at the outset of their college journeys, they should absolutely pursue that, and we should make space for that. But we should not necessarily impose that on everybody. Mm-hmm. Um, and I think colleges will make the case that, oh, you know, we, y- students can take electives within the major frameworks.

There's space for electives. But it's not, it, it's quite limited. And I, I also felt when I was in college, even with the, even with the way I approached my college education- Like, I was constantly questioning it and constantly feeling like, oh, this is... Uh, I'm looking around at everyone around me who they wanna become doctors and engineers and, and writers.

Like, uh, th- my college was [00:48:00] very... People mainly knew what they wanted to do, and I felt like a bit of an outlier, and I, you know, a- and that made me question myself, which is like, "Oh, all of these people know what they wanna do, but I don't. Does that mean there's something wrong with me?" The answer is no, definitely not.

That's actually normal, but I don't think we do enough. Uh, it, it's one thing to say it to students, but it's another thing to actually structurally design the curriculums to practice what you preach-

Daniel Dissinger: Mm ...

Raffi Wartanian: and give students more flexibility and to trust them more to use experimentation and exploration to arrive at a major, you know?

And also, so anyways, uh, I just wanna- But- Mm-hmm ...

Daniel Dissinger: yeah, like, uh, not to interrupt you, but like, before we even hit record, like we said, I said something about Pedagogy of the Oppressed and you grabbed your copy and it's just like, I mean, he talks about, like, problem-

posing education, and it's really, like, much more [00:49:00] holistic, like what can the action of education even look like, right?

And we're constantly shoving things into a student's brain, being like, even forget the information that's in the major, it's like finish in four years. Declare your major now. Get an internship now as a first-year student. That, like, that's like the pressure that my first-year students have to perform at such a level where I'm like, man, I have parts of my transcript that are just, like, Cs and Ds, like in certain moments where...

But it never, and I never felt like it was, it was gonna destroy my, my ability to continue my education. That, that, thank God, and I took years off. I took a year off between my, uh, associate's degree, 'cause I went to community college, took a year or two off, then, like, went back, got a, my degree in English.

Took a year off, went cross-country with my friends, came back, did my MFA, took more time off, started s- so, like, it was, like, very like, what do I do now? I have no idea. And I think everyone is forced into, like you said, [00:50:00] know now. Know everything right now, and follow that road, uh, be damned of whatever it is that you're doing.

It's like, it's impossibility.

Raffi Wartanian: Yeah, and I think they get a lot of that messaging in, in high school because of the college admissions process is, is what it is. Oh. And, um, and then the cost of college is what it is, is, you know, I mean, it, and it's just out of control. And so I feel like students are essentially having to face a, a world that's, like, marketing to them, you know, here's this very aspirational environment where you can bring your hopes and dreams, but if you wanna do it, here's the prescriptive rubric you need to follow.

And that there's a tension there, and I think that tension is, is, you know, creating a lot of- uh, contradiction and anxiety and to be like, "Oh, I have to internalize [00:51:00] this contradiction and somehow convince myself it's true and ignore all the blind spots." I mean, it starts way younger than that. It's like- Yeah

people are telling me that my, uh, soon-to-be five-year-old needs to sign up for Kumon, and it's like, no offense to people who wanna get tutoring for their five-year-olds. You know, if, if that's the path, okay, great, and different kids have different needs. But, you know, Paul Markowitz from Yale Law School has a

great book called The Meritocracy Trap, which is all about this idea like, if I just get into the good college, then I'll be set.

And then I get to the good college, I'm like, well, if I can just get the good internship, then I'll be set. Then I get the good internship, and it's like, if I can just get the good job after college, then if I can just get the good promotion, and then by that time I have kids, and it's like, well, if my kids can get into the good high school and the good college and the good...

And then it just becomes, you know, what Bob Marley calls the rat race.

Daniel Dissinger: Mm.

Raffi Wartanian: Uh, so it's, um, we need radical revision. We need radical revision of our education system, of our [00:52:00] economy. They're deeply intertwined. I think in high school we need to have mandatory, um, financial literacy courses, and I think we also need to have mandatory courses on, uh, social media literacy and, like, tech, like, tech literacy, and I'm not talking about learning how to type.

I'm not talking about how to use softwares. I'm talking about, like, what are... Like, thinking critically about which hardwares and softwares we would use and why, rather than just approaching them without questioning. I think instead, all of that labor, the intellectual labor of it, is being imposed onto educators at the classroom level.

Uh, but there's no sort of holistic, system-wide agreement and understanding that we need to standardize a critical framework to think about The way education is unfolding in this AI tech era. Mm-hmm. And [00:53:00] so w-bringing that... And so with all of that, in the context of being Glendale's first poet laureate, I don't know if that transition worked, but

Daniel Dissinger: I think- That's how we transition on this podcast.

That's

Raffi Wartanian: how we do it. That's how we do it. Um, I'd say, like, the way that there's a large sense of responsibility in the classroom and to think about the implications of what we teach, how we teach, you know, what's the text and the subtext, I think similarly with, with designing poetry programs, it's very similar.

I mean, you know, there's, there are thematic concerns with poetry programming and, and writing workshops, and then there's practical concerns. Um, o- one thing I'll say is that I'm from Baltimore, Maryland. That's where I was born and mostly raised. In the summers, we'd go to Lebanon. I'd only been to Southern California on a handful of occasions.

Well, why do I live here? Because my wife is from here, and we met... I was in Armenia doing a Fulbright Research Fellowship, and [00:54:00] she was there, uh, working. Um, she, she's Armenian from Bulgaria. Her family moved to Southern California when she was young, and then she was in Armenia coincidentally at the time I was there.

So we met and, you know, and then our relationship began, and eventually, you know, when the question emerged, where are we going to live and try to start a family, um, the answer became Southern California because- Her family is here, and they're very supportive, and it's obviously very important, you know, to the extent possible to have family support.

And on top of it, there's this giant Armenian community in Southern California, which is great as someone who's Armenian and comes from a place where there's a very tiny, tiny, tiny Armenian community in Baltimore. So, so I'd always heard of Glendale, but I didn't really know much of Glendale, and I feel like it always had sort of a...

I, I'll say this. I used to resent [00:55:00] LA and Glendale because I felt like, oh, all the Armenians there can just live so comfortably with their identity, and they don't have to live with the sort of being an invisible minority, which is what the experience of being Armenian in Baltimore felt like for me. I didn't feel like I could really embrace and explore my identity in Baltimore, not because anyone was telling me that you should not, but more so because all of the surrounding social cues told me that the only real visible minorities here in Baltimore are in the African American community and the Jewish community.

So growing up, I had many friends who were African American and Jewish and from other minority groups in the area, Filipino, but I was typically the only Armenian person. Now, 50% of my neighbors are Armenian. Most of city council is Armenian. The public school that we're zoned for has Armenian dual language immersion, where 50% of the day is in Armenian.

I mean, it's [00:56:00] a completely different ballgame. So, but growing up, looking at Glendale, I'd just be like, "Hmm, w- like, I, I can't even wrap my head around this idea. It's, it's just, like, all these Armenians living in one

place." I knew what that was like in Lebanon, but that was Lebanon. This is different, right? So anyways, when I got here and I saw that the city...

W- when I got to Southern California, I'll say that my, my biggest concern, one of my biggest concerns and anxieties was like, I don't really know many people here. I had been living in New York City for, on and off for about seven years, and I loved it. Yeah. And I really had, there was a time where I was like, "This is where I see my future."

And I was making great progress there, and then the pandemic hit, and then everything flipped upside down. So when we came here, I was like, "What are some ways that I can meet people with common interests?" You know, rather- I didn't wanna get, um, [00:57:00] I, I didn't wanna s- I, I wanted to make it work. I wanna t- try my best to make it work.

So I got very, very, very fortunate that this job at UCLA worked out, you know, knock on wood. And that was sort of the first step, that now I could, like, explore that whole side of the city and of course be part of this, um, really fascinating university ecosystem, and to meet all of the wonderful students and colleagues.

So that was great. Um, but the question was, well, in Glendale, what, what about here in Glendale? So when I saw they were looking for their first poet laureate, and they asked for people who could s- propose projects, I was like, "Okay, I can do that." I've organized creative writing projects and workshops. I've done that with incarcerated writers at Rikers Island during my MFA in New York.

I did it with veterans at the Manhattan VA. Mm-hmm. I've done it with, [00:58:00] um, you know, youth in Armenia and Azerbaijan in the summers of 2018 and 2019. Um, I even did an event here in Glendale, uh, bringing together Armenians and, uh, indigenous tribal Americans together. Um, so I proposed basically to just continue doing a version of that, organize workshops and create an anthology.

So that's what I proposed, and they accepted it. And so on a practical level, um, the, the sense of responsibility was, how can I, like, follow through on what I proposed? And so that really just required collaborating with the wonderful people at Glendale Library Arts and Culture to just be like, "Okay, let's come up with a schedule.

Let's come up with a system. What's the paperwork that you need from, from me and from the people we're gonna bring on? How can we make sure that we're ha- paying poets and artists [00:59:00] so that we're compensating them for their labor? How can we, um, make sure we're getting the word out? How do we publish an anthology?"

So, you know, just a lot of practical questions that the proposal I wrote was like a roadmap for that. Um, thematically Um, and then I'll just say besides the, the sort of quarterly workshops and anthology, there have been a few one-off events. So like when there was this big, um, brouhaha at the Glendale Unified School District in, I think it was Pride Month of 2023.

Uh, essentially, um, a group of very sort of far-right, um, let's call them far-right provocateurs who have ties to, like, the January 6th insurrectionists- Hmm ... uh, was trying to gain school board seats, and they were [01:00:00] creating a, a false moral panic about, like, um, transgender identity indoctrination in the public schools in order to scare families in order to seize power at the school board.

So a bunch of families w- had become convinced that Glendale Unified was, uh, uh, was trying to indoctrinate their children with gender ideology, which is not what happened. But, uh, this false moral panic essentially created cherry-picked evidence that substantiated a, um, fragmented claim. So There was a big tussle in front of the school district building, and I think a lot of people were, were feeling, uh, like there was a lot of violence and riots in front of the school district building- Wow

in the middle of Glendale. It was [01:01:00] wild. And, and sadly, um, a lot of the LGBTQ+ community members were feeling unsafe, especially the ones who are part of the Armenian LGBTQ+ community. So, um, we... What we did was we read poetry at the school board meeting, like the next school board meeting, and then we organized, um, a fundraiser for this wonderful organization called Galas, uh, the Armenian LGBTQ+ organization.

And so we had, like, I think 13 or 14 readers who read poetry, and we basically came together as a community to just say that this city and this environment is safe for us, and, like, we- we're using this gathering to sort of reassert our, and reaffirm our solidarity and acceptance of each other, while also, you know, coming together to understand that where this country is at, where this community is at, and what we can do to try to give voice to ourselves and not let the f- [01:02:00] understandable fear that arises from violent provocateurs and distortionists, let's call them, uh, the, the silence that might be imposed by, by

such aggressive and violent, rhetorically violent and physically violent and psychologically violent behavior.

So that was one thing we did. Another sort of, like, one-off thing we did was in 2024. D- Every year, the City of Glendale has an Armenian genocide commemoration. So, um, we organized an event called Poets Against Genocide, and this is as Gaza was happening, the genocide in Gaza was happening, and Artsakh, this Armenian enclave, had been ethnically cleansed in September of 2023, weeks before October 7th.

So we brought together, um, Jewish, Palestinian, Armenian, Turkish, uh, Mexican, Taiwanese, many different writers of many different backgrounds. [01:03:00] Similar concept to the previous one. Um, and so we had some of those one-off events. I think thematically the idea has just been to use p- I think of poetry as, like, the most authentic form of self-expression because we can write so freely.

Like, there's very minimal, um... Like, word choice matters and form matters, but we can write in free verse. We can experiment. We can invent words. Uh, poetry can be so many different things and can take on so many different subjects. So I've always thought of poetry as the most authentic form of self-expression because it has the least amount of constraints.

So because of that, I really just was trying to encourage people to share their voices, submit your writing, let's publish it, let's celebrate it. And, um, I think that it's just been really important to [01:04:00] establish a foundation, and it'll... You know, September will be finally the conclusion of my service after about three and a half years.

Wow. So it's been a great journey. It's been a, a, an amazing ride. I'm, uh, I'm trying to stay present right now, you know, but, um, I think I will be sad when it's done. But, but I will also be incredibly excited. W- I think we're gonna announce the new poet laureate quite soon, and, you know, this individual I think is very well qualified.

And I will say that Glendale and LA, like, there has been a poetry scene here for a long time. Yeah. So, um, I, what I wanted to try to do is to just build on that and to try to just make poetry accessible, and to use the workshop model, um, to foster that and to bring in experienced poets, bring in new poets who can write in any language.

Mm-hmm. And so, um, it's been, it's been great and, you know, each workshop has its own [01:05:00] theme, You know, is there a large sense of responsibility? Yes. I will say that, like, I think becoming a father during this time, and then having another child, uh, in January, I think, um...

And then just, like, this new season of life I think carries a lot of responsibility with it. So I just try to be, um, mindful, meticulous, and I just try to ask questions and ask for help as much as I can.

Daniel Dissinger: Wow. Okay. How do you... So I have a f- well-

How do you find places-- how do you find spaces of peace and rest? A- and the reason I ask that is just like there's so much that you do, and even we were talking about this prior to even hitting record of like all things we do even as educators and things. But you're a musician, you're a poet, you're a poet laureate, you're a teacher, you're a father, you're-- how do [01:06:00] you, how do you make time for rest and, and peace?

Even in, even in the times that we're in too, because that's the other thing, like we, you know, you're teaching, you're a poet, you're all this in a moment where so much upheaval is occurring and continuing, right? So it's not like there hasn't been upheaval of violence and everything even prior to these times.

I think a lot of people say that like these times it's like, well, in a lot of countries and places in the world, this is a continuation. We're feeling it maybe here a little bit more now than that, more because of the way things are now and how things are getting shut down. People are being-- their rights are being taken away here and everything, and without, you know, direct contact with so much oppression and violence around the world, 'cause the US is so isolated.

It's like now everyone's like, "Oh, there's never been these times now." It's like, well, [01:07:00] that's a lot of a global thing that's been going on. But so like how do you find places and moments for peace and rest and just almost like sacred silence for yourself?

Raffi Wartanian: Yeah. Such a great question. Thank you. Um, well, I think peace and rest are essential for the ability to do anything.

I mean, our, our ability to be functional is completely dependent on our ability to sleep. So, you know, that, that's critical. Sleep is critical. Um, well- I, I was, I think there's two parts to your question, which is- Mm-hmm ... like, the, the

peace and rest part, and then the times we're in part, and they're interconnected, but I'll start with the second piece, like the times we're in.

You were gesturing toward this already. You mentioned it. Um, you know, these things, these, these [01:08:00] struggles, these terrible social conditions have been happening for a long time, and, uh, I don't wanna minimize the reality that there is something particularly unique and acute to the struggles we're facing right now.

Absolutely. I think, like, I think ma- the mainstream Democratic establishment has lost its way. I think, like, the Republican Party has mostly become a cult of personality. Um, I think beneath all that, there are some core values that are being lost and, and, or overlooked that need to be returned to. Um, so those things are all unique, and then there is also this, like, sort of unique sense of, uh, corruption and fragmentation of focus and attention, which is making it easier for, um, these terrible things to become what the UC Berkeley anthropologist Alexey Yurchak refers to as [01:09:00] hypernormalized, which the- Mm

which Adam Curtis turned into an incredible documentary, uh, in 2016. I recommend. It's called Hypernormalization. So these things are all becoming hypernormalized, and the problem is that none of this is sustainable, and, um, and we need a course correction big time. So, so that's all true about this moment.

What, what I'll say about for me personally and for my family is that, you know, my grandparents and great-grandparents survived the Armenian Genocide, and my, uh, parents were displaced by the Lebanese Civil War, and my brother served in the US Army from 2002 to 2004. Mm. So even before 9/11 happened, um, we were living with stories of genocide and civil war, and then seeing the remnants of it, uh, not just in Lebanon whenever we'd visit, but also in the psychology of the intergenerational trauma.

Like, my mom's fear of dogs, I believe, is very connected to this idea [01:10:00] that nothing is safe. Nothing can be trusted. Mm. You know, where does that come from? I mean, I think it comes from what happens during genocide, which is that you've lost your home. You've lost your indigenous land. You lost your family.

You lost everything, and on top of it- Like you're losing your language and culture, and your genocide is being denied. Mm-hmm. The Armenian genocide is being denied by the Turkish government. This is very different from the

Holocaust, which the German government accepted it and paid reparations to Israel.

This never happened for the Armenian genocide, and we're never taught about it in our schools, in our American schools. Um, I don't know about ethnic studies classes in California. I'm, I'm talking about Maryland. That was my experience there.

Daniel Dissinger: No, I'll say in New York too. We don't hear about any of that. I mean, there's a list of genocides we don't even hear about that you ever learn about, right?

It's unbelievable.

Raffi Wartanian: And it, it's important to learn about it because when your government, you know, [01:11:00] starts to behave in genocidal ways or starts to advance state-sanctioned violence and starts to demonize and, and minimize the, you know, the other, well, that comes from a long historical tradition and blueprint, and there are historical precedents for how these things unfold that we need to understand and historical precedents for how these things can be resisted and pushed back against.

So we need that knowledge and understanding. I know for me personally, um, you know, that, that sense of, of upheaval and unease has been there basically since the beginning. Then when 9/11 happened, that was obviously incredibly traumatic. We, you know, we have a lot of family in New York City as well. I'd been inside the, the Twin Towers a long time, long before 9/11, but, like, that level of destruction and violence suddenly felt much more like, oh, much closer, and of course in Washington, [01:12:00] DC, which is much closer to Baltimore.

But then my brother joined the US Army during this fervor of, uh, revenge. You know, pa- this sort of nationalistic fervor for revenge. My brother felt called to serve in the Army, and that was incredibly difficult for our family and I'm sure for any family where you have a loved one who's serving in any army.

The prospect of them having to go fight, the question of whether they or not they're going to come home. Even if they do come home, are they going to be okay? What kind of lifelong scarring are they gonna endure, whether it's physical or psychological? So for me- Um, these things have been happening for a long time.

Um, and so I think I've had to develop coping mechanisms and skills to try to navigate it, whether I knew I was doing it explicitly or not. And honestly, I think creating art [01:13:00] is a very peaceful and restful process. It's very meditative and really, um, you know, cleansing in a way. And so I, I feel very lucky that I can turn to c- to writing or poetry or music to feel this sort of sense of peace and, you know, this sort of trance-like flow state I go into when I'm creating, especially when I get to have uninterrupted creative time, which is much harder these days, but it's still there.

I just have to work harder to find it. Um, so other things that are critical, sleep, you know. I, I, I think for my brother who's a veteran, I think what he ... He struggled with sleep, and I saw what that did to him, and that really impressed upon me. And also my father, who's a retired OBGYN.

Daniel Dissinger: Mm.

Raffi Wartanian: And so his sleep was constantly being disrupted by phone calls, like, "You need to deliver this baby at 4:00 AM," you know, [01:14:00] "Good morning."

So, um, I think sleep is critical. Unplugging. I, you know, I just ... There's only s- so much I can ... You know, I, I ... Being very judicious and, um, limited and, and disciplined about how much media I consume each day, uh, is really important. I don't wanna overdo it, and I don't wanna underdo it, so, you know, I'm try to find that sweet spot.

So being really mindful of that. Having good ha- good habits with, like, with tech, you know, just b- basic things like no tech at the dinner table, you know, avoid tech when you're sleeping kinds of things. Mm. Um, I also find, like, family, friends, and community is very important to feel, um, peaceful. Just hanging out with my kids and entering their world is a real blessing because children are very [01:15:00] wise.

They know a lot, and, um, they can teach us a lot, and I try to keep that in mind. Mm-hmm. Um, and not take it for granted because I know these are, these are fleeting, precious moments when these children are so young and so, um- In the moment, and, and so intuitive. So I, I try to draw from that, and, um, you know, it's tough.

Yeah, it's tough with, with children for sure. Um, but, uh, thing- I think when they're a little older, like, I look forward to trying to get back into, like, hot yoga. I love hot yoga. Um, I like go... On Sunday mornings when I can, I like to

go either to, like, a church or a Buddhist temple or an ashram. I, I like to sort of mix and match, you know.

So these are some of the things, you know, sleep, creating art, mindful habits, family, friends and community, [01:16:00] nature, outdoors, you know, things like this.

Daniel Dissinger: Wow. Thank you so much. I, I feel like we could keep going. I, I, but, uh, and I just wanna end there because, like, it ends us in a very peaceful place and a beautiful place.

The, you know, and I just wanna thank you so much and acknowledge all the work you're doing and all the amazing words and just ideas, and you just put it all out there for the audience. And so I want to acknowledge that and just say thank you. I appreciate that so very much. It's been Such an amazing time for me to hear and listen to you, uh, for this as well.

And, um, so I also wanna take, you know, let you, let everyone know, like, you know, and ask you, like, where people can maybe follow you or find you or any other programs or things that you'd like to, you know, plug or say. Like, um, this will come out before July 15th, [01:17:00] so you do know. So I will have this out before then.

So is there anything you'd like, you know, how the audience can find you or, you know, um, things that are coming up for you?

Raffi Wartanian: Yes. Well, first I just wanna say thank you, Daniel, for your thoughtful questions, for your generosity to give all of the different writers and thinkers on this and the other podcast, uh, the venue to speak our minds and share our truths and to reflect and, you know.

So it's a lot of, it's a labor of love that you're doing, and it's a great service, uh, to, you know, the people who, who come on, the people who listen, and I just really appreciate and admire this project you're doing and I'm so grateful to be part of it, and thankful to you for, you know, reaching out to me and, and for all these really wonderful questions.

And, you know, I look forward to more conversations for sure. Um, in terms of things we have coming up, [01:18:00] it's a bit of a long list. I will share a few splashes, and then I'll, I'll just mention, like, some website things at the end. Um, our last poetry workshop will be on September 26th, uh, Saturday, September 26 from 11:00 AM to 2:00 PM.

I'll just mention a fundraising plug. So I am doing this project where we are working with, uh, people impacted by the Eaton fire specifically to do poetry programs with them and to do a p- a poetry scholarship.

So, um, this year, we have a \$1,000, \$700, and \$300 scholarships for poets who were impacted by the Eaton fire. So, um, we're trying to fundraise to continue doing that for multiple academic years. If anyone's interested in contributing to that, you can do so by visiting the website of our fiscal sponsor, who is the Light

They're called The Lightbringer Project. So if you go to the website of The Lightbringer Project, and you [01:19:00] go to the donate page, there's, like, a menu, and you can click on that menu and select San Gabriel Valley Phoenix Poets, and that's where we're collecting those tax-deductible, uh, donations. Okay, and then the last thing I'll just mention is that I'm in the process of putting out an album of 10 instrumental oud compositions, so that may be coming out in the fall.

In the meantime, we have a bunch of gigs. Uh, so on Sep- sorry, July, Saturday, July 25th, 8:00 PM at Healing Force of the Universe in Pasadena, which is a record shop and a music venue. We've got a performance. It's gonna be our debut performance. It's an ensemble, so it's gonna be oud, violin, guitar, bass, percussion, and I'm trying to integrate poetry into these performances, by the way.

So stay tuned for that. And then we've got one on August, Friday, August 7th at the Brand Library concert series. It's an outdoor concert series in Glendale. And then, uh, [01:20:00] we're gonna do one in late September at Beyond Baroque, and o- one in late October at UCLA at the School of Music, so more on that. I have a website.

It's just my name, raffijowartanian.com, and then I have an Instagram, @raffijoe, R-A-F-F-I-J-O-E, where I try to post, like, flyers and things of that nature. So thank you for letting me plug- Way too many things, but-

Daniel Dissinger: No, I mean, I-- that's great. And, and all these things are gonna be in the show notes, so all the links will be exact for that.

So if you want to donate, uh, to the cause for the poets, um, uh, impacted by the Eaton fires, link will be in the show notes as well. Um, and everything will be there so you can, um, follow, follow Raffi and, and support all these amazing programs, so.

But, you know, and everyone, thank you for listening. Thank you for watching. Follow, subscribe, share the episode, you know, and especially on Substack, definitely, uh, [01:21:00] subscribe to the Substack. We, we're gonna be putting out some other pieces of writing that is extra to the, um, to the podcast. And, um, and also I'll put a link to the Inspired Belonging, uh, Substack where me and my partner, Stephanie Renee Payne, there we are going to be doing some more workshops as well.

So follow that so you can get the news of that, 'cause we just did our Claim Your Story workshop. It went really well, and we're looking forward to doing some more as well. But again, Raffi, thank you so much. This has been so great. And, uh, everyone, we'll see you at the next, on the next episode.