**There’s No Clear Line in Comedy with Maysoon Zayid**

**Sandra Bertin (producer):** Examining Ethics with Andy Cullison is hosted by the Prindle Institute for Ethics.

[begin music]

**Christiane Wisehart (producer):** Hi, I’m Christiane, one of the producers on the show. Throughout our interview with our guest today, she touched on ethics again and again. So today we bring you, not a topic, but a person, Maysoon Zayid.

**Andy Cullison (host):** Hi, I’m your host Andy Cullison. The Prindle Institute was lucky enough to host Maysoon Zayid, a celebrated stand up comedian, an actress, writer, tap dancer to come out to DePauw University. We managed to snag her for an interview on Examining Ethics. You may have seen her in her very popular TED Talk: I got 99 problems and cerebral palsy is just one.

Our other producer, Sandra Bertin and I, sat down with her and got a chance to ask her about her views on the ethics of comedy, discrimination, doing comedy in the Middle East, and when it might be OK to make fun of people. Let’s get to it.

[end music]

**Andy:** Great. All right, joining me today is Maysoon Zayid. Maysoon, welcome to the show.

**Maysoon Zayid (guest):** Thank you so much for having me on, Andy.

**Andy:** We're seeing a lot of criticisms about comedians in mainstream media for crossing a line. Do you have any thoughts about the ethics of doing comedy? Do you think comedians can go too far?

**Maysoon:** There's a really famous phrase that we use in comedy, which is "all is fair in comedy" and I believe to this day that all is fair in comedy, that absolutely nothing is off limits. Now, having nothing off limits doesn't mean that there's no lines to be crossed. There are lines that get crossed and sometimes you can cross a line without ever intending to. I think that pushing that line and sometimes stepping over the line and stepping back is an important part of comedy. I think that comedians have to feel like they can be safe and try to talk about things that are edgy that might get them in trouble, but I think that comedians also need to be willing to get feedback so I always say, "A comic can say anything that they want and you, the audience, can say, 'That's bigoted. That's ableist. That's racist. That's not funny. That's not a joke.'"

They have the right to say it. You have the right to criticize it. What I don't like is when comics refuse to hear the feedback. I think it's really important for a comedian to hear the feedback and then decide, "Is this something that I am so dedicated to that I refuse to change it because I know that the joke and the message is worth it? Whatever risk that entails I need to tell this joke," then tell it. If the feedback is something where you go, "You know what? I actually don't need to tell that joke and unfortunately I didn't know that was offensive and I just learned something new today and I'm not going to do that again," I think that's important to give a comedian the ability to do that instead of shutting them down completely and firing them for one wrong statement.

**Andy:** Let's say things should not be off limits, that we ought not encourage a practice of stifling comedians, but we did talk in there about it still being wrong, a certain kind of joke being wrong. Even if we should allow comedians to have the kind of freedom and space to experiment and do those wrong jokes or risk a wrong joke. Do you have any thoughts about when a joke might be wrong? What would make it wrong?

**Maysoon:** I have another cliché for you: with great power comes great responsibility. As a comedian you have to take responsibility for every single thing that you say. What for me is a bad joke is a joke that's not funny, a joke that is just hateful rhetoric masquerading as a joke. People would say to me, "Well, Maysoon, how do you know that it's not a joke? If their intention to make people laugh who are you to judge whether that's a joke or not?" And, it comes back to understanding context. Are you coming in and doing a joke that's completely racist because you're spotlighting racism and you're spotlighting, maybe, your own privilege if you're not of that race? Or, are you just making fun of a race in order to get a cheap laugh? It's the difference between comedy that has purpose and meaning and that earns the ability to be edgy and comedy that is just abusive and hateful to get a laugh. I think that it's pretty easy to step back and see what comedians are using misogyny or bigotry just to get the quick laugh and what comedians are actually discussing those difficulty, scary topics using comedy so that it becomes a more palatable conversation.

For me, jokes about violence against women that in no way discourage or criticize violence against women is irresponsible and not funny, but it goes back to they have the right to make that joke. I have the right to not buy tickets to their shows, to not follow them on social media, and to even vocally say, "I think it's dangerous for this comedian to promote violence against women in a way that makes it a joke instead of a serious epidemic issue facing us." I feel the same way about disability. Disability used to be fodder for a lot of people's jokes. It was funny to make fun of blind people. It was funny to make fun of deaf people. I think that we've evolved now where it's not okay to make jokes at the expense of someone who is different rather than make jokes that highlight the issues that need to be worked on.

**Andy:** Back in May, Megan Garber said that comedians have become the new public intellectuals. I was curious, why do you think comedians are starting to be regarded in this way?

**Maysoon:** I think it's because comedians don't fear risk. They don't fear the man the way that other people do. I think that journalism has been extremely, extremely compromised by the corporate structure that controls most of the mass media that we see, that I have personally participated in and would love to participate more in. It's a very controlled atmosphere where stories are told in a way that the media feels they need to be told, whereas comedians, we are the people who say what everyone else is afraid to say because part of being a comedian is having no fear. You look back to people like George Carlin and Lenny Bruce who were willing to go to jail to talk about the things that people told them not to talk about. I think that's why comedians have gained the reign of being the last voice of truth in mass media today.

I think that voice is under threat, I do, because like I said, I think a really big part of comedy is the ability to tell a joke, realize it was bad, apologize, learn, and move on. When you're not given the ability to make a mistake it causes you to self-censor. When we have comedians self-censoring we're missing out on so much of what they have to share. I think that comedy is such a great vehicle for discussing serious issues because when you're laughing with someone, whatever it was that made you hate that person that was not justified because your hate was based on either fear or misunderstanding or just being taught to hate people who were different than you. When you're sitting and laughing with someone you get to relate to them. It humanizes people and it allows them to hear things that they weren't willing to hear if you lecture them or if you scream at them.

One thing I want to add is that my goal in my comedy is not to educate people. My comedy has become educational because I happen to be talking about topics that people don't know a lot about, but my only goal as a comedian is to make people laugh. If I ever felt like I got to the point where I was using my comedy to lecture my audience I would quit and become a lecturer because I don't ever want to be that person. I tell people, "Sometimes I talk about Islam. Sometimes I talk about cerebral palsy. Sometimes I talk about the Kardashians." It's not always substance. I try to talk about the things that are important to me in a way that makes people laugh. If they go home and hate less then that's a bonus.

**Andy:** We've talked about ethics of doing comedy and we've talked about this interesting phenomena of comedians being viewed as public intellectuals. I also wanted to talk to you about ethical issues within the industry itself. I can imagine you've encountered unethical behavior on the business side of doing comedy. I was wondering what are some of the moral dilemmas that comedians might face on the business side of doing comedy?

**Maysoon:** I don't know if this qualifies as a moral dilemma but one of the most challenging things for me is the way women in comedy are treated. I came up through the New York comedy clubs. I came up doing open mics. It's very, very competitive. You go into a comedy club and you wait hours and hours to get on a mic and do five minutes of jokes. When I did that I didn't realize that being a woman was a negative. I didn't realize any of that. When I got further into the game of the business I started getting left out of things that my male counterparts were doing simply because I was a woman and simply because the concept is women can't be funny and that most women aren't funny, and constantly having to prove that I was selling more tickets, I was getting more laughs, but I wasn't getting the breaks that the guys were.

I couldn't figure out, "Is it because I'm female? Is it because I have a disability? Is it because I've over-hyped myself, I'm really not as funny as I think I am?" Then I started looking around me and my icons in comedy were people like Gilda Radner, Carol Burnett, Amy Poehler, extremely powerful, smart comedians. When I turned on my TV, the women who are getting their own shows are using sexuality. It's the same thing that we see in so many other parts of entertainment where women don't feel like they can move forward unless they exploit their own bodies. I am so behind any woman that wants to be super sexual in her comedy. I support her right to do that, but I find it shocking that there's a lack of diversity among women in comedy that did exist a decade ago.

When you turn on your TV today you're not seeing the Margaret Chos and the Ellens anymore. You're seeing the same hyper-sexualized, cookie cutter image of women in comedy. If you don't fit that mold where do you belong in the game? Comedians, because we have become the new intellectuals, we do a lot of news. When you see comedians doing news you're looking at numbers that are almost all male. When the women are coming in it's always something that is very women-centric. They'll only bring in the female comic to talk about women's issues, whereas they'll bring in the men to talk about politics, sports, pop culture, you name it. I see the disparity as a comic that's trying to get on air. I see the women that are being chosen and I see the men. It's very different than a decade ago.

**Andy:** Now you were the first comic to do stand-up in ... was it Jordan?

**Maysoon:** Yeah, Jordan and also the Palestinian territories in Palestine.

**Andy:** You were the first stand-up comic, period, but you were also the first female comic. Can you tell us how that came about?

**Maysoon:** I'm going to preface this by saying I believe that I am the first person to do stand-up comedy in Jordan and Palestine; however, I have no way of knowing because maybe there was some girl in 1860 that was telling jokes at the rotunda and no one ever documented it so I don't know. As far as recorded history goes, and by recorded history I mean Google, I am the first one to do stand-up comedy. What's amazing is I started in 2002 and now stand-up comedy has become very mainstream in the Middle East and there's huge shows in Dubai and Bahrain and Beirut. There's a comedy club in Jordan.

When I started, I was going to do charity work in the refugee camps. I was working with disabled, wounded, and orphaned refugee children and my goal was to mainstream them into the school system. Everyone who met me would say, "What do you do in America?" I would say, "I'm a comedian," and they would say, "You're an actress?" I'd say, "Yes, I'm an actress but I'm a comedian." They didn't know what it was so I told them I tell jokes for a living and they would laugh because they didn't believe that there are people who get paid to tell jokes. I was in Bethlehem and I said, "Why don't I do a stand-up comedy show?" I did a stand-up comedy show at an amazing, amazing art space called [inaudible]. We had a packed house. People sat and listened to stand-up comedy.

Now I do probably five, six shows a year in the West Bank. I go every single year. I do shows in Ramallah. I do shows in Nazareth. I do shows in Jerusalem. I always love doing shows in Jerusalem because it's a pretty magical city. I actually have the ability to do comedy in Arabic and I think that's a big deal. The fact that I was able to do comedy in the native language of the countries I was visiting I think allowed people to connect in a way where they felt like, "I can do this, too." Within a year of doing stand-up comedy my comic friends came out and started doing comedy, too. Aron Kader and Dean Obeidallah joined me in Ramallah, joined me in Amman and we started getting invited to do workshops. We did workshops in Qatar and Beirut, in Egypt and Ramallah, and we trained the new generation of comics who came up.

While we were doing this there was a strange security in that we were allowed to say everything, but the natives weren't necessarily allowed to say everything because a lot of these countries have monarchies. You're not allowed to talk against the dictator or the monarchy, yet at that time it was a safer space for comedians than it is right now. Right now, the Middle East has become extremely dangerous for the comedians. You can get jailed for doing comedy. You can get jailed for being critical of whoever the power that be is. It's gotten a lot more dangerous and I've seen a difference in the comedy being done and in the people willing to take that risk.

[music]

**Sandra:** What's the most awkward moment you've had on stage? Funny awkward.

**Maysoon:** I don't have any awkward moments on stage. The closest thing to an awkward moment is not awkward, it's just disgusting. I was at a New York City club at the beginning of my career and I have cerebral palsy so I can't stand. I can walk, I can run, I can dance, but I can't stand so I always sit on a high stool on stage because it's the closest thing to standing and you can still project and have energy. I was at this filthy New York Comedy club, not named that, but it's just a New York comedy club, and they didn't have a stool so I sat on a regular chair on stage and I was already bummed out because sitting on a chair just makes your energy sink. I'm doing my jokes and out of nowhere, not where a punch line is, the entire audience shrieks, screams really loudly. I looked down and there was a mouse running across my shoe.

**Sandra:** No.

**Maysoon:** I was like, "That's my time, folks. Goodnight."

**Sandra:** That's disgusting.

**Maysoon:** Yeah, it's disgusting, not awkward. Oh, well, yeah. I've never had a heckler win and I always-

**Sandra:** How do you fight them?

**Maysoon:** How do you fight them? It's really interesting. The way to fight a heckler is to come up with the perfect one line that shuts them up so that they have absolutely no witty response.

**Sandra:** Do you have examples?

**Maysoon:** It's fascinating when you do it. You actually watch their body language go inside and they kind of curl up in a ball. I, again, was working in New York City comedy clubs at 1:30 in the morning. You get a bunch of drunk tourists screaming inappropriate stuff at you and it depends on who is yelling what, what your response is. I am very good at witty responses. It's just I have an ability to slay people. I've taken that with me to dealing with trolls on the internet. When people say to me, "Don't interact with the trolls," I'm like, "I must interact with the trolls. It keeps me sharp. This is child's play compared to what I used to do in the comedy club," because in the comedy clubs you're coming up with a witty response and there's a very good chance someone is going to throw a beer bottle at your head, whereas on the internet you can just hit block and you're like, "You can't hit me with a beer bottle now."

The reason that I address trolls online is because I believe that allowing people to hate in a vacuum allows them to continue that. Since I'm blessed with the ability to fight back and not let people who have no power or influence in my life affect me I have the ability to, when I knock them down, show other people these people are a joke. Either just block them or mock them, but don't allow them to define you. You can't let January6565XX65 ... If there's more than 10 numbers in their handle you cannot let that person ever affect your life decisions and choices. It's easy for me because a lot of the people who attack me are either well-known members of the media and they embarrass themselves or they're completely anonymous. The reality is a lot of other people are being attacked by people they know.

Kids these days spend all day long being bullied at school and then all night long being bullied online. It's a lot harder for them to fight back than it is for me. I think that it's important that I continue to do that to make them understand that even if this is a person you have to deal with every day they still don't get to define you. Only you get to define you. I don't think I would have that power if I hadn't spent so many nights in the comedy club being told I had chunky knees by random guy number five.

**Sandra:** Can you give us an example of something that you-

**Andy:** Yeah, that was going to be my-

**Sandra:** -that you responded with?

**Maysoon:** No.

**Sandra:** Okay.

**Maysoon:** I can't give an example.

**Sandra:** Do I have to insult you?

**Maysoon:** Yeah, I can't give an example. I mean, one of my favorite ones online ... On stage, like I said, it really depends on what's being said. One of the go-tos is, "Have another drink." That always really rumbles people. Online one of the ones I love is people always say to me, "You need to accept Jesus. You need to accept Jesus." I'm like, "I do accept Jesus. He's a prophet in Islam. Now can you accept that Jesus looks like me and not Jared Leto?" That's one of my ...

**Sandra:** Got them.

**Maysoon:** Yeah, because it does stuff on multi-levels. It says to them, "By the way, I guess you didn't know Muslims believe that Jesus was born to a virgin, news flash," but also being like, "Hey, by the way," because Palestinians love owning Jesus. We are so happy he was born in Bethlehem and not the Vatican. We're like, "Yes!" He's like our celebrity. New Jersey has Bruce Springsteen, Palestine has Jesus.

**Sandra:** Do you get a lot of people face-to-face who try to proselytize to you not understanding ... I have a friend who always gets, "Have you ever been exposed to a truth besides Islam?" as if you're in a glass box.

**Maysoon:** People don't confront me in real life.

**Sandra:** That's good.

**Maysoon:** I don't know if it's fear or lack of access. Today I had a workshop at DePauw and I would have been really amazed if someone actually came up and was confrontational. More often than not they ask extremely offensive questions and have no idea they're being offensive, which is why I have chosen to always educate first. People are like, "Oh my God, they just said the most offensive thing to you. Why are you talking to them?" I'm like, "Because it's obvious to me that this person doesn't even know they're being offensive." I always take that moment to educate. Then if they refuse to be educated I mock them and then I walk away, but people have very limited access to me in real life and the people who tend to come up to me at the end of my shows tend to be applauding me and praising me. The haters tend to be hiding behind the keyboard.

[begin music]

**Christiane:** Stay tuned after the break, we’ll be back with a story about a documentary called *The* *Muslims are Coming*, we’ll also talk about the magic of twitter, and how Muslims have been a part of the fabric of the US since the very beginning.

[end music]

**Christiane:** Welcome back. So far, we’ve talked about how far is too far for a comedian, what it’s like to be the first person to perform stand up in the Middle East, and how to deal with haters.

**Sandra:** So, next I asked her to talk about the documentary she was a featured comedian in, called *The Muslims are Coming*.

**Maysoon:** I shot a documentary with my comedy partner, Dean Obeidallah. We're not full-time comedy partners but we founded two major comedy festivals together: The New York Arab-American Comedy Festival and The Muslim Funny Fest. The point of the Arab Comedy Festival was to show people that Arabs could be American, that we weren't this other foreign entity, and also to dispel the myth that Arab and Muslim are synonymous, because you can be Arab and Christian, Buddhist, Jewish, Muslim, you name it, and you can be Muslim and any race, ethnicity, or culture.

Dean and a woman named Negin Farsad came up with the idea to take a bunch of Muslim comics to the deep south in August during Ramadan to shoot a documentary in places where people had actively abused their neighbors who happened to be Muslims. It was places where people pissed on the Quran or refused to allow a mosque to be built or refused to allow Muslims to be buried in a cemetery. We went and did stand-up comedy. What was fascinating to me is that the shows were packed, packed. The majority of our audience was non-Muslim, non-Middle Eastern, non-South Asian, because the Muslims were mostly fasting and breaking fast at the same time. They accidentally put all the shows at the same time we would break fast, so not only was I fasting all day but I would go on stage parched and do stand-up comedy and be like, "I'm going to make it! I'm not giving up! The power!"

I was fascinated by the fact that it actually worked, that we actually changed people's impressions. It showed me yet again that part of what fosters hate in the United States of America is misrepresentation of minority groups in media. So many people had these outlandish views of what Muslims were. One of my favorite questions was a woman ... I do a joke on stage about how the doctor who delivered me was drunk and how he was down the Jersey Shore and he drove up ... it was Labor Day weekend and he drove up just in time. She came up to me and she said, "When were you naturalized?" I said, "Did you see the comedy show where I talk about being born in Jersey?"

She goes, "Yeah, but I mean, when were you naturalized?" I was like, "I'm born in the U.S.A. so I don't need to be naturalized." She said, "But aren't you Muslim?" I said, "Yes." She said, "So you must have been naturalized at some point." I'm like, "No, no, no. I was born Muslim and I am American. I can run for president." She laughed and laughed and went, "No you can't." I go, "No, no. I actually can." It was fascinating because she couldn't make the intellectual jump that you could be American and Muslim. They really think that Muslims are this other foreign group, the foreign entity, trying to get on the shores of America. They don't realize that we're part of the fabric of the country.

**Sandra:** Yeah. Also something you said during lunch I really connected with. I think you made a joke about how your dad has wanted nothing to do with citizenship here?

**Maysoon:** No, my dad ... It wasn't that he didn't want anything to do with citizenship, it was that my dad stayed solidly Palestinian the entire time he was in America. He always spoke Arabic. We always ate Arabic food. One of my favorite stories is that my dad used to ... We used to have stuffed lamb for Thanksgiving instead of turkey. It was really contentious because we were like, "We want turkey!" He was like, "The lamb is far more expensive. You should be thankful that we can afford lamb." It wasn't that he rejected American culture, it was that he deeply connected with Palestinian culture and it was such a major component of who we are. A lot of Americans get insulted when people hyphenate and say, "I'm a Palestinian-American," or, "I'm Italian-American," or something, but we are both.

I am American. I'm born and raised here. I was a delegate representing the great state of New Jersey in 2008. I'm extremely connected to this country. At the same time, I identify as Palestinian and I don't think that I need to make a choice of either identifying as Palestinian or identifying as American. What I dislike is when I'm labeled. I'm often labeled one of two things that I feel is completely inappropriate: Muslim-American and disabled. There'll be a headline and they'll say, "Comedian with cerebral palsy," or, "Disabled comic," and I say, "You actually don't have the right to identify me by my disability. I'm not ashamed of the fact that I have cerebral palsy but it's not one of my credits. It's not one of the first things that I list. I feel like what other characteristics ... Would you be like, "Overweight comic," or, "Incredibly ugly comic-"

**Sandra: “**Four-eyed comic.”

**Maysoon:** What are the other things that you would use to describe someone? I feel the same way about Muslim-American. Again, I am so proud, I'm really proud, of my faith. I have chosen my faith. I'm not forced to follow my faith. When people call me Muslim-American I'm like, "Okay, so why aren't all the other comics called Christian-American, Jewish-American, or atheist-American? Why do you feel the need to label me by my religion?" I think it's really nefarious and dangerous and we don't understand that, that I have the right to identify my faith. You don't have the right to identify me by my faith. You don't.

**Sandra:** Yeah, and yet they leave off tap dancer.

**Maysoon:** They leave off tap dancer. It's so insulting.

**Sandra:** Despicable.

**Maysoon:** It is. Can you imagine fighting with people and being like, "I want the fact that I'm a tap dancer included in my credits." The reason I do is because I am extremely passionate about tap dancing. It's a lost art that's kind of starting to come back. I'm proud of the fact that I tap dance and I'm proud of the fact that I'm proof that you can be a disabled dancer and there are disabled dancers. The fact that people wouldn't accept that and said, "If we put this they'll think it's a joke," it completely invalidated the 25 years of training I had done to get to the point where I could ... I lucked out and I booked this interview and they were like, "We need B-roll." I was like, "How about I tap dance?" They went along with it and it was a great piece called "Shake it Like Taylor Swift" on CNN and I tap dance in the middle of the piece just to show people. I'm like, "I'm actually tap dancing."

**Sandra:** This is real life.

**Maysoon:** "I'm not kind of pretending. You can't do this and I can can so check it out." Ask me your ethical question and then let me go back to sleep. By sleep I mean compulsively Twittering. I'm a compulsive Tweeter. I need to stop and I can't because Twitter is the new open mic for comedians. It's where we try all of our-

**Andy:** Test it out?

**Maysoon:** -jokes. I'm constantly being confronted by people who desperately need me to educate them. I'm all about education. I'm all about educating the masses.

**Andy:** There's that little strip comic, and I can't remember which one it is, but someone is like, "I can't go to bed right now. Someone is wrong on the internet."

**Maysoon:** That's like my life. Oh my God. My husband knows because my typing changes. I'll be like tick, tick, tick, and then all of a sudden I'm like tick, tick, tick, tick, tick and he's like, "What happened? What happened? Islamophobe? Someone who wants to put the disabled to sleep? Who's hating on you?" I'm like, "Somebody said General Hospital is not the best show on television. I need to deal with this."

[music]

**Andy:** You talked about this kind of mantra that gets played around that it's not part of the original founding fabric of America, Muslim is not part of the original founding fabric. You had some really interesting things to say about that, some actual facts about the early origins and the place of Muslims in early America. Could you just share some of that with us?

**Maysoon:** I grew up in America and I've always been fascinated by the concept of a secular country, the idea of equality for all. I know that America hasn't mastered that and that equality for all is still something that we're striving for, but I've been really shocked by the recent rhetoric in the political elections coming from people who are running for the Presidency. For example, Ben Carson said that he would not be comfortable with a Muslim being president. He didn't say, "I would need to know what their values were, what their ideas on certain topics were." He simply dismissed them because they were Muslim.

I thought to myself, as much as I hate comparisons, "If Ben Carson had said he didn't believe that a Jewish-American should be president," ... especially now with the fact that we actually have a viable candidate ... "would he still be running for office or would he have been shut down immediately?" But when Ben Carson spoke this way about Islam his numbers skyrocketed. His donations doubled and tripled. It was completely acceptable for him to talk about Muslims as if we weren't American. When he was confronted with that issue and when other candidates were asked their opinion they said the founding fathers didn't consider Islam when they were founding America. That's simply not true.

First of all, Muslims have been part of the fabric of this country from the very beginning. The first recorded Muslim landowner, 1682. I mean, that's almost 100 years before the founding fathers came together. Also, we are part of the people whose backs this country was built on. Ten percent of slaves were Muslim and the first country to recognize America after we separated from Britain was Morocco, a Muslim country. Also, Thomas Jefferson, it's documented that he studied the Quran, that he was aware of the teachings. To pretend that Muslims haven't been part of the fabric of this country and that the founding fathers were oblivious to the fact that we existed is simply untrue.

It's unfair because when a presidential candidate or a political commentator is allowed to talk about Muslims as this scary group of others that have no place in this country it incites violence. We have seen the results of this incitement, from mosques being burned to people who the haters are think are Muslim, who aren't even Muslim, being attacked, like the Sikhs who are constantly getting attacked with people thinking that they're Muslim and they're clearly not. The idea that ... people say this to me all the time, "Go back to your own country. Go back to your own country." I always say to them, "Where? New Jersey?" because they're unaware of the fact that we do exist, that you can be American and Muslim and that, honestly, there is no difference between Islam and the other Abrahamic religions.

When you talk to people about the fact that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam ... Abe is our dad. Abe is everybody's dad. One of us got kicked into the woods, the other didn't. Somebody said he was a son, the others said he was a prophet. There's minor differences, but Noah is all over both books. I always say to people, "I don't mind if you think my faith is goofy and I'm totally wrong. That's totally fine. Don't get involved with it. I'm allowed to believe what I want as long as I'm not subjecting you to believing what I believe you have no right to condemn my faith." Right now you have people saying things like, "We're going to shut down these mosques because they're encouraging violence," and you have comedians going on TV saying that Muslim students deserve the discrimination that they receive because they're blowing up kids everywhere.

We ignore the fact that the real threat in America in the past decade has not been Muslim-Americans. It's been supremacists and extremists of different faiths. There has not been one Muslim that has created a school shooting or a church shooting or a theater shooting. There has been two incidents on army bases. I will always acknowledge that violence against civilians committed by anyone, whether a state or a person, I condemn that. I don't care who it is or what your excuse is. I really don't believe there's ever a valid reason to kill a child or an unarmed civilian, I don't, but the reality is I'm much more scared of my fellow Americans than I am of Islamic extremists.

We saw it this week. We saw it with the bombings in Paris. The shock that occurred after the bombings in Paris is necessary. It was shocking and horrible. As a performer, I was devastated by what happened in that theater. All death is horrible but as a performer the idea of having your audience killed, I would never be able to go onstage again. We don't acknowledge the fact that we have massacres happening every other week in America and that our numbers are way higher than what happened in Paris in that one despicable event and that this is happening worldwide. One of the things I hear all the time is, "Not all Muslims are terrorists but all terrorists are Muslims," and it's simply not true. Worldwide you have people of all different faiths killing other people in the name of their religion and the religion has very little to do with it. Whether it's in Russia or Africa or the Middle East, it's power, hiding behind faith to manipulate the masses.

**Andy:** I think people have strong intuitions about when it's okay to make fun of somebody. I want to give some examples and then I think I want to test a few out on you to see ... I want to answer the question, when is making fun of someone okay and when is it not okay? The clear cases when it seems to be okay-

**Maysoon:** Shoot me.

**Andy:** -is when you're making fun of a politician for some kind of screw up or when you're making fun of a friend who has done something silly. That's when we usually think that what's going on is okay. When it's not okay, or when it seems clearly not okay, it's when people are being teased for certain kinds of traits that are well outside of their control, that they have no control over. Here's a view about when it might be okay and when it might not be okay.

I'm not talking about rights. You have a right to test out any joke, but just when it might cross some kind of line. I think one useful thing socially for comedy and making fun is a social rebuke. Here's a view you might have. It's okay to make fun of somebody when it's for the purpose of rebuking them for something that they're culpable in having done. Culpable means their fault. Maybe that's not the only time it's okay but that's clearly when it's okay and clearly when it seems to not be okay. There's one view you might have about the okay-ness. Thoughts on that?

**Maysoon:** Lots of thoughts.

**Andy:** Awesome.

**Maysoon:** I'm going to try to condense them. There's no clear line. I know the clear line is wanted, but there's no clear line. I think the first step is when you're making fun of someone, why are you doing it? If your only purpose is to be mean don't hide behind comedy and just go for it. Now we're going to talk about, can you make fun of the way someone looks, because looks are something they can't control. When the Kim Davis controversy was going on there was this great meme that was saying that Kim Davis is Dick Cheney. It was hilarious to me because she looked exactly like Dick Cheney. There was no difference in appearance. People came up to me and were like, "Maysoon, come on. You're a role model. You're more evolved than making fun of the way someone looks."

I had to sit with myself and I still haven't made a decision about it because part of me wants to say that once you've done something that is despicable you no longer have the right for me not to mock you, but the other part of me understands that even though it's funny that she looks exactly like Dick Cheney I can be funnier without ever attacking the way that she physically looks. When we talk about Donald Trump a lot of people talk about his hair. When we talk about John Bonner they talk about the spray tan. Now, can you talk about those things because those are things that can be changed? It's sketchy. You don't know.

If you're talking about Donald Trump's hair because he made fun of Carly Fiorina's face, are you stooping to his level or are you dishing out exactly what he deserves? I think the ability to change something is really important. If I'm making fun of someone who is grotesquely obese, and the word grotesquely and the word obese are both offensive, it's probably not a good idea. There's got to be something else that I can make fun of and still make my point. If someone's entire persona is wrapped around the fact that they present themselves a certain way is it really off limits?

If someone is doing a joke about me shaking and they're my best friend it's hilarious to me if the joke is hilarious, but if the joke makes everyone in the room uncomfortable and it's mean-spirited and even I'm like, "My, why would you say that?" it's not okay. The line is just not clear. I do a joke about my husband looking like a Mexican version of Bert from Sesame Street because he has one eyebrow and he doesn't look Arab. He looks Mexican. People always run up to him and start having full dialogues in Spanish with him that are somehow related to Sesame Street. I feel okay making fun of him and describing him that way because it's done with love and respect.

**Andy:** Yes. The view I have in mind, the one I want to defend at some point when I write a paper about this is that there are two purposes for making fun. One is it's a social rebuke. The other is that it's a way to reify friendships. What I mean is continually acknowledge that you're friends or you have a special relationship, because the other time when it's clear that it seems okay, it's when I'm making fun of my friend for something that would be wildly inappropriate to do to a stranger on the street. I can make fun of my friend's shirt but if I were to just walk up to some random stranger on the street and start making fun of their shirt there would be something weird about that. It's the relationship itself that I think makes certain kind of teasing perfectly appropriate and okay.

**Maysoon:** I think that applies to both comedy and criticism. I posted something on Facebook one day and this guy who I don't know but who is someone in media, I don't know him personally but I know who he is, he said, "Looks like you've put on a lot of weight." I wrote back and I said, "Actually I'm the same weight that I've been for the past five years and that's a really nasty comment. You should probably think before you type on my page." He was like, "Oh, you can dish it out but you can't take it Miss Comedian." I said, "No, I've actually never volunteered to anyone that they looked like they put on a lot of weight. It's not something I've ever considered.” He said, "No, but you're all about, 'It's okay to be constructive in your criticism.'" One of the things that I say is, "We cannot be a society that's in denial of the fact that we make bad choices."

Every once in a while, I'll get a picture back from an event I've done and I'll look at that picture and I'll be like, "Oh my. No, no, no. That was some bad choices." I have the ability to be self-critical. If I have not asked your opinion don't you dare volunteer your opinion on my appearance. Appearance is something that I had to let go of last. Like I said, I'm still tackling it because I want it to be like, "If you're a war criminal all is fair and I will make fun of everything," but as an intelligent comic who wants to make a difference in the way that we function as a bullying society I think that I can always find a better thing to make fun of. With Kim Davis it was her history of marriages that was better to make fun of than her appearances, because they were choices that showed that they were hypocritical.

As a comic, it hurt my soul because it was hilarious and it was hard for me to remind myself that if I'm going to say journalists can't criticize Hilary Clinton's appearance then it wasn't right for me to criticize this woman's appearance no matter how funny it was. The other day I was watching the Democratic debate and Hilary Clinton looked amazing. I had never seen her look that good in my life. I wrote, "She looked amazing," and I was like, "Why is that okay?" because I'm still reducing her to her looks but because I'm doing it in a complimentary way and not saying, "Man, she looks haggard. Who picked out that suit?" it was okay. It's really sketchy. I think it always comes back to the same thing: what's your intention? What's your relationship to the target? Can you do it in a more intelligent, less offensive way without feeling like the integrity of the joke has been compromised?

**Andy:** That's interesting. Lots more we could say about that but at the moment I think we should stop and I'm just going to say-

**Maysoon:** What was the second part of the question? Remember? You set me up for a two-parter.

**Andy:** The two-parter, I brought it in. It was the second part of the view that I was going to talk about.

**Maysoon:** The view? Isn't it fascinating that The View has been on television for 13 years and they've had every type of woman you can imagine: different weights, religions, ethnicities, political views, sexual orientation, yet they have never in 13 years had a visibly disabled co-host. Why is it that shows that try to be diverse and try to say, "We showcase the women that no one else would," have left disability behind? Why, when we're the largest minority in the United States, do we not have a more permanent presence in media? Why is it that the morning shows who work so hard on being diverse have left us behind? I say in the intersection of intersectionality the disabled have been run over.

**Andy:** What's really, I think, even more interesting about that is I saw someone ... a professor of disability studies gave a talk. One of the things that she said that just stuck with me to this day is, "It's interesting that the disabled are often overlooked in a wide range of circumstances for things like representation but it's pretty much guaranteed that all of us will be disabled." We're all going to be disabled one day. It's just a matter of time. Unless you die young, we're all going to be disabled someday. It's really interesting that there's this state that we are all destined to and yet we still-

**Maysoon:** I think that's why so many people fear disability, because they know that they're destined on that path or they don't want to admit that they're destined on that path and that having us as a presence on something like General Hospital or Scandal reminds them of their own fragility. One of my friends died in a car accident a week ago.

**Andy:** Oh my goodness.

**Maysoon:** Right before he died ... He didn't die instantly. Before he died, his mother was told that he would be a paraplegic. When he passed on person after person after person wrote, "It's better that he died than live as a paraplegic." That is the reality for many, many people. I am a person with a severe, permanent disability who has friends that are nonverbal wheelchair users, who anyone else in the world looks at them and thinks, "I would never want to live that life. I would rather be dead," and they are living amazing, full lives and they have relationships and they have friends and they have ideas and they have dreams and they are dismissed as members of society who would be better off dead than surviving in the state that they're in.

I think that even I suffer from that. Even I often think, "Could I do it if I didn't have a voice? If my voice as a comedian was taken away and I could no longer speak and I was trapped inside my head with all these ideas that I could no longer express, could I survive?" When I see my friends who are surviving and who are thriving despite the fact that 25 years after the Americans with Disabilities Act we still live in a very ableist, very inaccessible country, if they can do it I can do it, too. I think that we need to get away from a society that fears being disabled and would rather be dead than disabled to a society that includes people with disabilities and really embraces universal design as something that enriches us instead of a burden. General Hospital, General Hospital, General Hospital. Thank you so much.

**Andy:** Thanks for joining us.

[begin music]

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