

Finding Purpose and Staying Connected In a Disconnected World

With

Soledad O'Brien

Award-winning journalist, documentarian,
entrepreneur and philanthropist

Shiza Shahid

Co-founder, Our Place, founder, NOW Ventures
and co-founder of the Malala Fund

And Lisa Nichols

CEO and founder, Motivating the Masses

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SOLEDAD O'BRIEN: Hi everybody, and welcome to our special event, Finding Purpose and Staying Connected in a Disconnected World. I'm Soledad O'Brien. As you know, women are striving to stay connected with family and friends and co-workers at a time when staying in touch means FaceTime and Webex and Skype and Zoom. In this socially distant reality, you can't shake hands with a co-worker. You can't hug an old friend. And even though we've adapted to life in a disconnected world, we have to ask ourselves, will we ever be as connected to others as we were before? At a time when many women feel like they're operating on overload, is there a way to find purpose and even joy?

For answers, we're joined by two fantastic guests who are going to share their personal experiences and also lots of very specific advice on how women can stay connected while also continuing their own journey to finding meaning and purpose in our lives. We're going to be diving deep into how we can find personal purpose and power and become game changers in whatever form that might take for each of us.

So let's begin by introducing Shiza Shahid. She's a co-founder of Our Place, NOW Ventures and co-founder and founding CEO of the Malala Fund. Hi Shiza!

SHIZA SHAHID: So great to see you, Soledad.

SOLEDAD O'BRIEN: Lisa Nichols is a best-selling author, entrepreneur, humanitarian and also a motivational speaker. Lisa, hi!

LISA NICHOLS: It's a pleasure to be here. Thank you so much for having me, Soledad.

SOLEDAD O'BRIEN: It is my pleasure to talk to both of you. So let's begin by jumping into the past of your lives. Shiza, I know you were 14-years-old, 14, when you started volunteering in a women's prison in Pakistan. Sixteen years old, you were volunteering at an earthquake relief camp. You were the only woman there. And I know for you Lisa, you navigated some childhood experiences that led you to kind of where you are today. So I'd love for you guys to kind of take us back to your back story and how that led to resilience.

Why don't you start for us, Shiza?

SHIZA SHAHID: Absolutely. I think a lot of my formative experiences, a lot of -- all of our formative experiences start in our childhood and that's certainly how it was for me. I was raised in Pakistan, in the capital city Islamabad. I was fortunate to be born into a modest, but very loving and progressive family that wanted me to have all the opportunity in the world. But I was also growing up in a country that's ranked the second worst place to be born a woman. And in a country that at the time that I was growing up was experiencing a lot of challenges with poverty and terrorism and violence. And I just wanted to make sense of what was happening to my

society, so I ended up spending a lot of my early years volunteering in women's prisons and refugee camps and natural disaster relief.

And through my interactions with communities and specifically women who were dealing with some of the most challenging situations in the world, I really understood what it meant to drive grassroots change, but also what happens when you financially empower a woman.

I was really sort of guided by this learning in all of the work that I did after that. I was fortunate to get to come to the United States to study here. I co-founded an organization called the Malala Fund with a young girl named Malala Yousafzai who was shot by the Taliban for wanting to go to school. And Malala really is sort of I think a symbol of resilience and forgiveness. She taught me how to forgive and how to move forward from that moment to really bring positive change for other girls around the world who are fighting for their right to education.

And since then, I've been focused on what I call mission-driven business: the intersection of business and impact. And, of course, I started that business in a pandemic, at a time when we cannot gather. So I've been learning a lot about how to pivot, how to adapt. But I also believe strongly that it's in times of hardship that we become stronger. I am a strong believer in resilience and that in this moment, we have to find how to adapt, how to support each other and how to make something good come out of even the worst things.

SOLEDAD O'BRIEN: Lisa, how about for you?

LISA NICHOLS: Oh wow! First of all, Shiza, that's so inspiring to hear. I'm honored to be in this space with you and to just hold the space for all that you're creating. So I just want to acknowledge you for that. For me, I was born and raised in Los Angeles, California. I lived between the Harlem Crip 30's and the Rollin 60's. Those are not cheerleading squads. So I grew up between two gangs and I had on average three fights a week to get home from school because I didn't have a choice. I needed to get home and there was all of this violence and all of this just negative energy around me.

Though when I stepped into my house, I had an amazing household, amazing mom, an amazing - - to Shiza's point, I had a great family. The environment was just toxic, the environment was, felt like it was just full of lack. And everything around me represented scarcity. Everything around me represented there's not enough. I remember when my middle school teacher asked me "What did I want to be when I grow up?" I was 15 at the time and I looked at her and I said, "I just want to be alive." And if I get to 21, ask me that question again because I would have achieved my first goal.

And I just had this energy when my son was born, when he was eight-months-old, I went to the ATM to get money out to buy him Pampers and I didn't have enough in to get \$20 out. I had \$11.42 in the bank. And I remember, Soledad, having to wrap my son in a towel for two days.

And on the second day, I looked down at my son, Jelani, and I said, “Son, don’t worry, mommy will never be this broke or broken again.” And so I began to teach myself.

And I volunteered at women’s battered shelters, helping them through their mind, to possibly get out of situations, and then I went to alcohol and drug recovery places. And then my lifestyle just kind of kept blossoming from that. I never stepped into personal development saying, “I want to be a motivational speaker.” I stepped into it saying, “I need to save my own life and I need to save the life of my child,” and hopefully, if this works, I can possibly inspire a few people to do the same.

SOLEDAD O’BRIEN: You both described survival mode and of course I think in a lot of ways, you’re describing very dire and difficult circumstances. But I think there are a lot women today, myself included, where sometimes we just like shift into the gear of survival mode.

There are so many unknowns. Will you have a job? What will your finances be? Will your kids go to school? Will they be moving back home? Just what’s going to be six months out, one year out, three years out? So many variables. Should we not be in survival mode? Maybe I’ll have you start Lisa and then I’ll go to Shiza next. Is there something that can bring us joy and purpose that’s higher than survival mode?

LISA NICHOLS: Absolutely. I think that survival mode will allow you to do just that, survive. And some techniques or some mindset that you can pick up to support you being more than just surviving it, just hanging on by your fingernails, hanging on by your eyelashes, is to begin with the end in mind. You don’t just want to get through this, but who do you want to be on the other side of this?

The way you navigate through this and build your own personal momentum up is that you give yourself micro wins to hit and then you go hit those micro wins, because there’s so much that’s in your circle of concern, but then there’s so much that’s in your circle of influence. And what takes our joy away is that we live 80 percent of our time in our circle of concern and only 20 percent of our time in our circle of influence. When you began to navigate and move to your circle influence primarily, those things you can’t influence, you still can’t influence them, they are your concern, but your energy is on what you can influence versus the things that you can’t touch. That makes a huge difference. So No. 1, set micro wins, milestones; and number two, begin to look at what you can influence in your circle of influence and spend more time on that while monitoring everything else.

SOLEDAD O’BRIEN: That’s so smart because often I just slam my head into the wall and become more and more frustrated especially in an environment where everything is very stressful. Shiza, when you were in prisons volunteering, when you were doing earthquake relief

and volunteering, what did you learn about resilience? Was there joy in there? Was there purpose in there? Or was it -- again let's just get through to the other side.

SHIZA SHAHID: I think it is important to acknowledge that the effects of this moment are very unequal and there are a lot of people particularly people of color, people in the service industry, immigrants who are disproportionately affected and in survival mode. There are others amongst us who are perhaps able to do our businesses or perhaps even able to do our businesses better at this time. And sort of where we are in that spectrum sort of allows us to understand, what's our role? And are we just trying to make it through? Or do we have the capacity to give and support in this moment where we are really all connected and we do need to be helping each other more than ever.

For me, I started a business about a year ago called Our Place, a mission-driven business and we create kitchenware and cookware products and our whole mission is around bringing people together around a dinner table. So all of our storytelling is about people from different cultures and faiths and ethnicities and beliefs and traditions coming together around a dinner table.

And so in April, when we all first locked down, I was really uncertain because April is this month where you had Passover, you had Easter and you had Ramadan. So collectively three of the most significant home-cooking traditions where communities gather and they celebrate and they eat together and that was sort of a cornerstone of our brand and storytelling. So we decided to just ask our community and ask them how they were dealing with the uncertainty in this moment and finding joy.

We ended up connecting with Liz. Liz is an entrepreneur and she was hosting Passover Seder during the quarantine and she talked about how typically she would have 27 members of her family come over, they would all eat together and it was a really important tradition for her, but this time she was hosting a Zoom Seder with 60 members of her family from all over the country. And she talked about the loss of not having her regular Passover Seder with the 27 family members she loves dearly. But she also talked about how this was the first time she was having Passover with some of these relatives from across the country and how she was really excited about that and reconnecting with people and finding a sense of joy and hope in that.

And we connected with Anna who is a chef and a cookbook author and Anna was celebrating Easter. She talked about how her mother couldn't come over and her kids were really asking for this one dish that her mother would always bring. And so she called up her mother and asked her for all the recipes and written them down. And she said that she was grateful that she'd done that because in the past she'd always taken the fact that her mother would always be there for granted, but now she had these really precious memories written down and that she was finding joy in that.

And I think what I learned from those conversations is exactly what you both have sort of pointed to is, is there is joy everywhere. There is joy even in times of hardship, and sometimes in times of hardship, it is when we notice it the most and cherish it the most.

SOLEDAD O'BRIEN: That's so interesting that obviously in a pandemic, there's clearly been a ton of loss, but I think we could all come up with the little silver linings—not traveling as much. I have dinner with my kids practically every night for the last six months, which we normally wouldn't do. They're not even little silver linings actually, they're big silver linings. They've been wonderful blessings in a really difficult circumstance and I think everybody kind of has their own list of those things.

What advice have you been giving people about how to stay connected when you're not going to hug them, you're not going to see them, you're not going to run by their house, you're not going to drop by to pick up something. What tips do you have that we can really feel connected? Why don't you start for me, Lisa?

LISA NICHOLS: OK, thank you. So first of all, to recognize that social distancing does not mean socially disconnected, like those two don't mean the same. That social distancing does not mean not to check on each other. Remember, this is the first time in our lifetime that someone is afraid of both being the victim of an illness or a virus and being the perpetrator.

When I was traveling home to California, I had the fear of catching it and then I had the fear of giving it to my 91-year-old grandmother. We've never been there before. This is an anomaly that we haven't ever seen in our lifetime, at least, in many of our lifetimes. So understanding what it is that we're climbing over or navigating through, it's not an emotional disconnection, and a lot of times what starts physical begins to threaten an emotional connection or a mental connection or a spiritual connection and that's our job to defend that.

A couple of techniques to do and many people may already been doing this but these are the things that I have done. I carve out, I carve out 30 minutes every Sunday, sometimes I go up to 45, and I make two-minute love videos. And so I just get on and I make two-minute love videos and they're to cousins and old friends and people that I could easily forget about because I assume they know I love them. And right now, let's not assume anything, let me remind you. So two-minute love videos.

I also have once a month that I get on Zoom with my cousins on a Friday night or a Saturday night and we recipe swap, and we all agreed to start cooking around six-ish, so that an hour later, we're coming out of our dish. We're not prepping the dish together. We're talking about the dish and we're eating it and either really disgusted at we created because many of us are experimenting or really excited and we have that moment of share. What's crazy is about seven of us get on; within the next three weeks, we've all made each other's dishes because it looks so

good. We post the ingredients in the chat and then we go out and we make it because food is a love language. To me, food is a love language.

The other thing is that we have a movie night where you're not watching the movie together but we're all watching the same movie at the same time and then we just chat about it.

SOLEDAD O'BRIEN: I love the way you're leveraging technology for very human emotions, right, pulling people together with the technology but not replacing the love or the thoughtfulness with technology. And I love these two-minute love notes for my sons. I cannot call them, they're teenage boys. I cannot call them love notes. I'm going to send them family update notes. I love that idea because they're not at home.

So Shiza, what do you recommend? If someone were to call you and say, "I feel so disconnected from my friends, how do I stay close because I can't go visit them?"

SHIZA SHAHID: Yeah, I love those tips as well. Thank you, Lisa. I have found the more I plan and the more deliberate I am about it, the more likely I am. Literally planning, seeing a friend over Zoom a month out or if we're trying to do a group chat, limiting the number of people, things that feel like I would never do them in normal times, but they make all the difference right now. I think those things really help.

And then I want to mention cooking again because I do think cooking, making something with your hands right now is incredibly comforting. For me, it's cooking the recipes that I grew up with that my mother used to make for me that the moment I make them, I just feel like I'm transported back. And she lives 7,000 miles away in Pakistan and I don't know when I'll see her but there's something just very visceral about eating food that she used to make for me with those same flavors that makes me feel like I'm right back there with her. And I think those practices even on your own can just give you a moment of connection.

SOLEDAD O'BRIEN: I love that advice. I'm a terrible cook but I'm an excellent assistant to my daughter who's a fantastic cook and I do all the dishes. So I think we've worked out a thing that works.

Lisa, I want to ask you career advice, because again, I think as we're all trying to get through this pandemic, the reality is if you're trying to grow your career, while you might be also navigating dealing with your kids or starting to homeschool them again or taking care of other people. How do you have face time with your boss when you're not in the office?

How do you think about well, here's where I want to be in six months or a year, here's how I want to get this next opportunity or here's how I can be helpful in a work situation? Normally that kind of thing would be popping into someone's office saying, "Hey, I'm here, and here's the

work I'm doing." What advice do you give for women who are trying to grow their career at a very difficult time?

LISA NICHOLS: Well, you can still do that. You just pop in their office differently. So now popping in the office is popping into my space. What are all the ways that you can pop into someone's space? A lot of times when people are looking to advance their career, they believe it's about being seen, but truly, it's about being result driven.

What problem can you help to solve? What problem can you help to solve? And how can you help us get to that end solution? Look at -- I tell my team all the time you are all the CEO of your division. What's the problem in that division that you are the solution to? And so looking at it that way on a very basic level is doing business from home or virtually, if you're doing business virtually, or if you're on a skeleton crew at work does not mean leisure. So are your machine -- is your technology and your machine and your environment up to par? Your sound, your lighting, your work environment, your appearance?

I took a guest bedroom and broke the bed down this weekend and said, there's no guests! There's just work at home. So, this room is no longer a guest bedroom. This room is now my office and my studio because that's the pivot. And so pivot with purpose. Don't just pivot and don't drag yourself into the change, my business sisters. Don't drag yourself into the change. The change is here and those who will rise on the other side powerfully are those who pivot with purpose and with resiliency and with passion.

The last thing I'm going to say is follow up. In this pandemic, everyone's leaned back a little bit. I'm going to invite you sister, lean forward. And the place you lean forward in, to me first, is in your follow up. Turn around requests, turnaround proposals, turnaround opportunities like you've never done before.

SOLEDAD O'BRIEN: You know, I live in New York City and generally speaking, I wear sweats all the time like everybody else. And the other day, I was walking around the city and I saw at least eight women in the greatest summer dresses. They were beautiful and it literally inspired me. I was like, you know what? I am done with sweats. I am done looking like I'm running to the corner to get a quart of milk in my flip-flops and my hair in a scrunchie.

Just seeing how they were dressed for work when clearly, here in New York City, they're not going into an office but that they were, as we talked about, that environment for work, it really, it literally lightened my day and really inspired me to kind of do better. So I think all of that is fantastic advice.

How do you guys think about or maybe even do yourselves, finding personal time or putting yourselves first? I feel like I have a list of 76 things I have to get done today and then myself is like number 77 or 78 possibly after walking the dog, that sort of thing. I know I'm not going to

get to it and I'm always amazed at women who have a lot of self-care, because I really would love to be that person. And I never ever, ever get to be that person and I think it's important to be that person, but I never get to be that person.

What's the advice that's realistic that you can fit -- I mean both of you guys have very busy days, how do you fit that self-care in? Why don't you start us off, Shiza?

LISA NICHOLS: Yeah, I was going to say Shiza, why don't you go first? Because hopefully you're better at it than I used to be when I was your age.

SHIZA SHAHID: You know, I'm not and I'm OK with that, because I made a choice to build something at this moment. I have -- I'm building something that is incredibly hard at a difficult time and I feel like -- I know that I have a lot of people relying on me and I love my work. It absolutely brings me to life.

And so I know that this is busy time, I know that this is not a time when I can take a long vacation or the other day, I thought I want to learn to play piano. I never got to learn how to play an instrument. And then I thought about whether my brain would possibly be able to handle working on anything. And I was like, no, I just, I can't. I'm just not going to learn the piano right now. I'm not going to -- there will be a moment where I can learn the piano. This is not it.

So I think there are ebbs and flows in life and there are times when you choose to do something hard and you need to give it your all and there are times where you have a little bit of rest from that and you can learn a new skill and travel and that is also growth. That is also so important. But I'm not sure you can do it all at the same time. I think as long as you're making the choice deliberately and you have those ebbs and flows, I think it's all good.

SOLEDAD O'BRIEN: I love that. I think you're exactly right. Sometimes getting a massage, as crazy as it sounds, is not relaxing if you have a long list of other things that need your attention. So I don't disagree with that at all. Lisa, you had said you didn't used to be good at that. Do you have a different philosophy now around taking care of yourself?

LISA NICHOLS: I don't know if it's a different philosophy or a different practice. I'm at a different place than Shiza. I see my little sister in her like -- the Lisa, the little Lisa in her and you're so beautiful, your soul is so beautiful, Shiza, you're just -- I'm looking forward to getting to know you better and what you're up to. I'm probably just a little bit older, just a little bit.

So I just believe that we have different purpose seasons and they require differently of us, and your line is always going to have 77 people in it. That's what movers and shakers do. We always have 77 people or 170 people in our line. Your job is to simply know when you have to be at the front of your line. You won't always be at the front of your line, but you have to sign up for being at the front of your line.

And then Shiza to what you said, time management, you said time management. So, I'm going to invite you to write this down, sis. There are the things that I'm doing now, they have a date on the calendar. There are the things that I'm not doing now, they have a date on the calendar that's way out there. And then there's the things that I'm never doing now, they're just on the wish list. So everything I want to do including things like play a piano, they're all on my list. Doing now, got a date. Not doing now in 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024. Never doing now, learning fluent Spanish. I want to know it more than anything, but I don't have a date for it. I don't want to put a date on it. A date stresses me out, but it's out.

SOLEDAD O'BRIEN: Final question for both of you. My husband and I started a very small foundation. We send girls to and through school and sometimes I have to tell these young women who often come from difficult circumstances that the challenges that they faced have actually made them in some ways tougher than their counterparts. That actually there has been something out of that difficult thing that you can take to the bank. Like you had been here before and some of your classmates have not. You have survived this. This thing here will not chuck you. You can make it. You've been tested already.

It's sometimes a very hard sell for them because I think they look at struggle as struggle. Are we going to be more resilient coming out the other side of a very difficult time? Let's say it's mid-2021. Is that -- is what I'm telling them a true thing or am I just spinning a wish for them? That we're going to come out the other end and there's going to be some valuable lesson that actually will make us stronger as we head into 2022. Who wants to start?

LISA NICHOLS: If I can jump in, I think 2021 is too soon. I think that the message now is sign up for the marathon because this is not a sprint. So preparing them for the long journey. And if we're wrong and it's over soon, that's great news. But prepare me for a marathon, not a sprint, so that I'm ready for that.

Speak to -- replace the question marks. The best thing we could do is replace question marks with either a period or an exclamation point. Will I survive this? Can I survive this? That's a question. You are built to survive this. That's a period or an exclamation point. Because when the question marks are replaced with periods and exclamation points, the moving ground becomes solid. And the best gift we can give to each other is to make our foundation solid right now.

And sometimes you have to answer with something that you can't quite touch it. Like I say, here's what I know. No matter how bad this pandemic is, no matter how crazy the social injustice gets, my human spirit is unavailable to be taken. My faith, my faith is not on the option block right now.

So to sit inside that certainty with them, I think the thing, Soledad, that I would write down to give people is certainty. Certainty. It might be 2021. It might be 2022. It might be 2023. None of us knows, but here's what I do know, is that who you are is built for such a time as this. That's what I do know. Period. That's where the period comes.

SOLEDAD O'BRIEN: Love it. And Shiza, I'll give you the final word on this.

SHIZA SHAHID: Yeah, I think that's beautiful. I think it is in times of hardship that growth happens, but growth and resilience is not a given. It is I believe the most significant determinant of success, of happiness, not intelligence, but resilience and how we adapt and how we react and how we grow. I think when I hear about the girls that you're sponsoring, I think of my own experience. I was fortunate to come to the United States on a full scholarship to Stanford University. I had no idea really what that even really meant, and I was surrounded by classmates who had been to elite boarding schools like Andover and were off to the Olympics next year, and spoke four languages and played five instruments. And I definitely felt that sense of inferiority, of envy that I hadn't had those same opportunities.

And it took me a while to realize that everything that I had gone through was a whole education and set of experiences that I possessed and understanding that I possessed and cross-cultural ability that I possessed. And I think what I would offer to those girls is to stop discounting the experiences, the hardships, the perspective that they have gained. And I understand why they do it because the education system doesn't value it and society doesn't value it and nobody is really asking you about it in a job interview. But once I learned the value of those experiences is when I was really able to sort of unlock my path. So I want to offer that to those girls that you support and thank you for doing that.

As for 2022, I wish I had a crystal ball, but I do think the human spirit is resilient and I do think the moral arc of the universe bends upwards, as Dr. King so eloquently said. So I think we're in a difficult moment right now, but I think it's galvanizing us to see the things that are broken and to really re-commit to a better future.

SOLEDAD O'BRIEN: I love that you said, "Don't discount your experience even if everyone around you does," because ultimately whether we're talking about young scholars trying to get through college or working women trying to figure out how to navigate the job or moms who are losing their mind because they're juggling so many things, I think that's exactly right. I think that out of that can come resiliency, even if people don't necessarily give you credit for it.

A big thank you to all of you who are watching and of course to our guests, Shiza and to Lisa. I think it's inspired all of us to take action in our own lives and I hope that you've all been energized by hearing their stories.

We hope that you've enjoyed this conversation and that you can take away from it some really specific and useful and tactical information on how to navigate the road ahead. So stay safe everybody and thanks for watching.

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