

Exploring how we can master ourselves by looking at how authors and experts say it is possible with your host Suswati Basu.

Intro music

Welcome to season 3 episode 90 of How To Be...with me Suswati as your timid presenter, guiding you through life's tricky topics and skills by reading through the best books out there.

Juggling faith and identity can be challenging because these two aspects often intersect and interact in complex ways. Faith, which encompasses one's religious beliefs and spiritual convictions, can deeply influence an individual's sense of self and their values. At the same time, personal identity is multifaceted, including cultural, social, familial, and individual elements that shape a person's worldview and behaviour. Striking a balance between faith and identity requires navigating potential conflicts, contradictions, and pressures from external influences. It involves introspection, self-reflection, and sometimes reconciling differing belief systems or societal expectations. Additionally, societal and cultural norms may impose rigid definitions of faith and identity, making it difficult to embrace both simultaneously without feeling torn or misunderstood. Negotiating this delicate balance often demands courage, open-mindedness, and a willingness to explore the intricacies of one's beliefs and personal experiences. Before we begin, I just want to mention I am cisgendered, open-minded about sexuality, and an atheist myself. Hence I am listening to those in the community who have a different experience and not putting my own agenda in this.

So how do we reconcile faith with identity?

Here is Angel Gravely, (M.Ed.) an LGBTQ+ educator and advocate and founder of Angel Gravely Education, and Reverend Jide Macaulay, founder & CEO House of Rainbow on their thoughts:

ANGEL GRAVELY: For me reconciling my queerness and my faith has come largely through two things. One, gaining exposure to other LGBTQ plus people of faith, especially those who are also black or also bisexual or both. And the second is really listening to what God was actually saying to me about the role of my bisexuality in my faith journey. Specifically, that it is an integral part of my calling. It is integral to the toolkit I've been equipped with to do the work that I'm supposed to be doing to help make the world a more just and more loving place. So without my bisexuality being acknowledged and embraced, I wouldn't be able to live fully as the person that I feel like God wants me to be.

REVEREND JIDE MACAULAY: Reconciling faith and sexuality is important to me. I was raised in a Christian family, even though conservative. I've also come to understand that God loved me just the way that I am a black, African gay man. I've always believed that G-A-Y means God adores you, God accepts you, and God anoints you for me and for many people. The Bible says that for God knew us before we were formed in our mother's womb and consecrated us as prophet over nations. The Bible also says that for we are fearfully and wonderfully made. The

Bible says that God loves everyone, regardless of who they are. And these are some of the things that has kept me together, that's kept me going for so many years of my life. And it is important to know that Jesus Christ came for everybody, regardless of our sexual orientation and gender identity. Too often, people have relied on scriptures and have used it badly. But we understand that a misinterpretation of the scripture is not an invalidation of those of us who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. I always live with the words that G-A-Y means God accepts you. And this is some of the messages I've shared with others as well.

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Our first book is from Lamya H, who is a queer Muslim writer and organiser living in New York City. Her memoir *Hijab Butch Blues* was published by Dial Press in February 2023. Lamya's work has appeared in *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Salon*, *Vice*, *Autostraddle*, *Vox*, and others. She has received fellowships from *Lambda Literary*, *Aspen Words* and *Queer|Arts*. Lamya's organising work centres around creating spaces for LGBTQ+ Muslims, fighting Islamophobia, and abolishing prisons. It was wonderful speaking with her, hence here is a snippet of our chat, but find the full interview on www.howtobe247.com or on the YouTube channel.

LAMYA H: I've been writing for a while. I've been writing sort of essays like you talked about. I've had them published in various places. But it was only when I started I found myself writing the Hajj essay that's in the book that comes towards the end because I found myself in this situation where me and my partner were going to visit my family and we were pretending to be friends and we were pretending that we weren't in a relationship. And it was also Eid. And so the story of Hajr was just sort of like, everywhere the story of Ibrahim. And people were talking about that story in sermons and posts and other things. And I found myself really reflecting on my situation where I felt really happy that I was able to take my partner to meet my family and she got to meet my cousins, my grandma. But then there was also this deep rooted sadness and I found myself thinking a lot of Hajar and how she must have been feeling those things too. And so that's where that first essay came from. And once I found myself writing that essay, I just had this feeling that I had so many more of these essays to write because I had been thinking about sort of like these dilemmas that I would find myself in. And I had also spent a lot of time sort of thinking about stories of the prophets in the Quran and just as sort of like complicated figures. And so in some ways, the book came out of that essay because I had so many more essays and chapters to write. And then I found myself sort of, like, writing more and more and then shutdown happened, and I suddenly had sort of, like, time and space to write because I had one of the jobs where I just couldn't work from home. So I was at home and trying to figure out what to do with my time. And it was just, like, so lovely to have uninterrupted time during the day to really focus on writing. And that's how the book came about. It took me a really long time to realise that I didn't have to listen to everyone. I think that was one of the things that I just really had to learn in my 20s, that you hear all this messaging, but what's really important is figuring out how to sort of carve your own path, and figuring out how to live in ways that really feel true to you. So, to me, I feel like I got so many messages about how to be queer or how to be Muslim, and to me, it was just, like, really a matter of sorting through and being like, oh, no,

this is what I want out of my life, and this is how I want to live. Yeah, I think one of the big turning points in my life was when I found community, which really expanded my notions of sort of interdependence and being able to be vulnerable around people and letting people in. And that loneliness was such a big part of my life in various ways, like growing up as a brown kid in this sort of Arab country that I lived in, or even sort of, like, moving to the US. And just not knowing a lot of people, not really having a ton of family here. And then from that to sort of finding myself in sort of queer spaces as the only sort of visible Muslim, or finding myself in Muslim spaces as someone who's queer. And to me, finding a community of people who were both sort of, like, queer and Muslim or, like, Muslim ish and sort of on the spectrum of those identities and had other identities too, and that were just really living their difference. That was a big turning point for me in my life. And that really changed the way that I think about the ways that we connect with each other and the ways in which it's possible to build relationships that are really rooted in an intentional love and an intentional sort of building and not shying away from conflict. A lot of those things really led me to find community, and that is what finally sort of lifted some of that deep rooted loneliness. A dyke? Yes, potentially. But also, I think what was really interesting in sort of, like, looking back at myself in my childhood is that moment of recognising that she could have made me feel so validated and so seen, and not like I was the only person in the world. And yeah, I remember being sort of like 14 and having this moment where I was like, oh wait, Mariam just told this man who appeared at her door to go away and she says that she's never been touched by a man. And I don't know, there was just something there that felt so deeply powerful to me. And that's kind of my thing with the other sort of figures in the Quran as well. So I read a lot as a kid and I still read a lot. And to me, one of my favourite things about reading is being able to really get inside a character's head and be able to sort of hear almost their internal dialogue and just really deeply know their sort of dilemmas. And their decisions and their thoughts and why they're making a certain choice and what are their regrets. And just like, what's in their head? And to me, I grew up with the Quran as just like a text that was everywhere. It was something that people played on the radio or you'd be sort of like walking down the street and you'd pass a mosque and you'd hear the Quran being read. And so to me, as I was reading the Quran, a lot of the same questions would come up for me around the various stories and the various figures. Like, how does Moses feel when he first talks to God? Like, what must that have been? Like, was he scared? Was he anxious? Was he nervous? And so to me, it felt like, I don't know, being able to really question all of the motivations of these figures and in these stories really led to a lot of self reflection on my part because I would also find myself in sort of like tangly situations the way that a lot of the prophets did. And so, yeah, it was really helpful to be able to look at my life through the lens of these stories the same way I've been looking at my life through the lens of all these other books that I read.

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The book explores Lamya's experiences of growing up as a queer Muslim in a world that often sees those identities as incompatible. When Lamya was fourteen-years-old, she talks about when she used to attend an Islamic school in a foreign country with a diverse student body including Bangladesh, Nigeria, Egypt, Germany. She is deeply introspective and contemplates her identity and faith. Lamya's regular Quran class covers the Surah Maryam, and she finds

herself relating to Maryam's struggles in the Quranic story. In a parallel narrative, Lamya reveals her own emotional turmoil, feeling trapped and isolated in her life. She battles with the desire to disappear, wishing she had never been born. The author writes that this verse is saying that Maryam wants to die. Maryam, of the eponymous surah we're reading, wants to die.

It reads: "And the pains of childbirth [of Isa] drove her [Maryam] to the trunk of a palm tree. She said, "Oh, I wish I had died before this and was in oblivion, forgotten." (19:23)

Lamya shares her struggles with feeling disconnected from her surroundings, her desire to disappear, and her realisation that she is gay. As she reads about Maryam's story, Lamya identifies with the character's sense of being different and misunderstood. She finds comfort in the possibility that Maryam, like herself, may have been gay. She reads out:

He said, "I am only the messenger of your Lord to give you [news of] a pure boy [Isa]." She said, "How can I have a boy while no man has touched me..." (19:17-19)

She adds: "No man has ever touched her, she says. She hasn't let them, she hasn't been interested." Therefore, it leads her to believe that Maryam is a lesbian. This realisation sparks a newfound curiosity about her own identity and a desire to live and explore life.

Throughout the narrative, she grapples with cultural expectations, societal norms, and the need to conform to traditional gender roles. Despite her internal conflicts, she embraces her uniqueness and chooses to confront her true self rather than suppressing it. She tells her mother: "I'm never going to marry a man, Mama." Her mother laughingly responds "Of course you will. Everyone does. How will you live if you don't get married? Who will take care of you? Who will love you then?" Despite feeling deflated, she realises that this is the year she chooses not to die after reading the Surah. This is the year she chooses to live instead.

Lamya then learns about jinns, supernatural beings in Islamic tradition, through various encounters. The first part takes place during a visit to Asma Aunty's house, where Lamya and her brother discover that jinns are real beings that can change shape and cause trouble. Asma Aunty recounts a frightening encounter with a jinn in the form of a black cat, leaving the children with nightmares.

She then talks about her fascination with a cool girl named Rasha, who owns a pogo stick. Both her and her brother want a pogo stick but hesitate to ask their parents or Rasha. When their parents suggest asking Rasha, they feel uncomfortable due to social hierarchies in the unnamed country in the Middle East, which affects her self-perception and questions her identity.

She also learns about jinns during a biology class. The teacher shares a jinn possession story, which terrifies her. However, more than anything she wonders if she, too, is like a jinn, invisible and unimportant. The author writes: "She looks at me like she's never seen me before, like I'm a

jinn who has just materialised before her, even though we've been in classes together for years."

Lamya talks about Lina, a popular and privileged girl, for a school project. Initially distant, Lina starts seeking her help with homework, and they become friends. However, she then faces doubts about whether their friendship is genuine, given the cultural and social differences between them. "You don't understand," she tells her mother. "Lina is my friend." I startle a little when I say it, unsure if it's true, unsure when I started believing that. My mother is unconvinced. "People like that aren't friends with people like us." It highlights the complexity of navigating relationships and self-worth, especially when confronted with differences in social status and ethnicity.

She then reflects on her experiences as a young Arab Muslim woman growing up in an Arab country and later moving to the United States. She grapples with feelings of invisibility, fear, and inferiority resulting from racism and white supremacy. She also recounts instances of racial profiling, being asked for her ID more frequently, and feeling unseen or misunderstood. She says: "I realize that I get asked for my ID a lot more than other people. And there are clear patterns. I'm asked for my ID the most when I'm alone."

Throughout her journey, she realises that it is not her race or identity that is problematic; instead, it is the deeply ingrained white supremacy and racism in society. She seeks to unlearn these harmful beliefs and educate herself about social justice, decolonization, and antiracism. She adds: "I begin to get the hang of deciphering the hierarchies of this country. I notice that my Black friends are treated horribly by everyone in authority; my friends with accents are assumed to be stupid; my immigrant friends are always being asked where they're really from. I notice that people who are white or appear to be white are on top of the pyramid here just like they were in the country where my parents and brother still live, that sometimes this category of "appears to be white" includes wealthy, worldly, light-skinned Arabs like Rasha and Lina, but not always. I notice that this category doesn't include Arabs who are visibly Muslim, who have identifiably Arab names. I learn that my brown hijabi Muslim body is seen as scary, disempowered, both hypervisible and invisible at the same time."

By connecting her personal experiences with the Quranic surah about jinn, Lamya finds a new perspective. She begins to understand that jinn are diverse beings, some good and some not, much like humans. This realisation prompts her to accept herself and challenge the prejudices she faced and internalised. Lamya acknowledges her growth and the need to embrace her identity, heritage, and difference without fear or shame.

She says "Allah," the Arabic word for God, carries diverse interpretations. Some envision Allah as an entity beyond gender, transcending the traditional binary concept. Lamya recalls childhood experiences, first with their maulvi saab which is a religious teacher and then at Islamic Sunday school, where they ask about Allah's gender. Later, at a halaqa study circle in New York, she meets a Muslim feminist who refers to God as "she." Intrigued, they explore non-binary and trans conceptions of God. She says: "I don't find my people, my Muslim

community at that halaqa. But I learn something else: how important it is for me to use the pronoun they for God—my God, whom I refuse to define as a man or a woman, my God who transcends gender."

Lamya reflects on her struggle with societal expectations of gender roles and beauty standards. At a family wedding, she reluctantly tries on makeup, which leaves her feeling uncomfortable. These experiences prompt her to embrace a gender-expansive concept of God and search for their true self. The story highlights the complexity of understanding divinity and the societal pressure to conform to gender norms.

She also faces societal expectations of how a woman should behave and look after reaching puberty. When they put make up on her, Lamya's reaction is: "I feel so confused and disgusted by this person I see in the mirror that I start crying."

It then moves to a time when the author is older and living in New York, facing incidents that challenge her gender identity, like being mistaken for a man or being suggested to transition. The author reflects on how God is portrayed in the Quran with ninety-nine names, none of which are inherently gendered, and questions the societal constructs that categorise people strictly into male or female. She also remembers wondering about Allah's gender and her desire to see God beyond societal expectations.

She shares her experiences and struggles with gender and identity as a Muslim. As a child, she excelled in Islamic Sunday school but question the gendered language used to describe Allah. Later, as an adult, she searches for her place in the Muslim community, encountering both acceptance and misunderstanding. She asks Uncle Karim "How come the translation says he? Isn't Allah not supposed to be a man or a woman?" Uncle Karim pauses for a second and looks thoughtful before he answers her. "It's just translating the Arabic word huwa, which means he in English. It's just convention", which she isn't satisfied with.

She then shares incidents where others misgender or question her identity, highlighting the rigidity of gender norms and societal expectations. Throughout, Lamya asserts her belief in a gender-expansive conception of Allah, seeing divinity as beyond traditional gender binaries. She emphasises the importance of language, representation, and self-definition, as she navigates her journey toward self-acceptance and understanding in a society that often fails to acknowledge and affirm nonbinary and genderqueer identities.

She begins teaching in the US with a group of students. Amid feeling trapped and bonding with the group, the author develops confusing feelings for a girl on the trip. She struggles to articulate these feelings until confiding in their friend Cara, who is supportive and shares her own experiences with liking girls. The author finds solace in knowing they are not alone and prays for guidance in accepting and understanding their feelings. The narrative draws parallels to the story of Musa (Moses) and emphasises the importance of courage and support in facing personal revelations. She says the words that come out of Musa are her favourite duaa, a prayer that comes to her lips again and again when she does not have words of her own. "My

Lord. Expand for me my breast with confidence. And ease for me my task. And untie the knot from my tongue. That my speech may be understood.”

Then she talks about two interconnected stories. One is about Muhammad, who receives a divine revelation from God, changing his life forever. He becomes a prophet and starts preaching Islam to a small circle of trusted individuals, gradually building a community of believers. The other story is about the author, a queer individual in her early twenties, struggling to come out to their straight friend. The author finally confides in their friend, who accepts them but makes a hurtful comment about bisexual individuals. The author initially goes along with it to maintain the friendship but later feels disgusted with themselves for not standing up for their identity.

The two stories highlight themes of self-discovery, vulnerability, acceptance, and the complex dynamics of identity and friendship. They also emphasise the importance of building supportive communities and how acceptance and support can be transformative. Lamya's journey in the story reflects the struggles and challenges faced by many queer individuals in navigating their identity in various social circles.

She also draws parallels to the Prophet Muhammad's journey after receiving revelations from God. The author contemplates the difficulties of being true to oneself and their faith while seeking acceptance from both the LGBTQ+ and Muslim communities. She shares the struggle of trying to fit in with a group that might not fully understand or accept them. The author finds solace in a gathering of LGBTQ+ Muslims and feels a sense of belonging and acceptance among them. The Prophet Muhammad's life is seen as a source of inspiration, reminding the author to be true to themselves, to stand up for justice, and to find their place in the world.

The author writes: "God sends you a wahi, a chapter of the Quran dedicated to this reprimand: Surah 'Abasa, meaning "He frowned." You shouldn't have done that, the surah says. The chapter is about how God guides whom They will and leads astray whom They will. You can't make someone listen to you, you can't make someone respect you. You can only respect yourself, and the best way to do that is to enact justice, to live love. For the poor, the blind, the marginalised, those on the outskirts of society, those people who are not in power, those people who are your people, those whom you come from, those who are yours."

"Asiyah" is a poignant narrative exploring the concept of patience and endurance through the story of Asiyah, a queen married to Pharaoh in ancient Egypt. Lamya often heard this story from her mother while waiting for her father in the car. Throughout her life, her mother uses the story of Asiyah to impart the virtues of patience and kindness. As she grew up she witnesses the consequences of a forced marriage on her cousin and feels the weight of cultural expectations in her own life in the U.S. Lamya asks her mother why she has to stay married. Her mother responds "This is just what marriage is like. What will she do if she leaves him? Where will she go? And she has a baby now, too; how will she support her child? You're being irrational. You know she can't legally stay in this country without a male guardian."

The story weaves together Lamya's experiences, her mother's teachings, and societal pressures, highlighting the complex dynamics of marriage and womanhood. Her thoughts suggest the conflicting attitudes towards marriage, patience, and independence in different cultural contexts and raises questions about the price women often pay for endurance.

She then recalls her experiences with obtaining visas, renewing documents, and the constant fear of deportation. Despite facing hardships and witnessing friends in abusive relationships, she chooses to stay and build a life in the United States. The story concludes by reimagining the fate of Asiyah as a symbol of strength and resilience. Lamya reflects on her own journey and considers how to fight injustices and live according to her principles in the place she calls home. She says: "I gather my resentment, my fury that there's nowhere in the world that's magically free of racism and Islamophobia, homophobia and transphobia. I take that burning energy and channel it toward new, different questions"

She then shares their experiences on Eid, a Muslim religious holiday, and her feelings for a girl they met recently. They enjoy each other's company, and she develops strong feelings for her. However, she seems oblivious to Lamya's romantic interest and doesn't understand terms related to queer identity. It looks at her internal struggle of harbouring feelings for a presumably straight girl and grappling with the idea of unrequited love. She also mentions the story of Prophet Nuh, drawing a parallel between her unyielding feelings and the prophet's persistent efforts to change people's beliefs. Throughout, the writer navigates her emotions, uncertainties, and the potential risks of revealing her feelings to someone who might not reciprocate them.

Prophet Nuh is sent a flood by God to wipe the slate clean and start over. Hence she draws a parallel to her own life, expressing frustration with pining after straight girls and having bad experiences dating queer women.

She remembers her own life experiences while reading Surah Yusuf from the Quran with her friend Manal. She recalls the story of Yusuf, who faced abandonment, betrayal, and imprisonment and then draws parallels between Yusuf's experiences and her own struggles with feeling abandoned and hesitant to open up to love. The conversation with Manal prompts her to contemplate the possibility of allowing themselves to be vulnerable and open to love, even though they fear being hurt and left behind. She also mentions her relationship with Liv, who encourages her to let her guard down and embrace vulnerability.

Yusuf goes to prison after being wrongly accused. In prison, he interprets dreams and gains favour with the king, becoming the head of the granaries. Yusuf's behaviour reminds Lamya of "queer indispensability," the fear of being left that makes people make themselves indispensable. Lamya struggles with the same fear, constantly testing her relationships by not asking for help. However, through conversations with a friend, she realises that she is already loved and doesn't need to be indispensable. She can be vulnerable and ask for support without fearing abandonment, just like Yusuf finally allowed himself to be loved by his family.

She talks about "Hajar", a powerful and emotionally resonant story that weaves together different narratives and perspectives. It tells the tale of Hajar, an enslaved Black woman, and her journey with Ibrahim and their son Ismail. The story explores themes of love, sacrifice, faith, and queerness. It delves into the complexity of relationships, family dynamics, and cultural expectations. Lamya's partner Liv, navigates her identity as a queer woman and the challenges of hiding her relationship with her from her culturally conservative family.

In the story, Hajar and Ismail are left alone in the desert. Despite the hardships, Hajar's faith and determination lead to miracles: a spring called Zamzam and the founding of the city of Makkah. She finds solace in the story and trust in God's care as she builds a new family with Liv and chosen queer Muslim friends.

A group of friends, including Lamya, go on a camping trip in the wild West. During a hike, they play a game of "favorites," where Lamya critiques her friend Mitra's choice of the prophet Yunus. The friends engage in playful banter and share their favourite prophets. On the hike, Lamya reflects on the importance of fighting for her beliefs but also the need to protect herself. Yunus emerges from the whale into a better world after undertaking trials and tribulations, which she hopes for her friends.

Our final book is *Unashamed: A Coming-Out Guide for LGBTQ Christians and Refocusing My Family: Coming Out, Being Cast Out, and Discovering the True Love of God* by Amber Cantorna-Wylde, who is an LGBTQ+ advocate. As a gay woman living with late-stage Lyme disease, Cantorna-Wylde specialises in bringing messages of diversity, hope, and self-acceptance to those who have been pushed to the margins. She is the host of the Unashamed Love Collective – a safe haven for LGBTQ+ people and allies that fosters a supportive community. She also leads Cultivating Community retreats—small, intimate group gatherings that build lasting relationships with like-minded people. Here she is

AMBER CANTORNA-WYLDE: I think it meant that my world was so small. My dad has worked a focus on the family for over 30 years and he continues to work there even now. And so our world was grounded in Colorado Springs in focus on the family, in those conservative Christian values. I was homeschooled, I was raised in the purity culture. So all those things really influenced me and my. Worldview. And really, my parents worked hard to kind of keep me safe and sheltered in that Christian bubble, which meant that I wasn't really exposed to any diversity at all. And so our world was very small. Our worldview was very small. It's very much a black and white of we are right and they are wrong, and we know the right way to be a Christian, and we need to convince others to follow in these footsteps. And so even the relationships you had, the way you interacted with people, everything was I talk about this in my first book of like everything was to, quote unquote, be a blessing to them, which kind of just was like the insider's language for making them come to your side or convince them to become more of your kind of Christian because your kind was the only kind and the only right kind. And so it was a small worldview, and it was one that had kind of a caveat of this conditional love. I think, even though they don't necessarily say it that way that love does come with a caveat, with a condition on it. And so even though they preach unconditional love, and they say God has unconditional love,

when it comes down to it, that's not really the case. And there's actually quite a few conditions for being accepted into that group.

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Cantorna-Wylde grew up in a devout Christian home in Colorado Springs. However, when she came out as gay in her early 20s, her family disowned her, causing her immense pain. She found solace in a welcoming faith-based community in Denver and became an advocate for LGBTQ Christians.

She adds however, that she is not a not a licensed therapist. The information in this book is based on her years of experience, research, and study as an LGBTQ Christian advocate and leader, and is formed out of the hundreds of conversations she's had with people who have reached out to her for guidance and support. This book is not meant to be a replacement for therapy, but rather a tool to help guide those along the path to healing and wholeness.

One central aspect of Cantorna-Wylde's guidance is addressing internalised homophobia and transphobia. She shares stories like those of Isaac, Erin, and Paula, illustrating the pervasive impact of homophobia. These narratives highlight struggles such as familial rejection, self-doubt stemming from prejudice, and workplace discrimination, which underscore the ongoing challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals in society. She introduces definitions for terms like homophobia and internalised homophobia, emphasising the importance of openly acknowledging and rejecting harmful attitudes.

Cantorna-Wylde acknowledges that homophobia and transphobia can lead to serious mental health issues, pointing to statistics from organisations like the Trevor Project. These alarming numbers highlight the vulnerability of LGBTQ+ individuals, making it crucial to consciously reject negative opinions and foster self-acceptance. To address internalised shame, she draws on Brené Brown's work, emphasising the power of vulnerability and empathy. By openly sharing experiences and struggles, individuals can counter shame and create a more inclusive environment.

The author also explores the difference between guilt and shame, emphasising that guilt pertains to actions while shame relates to one's identity. She advises embracing one's LGBTQ+ identity openly to overcome shame. Cantorna-Wylde encourages individuals to listen to their inner voice, which might be a conduit for divine communication. This inner voice can provide guidance that aligns with a person's true self.

Fostering self-acceptance, particularly for LGBTQ+ individuals of faith, is a recurring theme. Cantorna-Wylde stresses that embracing oneself and celebrating diversity are essential for thriving as a minority. She advises releasing expectations imposed by the evangelical church and recommends affirming Christian authors and resources that can reshape perspectives on spirituality and equality.

The author suggests practical steps like writing "permission slips" to grant oneself grace and setting healthy boundaries. Creating a supportive community before coming out is also vital. Cantorna-Wylde distinguishes between welcoming and affirming churches, emphasising the importance of finding inclusive spaces that prioritise LGBTQ+ inclusion.

Regarding the coming-out process, Cantorna-Wylde acknowledges its personal and intimidating nature. She stresses mental readiness and the importance of therapy for addressing any mental health concerns. She debunks the misconception that seeking therapy contradicts faith, advocating for professional help in the healing journey.

Practicality is a focus as well, covering considerations like timing, safety, and planning for the coming-out conversation. The author highlights the need for educating oneself to dispel negative beliefs and assumptions, suggesting distance from unsupportive environments if necessary.

Developing a robust support system through relationships, online communities, and gatherings is encouraged. Cantorna-Wylde discusses taking a leap of faith and finding comfort in spiritual growth. She suggests coming-out strategies, sharing advice on handling questions and discussions about theology.

The importance of asserting healthy boundaries, especially in the face of internalised homophobia, is stressed. Boundaries reflect self-worth and self-respect, fostering a healthy environment. Practical tips, such as finding hobbies and practising forgiveness, are provided to aid self-care during this transformative process.

Cantorna-Wylde highlights the significance of fostering a healthy spiritual identity by questioning beliefs, redefining God's image, and finding faith in diverse spaces. She addresses grief and loss, adapting Elizabeth Kubler-Ross' stages of grief to the LGBTQ+ community's experience, underscoring the complexity and growth opportunities in coming out.

The book also delves into the hurtful terms and phrases that LGBTQ+ Christians may face, promoting the importance of embracing one's identity without shame. In summary, Cantorna-Wylde offers a comprehensive guide for LGBTQ+ Christians navigating the complex terrain of self-acceptance, faith, and community. Her insights provide a roadmap for those seeking to reconcile their identities with their spirituality while fostering inclusivity and empowerment.

So to sum up:

Lamya H shows in *Hijab Butch Blues* how she's identified passages in the Quran and reconciled her faith with her queer identity, while also facing discrimination throughout and feeling like an outsider - just like the spirits called jinn. She also tells a universal story of courage, trust, and love, celebrating what it means to be a seeker and an architect of one's own life.

Cantorna-Wylde says in Unashamed that chase after your dreams. Embrace the Divine diversity that God has placed within you. Walk confidently in who you are, and claim your place of belonging in the world.

I grew up Hindu, but lost my own faith when I was 12 years old. But I believe in a level of spirituality that we are a tiny spec in the universe, and respect everyone's right to believe. Please join in on the conversation by following @howtobe247 on Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook, and subscribe on the podcast, which can be found via www.howtobe247.com.

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Before we go, here are international award-winning leadership and empowerment expert and author Ashley T Brundage, Rev. Kipp Nelson, who is the Pastor of St. John's on the Lake United Methodist Church in Miami Beach, Florida and the first openly gay pastor to a local church in the Florida Conference of the United Methodist Church, as well as queer researcher and teacher Jebin Samuel on their thoughts. See you next week.

ASHLEY T BRUNDAGE: I use she/her pronouns. I'm a proud out woman of transgender experience and I've only had to transition my gender one time, but I've had to transition my religion three times and part of this process of navigating religious differences is all about finding the enlightenment that's necessary for you to overcome obstacles. Being born Jewish and having to navigate and changing my religion to suffice. For getting married in the Catholic Church, it was really hard for me and I had to sacrifice lots of things that I knew were going to address my identity groups. But now I'm happy to be out proud as a very proud Jewish woman now and being welcomed back into my faith is incredibly important. So please make sure that you understand that while all of our differences are navigated, religion is one of them that requires you to showcase empathy, trust, compassion and support regardless of how people identify.

REV. KIPP NELSON: I was born and raised in Birmingham, Alabama and grew up a United Methodist my entire life. When I was 14 years old, I knew two things: the first, that I was called to ministry, and the second that I was gay. And so I spent the next ten years of my life fighting those two experiences. And along the way, I encountered some incredible friends and allies who went above and beyond to show me that it was possible to be both Christian and queer. And as I began to explore other perspectives, I also encountered many friends who were also in the process of reconciling their own faith and their sexuality. It helped me to understand that I wasn't alone. God wants us to love each other and to love ourselves. And I'm honoured that my church is supporting organisations like the National LGBTQ Task Force because this work is the foundation of who we are as Christians. We believe God wants us to love everybody, and especially those that society and religion have often pushed aside. We are working for a world where all LGBTQ people have a place to belong and to be found in community with others, and to receive the same type of love and respect as everyone else.

JEBIN SAMUEL: I identify as a gay Christian. I am from a community where Christianity is pretty fundamentalist. And in the last few years, I've become quite open about my sexuality. And I still work in church, I sing in choirs. I still have faith. I'm not religious, but I'm a believer. I'm not exclusively a Christian in the way where I do not believe in other possibilities. I believe there could be multifaceted sides to spirituality where everybody has found their own truth in their own way. I do not subscribe to absolutism here. So this is one of the things that irks my cousins and my family. I've been told that I've given up on the truth, that I do not believe in an objective truth. They believe I've compromised my God and my truth. And, uh, they think that in the name of Christianity, I have conjured up my own God. And it's an imagined God that I have. And it takes a lot of energy to logically talk to them. So I don't always get into that conversation, but I make sure that they do not cross the line where they deny me my God, imagined or not, or whatever. It's my say. And whether I use imagination well, that imagination, I believe, is quite close to spirituality. So imagination, for me, is not opposed to reality. And, I believe God loves everyone. And, we are in a narrative which puts down queer people, and it is our responsibility to make sure that we stand up and say, no, this is not right. This is not Godly. And God is for me just as much as they or she or he.