

Hassan Ikhzaan Saleem Transcript

Amy Chatelaine: Welcome to Las Dispensas, New Mexico. The land here is rugged, and held by the root system of the Santa Fe National Forest. The trees are a mix of conifers and ponderosa pines that historically adapted to survive frequent, low-severity fires. However, a century of fire suppression is leading to uncontrolled growth and a higher-density forest. This translates to heavier fuel loads and a greater chance for a small burn to get quickly out of hand.

Our teacher today is Hassan Ikhzaan Saleem, a horse trainer originally from the Maldives. Hassan's work with these magnificent, spirited animals is fueled by patience and ongoing attention. His approach is a form of deep listening that helps him stay connected to the values imparted by his family back home.

Here is Hassan with his American story.

Hassan Ikhzaan Saleem: So my name is Hassan Ikhzaan Saleem, and I live out here in Las Dispensas, New Mexico. So I grew up in the Maldives during a dictatorship, which was there for 30 years, and was actively part of resisting it in a nonviolent, non-cooperation way, especially in high school where we did a lot of student demonstrations in the sense we were not out on the streets protesting much but a lot of systematic boycotting of school activities. And so my mind was very much focused on doing those things.

But since I was a young child and growing up, in the back of my mind, the thing I really wanted to do was ride horses and be out in the country and climb mountains and whatnot. But that was not something that I ever pursued because in the, at the same time, the political economic situation did not allow me to even think of those things. But in the back of my mind, that was something I always wanted to do.

In 2008, I graduated from high school and I took about a year and a half off just doing work and activism and whatnot. And in 2008, November, the revolution was successful and the government fell. So we considered our work done, though our work is not really done. But they gave me a chance to pursue some of my own personal goals. And I wanted to go out and get an education. And I discovered the United World Colleges and pursued that. I got in. I came. It was a hard journey to get the visa and the travel. I didn't have a lot of money. So I worked really hard to make up the money to come here, but got here and it's been great ever since.

Also, when I came here, I really wanted to get into horses. So I got introduced to the horses from a very different perspective. The mainstream name is the California style horsemanship, but it's horsemanship where you're really looking for a relationship with the horse and the rider rather than a very well-trained, fabulous horse.

So our horses in the end become really eloquent and fluid and all that, but the process is not very nice. I mean, there is no glory to it. There is no, how do you say, poor man's circumstance. And in this industry, we say there's always tomorrow, so there's no rush in getting things done. If the horse doesn't want to cooperate today, we just stick with it. It's like rearing children, I guess: you take your time with it.

When I go out there with horses and I'm young and I'm starting, I'm really learning this stuff. And it's frustrating, because with horses, you don't get anywhere for years and years, days and months for me. And then one day that clicks and you just have to be really calm because you really can get frustrated and if you get restless during that process, then it just all goes away. You just have to be calm.

So, when we were growing up, my parents, they really believed in literature. They really believed we should have read Tom Sawyer and all that stuff. And we loved it, right, because, I mean, it's just, in Maldives, you sit down and read *Huckleberry Finn* and you're going like, wow, people live like this. I mean, there is no conceptualization of that kind of lifestyle. I mean, it's unbelievable and we loved it and, we read it: Oscar Wilde and *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, *Moby Dick*, *Picture of Dorian Gray*. They stuck with us. And this one book, and I always forget the author, but it's *Lonesome Dove*. And I read that book and I completely fell in love with horses and the "Western lifestyle."

So, my dad and I have a very close relationship. My dad and I, we're like pals. And so, he kind of tapped into that. And on my 13th birthday, I got a horse, a wooden horse. I've never seen or touched a live horse before I came here. So he cultivated that idea of me doing what I want to do. So, every year for my birthday, I got a horse. That's the whole story.

This red horse that I work with, Caspian is his name. And we go out there and we work, and we work and we get things done. And it goes great. And I'm so proud of myself. Come back and next morning, I go there and he's forgotten everything. Or I've forgotten everything and it doesn't work. And it's really hard to be calm at that moment.

So, when I was getting into the horsemanship, this one great cowboy and horseman, he said to me that, "If humans were like horses, there'd be more peace on the earth. Because we just take a wild horse, a feral horse, and it's being chased by a mountain lion. It's going 100 miles an hour. And the mountain lion gives up, and lets it go. The horse just doesn't stop and go back to grazing. But the horse stops, and get on the ground, and roll in the dirt, and makes a transition. You take a horse out of a ground pen and go work him on cattle, and you bring him back, and take that saddle off. He goes onto the ground, and rolls in the dirt, and makes a transition. If humans would take the time to make the transition between their lives when they're doing things, there'll be more peace on earth," he said.

And this was something he said to me on the ranch, on horseback, and I always remembered it and I try to apply that to my life. Because if you take the time to transition — you get mad today, don't carry it on with you the rest of your life. You know, today I go to a hearing about hydraulic factoring and you get despaired. Okay, that's it. Transition. Come on back home, calm down, relax, enjoy your company, right?

And this guy, he was a great horseman, all that. He goes up to him, and there is a kind of prestige thing that goes around in the ranch culture that I'm not really into, but never falling off and looking good and all that, right? So he goes up to this bull and he's an experienced cattleman who's worked cows all his life since he was five or four. He goes and he throws his loop on the bull and puts the deli on and he falls off. He falls off, and he's embarrassed and everybody's making fun of him because he's an experienced rider. It shouldn't have

happened, right? And in some other case, the guy would have gotten up and beaten his horse or blamed something else or — but he got up. Took the deli off, he got on the horse.

It was like it never happened. He didn't get mad. He didn't curse, like it never happened. Just got up, dusted off, get on, got on with it. And it quieted people. There were, some loud mouths on that outfit that was making fun of him. But I mean, just seeing that, it just shut everybody up. And everybody thought about it, I think. And after that, we were more calm. Stuff happens, but it's all right, you know? We go on. So, I try to do that. I try to remember that.

We, as people, got to live together. And if you're not going to live together, then there's no reason to live. And I love living out here without anybody else, right? Don't get me wrong. But at some point, you got to make interactions.

I think it's your responsibility to live as humans in a group, in the sense, everybody's your brethren. Doesn't matter if you're from the United States or the Maldives or whatever. And that relationship we have with humans, the four-legged, the trees, the earth, that's the reason why you should do it. Because, yeah, you can live all by yourself and have a happy life, but are you really happy? Are you really in peace? I won't speak for them, but I don't think so. I don't think I could be.

The reason I do it again and again is I think that's how you get peace, because you keep trying.

Amy Chatelaine: We're grateful to Hassan for sharing his story. Before you go, here are two prompts toward deeper listening.

First:

How do you tend to move through daily transitions? How has that impacted your relationships?

And the second is an invitation to think of a relationship that took, or is currently taking some time to develop. This could be with a classmate, a coworker, a neighbor, an in-law.

What is the process teaching you about yourself?

Thanks for practicing today. See you next time.