

I REACHED FOR BOOKS

Guest: Hem Rizal
Interviewer: Joshua Dolezal

Locations: Pella, IA, Kyle, SD, and Des Moines, IA
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JD: I'm Joshua Doležal and this is Mid-Americana: Stories from a Changing Midwest. We continue our Immigration series this week with a story from Hem Rizal. Hem fled Bhutan with his family when he was just a year old and grew up in the Gold Hap refugee camp in Nepal. Hem's family believed he had a bright future as a teacher. But just as he was about to take the exam that could open up the world to him, a fire swept through the camp, and he had to run for his life.

HR: When I think about that fire, I remember distinctly reaching for my books, my notebooks, whatever I had from school supplies because I knew that if I saved those, I would have enough time to, review and read and do all the math that I needed to get ready for the exams. So I remember saving only those items and running with them as my family and neighbors, you know, hustled to get out of the fire. Looking back, that seemed significant because that's what education meant to me. If there is a fire, and you wanna save one thing or two things that you can and in the moment of that you have to make instant decisions, I reached for books because that was the only future that I had.

JD: Hem survived that fire and settled in Seattle with his family when he was seventeen years old. By the time he entered the University of Washington, where he studied math and political science, Hem felt that he was living two lives: his own life and the life his parents had been denied. It's a burden that he carried with him through four years at the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation with the Teach for America program. And it is this feeling - that his own survival comes with the obligation to lift others up - that drives Hem's interest in public policy.

Hem is now a graduate student at the Harvard Kennedy School. This fall he has been attending classes remotely from his family's home in Des Moines while also supporting the Black Lives Matter movement. Hem describes himself as still searching for a home. But in the story he told me, Hem was never truly alone. Even last spring, during COVID precautions at Pine Ridge, Hem took in a rez dog he named Apollo. Whether he returns to teaching or makes a life for himself in public service, Hem will be guided by a question that more of us ought to ask ourselves: What have we done for others?

JD: I'm curious when you think about your immigration story, where does it begin in time? Does it start in a refugee camp? Do you think of your own immigration as beginning with your parents or further back with other ancestors?

HR: I mean there are two parts to it right? Part one being it has to start where my great great grandparents started right which was in the Northern Bhutan from where they moved to Northern Nepal where my great great grandparents originated from and then moved to Bhutan. But then the second part to that is my own experience right? Where my first recollections of

myself, my life was in that refugee camp where I grew up. And then moving to the United States it was the biggest immigration stories for me right. So that's yeah, the two parts to it is how I would say that.

JD: Well could we start with the older part then with your great great grandparents moving from Nepal to Bhutan and that was, as I understand it, by the invitation of the king of Bhutan?

HR: Yeah that's what they say, that Bhutan was not, it was very sparsely populated, they needed people to pay taxes, they needed people farm their lands, and they needed people that they can rule right kind of to establish that kingdom, you know. Establish sort of like a, establish something that they can hold on to as a political identity you know, right. A ed a lot longer before but 1620s I think is when there were formal delegations right commissioned from Bhutan. We came into Nepal and then brought some people to go and live and then that kind of opened the doors for many more to go in that's the way that, a lot before that, but that's the way that really increased people migrating from Nepal to Bhutan and kinda calling that their home. That's where it started.

JD: Maybe you could tell me a little about your parents. What were their lives like in Bhutan before the crisis that your family survived.

HR: Yeah. So I mean my parents were born in 1961 right and then if you kind of juxtaposed that with what was happening in the US or the world right. I mean in the world right that was the end of the second world war and then in the US there were, you know, the Civil Rights Movement happening and then if you think about Bhutan at that time right, basically it was nothing. My parents were born and they were born when their parents came back from the farm after a days work and they were born at home in rural villages. No hospitals, no roads, no cars, none of that right? So very rural. And that's all that they knew for a long time.

JD: Life would change for the Rizal family in the 1980s, when the Bhutanese government adopted a policy called "One Nation, One People," and began expelling ethnic Nepalis. Hem's family had lived in Bhutan for three generations, but the government began questioning their property titles and asking for records of land taxes.

HR: So it was kind of like DACA, when we think of, you know, documented versus undocumented people here and that were born here, raised her, that's all that they know. Thousands of them right, but then if you all of a sudden start asking them for citizenships and their belonging here then, you know, they are not able to show anything except for the fact that they were born here. And all that they know is this place, right like all that they know is the schools that they went to, the people that they met, where they were born

JD: Yeah. When you describe that period, you know, one nation, one culture, there are echoes for me anyway of this America first, make American great again, kind of philosophy and the

xenophobia that seems to have come along with that. I don't know if you've made those connections yourself?

HR: That's-- Absolutely, absolutely right because I mean my parents were born there, their parents were born there right like and it was a land, culture, people, that they knew and the only place that they knew ever in their lives. So to re-ask of them to prove their religions right to be ask prove that they belong, what was shocking to them right. But also, kind of paralleled with that was the fact that the government wanted Buddhism to be sort kind of like saying we want white people here only, like the Trump administration saying its okay for immigrants from Norway and Denmark and the UK to come here as long as they are not coming from, you know, the Middle East or Asian countries right because this is white land kind of thing. That's what they did right?

JD: Yeah.

HR: And that ended up with thousands of people leaving the country in the early 1990s just when I was less than a year old actually. And they my great ancestors crossing there to Nepal where they resettled

JD: Well, were you born in a refugee camp then?

HR: No, I was born during the height of that crisis in Bhutan so when I was born, my parents were in that state where, you know, we're not sure exactly what's going to happen here. We might be leaving the country, you know, this might die down. But no, I was born in Bhutan and I was a year old, not a year but less than a year old when we moved, and when we migrated or when we fled the country.

JD: So do you have memories of anything before the camp or is that really where your memory begins.

HR: All I know my parents telling me what happened and there are five siblings including myself, and the oldest two were the ones big enough to hold our hands and carry us. We're talking about eight and ten year old children right, but they were still able to hold my other brother two years older than me and myself. Carry us on their backs when they were migrating. So they remember more than I, obviously I don't remember any of that.

JD: Well so you grew up in the Gold Hap refugee camp? What was day to day life like in that camp?

HR: You know, it was it was there are two parts to it again right? Like one was the hardships that my parents faced, where food rationed, right we had, you know, there were they had six kids to feed and at one point my up until 2005 I think is when my grandma died, we had an elderly in the family as well who had chronic diseases, diabetes and others so from their angle, it was really really difficult. But for me as a naive kid growing up in the refugee camp, I didn't think about all that right. I didn't have to, I didn't know, I wasn't aware of what was, you know,

the challenges. Trevor Noah said something in his book Born a Crime that I think about a lot when he said something in the line of you can't dream what you've never seen. Something like that right, and that's kind of what it was for me because I'd never, you know, I didn't have a pair of shoes until I was 16 so I never thought that not having a pair of shoes was, you know, strange or unfair, there was not such a thing there. I never had it, so there was no comparison right, I didn't feel injustice.

JD: Right.

JD: Well, tell me if I'm wrong, but it sounds like you had a fairly happy childhood and based on what writings you have shared with me it sounds like the event that really kind of changed that for you was this fire that burned the camp down, is that fair to say?

HR: It wasn't something that I realized then that there were significant, but looking back, you know, those huge components including that fire. Because I remember vividly right, I was in the forest. So we would go to the forest to study because there was this the SLC or the School Learning Certificate. When I was there I didn't really realize that, but looking back, education was the only bright spot so when I think about that fire, I remember distinctly me reaching for my books right, my notebooks, whatever I had from school supplies that I had because I knew that if I saved those, I would have enough time to, you know, review and read and do all the math that I needed to kind of get ready for the exams. So I remember saving only those items and running with them as my family and neighbors, you know, hustled to get out of the fire. And looking back, that seemed significant because that's what education meant to me right. Like if there is a fire, and you wanna save one thing or two things that you can and in the moment of that right, when you don't have a lot of time you have to make instant decisions. I reached for books right because that was the only future that I had.

JD: Hem's parents had been farmers, and they wanted a different life for their kids. So Hem grew up thinking of teaching as his destiny. But that wouldn't happen if he didn't pass this exam. His whole future was riding on it.

HR: They call it the iron gate right, if you don't make it through, that's the only thing that you have. That you can prove. That you can show to the world that you are capable. I remember feeling okay, well what if I fail right? And I then I remember thinking like, you know, I really don't care because it's, you know, I've always failed in sense that now I'm already this old and we don't have much of an identity and we don't really know where we are going so failing is not, you know, not a problem like your entire life is a failure in a sense that it's out of your control so failing this is, you know, just another part.

JD: Yeah well and in an essay about that time you wrote and I'm quoting: "There is wisdom in survival that transcends survival itself" and I wonder if you could explain what you mean by that.

HR: survival is awesome right, you make it through these series of events that you are not supposed to live through for example me being born in that village when, you know, after my mom came back from a days worth of labor in the farm and then gave birth to me. I could have died there, the nearest hospital, you know, would have hours away on foot, right like there were no cars at that time, so I could have died there, but I survived right. But when I was a year old, less than a year old, you know, marching through Bhutan through India days and nights and coming into the refugee camp I could've died there, you know. People that know me and my brother from back in those days are still surprised, one thing that they say is that when we drank water they could kind of see the water going through throats . That's how pale we were. but it's the wisdom that you gather in that those moments of survival. Now I think about that as going through college or, you know, getting in difficult situations in life. It's not like I've never been in these situations or maybe not the specific situations but I've definitely been in harsher ones before. So you gather, you know, a book of wisdom along that road that you've traveled that helps you, you know, kind of cope with all these other uncertainties in life that are always destined to encounter.

JD: Soon after he passed his big exam, fifteen years after he had first arrived in Nepal as an infant, Hem's family became eligible for resettlement in the U.S. They had family in Washington state, and so they applied for settlement in Seattle. All Hem knew about the U.S. was that the sun rose there when night fell in Nepal. Nearly everything he saw during that long journey was a first. To the point where nothing seemed strange because *everything* was.

HR: Yeah I had never been to an airport or, you know, been in a plane so that was definitely a first for me and my family. I remember when I was flying from Kathmandu to Abu Dhabi international airport and I had to use the restroom in the plane and then I remember flushing it and I remember that sound that it made I felt like well this is the moment the plane's going to burst in fire, you know, we're all going to die right because it was so loud that I'd never heard that and it was so scary.

JD: I asked Hem how the reality of life in the U.S. matched his expectations once he settled into high school.

HR: So I remember wanting to go to college but I remember that my expectations That I would like, you know, go to this university or something and be a doctor or engineer, whatever it was right. But all of those expectations kind of fell flat because once I came here I was, you know, I was registered for high school, enrolled in the high school and I remember that I was given ELL classes in and English I thought of it as, you know, you walk in and do great but then the reality is that there are so many hurdles. But then quickly right, you learn to, with refugees and with immigrants, you know, they tend to quickly try and figure out what's the best route right. Because then they have to survive.

JD: In Nepal, Hem's goals were simple: pass the big exam and go to college and find work as a teacher. He was ahead of the game there. But in the U.S., he learned that he needed four years of English classes before he could begin college-level work. By this time he was seventeen years old and already well ahead of his classmates in math. His only chance to begin college on time was a program called Running Start, which could bypass those four years of English. But first he would need to pass another major exam. And he would have to convince his guidance counselor to approve him for the program.

HR: There's very few people that actually trust your ability and that actually want to help you move ahead I remember talking to my counselor about it vividly and I was like "look I want to go to a four year college but I'm, you know, there's no way I can have enough English credit to do that so I want to enroll in this Running Start, tell me more about this." And then the counselor was confused because she's specifically said that she has never seen anyone of my background, an immigrant refugee coming through wanting to take college classes within a year of them being in the high school but I was very insistent because I knew that that was the only way that I could go to college. But then after, you know, the first meeting with her failed and then the second one failed, and then I remember telling her "look at least tell me that you'd sign these papers and if I fail it's on me right. At least give me that permission to explore this."

JD: With his counselor's approval, Hem only needed to pass the COMPASS exam, a series of standardized tests in writing, reading, and math. On his first try, he scored high enough in math to be placed in Calculus. He did fine on the writing test, too. But the minimum score for reading was 80, and he fell just short with a 78. He took two weeks off, studied hard, and came back for one more try. Time was running out to register for college classes, so he waited impatiently for the results. Once again he scored...a 78.

HR: And that was like, yeah, that was like I'm done right, I can't do this because I'm just not made for a four year college I remember truly wanting to go to the University of Washington for my four year college and then I gave up for about a month of so, I didn't want to think about it, none of that and I was like "you know, I can't do this" and then I was like "you know, I'll do it again!" I don't know why, I don't know how I got this energy again, determination again. And I remember reading more and going to the library and having the libraries print out all those test resources that they could find and thankfully printing was free back then Went back for a third time and I passed it and remember that to be the moment that changed my life right. I passed it with an 84 and if I didn't go back for that third time, I wouldn't be talking to you right now because I would probably be working at a McDonald's somewhere probably because I wouldn't go to college I wouldn't so many things that I did right. I do think about how much resilience I still needed, how much faith I still needed in myself. My life has always been like a series of moments like that.

JD: Right.

JD: Well I'm just wondering if you grew up in in Seattle, you know, where you were living at the time without having survived all the things that you did if maybe you would not have gained the resilience you needed for that third attempt right.

HR: I totally agree When you are forced into a corner you have to take actions that are not normal or actions that are not precedented, unprecedented actions.

JD: When Hem began studying at the University of Washington, he didn't struggle with the coursework. Education had been one of his brightest lights in Nepal, and it still gave him pleasure. But he didn't find the same sense of community in college that he knew from his family. At the same time, he felt the constant pressure of his family's expectations that he succeed in America.

HR: I didn't have a clear sense of what I wanted to do so I struggled in that respect, right like I didn't know exactly how to build a community of people around you that would support because I that was never something that I was taught or given opportunities to learn about, you know, socialization was a problem because I'd never been to a college campus before until I actually enrolled, I was still new to the country so that was that was a difficult transition to navigate but also that fear of failure in a sense that when you're a refugee and everything that you do matters in terms of survival and making it through life, failure is not an option right, you just can't fail. So I think that burden or that fear of fail ily had. Kind of like unspelled ones right, unsaid burdens or expectations that you will do something great and look out for your family and all these, the fear and burden really didn't help because, you know, the transitioning itself was difficult but then you have to manage all these other aspects that you don't have coping skills to manage. It becomes a challenge. So I remember college as being not as a place for you to go and have fun and build relationships and get to know people but more of like a place where you go and get that education, and get out of there right and do something with your life. And I don't want to speak for other immigrant populations, other immigrants, but I feel like all immigrants live different, at least two lives right, or more. And for me certainly that was the case, my dad wanting me, wanting to see me graduate from college when I had no desire to walk right. As an immigrant I can't disown my parents desires, you know, I can't separate myself from them or their aspirations. It's always something that I have to think about.

JD: Hem's family moved from Seattle to Des Moines while he was finishing his degree at the University of Washington. After graduation, he rejoined them in Iowa after landing a position with AmeriCorps teaching math in the Des Moines Public Schools. Hem knew he wasn't ready to go back to college just yet, so he applied to the Teach for America program and requested an assignment in South Dakota. After several years of urban living, he found the rural Midwest familiar and invigorating.

The next segment comes from a conversation I had with Hem from his family's home in Des Moines. We spoke near mealtime, so you'll hear some kitchen sounds in the background.

HR: The rural part of it, I loved. The prairies and the hills. The Badlands just right close by, just going out and disappearing into the wild without anyone noticing where you are. That much rural land I really enjoyed because it was quiet, it was peaceful, it gave me a chance to take a break from all the other problems that are happening in the world and social media and the news, other mental worries that I had. I really enjoyed it. It gave me, I wouldn't say deja vu on Pine Ridge itself, but the ruralness of it made me think about where I lived. And more than even the landscape of it, I really think it's the community, that sense of community, and connectedness, and sense of family was something that really came back. And I wonder if that was one of the reasons why I felt so at home, especially toward the end of my second year. Where I knew the challenges of living in - I'd never lived in a rural place in the U.S. before Pine Ridge, but it kind of felt very automatic.

JD: Compared to the West Coast, South Dakota feels like a different country. I asked Hem what he came to love about the prairie as a landscape.

HR: Yeah, I mean just standing in the middle of a prairie and just watching the sunset go down, just watching prairie dogs disappear into little holes that they built for themselves or my dog just leading him out and letting him explore and him tracing me back wherever I've ended. Those things are healing. And not seeing anywhere within as far as you can see, within a two, three mile radius, no human being and just you and your dog. Just observing and taking in all that the nature has to offer to you. The sunflowers and the tall grasses. And the buffaloes.

JD: This was the first I had heard about Hem's dog, Apo, which is short for Apollo. I asked him how they found each other on the reservation.

HR: This dog just started following whoever it found outside and tried to sneak in and was just very friendly and nice and energetic dog, lots of energy. And it turns out that he didn't really have a home in the sense that the person that had him was basically just Apo was his name, just basically followed her from wherever she was nearby and kept to their house. So I guess in a sense he was looking for a house and trying to please people to let him in. So there's this term called rez dogs which is basically just dogs that are on the rez and nobody knows where they come from. So he was one of them.

JD: Hem spent more time with Apo, and started to miss him during the Christmas holiday in Iowa. So when he came back to Pine Ridge, Hem tracked Apo down and found him with another family. It was awkward, but Hem asked for permission to care for the dog that had come to feel like his own.

HR: And then I just asked them, hey he was with me for the last four days, and it was strange because asking for someone's dog, you know, it's like hey, give me your dog it's a strange thing to say, but the son was like "No, he's my dog," and his mom was like, "Well you're not taking care of him, so why don't you just give him the dog, he's gonna take care of him," so that's how I got him actually. So he was and still is a really good friend and companion.

JD: Hem had lived in the Midwest for nearly five years by the time I spoke with him. I asked him how he had come to define the region.

HR: Yeah. It's strange to me to think about the Midwest as, because then, with that geography, because I actually wasn't aware of the Midwest being, you know, Iowa and then also all the way up to South Dakota and then all the other neighboring states and I don't know. I think it's more a cultural thing than geographical to me because that's how it's portrayed in media and elsewhere when you read about the Midwest. When I first moved, I felt of the Midwest as more of like a, you know, predominantly white people. And that's true, right, but lost in that definition is the fact that there is so many other folks right including native americans of who I've been living with for the last four years, immigrants and other populations that are ignored or not brought to the conversation when we talk about the Midwest. So I do think of it more as an identity more definitely than a geography. But then it's my experience of the Midwest has been completely different right. When I'm in Iowa it's immigrants right, and Des Moines has a huge immigrant population, black population, and then here in South Dakota, it's always Native Americans for me right, like the Pine Ridge Reservation. So it's weird to think about the Midwest as what I thought about as this white flat land where a lot of white people lived and were farmers. I almost never found the Midwest to be dominated by white people in my own personal experience or farmers or cornfields or flatlands, right because it's never been that for me for the past five years so it's weird. It's not that uniform identity right, it's a collection of identities.

JD: What are some surprising things that you've learned about Lakota culture or history while you've been there.

HR: Well I mean when I first started right like I didn't know anything about native people because all I knew was, you know, this was a white land right like people, white people have always been here like the whole notion that, you know, that this country pre-Columbus was 99 percent native right, 100 percent native and that realization that in less than 400 years it's gone down from that 99 percent to one percent and that is truly mind blowing to me.

JD: Learning about Native American history made Hem more aware of injustice in the present time. So one weekend he drove north to the Sacred Stone Camp on the Standing Rock Indian Reservation in North Dakota. Indigenous people from many nations - and their supporters - had gathered there to protest construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline, which would carry crude oil from North Dakota to a storage facility in central Illinois. The pipeline was to burrow under the Missouri River, destroying ancestral burial grounds and threatening the main source of drinking water for thousands of people living on the Standing Rock Indian Reservation. Hem came to observe and to learn what he could. He was completely unprepared for the memories that came flooding back of his own family's struggles in a camp much like this.

HR: When I arrived I was like, you know, I'm just going to check it out see how things going and what they're doing, you know, talk to people. It was not in my intentions to stay. But then like

just going around it was, it just felt great, you know? It was kind of like a we're back in the camp or we were in a refugee camp, you know, we all had our own small huts and that's how people were set up there and I kind of, I kind of instantly felt gravitated right, I kind of instantly felt like I needed to be there for much longer and it was evening time, right, the sun was going down and I quickly needed to decide if I wanted to stay there or just head home because it was a long drive for me to come back here on Pine Ridge and then just going around I was like okay I would love to stay here but I don't really have anything, I didn't plan on this, you know, and then there was a tent close by and they were like hey I have an extra tent, why don't you take this, you know, and there was a long line for dinner that, a community dinner that was there going on and they helped me set up the tent and then they sent me there, went there to get my dinner and I was like, you know, I'm camping here. There's no way I'm not camping. And kind of by pure generosity and kindness of these folks that were there, what was powerful about that really was just that people from all over the country and the world really, there were folks from Germany I remember, Ireland, people from all around the world really right that were there. I don't know if they directly came there from wherever they were, or if they were already traveling in the US and they decided to show up in solidarity. But it was incredibly powerful, there were these flags from all around the, all around Tribal Nations of Seattle that I'd seen, California, Oregon, you name it right, Florida, just incredibly powerful to see, you know, a group of people that were there to, you know, protest capitalism basically and greed.

JD: You've written about this in a blog post where you said that leaving that camp which you stayed at for only one night was almost as emotional for you as leaving the refugee camp in Nepal. Can you explain how you felt that?

HR: Yeah so the next I get up and put down the tent and handed everything that I had gotten from folks to where they belong and, you know, I was leaving my truck and that's when I realized it kind of felt nostalgic right, it kind of felt like I was leaving something that I had already left or something that I'd already seen or experienced although, I'd only been there for one night, I kind of felt sad and that's instantly when I realized , exactly 8 years before in 2008 the same day I was leaving the camp that I'd called home for so long. And it felt like, you know, leaving the refugee camp was exciting but it was also like okay we're going to this uncharted territory right and leaving behind everything including my culture, my language, and also the sense by abandoning where you come from, you're leaving, you're abandoning your history right, like you are abandoning or you are giving up on your past in a way. And leaving that sacred camp, that's how it felt because it felt like I was kind of giving up on these people that were there for so long protesting the construction of the Dakota access pipeline that leaving that was kind of abandoning them and their values and what they were standing up for so it felt that, you know, the analogy didn't come instantly until I realized that these folks that were there were protesting, you know, or were standing up for their rights, their sovereignty their rights to self-determination, their lands, their waters, and connecting that how my parents, and my grandparents left Bhutan and how powerless I was you now how I couldn't really contribute to that right, like my parents leaving Bhutan and the only lands that they had known for so long and how, you know, there was nothing I could have done back in the 1990s to prevent that or to

be in that fight or to stand in that solidarity because I was just a year old, knowing that more than two decades later, I was able to reconnect those dots and that was able to stand in sort of solidarity with these people that I'd never met before and never heard of until until a couple of months before so it kind of felt like I was able to accomplish what my parents weren't able to which is to stand up for your own lands and your own waters. Because I was doing that also for my parents and my grandparents that weren't able to do that for their own lands, for their own waters.

JD: Well I know that from following you on social media that you feel that solidarity with other groups that underrepresented or oppressed and I'm curious if you feel something like that connection with Black Lives Matter and the demonstrations or protests that are happening across the country still?

HR: Yeah absolutely. So leaving the Pine Ridge Reservation here right I you just the understanding that I was leaving my students these people that I've worked with for the past four years was, you know, giving me some guilt right, like I still have that guilt it's that guilt will never go away. But I was also trying to channel that into action and, you know, BLM Des Moines was another group of marginalized people right that are voicing for their own, you know, for justice and for equity and kind of instantly felt like I needed to join right because then it was kind of like okay well, you know, I may be abandoning this one group of people, here on the reservation, but, you know, I can still sustain that fight through maybe it's for the same group of people but it's still a group of people that are still fighting for a just cause right. So yeah it was an instant connection there for, it made it a little bit easier for me to kind of reconcile my own guilt of leaving my schools here.

JD: Well, so you'll be starting graduate school this fall at the Kennedy School at Harvard and it will be online which will be a little bit strange because you will be studying at Harvard from your family's home in Iowa is that right?

HR: Yeah. I'll be, I'll be taking classes at Harvard from my parent's Habitat for Humanity house so yeah that'll be, that'll be interesting online. All of Fall semester is going to be online.

JD: And what will you be studying?

HR: Public policy, a masters in public policy.

JD: And why did you choose that program over the other opportunities you've had?

HR: I think part of was the realization that being a classroom teacher, you have the ability to change or affect or impact, you know, a group of people, of young minds that come through your classroom doors, but otherwise, you are very powerless right, there's not much more you can do and there are decisions being made for your classroom, for your school for your community for your people that, by people that, you know, decisions being made by people that

have no idea about what it means to be in the classroom or what it means to be in rural parts of the country or what it means to be in, on a native reservation. So I wanted to get into policy because of that, because I feel like if I, if I have, you know, a better understanding about how policies are made, enacted, who gets to to enact policies, then I would be able to make a little bit broader, impact. More than just in the classroom.

JD: Well it sounds like you're carrying some of that burden of obligation that you, that you feel from your family, from your father in particular, but you're carrying that also for other people that you don't even know who are affected by policy. Is it fair to say that your life's work is a way of working through that, that burden of obligation that you've felt your whole life?

HR: I think so I for the past, I think about 3 years ago or so is when I kinda decided because until, up to that point I'd been wrestling with what I truly wanted to do with my life and I think about 3 years ago or so is when I truly kinda determined that all I really wanted to do was involve in making a difference in the public sector right? Making a difference through social good. Toni Morrison I think is the one that said, you know, if you have, if you made it in life, you have a moral obligation to help those haven't quite made it and I think that's something that I do think about or, you know, I, I'm going to be fine, you know. But what have I done for others? And that's something that I, that I think about and I think that's, you know, I don't ever envision myself in the future, you know, working for a bank or insurance company, although I could bring my mathematical skills or things like that to that but I just, I don't know its just kinda feels like, you know, that would only be helping rich people get richer right like what's--

JD: Yeah.

HR: What's the value in it, I want to go home and be like yeah, you know, I helped someone apply for this public benefit today or, you know, I saw or maybe I wrote something a policy that helped, you know, marginalized communities, you know, we all have our callings and for me its in the public sector.

JD: Yeah well I'm just thinking of your story, you know, grabbing your books running into the jungle, all the time when, when you could have died and it seems like what you've taken from that is that your life needs to have meaning that's not just for yourself.

HR: Yeah I think that's fair because yeah that's my value system, my people's value system where we're more than our own individualistic thoughts and desires and that's what my parents, you know, that's how my parents think, that's how my people think, that's I've always thought about so when my dad celebrated my graduation, right like it was a, a collective success right for him of of not just his son's success but his success and his people's success, so yeah no definitely its, it's definitely a collective thing for us.

JD: Well maybe a final question so when the pandemic eases and you go to Cambridge to study at Harvard in person and beyond, how do you think you'll be able to maintain connections with communities and other places like, like Nepal or Bhutan?

HR: Ah see, unfortunately for me I haven't been in, and my own ignorance my own fault, I haven't been in touch with folks back in, in Nepal because I mean part of the reason is that all of my people, the refugees that I grew up with, you know, almost all of them are, are, you know, resettled in Western countries now, and so that's why I don't really have that connection and in Bhutan I don't have any connections because, you know, my people don't live there I can't even go back, I'm not allowed to, so hopefully I can continue maybe I can I can I can be in touch with them by reading about them, writing about them, or I don't know maybe visiting those countries one day if I can go back to Bhutan, I can't right now but, I'm not allowed to I believe.

JD: Yeah. Are you, do you still like, do you still feel like you're searching for a home then?

HR: Yeah. No I think that's very fair to say because I I mean I kinda like in Pine Ridge but I'm leaving and Iowa hasn't quite felt like home yet because I know I'm there temporarily and I know I'm going to BLM protests and writing about them, advocating about them, but its, you know, I'm there temporarily because after the fall, in the spring of 2021 I might be moving to the East coast and that's going to be another new community so it's been a series moving from one community to another for me so it definitely hasn't felt like I've found a home yet, but hopefully that happens soon but I think home is, you know, something that is constantly in the making.

JD: Thanks for listening to Mid-Americana. And our heartfelt thanks to Hem for sharing his story.

Next time, Brian speaks with Abdirizak Abdi, who shares his story of fleeing civil war in his native Somalia and immigrating as a refugee, first to Kenya and eventually to the U.S. Abdi talks about his work as a high school principal in St. Paul, Minnesota, the challenges of education in the midst of a pandemic, and his vision of America as a place of promise and opportunity, even in the midst of its own darkness and division.

You can find transcripts and show notes on our website, midamericana.com, which includes original illustrations for each episode by Mathew Kelly. If you like our show, please recommend us to your friends and rate and review us on Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen. Hem Rizal's story was produced by me and Brian Campbell and edited by Brad Linder. Music for this episode was written and produced by Adam Bruce.

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