

Transcript of Interview with Maria Ignacio Ilas by Kit Heintzman

Interviewee: Maria Ilas

Interviewer: Kit Heintzman

Date: 02/16/2023

Location (Interviewee): Modesto, California

Location (Interviewer):

Transcriber: Lily Crigler

Some of the things we spoke about include:

Following the pandemic in Italy in December 2019. Planning to get married November 2020, planning a ~170 person wedding, cancelling the venue. What getting married in June 2020 looked like; navigating guidelines in different California counties. Having an immunocompromised sibling and considering his safety needs; communicating long-distance with a brother in the military; supply chain impact on military food. Perspectives on health as a second-generation Filipino American. Entering the pandemic with medical knowledge, having gone to nursing school and changing career paths; hand washing. Having lots of friends and family who work in medicine: doctors, nurses. Running a pro-life non-profit at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. Working remotely pre-pandemic and during the pandemic as a campus mentor. The difference between communicating in-person with voice and body language and communicating textually. Using pool noodles to measure 6 feet of distance at university club meetings. Husband working as an occupational therapist in a hospital; greeting husband coming home from work. Having family in Minnesota; the murder of George Floyd; watching the riots of summer 2020; destruction of private property. Looking at issues from both sides; rifts between friends based on politics. Having a brother in 8th grade who struggled during the pandemic; providing him with long distance support. Social relationships, comfort zones being pushed, the risks of injury that come with human social relationships.

Kit Heintzman 00:02

Hello, would you please state your name, the date, the time, and your location?

Maria Ignacio Ilas 00:07

Yes. My name is Maria Ilas. The day is February 16th, 2023. My time right now is actually 2:20, and I am in Modesto, California.

Kit Heintzman 00:26

And do you consent to having this interview recorded, digitally uploaded, and publicly released under a Creative Commons License Attribution noncommercial sharealike.

Maria Ignacio Ilas 00:36

Yes.

Kit Heintzman 00:37

Thank you so much for being here. Could you just start by introducing yourself to anyone who might find themselves listening? What would you want them to know about you?

Maria Ignacio Ilas 00:48

Well, let's see, I, I love working in the service of other people. Many of the things that I do currently are really just about how can I help someone thrive in the role that they're in? Part of my title is to mentor, so it's a natural, a natural thing that happens often. But it is something that I find great joy in and desire to continue to do, so yeah.

Kit Heintzman 01:30

When you say apart of your role title is, as mentor, could you give me some context around that?

Maria Ignacio Ilas 01:35

Yeah, so my title with our organization, We Dignify, is Campus Mentor. Um, and so what we do is we, we mentor students in leadership skills for small groups on campus. We, we are a pro-life nonprofit, at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign currently. So when we're doing that, I meet with students one on one every week; I do it via Zoom, as you know, through this recording, but I live in California. So I do it through Zoom, but I do, I do go out to campus, once a month or once every other month, and so I do get some of that in person time. My, my specific role and how I came to be here is very, it's unique, but the mentor role itself is not unique. I'm not the only mentor on our team; I'm just the only mentor that does not live in Illinois. But yeah, so what that looks like is me meeting with my students once a week, and we work on specific things, specific skills, specific qualities, that supports what their role is. And so all of the students that I meet with are leaders in some capacity, so they're leading a group into, in education, or they're leading a group into taking action. And so what we focus on every week is usually tied to what are you doing with your group. So let's say if we're teaching a lesson, or we're trying to guide a discussion this particular week on "so why are you here? Why are you interested? Why do you want to learn about what being pro-life means or what that entails?" Then our mentoring, discussion or meeting will, will be related to that topic, if that makes sense. So it very much pairs with if you're leading a group in a specific way, then I'm going to be talking with you and help guiding you to do that the best to, the best of your ability, right? So, yeah.

Maria Ignacio Ilas 01:39

Tell me a memorable story about your life during the pandemic.

Maria Ignacio Ilas 03:55

A memorable story.... So I feel like there are probably a couple, but the first thing that came to mind... So as you can imagine, so again, my situation is very unique in that I'm the only one that does not live in Illinois, but everybody else does, and typically when people are meeting with their students, you're meeting with them in the same office, in person, you're encountering people in the same space all the time, and it's beautiful, and it builds community that way. Pandemic changed that obviously, because, oh, okay, we're, we're now all meeting on Zoom or Google Meet or you know, whichever platform anyone was using. And so in the summertime, we have a leadership training, so we prepare our leaders for the upcoming school year, and that's always in person, so I'm usually flying into Illinois for that, but one of the summers, and I can't remember exactly if it was, it was probably 2021. My boss had an idea, he was like, well, okay, so six feet apart, so how do we do this? We're going to like, arrange the room so that each student is at one table, and these are like kind of those long rectangular tables that are typically like in conference rooms if you're doing like a classroom style setup. So normally, you'd have maybe three students there, but we only put one, so he said, okay, like that provides some and then there'll be an island between, but then when we're walking around, we're going to give each student a pool noodle, because a pool noodle is about six feet, so if we're going to try to make sure people are standing six feet apart, so as you know, to keep everybody you know, safe and protected, in addition to wearing our masks, we're gonna carry pool noodles.

And so, you know, we just had a group of, I want to say we had like 12 students in a very large room that normally fits like 200 people. We had 12 students and each person had their own little like, corner or table to be at, and then, but as we were walking around, we would, we had these pool noodles with us. And it, it just looks so funny, because it's usually like business, like professional the attire, so you're usually not carrying a pool noodle if you are wearing that attire, but it was, it was hilarious. But also, I mean, I think it was just a very clever and innovative way of using pool noodles. My boss has three young children, and so I don't know, I think it, maybe that was just why like, normally in summers, you know, you take, you take your kids to the pool, or you put them in like your little pool in the backyard, and maybe that's why he thought of it. But I just thought it was a really good way to use that, and so there's a clear measurement of this is how far I need to be from someone else, so it's not, and I think it's a good way to keep it respectful because as we know, in the pandemic, it just, there are varying, varying opinions on everything on how we should be, what we should do, what we should be told to do or not hold to do, and if you're trying to guesstimate like, well, you're supposed to be this far from me, look, you're not this far from me. But if you just have a clear like, okay, we're gonna, we're going to level set guys like, this is how we're going to respect each other, and this time, in multitudes of ways, but one of them is we're going to keep our space, and it looks like this much space. And there's no guessing like, I don't have to guess how long this pool noodle is, I can visibly see that's how long it is, you know? So that was pretty memorable.

Kit Heintzman 07:36

How did you, how did you come up with that as an implementation strategy?

Maria Ignacio Ilas 07:41

The pool noodle?

Maria Ignacio Ilas 07:43

That was my boss; it was definitely not me. He's, he's got some... he's our visionary, and he's got very creative ideas, but we were just really trying to think through, it was important to us to still have something. And I think that was very key for us throughout the pandemic, was, we want to make sure that our students, should they want to participate, because it's never forced; we're never forcing anybody to be, to be part of us, to be in a leadership position. It's, if you want this, and if you want, if you want to learn, if you want to lead, we're here for you. But we had to be very creative and how we would think about that, because essentially, we are a relational ministry, which typically just translates to, okay, we're going to gather in person together; it's very like community. But how do we do that if we can't be around each other? Or how do we do that if we need to stand far apart? Or, you know, how do we do that respecting that there are going to be, there are going to be people who are coming from different schools of thought in regards to COVID but still maintain that, like, respect of what individuals' opinions are. And so that's why we really had to think about okay, so for if we want to bring people into one space, because we have identified that that's going to be a stronger, that's going to be a stronger connection point in terms of like the, the relationships between the leader team, then maybe just having people on Zoom, where I think it's possible, because I, I do it all the time. I think it's, it's possible to make connections on Zoom but knowing our students, sometimes, you know, you just you get the, well, we're gonna keep my camera off and they're doing something else at the same time, you know, it's just not quite as like, engaging and the relationship building isn't there. So how do we, how do we be creative to make it possible without having someone feel like they are unsafe, or they will get sick, or, you know, it's, COVID was such a very interesting time in that... or it was just, it felt like a lot of people were just very afraid, and I think there was reason to be. That seemed very reasonable. And so it was a challenge for us as a team to think about how do we bring people together so that they can take in the

content, we can have conversations, maybe you're just talking kind of loudly across the room, but you can have the conversation, and you can see a real person sitting in front of you from further away, but still, like they're still sitting in front of you. There's just something different about that, about being in person that is just different than the virtual. So, yeah, we were just thinking of different ways, and like I said, I think my boss maybe in the summers, I know that he usually takes his, his little, his kiddos to, to the pool. He wasn't doing that necessarily during COVID. They were close, but I think that they just have, they have pool noodles, like in their sunroom or in their backyard, or I don't know, maybe he was just thinking like, this could be an easy way so people know, this is about how far away I should probably stand from someone, and this, this is our, this is what we're going to do. This is the structure we're going to put in place to make sure we're respecting everyone's boundaries while still focusing on we're not gonna get like, we're not gonna get tripped up over how far do I need to be from somebody? How, am I too close? You know, and sometimes like those can be barriers, right? Like, if you're trying to just have a simple conversation, but you're too worried about where do I stand? And you can't, it's hard to have a conversation if I'm like, looking at my feet. Okay, like, am I too... should I, should I be closer to you? Should I be farther from you? You know what I mean? And so we wanted to just get those out of the way of like, here's a clear way we can define this so that we don't have to worry about where are you going to sit? Where are you going to stand? How close can you be to someone? How far do you need to be from someone in order to maintain safe distances so that that doesn't distract from the main reason why we were there which was, what are our goals this year? How are we going to lead other students? How are we going to lead other people? And how can we, how can we come together as a team, a leadership team? And how can we have these conversations, you know. How can we learn? How can we take in this information? Because sometimes the little things like get really distracting. And so we wanted to be able to optimize the situation for our students to be able to take all that in and to participate fully, without being in that fear of like, ooh, I don't want to be too close to this person right now because, because COVID is a really scary thing, and certainly there were students that were not able to come because there was a lot of concern with like, COVID. So that, that happened, you know, but for those who are willing and those who are wanting, we wanted to be able to create that safe space.

Kit Heintzman 07:43

Yes.

Kit Heintzman 13:33

To the extent that you're comfortable sharing, would you say something about your experiences with health and healthcare infrastructure, pre-pandemic?

Maria Ignacio Ilas 13:44

Health and in terms of infrastruc-, infrus- wow, infrastructure? Can you expand on that? What is, what does that mean?

Kit Heintzman 13:53

Sure. Uh, like, do you go see doctors? Do you like your doctor? Like, like, in terms of meeting the needs of your health; do you interact with any infrastructure sort of bigger than you?

Maria Ignacio Ilas 14:03

Yeah. So pre pandemic, yes, I do go to my doctor. I do like my doctor. I mean, pretty much it's just you know, the ...resical... the, the, the physical that you take, you do every year. Make sure everything is good and in working

order, and I should have no concerns. Go to your dentist regularly. Make sure your, your dental hygiene is great and good to go. Yeah, if I was sick, then I would go to the doctor. I think I have a pretty, I don't know pretty good, pretty good level of relationship or, I don't know, association with like the medical field. So I'm Filipino, and there are many Filipinos who are doctors and nurses. It is a very common thing culturally. It is, it's something growing up that, it was definitely encouraged by my parents because I mean, growing up in poverty in the Philippines, my parents are also immigrants, there are a lot of families, including my own that view healthcare as a very stable field, right? Like you will always have a job, there will always be people who will need you. So my, for my family specifically, that's definitely where it came from. And so, anyways, that is to just say, like, I know, a lot of nurses and doctors in my life and friends with a lot of them. I, myself, just didn't become a nurse or a doctor.

Kit Heintzman 15:40

Pre-pandemic, what was your day to day looking like?

Maria Ignacio Ilas 15:44

Pre-pandemic, my day to day... well, I worked from home. So pre-pandemic, that actually didn't, or once we were into the pandemic, that element actually didn't change. And let's see, I would usually get together with friends, like in the evening, you know, friends that are just kind of around. Sometimes we just had dinner together; we enjoy playing board games, so we play board games. But yeah, post-pandemic, or once we got into the pandemic, that definitely stopped. So I probably should have mentioned this, that my husband is in healthcare. I guess I don't, I didn't have to mention that, but that I think it was really important, or is really relevant because my husband, so he's an occupational therapist, so not a nurse, not a doctor, but he works in a hospital, he works locally. And so pre-pandemic, what it looked like for him to just even come home from work was, oh, hey, how you doing? We'll kiss, you know, and then he would get changed, and we would just go about our evening. But then, once the pandemic, like, really began in that March, for us, I guess that's when California had shut down was March of 2020, it, it definitely had us thinking, you know, how do we, what should we do? And so we implemented a process, excuse me, we implemented a process, so once he got home from work, he would wave from the front door to where I was sitting at my desk, say hello, and then we had like a specific like laundry hamper, where he would put his scrubs in, he would shower. And only then would he say hello like, well, only then would we actually be able to hug each other, you know, because of that. So, thank you... speaking of my lovely husband. So, yeah, anyway, so it implemented a process that I think that's probably one of the most significant changes. So pre-pandemic, just what it looks like for my husband to come home from work and to simply greet each other looked very different once we went into the pandemic.

Kit Heintzman 18:24

Is it still looking the same when he comes home?

Maria Ignacio Ilas 18:29

Slightly, so I don't necessarily stand all the way across the room anymore. We will like, we might kiss but I don't hug him because like, I just don't, I don't touch his uniform, like his, his scrubs, so there's still, we still have a hamper where specifically his like, his work uniform goes, where his scrubs go. He will still shower before we are able to really embrace, so we still have that practice in place. So yeah, that's still a thing.

Kit Heintzman 19:05

How did you come, how did you sort of navigate those early boundaries in the beginning with safety in him?

Maria Ignacio Ilas 19:10

Um, like, how did we come up with that, or? Okay, um, I think it was actually pretty easy. Like, he and I were just, I don't know, I, trying to think like, was it just... once that happened, it was sometime in that month, he was just like, you know, yeah, I should probably, we should probably have a separate space. I think especially in that time, there was just, I think a lot of the discussion around us was about you know, like, what's, like, what can you touch? How do you make sure you're clean? I think a lot of people were so afraid of like, even touching surfaces or a piece of paper transferring from one person to another, right because what if it was contaminated? You know, so we just thought, hey, this is probably going to be a good practice to, like I, I won't give you a hug, I won't kiss you until, until you've removed your scrubs and you've gotten a shower just to, like, you know, anything that you can ma-, maybe have picked up in the hospital, you know, we just got to do the best that we can. But also like, knowing having sort of the reality of, you know, if you're going to work every day at a hospital where patients go, it's possible you're gonna, you might get sick. And so may I because I'm your wife; we live in the same house, you know. And so that reality, I think was, was definitely there. We weren't, you know, we weren't thinking like, oh, if we just, if you just shower and you remove, you know, your scrubs, and that goes in one specific players, like I will never get sick. But we just, our mentality was just let's do the best that we can because you just you never know. Maybe this will help. Maybe it won't. Some experts say you should do this, most experts say you should do this, some experts say oh, no, no, like you don't have to, but who's to say, I don't know. So on the off chance that this is what's going to help, let's do it. Why not? For the sake of our health, and then if we were to encounter anyone, which at that time we really, we really weren't unless we were going to the grocery store, but even then, you know, everybody was kind of, was kind of nice. Nobody was bumping into your shopping cart at the grocery store then. But, yeah, that's how it happened.

Kit Heintzman 21:42

Do you remember when you first heard about COVID-19?

Maria Ignacio Ilas 21:49

Yeah. I think it might have been around, maybe end of December, it was around the holidays because of Italy. We remember seeing on the news that Italy had been hit with COVID. I mean, I guess I probably heard a little bit about it before that because of when it was happening in China, but I think when we were really seeing a lot about it was when it had hit hit, when, when it had hit Italy. We were like, wow, like they're experiencing a high rate of deaths; there's a lot of people getting sick, but also a lot of people dying. And we just remembered being kind of devastated by that, like, wow, that's just so awful. Like, I hope everything's okay, I hope things are, you know, gonna be able to figure it out, and so, I mean, I think that was end of December going into January. My husband and I also got married in 2020 so that was also a factor to navigate greatly. As you know, by January of 2020, you're definitely planning a wedding, you're in the midst of planning a wedding. So we were actually thinking of going on a honeymoon to Italy, but once that had happened, we were like, well, looks like we're probably not going to Italy, and that's okay. So it's pretty wild.

Kit Heintzman 23:31

Would you share more about getting married in 2020 and the sort of ripple effects?

Maria Ignacio Ilas 23:37

Oh, I can absolutely do that. I laugh because it's just... it was, it was not anything that you would have expected in planning a wedding, and I think planning a wedding can be very chaotic already. There are a lot of details that you have to think about. And I mean, depending on how you want your wedding to look and to be, I think big for us was one like, having the people that we love and care about be present with us when we got married. So this was, regardless of COVID, it was, that's kind of, that was our outlook going out. One, we want to get married at our church. Two, we want our family and loved ones to be there. Three, my husband and I are very active in ministry, so the people in ministry, in our ministry life, like we're very close to them, and we want them to be able to be there. But when you live a life where you do a lot in ministry, you tend to know a lot of people or meet a lot of people, and so that meant our wedding was not going to be too small. It could have been very, very large, but financially, we weren't trying to have a very, very, very large wedding. So ultimately, I think it was pretty good size, so it was 170 people were on our guest list, and we were supposed to get married in November of 2020. So, when we had set out, we had booked, you know, we had booked a reception venue, we had a deposit in, we had reserved the church and had everything set to go there. We printed our save the dates, which were these little magnets that I actually still have. They're these little magnets that we had just stuck to a postcard, well, it had to go in an envelope because otherwise the magnet would have fallen out, but, but there was magnets, so just having the magnets printed, so people who just put them on their fridge, and it's easy and doesn't take up a lot of space. And so it was literally the week that California, our governor decided that, you know, we're in a state of emergency, we're going to shut down, that I had actually already prepared our save the dates to go out in the mail. I thankfully did not stamp them yet. And my husband and I said, okay, well, if we're in a state of emergency, and only essential businesses are going to be open, and everything is shut down, we have no idea how long this is gonna last. It's pretty serious; look what happened to Italy. But yeah, I think we just had no guess, no sort of anticipation of this is gonna happen, or this is gonna end in two weeks, or this is gonna last forever. But on the off chance that it was going to impact our wedding in November, this is March, but in the off chance that it was going to impact our wedding in November, we had decided not to send our save the dates. I think a lot of people knew... we, I mean, obviously, we were naturally just talking about getting married and talking about our wedding, and so people who are already on our list knew when our wedding was going to be, we just hadn't officially sent out the mail. So we didn't send them out, and so I still have a little shoebox of all of those save the dates that are in envelopes. And we just were like, okay, let's see, we'll take it a day at a time, a week at a time, we'll figure something out. I think by, I want to say maybe May or June, probably May, just a couple months later, we had contacted our, our venue because we were thinking, I don't know if this is going to, it doesn't seem like it's letting up anytime soon. So we had communicated with our venue about getting our deposit back or just like canceling, like not having our wedding there, and thankfully, they were very gracious. They were like, absolutely, this is 100% outside of your control. You know, we're really sorry, like they communicated a lot of just compassion, like we're really sorry that this isn't... your wedding day isn't going to be what you had thought and planned it to be, but, but that's like, you know, we're like, here's your deposit back. So we got all of our money back, thank goodness, because you know, a deposit is pretty big when you're trying to reserve a venue. But yeah, so we got that back, and then we were trying to figure out, so what do we do? Do we, do we just wait, do we just not get married yet? But I think just in that, again, like our one- number one priority of all the priorities was that we wanted to get married, we wanted to take that next step. And although having a big party is very fun, and exciting, it wasn't the reason why we were getting married, so we had decided we were going to, if we were able to, if we could still make it happen, that we would still get married, it would just look significantly different, right? So we were trying to navigate what does that even look like? What are our options? So we, we were talking to the church, we were talking to our priest who was going to marry us, he was a good friend of ours, and he was just like, okay, so let's see what's allowed because a lot of the churches were functioning within the regulations put

forth by the counties. Well obviously, so by state and then by county, and so the church that we were going to get married at, our church, there was, their guidelines were that if we wanted to get married, we could only have one person there because that was just, that, those were the guidelines, you know, that's what we could do. And I think by this point, so we're in June now, summertime of 2020. And at this point, we are... my husband's family, so my in-laws, but I guess then, they weren't my in laws yet, but my in-laws, they live near us. And so at this point, like, our pods had come together, so we were seeing them. And so what, what do you call it, so we were trying to figure out, where do we go, what do we do, and the church that we were gonna get married at, said that we could only have one person, besides the priest who was marrying us, be a witness to the wedding. But otherwise, like, our family would have to stay outside and like watch from the doors. You know, which we like, understood why that was the case, but it was also just like, well, that's, that sucks. You want your family to be there. And we were just so grateful for, for our priest. Um, he was just, he was just like, oh, no, like, let's see, let's see what we can do; I have connections like throughout, you know, throughout all of Northern California, let's, let's see what happens because he was, he was saying, like, you know, I know, at this church, there's a church in Oakland, a friend of his is the pastor there. And, again, it's a different county from where we live, so where, what they were doing, they weren't even like having church services inside. They were outside, there's like a portico area where he had set up some chairs and then an altar, and so if people wanted to attend mass or a church service, they just, they can go, and they'd be outside. You know, and so if you recall, like back in, you know, back in 2020, that was a big thing. Like, we can do this, we could do it outside, because being inside is, it's enclosed, and it just, the fresh air is much better for all of our health. So, anyways, so he had reached out to that priest, and he was really gracious and was just like, yeah, of course, when are you guys trying to get married? When do you want to do that? Like, we can have that because the one that was going to marry us, he was just like, no, Maria, if, you know, if, if this was me, if I was in your shoes, I'd want my family to be there. You know, they, they're your loved ones, like you want them to be able to celebrate with you because this is a big deal. So he was just like, no, no, no, let's see what we can do, let's not, not here, not just one person, let's not do that. Um, so it's just really awesome that like, he was advocating for us in that way, like there's possibilities, let's see what we can do. So all in all, we ended up getting married in Oakland, at a church there. And we had our families, both our families were there, and because it was also outside, we also got to have our best friends there. And so there were 24 people at our wedding. And this is the other thing that we had to navigate in regards to our wedding besides... so all of this came together in two months, I should say, was figuring out where we were going to get married. So what church, and then who could we even invite? So our families and our best friends were able to be there, which is great. Um, and then where do we have a reception? Do we have a reception? Can we have a reception? Are people comfortable with that? And then third was, well, I guess it's another component, is just the date like, when do we get married? So if you recall, I definitely recall, like through- throughout the news, there'd be different experts who come on who could anticipate well, it seems like COVID numbers are slightly, slowly decreasing we can maybe correlate that with, I don't know, it's not flu season, it's the summertime, people don't often get as sick in the summertime or not as many people get the flu in the summertime, or get colds in the summertime. And so there was, we were just hearing about like, predictions of in the fall because you know, that's normally, the weather is getting cooler, people tend to get sick then, especially not in that year, but generally speaking, like when students go back to school, kids are getting sick because they're around each other, and then they come home, and then they spread it to their families, and... But so my family actually lives in Minnesota. They are not here in California. And so my family was going to have to fly in, and my youngest brother has type one diabetes, so he is immunocompromised. And so a really big thing that we considered was, can my family come? What can we do to help support that? I wasn't going to be offended if they said they couldn't come because they're not comfortable. You know, like, I'd be very, I was very understanding of that, but of course, if we can make it happen, I would love for them to be

there, and they wanted to be there, of course. So, um in looking at our original date being that it was in November, which in California means it's a little cooler, but in Minnesota, November means it's very, very cold. And yeah, just like the chances of people getting sick in Minnesota in November, just very high and very cold, lots of sickness, anyways. So we thought, okay, if we still get married in November, there could be a really strong chance my family won't be able to come, because it's just the height of people getting sick because of weather, but also, they're making all these predictions, but it makes sense, it seems very logical like that, if CO-, that COVID, cases of COVID would increase as the probability of somebody getting sick increases, and that does happen in the fall. So if this is all we're waiting for, if there's like, really no, no question of, are we going to get married or not, why don't we just move it up? Let's make that happen. And so we had, we moved the date up to August instead of November, so that's why all of this like came together in two months. And so in regards to my family, they were able to make it with the exception of one of my brothers who is in the military, and he was deployed that year. Um, come November, he, he might have been home, there was a strong likelihood, the military you don't always like, get all the information, but the strong predict-, prediction was that they could expect to be home if we had gotten married in November. But yeah, there's just a lot of factors to balance with COVID is, do you wait, and nobody can come. Do we do it now and likely most of my family can come, just not my one brother who was deployed. So I spoke with him over the phone, and he, you know, he was very gracious, there's just a lot of grace in these, in these times for us, which is just great, and I have so much gratitude for it. And he was just like, you know, of course, I'd want to be there, but if this is what you have to do, then do it. Like please like, I want you to be happy, like this is your wedding day, not my wedding day. Like yeah, but, but you're my brother. I want him to be there, and... But no, he was, he was okay with it, and we did have him on a phone. He did, he was present virtually at our wedding, and my sister in-law held the phone the entire time, so that he could watch. So, yeah, so my family was there. And that was just a great blessing that they were able to be there because down the road, come that original date in November, lo and behold, there was, it was really like, the number of cases for COVID that year, it was really high, like in November, and had that, had we had stayed with that date, my family would not have come. It was a, I think they were thinking about the possibility like, could we go somewhere for Thanksgiving? Could we come together in November? And with the way that it was, they were just like, no, we really, we just can't travel like, not for us, but also especially for my youngest brother who has type one diabetes, you know, we don't want to run that risk, so they were not gonna go anywhere. And so I'm glad that we were able to make that move, and that we had that foresight to think about that because otherwise, my family wouldn't have come. So yeah, and then we had our reception in my in-laws backyard. We had just rented some tables, and we ordered Chinese food takeout. And that's what we did for our reception, and it was really fun. It was, it was very intimate, but it was really fun. So yeah, it was wild, just a lot of things to consider and pivot, but at the end of the day, what was important was us. We wanted to take that step and to, to be married and we were able to do it; it was able to happen, so that was meant to be.

Kit Heintzman 40:15

2020 had so much going on that wasn't just the pandemic. I'm wondering, other than COVID, what were some of the issues on your mind and heart?

Maria Ignacio Ilas 40:27

Yeah. Um, it's so interesting that you say that because in 2020, in Minnesota, where my family lives, is when there are all the riots that were happening. And I think that, it brings... it's a sadness that was brought to light, I think. And it's important that it was brought to light, right, that sometimes people can be so awful, but just that, that we have people who are supposed to protect us, right, that's what kind of the general idea of like, if we think

about the police, that they are, they're met, like in an ideal-, idealistic world, that that they're meant to protect us and to serve their duty, but that sometimes there is that reality of exercising their power in the wrong way. And that resulted in, in George Floyd and the loss of his life. And unfortunately, a lot of people were really angry about that, and I think it makes sense like, it makes sense that people were angry. Did they do it? Did they react in the right way? I don't know, who am I to say, I don't know if they should have been destroying the businesses of people who lived there. I mean, I went to high school in Minneapolis, I went to college in St. Paul. You know, Minnesota is a home for me, too in some ways. And so it was just kind of heartbreaking to see all the violence that came from, from violence. And so that was something that was really on my heart that I was thinking a lot about. And really just, you know, like, what about the safety of all the people that are there? You know, I think I get torn a lot between people who are angry and have reason to be angry, but how it, how those, how people react with their anger, and what they do with it because, you know, if you look at some of the businesses that were destroyed, because of the riots, they had nothing to do with what actually catalyzed all this, you know, they had nothing to do with the police department or anything. But you know, I, I don't know. I think that's, that's tough and a little frustrating, I think, for me sometimes to see is that they're always casualties, to, to big movements. But I think that's something that I can like, look back on in 2020, that was also really big, besides all the, all the other things that were very big in my life. And certainly, that sparking protests and riots all across the country, as well, including out here in California. And I'm not a violent person, I don't know, are people violent people by nature? I'm not violent by nature. I understand protesting, and I think like, that's really good. And to go out and protest and to be out there marching like, I think that's important to show like, I'm here, and I am in support of this, or we're not supportive of this depending on what you're going for. Um, but I think it's mostly just like the destruction and the violence that I think is just so detrimental to a lot of things and a lot of people that may not necessarily have had anything to do with why you're even angry, you know. So that, that gives me lots of, I'm always torn, but I'm always concerned, and I'm always looking at both sides. Well, this makes sense; this is reasonable, but why are we doing it in this way? Like, are there different ways that we can come to more productive solutions? Am I too idealistic in thinking of that? I don't know, but I do like to... that's just the way I think I guess. That's what I like to think about like, what solutions? Like what can we actually do that will make a difference? What can we actually do that will make an impact that can lead to, to change being, like happening in a way that is maybe a little bit more direct, and a little less destructive? Maybe somebody might disagree with me and think, well, sometimes you have to be a little disruptive to make some change. I don't know, I me-, but I think just for me, it's like, what can we do that's going to make a way for it to happen. And I think that definitely, like influenced, or like, it permeated into, like, friend groups, my friend group, definitely hearing a lot like there, I have friends who are very, very passionate about, um about like, Black Lives Matter, and like, that movement, and like what that stands for. And I have friends who are maybe more passive about it, and like, yeah, like, that matters, but I'm not really gonna do too much about it, you know, people on different spectrums, and definitely seeing, I'm usually the person that's always in the middle. But, but just like seeing that, like rift some of my friendships, like people that I'm friends with, who are also friends with each other, and seeing that, like rift kind of come in between, because people weren't seeing eye to eye on how they should be doing something about the issue because I think overall, it wasn't necessarily a disagreement of... I think there's not a disagreement of that is bad, or this is an issue to be concerned about. I think that was fairly universally accepted within my friend group, like, this is a problem. Like, we need to stand for this. We shouldn't be doing this. We shouldn't be okay with policemen who are over-exercising their power. We shouldn't be okay with police brutality, that's absolutely not okay. But I think there's just a lot of disagreement on like, how do you do that? How do you fight against that? How do you stand up against that, and if they were on the same page, it was hard for them to even like, have conversations. It was, there was just screaming, or kind of yelling matches. But sometimes that just kind of looked

like it over social media, or text messages, you know it, because we weren't literally with each other at those times, so I think that also made it difficult, because the relational aspect is a little bit lost, it's hard to communicate emotion when you're just reading words. It's possible, but sometimes, like, the body language is different, or the tone of how someone is speaking is different, so that was a little, I think, difficult to see. And definitely like, it hurt my heart to see that happening, like on a societal scale of like what you're seeing happen across the country or in our state, but also on a personal level, like within friendships and seeing those, seeing the issues kind of rift that apart, and as opposed to like, allowing friendships to be enough of a common ground to actually have a conversation about it, even if you don't agree, you know.

Kit Heintzman 48:24

What was it like communicating back home with family in Minnesota either, generally about the pandemic, after the murder of George Floyd, as sort of anywhere in that context; how were you keeping in touch?

Maria Ignacio Ilas 48:35

Yeah, um, usually, we are communicating via FaceTime, so just video calls. So with a pandemic, just, you know, my mom being a mom, how are you doing? Are you guys okay? You're doing fine, like, make sure you know, your keeping, keeping clean, washing your hands, staying away from people, like okay, mom. Like, we can only do so much? You know, Gian does work in a hospital. So you know, but her definitely communicating her worries and just, just showing her tender, love, and care as a mom. But yeah, so that I think that's a gift that we have, that we could do video calls, that this is, this is a thing that exists, and so we're able to, to chat with each other. With my, I have three brothers, so the one who was right after me, he was one that was deployed, and so we used WhatsApp to communicate. And so that usually just looked like messages here and there, but every once in a while, he'd be able to call us, so we'd be able to chat to see how it's going. It was actually very interesting for him. There was, I think, like, probably for both, well, for health reasons, one, you know, with like supply chains of things and like things being able to be delivered or not delivered, because, because people are getting sick, or they don't have enough people who are working because they're sick or you know, for whatever reason. So the disruption of that, like deliveries, and then maybe even security, they, there was a long period of time, he was saying, I could only eat chicken and rice, that's all we had access to, because no food was getting delivered to where they were like, and that's all they had, or there was a time where they were only eating... oh, man, there's an acronym for this, because there's an acronym for everything in the military, but like their military prepared packaged food. Because there was one time we were able to do a video call, and he was just, I was like, wow, Gabe, you've gotten so skinny. You're, you know, like, what happened? Like, he didn't look unhealthy, you know, but definitely just a little less round in the cheeks. It's just like, yeah, well, it's because we're only eating chicken and rice, because that's all we had access to. None of like any of the other food that we would normally be able to have options for is getting delivered, so that's what we have. And again, I think maybe it was partly security, but definitely, like, part of that was was COVID like kind of interrupting what that usually looks like for them. So yeah, and then, with my family in Minnesota, just communicating via FaceTime, my mom was always checking in. We've talked to my dad every once in a while, you know, like dads aren't always that chatty, but he'd say, hi, and how are you guys doing? With my youngest brother, we enjoy video games, so does he and so sometimes there are some of the games that you can play online together, we were able to do that. That was like one way we were able to really like be intentional about like hanging out, even though we weren't physically together, and so we'd just be on FaceTime. And he's got his, you know, Nintendo, and we've got ours and just like, you know, playing together and just chatting and spending time together in that way. Wow, you're really taking me back. I'm like remembering things that I sort of just forgot about, but my youngest brother was in eighth grade in 2020, and

he's not a bad student, but I think it was very detrimental for him to only do school online, to not be in person, come into the classroom, be with his classmates. And so he was struggling a lot like academically, like, with school. And my mom had reached out to me and she was just like, you know, is there anything you could do? He just needs a little help. I don't know, like, I don't know what else to do. I don't know what else to help him, like, be better at school, but he's legitimately failing right now, you know. And she's like, I don't want him to fail eighth grade. You know, we want him to be able to keep going, so something that he and I did is we would just hop on FaceTime for an hour or two in the evenings throughout the week, maybe two or three times. I couldn't necessarily do it every day, but like two or three times, and it was almost like study hall on Zoom. And I just kind of asked him like, okay, like, what do you got for homework today? What do you, what do you have to work on? You know, and what, or what do you want to try to accomplish? And then he'd say, like, well, I had to do this math, you know, he'd identify, like what he actually had, and he'd identify like, this is what I'm going to try to work through in like the next 30 minutes, like okay, so work on that, and we'll check in if you have any questions, just let me know, I'll do my best. But I think a lot of it was really just like, he needed somebody to just be with while he was working on stuff, just kind of that accountability because otherwise he would just get distracted, it's too easy. You could just take your Nintendo out and start playing you know, because homework is boring. Or, you know, whatever, for whatever reason, and I think he just kind of needed that like accountability of like, okay, I'm gonna spend this 30 minute focus time on this. Okay, then I gotta take a break, or you know, if you got to do that, fine. And I think that helped a lot. My brother did pass eighth grade, so thank goodness he passed everything. Yay. But it's just funny. Like, you know, I think one of my friends was like, does that actually work? Is that actually helping? You're just sitting on a computer staring at him while he's doing all the work? Like, I mean, I'm not staring at him, I'm just, I'm just here, you know, but I think even just that company like virtually, like made a difference, because otherwise, he was just sitting at his table by himself. So, yeah, I don't know, that, that helped him a lot.

Kit Heintzman 50:10

What does the word motherhood mean to you?

Maria Ignacio Ilas 51:22

Motherhood... I think motherhood can take many different forms, But there's sort of like a... to me it is associated with a certain type of care, I think, like a certain type of care or a certain way of showing love. It's sort of, it's sort of protective, and I think you can be, you can be biologically a mom, obviously, we've got, we've got moms, but I think also, there are like mother-like roles that we have, for other people, or I mean, vice versa, for me. I think that there are people in my life who certainly aren't my mom, but they're like a mother figure to me, and, and they love and care for me in that same like protective, protective way, a very tender way, and it's just, it's kind of like a deep love. I don't really know how to explain it, but you just, but I think you can recognize it when you feel it. Whether it's a motherly love that you receive from someone, or a motherly love that you yourself are like giving to someone else. But yeah, but it's just like a protective love. I feel like it's probably the most concise and best way that I would describe it, so motherhood to me is is that sort of relationship that in which like a protective care exists, whether it's from you to someone else, or from someone else to you and that you receive.

Kit Heintzman 57:26

I'm thinking about you sitting with your brother while he was working and wondering what you observed in any of the students you were mentoring.

Maria Ignacio Ilas 57:35

You mean in, in as I'm sitting with my brother, if there were like any, like similarities?

Kit Heintzman 57:41

Yes. Yeah.

Maria Ignacio Ilas 57:44

That's a good question. Um, yeah, I could, I guess I could say that I think... I think mentoring, and I probably naturally do this to other people, in fact, probably my husband will like call me out on it and be like, hey, you don't need to mentor me right now, but it's hard. I think it's just, it's sort of in my disposition. In fact, actually, well, I'll answer your question, so I think the similarity of how I like viewed that was really just like, okay, how can I support my brother in doing something that he's trying to accomplish? So just simply trying to pass like, we're not, I'm not forcing you and trying to push you to be like, okay, you must get A's, A's only, right? But it's just like, no, like, I think you want to pass eighth grade, I think you want to continue on with your friends, when they go into ninth grade. And I think that's what you want, and so like, let's, let's try to make that happen. So what are we working on today? And, and I think that was just like my best way of, I am not physically there with you in Minnesota, even if I wanted to be, it's the pandemic right now. I can't just fly over there and like, go be with you. Plus, also, I have a husband here, and I can't just leave him behind and just be with you while you finish eighth grade. So, you know, I was just trying to think of a way, how can I support you and doing what you want to do? How can I support you in achieving your goals? And I think a lot of that is similar to when it's mentoring, like, of course, if a student is coming with us within our program, like our program has specific goals or things that we try to accomplish, but it's very relational in that like, I get to know the people that I'm, I'm serving with, the people that I'm talking to, you know, and I come to understand whether they tell me straight up or if it's because something that I've observed on how they're acting or how they're speaking, like what is important to you, what do you want out of this? Like what, what is the goal that you have for your leadership? What do you hope the people that you're leading are gonna get out of being part of your group? And then I consider how am I going to help you get there? Is it because I'm simply going to remind you that at the beginning of semester, this was your goal? I don't know, maybe you need those reminders, or maybe there's something that we put in place, like one of my students is, she's very Catholic, she loves prayer, you know, and so one of like, one of the thing that I talked, talked with her about like, okay, like, what's gonna help remind you like, why you're here and what's important? Maybe is there a little prayer that you can write, it's like a sentence, two sentences, or it can be a whole paragraph, if you really want it to be. I'm not going to put any limits or anything on that, but if that's important to you, and that's how you find yourself kind of coming back to center of like, this is my goal, then what can you write, and so it's, it's just really like a guiding, guiding the steps, but really, I'm not taking ownership of what, what you want, and how you want to do that, but maybe just helping provide some outside perspective of like, how can we achieve that together? How can I support you in doing that? So I think very much like with my, with my brother doing that, and seeing a way where, how can I support you and be present with you? And you know, outside of I'm not gonna do your homework for you because otherwise, you're not learning anything, you know, but how can I support you when you're doing your work? And, you know, do you just need somebody to be there? Do you need someone, I don't know, to create a schedule for you. If you needed that, then I guess I could try that. So yeah, just like kind of the mentality that I had, in approaching both situations is very similar in that way, but I think it is also pretty consistent with I think how I relate with people naturally, just like, how do I get to know you? Who are you? Where are you from? What are you doing? What do you like to do? Oh, that's awesome. I heard about this book, maybe you could check it out. You don't have to, but that just made me think of it, you

know? Or there's this podcast, you should listen to it, or... yeah, I just like helping people and supporting people and what they want to do.

Kit Heintzman 1:02:30

What does the word "health" mean to you?

Maria Ignacio Ilas 1:02:34

That's a good question. Health. Hmm... It made me think of homeostasis. I probably actually learned that in a, an anatomy or physiology class or something, but, but that's what came to my mind is, is homeostasis. And like, I guess that would be good health, but health is like your state of being. And usually, if there are issues with health, then there are things that are disrupting your state of being. So you're like, health is... um health is well anything, it's always like hard to just define something, sometimes you have to, like define it and what it is not or what disrupts that. But yeah, I think health in a physical sense, right is like, how are you made to be? How are you made to function, and I don't know, live out your life. And what are you doing that continues that natural function or like, your way of being? Does that make sense? I don't know if that's making any sense, but like, be, just being you. Health is doing, what supports your way of being, whether that's like, your physical health, your mental health, spiritual health, I don't know, I think there's different, but that's kind of like your way of being and like the balance of being that, which is an active thing. And so I think your baseline, I also went to nursing school, I should probably you know, so baseline makes me think of that. I was going to be a nurse, but I decided that was not where I was being called, so I didn't finish, but that's what your baseline, that's where it comes from. Right the like, the baseline of your health can look different and it's because we are human beings, and we're like very dynamic, and we change with our times and what we're influenced with and our bodies change and grow, and you know, they look different. So, health is just like an active, ever changing thing, but it's kind of like, where's your balance? Where's your middle? Like, where are you centered? And if there are things that are disrupting health in any specific way, like physical health or emotional health, or mental health, you know. I like to look at it like, you know, what is disrupting that? And maybe why is it being disrupted? Is there something that I should be doing that's different, especially like, with your physical health. You know, if like, something's been disrupted, your body's not in it's like homeostasis, then should, is there something you should be doing differently? Maybe you're not taking enough vitamins? I don't know. But then, I think more importantly, like with mental health, or emotional health, right, it's like, if something's, if that state of being isn't at peace, or if it's not balanced, maybe there's a reason why, and it's like, worth it to explore, why, why is that? Like, maybe there's deliberately something that you're doing that is, um that is interrupting that and should be changed? Like a behavior, maybe, maybe it's a person, I don't know, or maybe there's like, a reason why, and maybe it is one of those things that it's like, something to sort of like experience and go through, but it's not a forever state of being, but yeah...

Kit Heintzman 1:06:36

Would you share about your own religious and spiritual journeys?

Maria Ignacio Ilas 1:06:41

Yeah. So I, um, I'm Catholic. I, my parents are Catholic. I was, I was raised that way. I was just yeah, just like taught a lot about who Jesus was when I was a kid, and I went to Sunday school. I didn't, I went to public school, but I also went to Catholic school. As I mentioned, my brother is in the military, I had two brothers in the military. My dad was also in the military, so we moved a lot. It's how I ended up in different places, and how they ended up in Minnesota. But so, just like, experiencing faith in a lot of different places, I think, is also very

different rather than sometimes like when, when people grow up in like, maybe one specific church, and they have the same community their entire life, which is awesome, I was always jealous of that, man would be like to grow up in one place? But yeah, it was, I learned about Jesus very young and continuing to learn about him, and to really, like grow in that and understand what that means and what that looks like, for, I guess, for our church, but also just like, for me, specifically, like what my own relationship with God looks like, what does prayer look like for me. And I think that's something that definitely has shaped me and who I am and how I hold myself. It has helped get through some really, really tough times in life... but I just have a lot of like gratitude for, for my own faith journey, um and there have been many people who have influenced that. I mean, it started with my parents, you know, because they took me to Sunday school, and we went to church, but I definitely think it, it grew in the way that it has, the way that it looks like now for me, in the fullness of how I, I experience it because of like friends that I've made within like, like church ministry and like that service, and that's where like my husband and I, as in my, my husband and I met at a youth ministry conference years ago. And when we were teenagers, we didn't even date right away. We were just friends for a long time. You know, and so it is something that has like, transformed my life, and I can find, although like things may be difficult, honestly, I think it helped so much and support, especially like during COVID because it was, it was a very tumultuous time. Lots of things to decide and pivot and you know, it's not really an optimal time to plan a wedding, but I think that's what helped like anchor me a lot in that, that reminder of like there's still joy to be had, like what is important and a reminder of what is important for me and for my husband and for our, for our life, and then the people around us. That it, it helps us to be centered on what's important, like, the love that we share with each other and to celebrate that, the love that we have with our families. And that there's, there's gratitude and joy to be had even, even though things are very difficult, which can also be very, it can be like sad and frustrating and make you really angry while also, you know, there are moments to be reminded of like, oh, yes, but there's a reason why, like, there's still hope to power through even though right now I feel really angry that I can't have the wedding that I want, or the way that we had planned it, or you know, for whatever unforeseen, unforeseen circumstance definitely very rooted in, in my own, like, religious life or my spiritual life and my belief, my belief in God and my relationship with him and my prayer life, and how I'm able to really bring all of, all of the things, I'm worried about, all the things that I desire and to bring that to prayer, and really trust in, trust that things are going to still be okay, that there is a way, that there's, there's still joy, there's a way to peace, if you're not currently feeling it, you know? Because not everything is gonna be perfect all the time because that's just not how life goes and that's not how people are, even me, so, yeah.

Kit Heintzman 1:11:44

What are some of the things you want for your own health and the health of people around you?

Maria Ignacio Ilas 1:11:50

Things that I want for my own health, um, and for the people around me, I think a big thing is stability. If I think back to like, what I'm saying with homeostasis, and like balance, there's so many different factors that influence what our health looks like. Again, like either physically, spiritually, mentally. But I, I think that there are, there are things in place that can help support stability in those, so you... like, maybe we're rocking either which way within our physical, mental, emotional health. There are places like we could go or people that we can see that will help support like, that homeostasis, how do we come back to center? How do we come back to balance or stability? And knowing like, where we are, who we are, what we're doing? I mean, literally in like, the physical sense, right? Like, if my mom is not going to see her doctor and making sure that she's like, on par with stuff, you know, I'm probably going to encourage her like, mom, like, have you seen your doctor late-, doctor lately, you

should probably go check and because I want you to be, I want you to be healthy. I want you to have a full life. I want you to, uh, not be experiencing pain if your knees are hurting, although I do know that that does come with age. But maybe it's like, you know, this is actually something I do encourage my mom in, okay, Mom, maybe you should like go for walks around the block around the neighborhood, you know, just like strengthen your body a little bit with some exercise because she is always saying that her knees are hurting and her back is hurting. I know it's not going to fix everything right, but like, I think having an active life is generally what I've been told from our health care professionals is healthy for you and helps support, so if you're having some pain somewhere, sometimes you might just need to strengthen those muscles around it. My husband is also an occupational therapist so that's probably where some of that talk comes from. But yeah, I would hope for stability like for myself, so in the physical sense, like making sure we're like getting checked and doing the things that we need to do to stay balanced in health and, um, and then similar constructs, right, for other, for other things. So like, for emotional health, like maybe that means like, you're going to therapy, if that needs to support that, or maybe it just means like you're ,you're making time for yourself, you're setting aside time where it's, it's just you time. Maybe it means you're setting outside time for like, I'm gonna go with my friends, and I'm gonna spend an evening, and I don't know, we're gonna go to the movies. We're gonna, I don't know, what do we do? We go to the movies, we play board games, we really like games, so doing that. Getting your nails done, you know, doing something, doing something for yourself that's going to continue to build those, like, those relationships with people that I think. I mean, I can't imagine my life without like any other people that are like, in my community of people, you know, like my family, my friends because I just, I can think of countless times you know, that they've had my back when I was going through difficult things. Sometimes I forget who I am, I forget, like, what I, what am I good at, and I can like, be really like despairing like, man, like, it's just rough, and I just feel like, you know, you kind of throw a pity party a little bit, you know, but when you can turn to a friend who knows you, and who has seen what you were able to overcome, like, in moments like that, and my best friend has reminded me like ma-, she calls me mama.... she, you know, she'll say, mama, you're strong lady, like, you know, don't worry, like, it's gonna be okay, and if you feel like, you're gonna worry right now like, that's alright, but, you know, you're not, you're not a little person that nobody cares about. We all love you, you know, and just like, just being reminded of that way, and I think just like our community can be that, can be that balance of like, they're gonna keep you in check, you know? Like, is my emotional, mental health, like in the right place? Or like, maybe, yeah, maybe you do need to seek someone who's gonna help support that in a stronger way, like, you know, someone like, to go in therapy, but yeah, but like, our community, like helps us in that way. There's someone that I talked to you who is, like, on a spiritual level, he's my spiritual director, and so he's like, the thing that people go to school for, and they get a certificate for it, but, and so like, on like, a spiritual level, like, that's kind of how I keep my spirituality in check. Like, this is what's on my heart. This is what I've been praying about, like, you know, and I think that has been really helpful and supportive for me in keeping my spiritual health in the right place. And, yeah, I planned that with him the other day; it was really awesome. Um, but yeah, so what I want for myself and for other people in my life that I love, just stability. So like, what are we doing in order to help have that? And like, if we're not at a stable place like, what steps are we taking to like, get there right? Like how do we like manage in the times of instability? Coping skills.

Kit Heintzman 1:17:52

What does the word "safety" mean to you?

Maria Ignacio Ilas 1:17:56

Safety. Hmm, how do I describe the word safety without using the word safe? Um... for me, I think safety is somewhere or with someone. An environment, I guess, an environment where you feel comfortable, or you feel protected, where you can be yourself, where you can be out of harm's way, whatever harm looks like, whatever harm looks like. Um, I think being safe... yeah, I think being safe is just being not in a place where you can come to harm, but I also say that knowing that sometimes your safe place, or the people that you are safe with, sometimes they can hurt you because they're people, so they might hurt your feelings, but that doesn't necessarily mean you can't, that is not a safe place. Um, so I do, I put a little asterix there of like, sometimes in your safety zone or your environment of safety, whatever that physical location is or what, what that environment looks like with the people who are in it, sometimes they can push you, they can push your buttons, they can push you out of your comfort zone. And just like knowing that fact that like people are imperfect, just like I am, you know, sometimes we're going to, we might be hurt in that way, like our feelings will get hurt, or some might say something that doesn't, doesn't jive with you. But it doesn't necessarily take away the safety factor from that environment, depending on what it is, you know. It's not a blanket statement for everything. There's always like exceptions, I think, but, but I think generally speaking, safety is an environment in which you, you feel the most like yourself and that you are protected and that you can be comfortable, and you are loved, and you love the people that are in that space as well. Um... yeah.

Kit Heintzman 1:20:51

Thinking in the sort of narrow biomedical context of COVID, what are some of the things you've been doing to keep yourself feeling safer, and how has that changed over this like, 2020 to present?

Maria Ignacio Ilas 1:21:05

Yeah, um, being safer, I think so, going into COVID or like, being in that spring, summer of 2020. Excuse me, um things that my husband and I did to be, to be safe. We definitely, also his like, home routine, obviously, that was one, but I think just like, level of cleanliness, we're generally clean people anyway, but I think like when we went out like, we made sure we like washed our hands, or it became a habit pretty quickly, but I was conscious about like, not touching my face. So if we were out in a, like going to the grocery store, like that's one of the, one of the main things we went out for was going to the grocery store, but just like, yeah, so if like I'm touching things like out in the public space, like not touching my face. Or eventually, it like a got, as time moved on, like through COVID, we introduced more people into our bubble, but then like, something that we, we did in terms of like, planning was always like, well, we were doing things outside, like we went out for picnics and stuff, and people brought their own like picnic mats. So it was just like that, that maintaining of distance, right, but that was, that was definitely more subjective as time went on, like, I don't think we were necessarily like, okay, we have to measure out six feet, right? Like, it was kind of just like a general like, I'm not going to be sitting right next to you, but I might be sitting like, across from you on my own mat, or picnic blanket, or whatever. We were always wearing our masks outside, or like whenever we were going to the grocery store, or if we were coming together with our friends like for picnics. But yeah, so just like the general like, we're washing our hands for a long time. This is something that I still do, actually, I'm conscious of, of like, okay, like, I gotta make sure I'm not just, you know, okay, done, but like, I'm actually washing my hands for like 20 seconds, and it's a habit, but I think that it's something that really came out of, like COVID and that intentionality in the beginning of like, okay, make sure you wash your hands for a long amount of time. And it made me think of when I was starting nursing school. We did like this little exercise. I don't know, they just told us like, go wash your hands, and they had us use like a soap, and a specific type of soap, and then they like took out like a light, and they were like, okay, everywhere that is lighting up is actually where you missed, and you didn't wash your hands. And we're like, oh, like in

between your fingers like that? Oh, you got to like, make sure you get in there, for like, right here, like, where your thumb is and stuff, you know. And so that's really what I thought about like, when we were going into COVID, I was like, oh, yeah, gotta make sure you're not like lighting up those spots. So yeah, so going into COVID, that's like what we did, and then I think just kind of, I guess to where we are now. There's just that general mindfulness of like, washing like, washing hands, but also I guess like when you're, when I'm touching stuff, like in the pub-, like, when I'm going out shopping or whatever, I'm not like, I don't know, I guess I'm wary of wh-, touching my face or like I'm just mindful of like washing my hands like when I get home, that's something that I do always. Like when we come home like, we wash our hands or for out at the store or anywhere else, we'll, when we get in the car, we have hand sanitizer, so we just, you know, sanitize, and that has just become a habit more than anything. It's not necessarily like, I don't think there's a conscious thought of, well, we got to make sure we're clean, but we just, that's a habit that has stayed. But now, thinking about it not necessarily bad, you know. So, yeah, that's something that has stayed with us. As we keep... I don't think your question was about clean. Was it about clean?

Kit Heintzman 1:25:46

It was about staying safe. Different ways of staying safe.

Maria Ignacio Ilas 1:25:48

Staying safe. Yes. But in the like, sort of in the context of what COVID has done, okay. Yes. So those are things that we have done in addition to just I guess, getting like regularly, like regular doctor's appointments, like when we do like our physicals and whatnot. I do think one thing is if, if we're presenting with any sort of symptom, like, if we've got the sniffles, or we have a cough, it is something that we're mindful of of like, okay, so is this a cold? Is it the flu? Is it, could it be COVID? So we do have rapid tests? And so we'll usually do that as well, we'll check like, okay, do we have COVID? Did we test positive for it? And so that's something that, that we do without really thinking about it, like, if we're, if we're feeling sick, then we'll check. And then within our friend group, for sure, like, with each other, if we're coming together, or if we've already had plans, and if anybody has, like, sniffles or a cough, like, hey, heads up, you know, I was feeling I was having, I had, I've had a cough this week, you know, if you're comfortable with that, or if you're not comfortable with that, just let us know, and we'll just stay home, you know. And so we kind of just like, check, check in with each other, and it's usually pretty chill, like, one of my best friends has, she has four kids. And you know, school's in person now, and kids go to school, and they pick up all sorts of things, and they come back home, and then they bring it to everyone. Like when RSV was happening in the fall, that was happening in their household. So you know, like, sometimes if we're all coming together for dinner, like at their place, they'll say, just a heads up, our three year old has a little bit of a cough, you know? Are you comfortable that? You guys don't have to come over if you don't want to, like, you know, we'll take no offense or anything like that. But I think that's something that has definitely come, like a mindfulness that has come out of COVID that we do with each other. Which is, yeah, I appreciate it. I don't think we were necessarily doing that pre-COVID. Um, yeah, I don't know. I think COVID just kind of like built that mindfulness of like, hey, you're coming into our space and just want to make sure you're comfortable with this, and it's not a huge deal. Just like simple text message, you know. This is what's happening. Cool if you come; cool, if you don't. Just let us know. We'll make more food, less food, you know, whatever. So, yeah.

Kit Heintzman 1:28:37

How are you feeling about the immediate future?

Maria Ignacio Ilas 1:28:41

How do I feel about the immediate future? Wow, that's like, that's broad. I feel pretty good about the immediate future. I don't know, hopeful. I'm excited for whatever it is we're going to be doing in the immediate future. Yeah, lots of things. Goin' and movin'. We are, let's see, we are very active ministry people, as I mentioned before, and so my husband and I do music. We do music for retreats, and so that's like one way that we serve in ministry, and we really love doing it. And so, I'd say that something in our immediate future that we are excited for and love doing. Um, yeah. One of our friends is getting married, that's exciting, and we're excited to be there with them and celebrate with them. I feel like we are, we're just in a really good place, so I'd say immediate future, pretty hopeful and exciting.

Kit Heintzman 1:30:04

What are some of your hopes for a longer term future?

Maria Ignacio Ilas 1:30:09

Longer term future? I hope, also such an open ended question, could be anything. I hope to be great in the future, just kidding. Um, for a longer term future, just continued, I don't know, I hope to still be friends with the people I'm friends with because they're awesome. I hope to continue to build the relationships with the people that I have in our life. They're very important to us. I actually hope to go back to school someday, not feeling that as urgently. I think when the right time comes, I'll know when it's time to like, you know, really dig into the the application process and stuff for that. But as I mentioned, you know, with We Dignify, also with my brother, I love supporting people. And I think, I think it's something that I do have a knack for' I think I'm fairly good at it, in addition to something, it being something that I really enjoy, so I do hope to go back to school for for my Master's in, in clinical counseling, so it's something that I desire. That'd be really awesome if I get to be there eventually. Yeah, just continue to live my life with my husband, and however that looks like because he's a pretty awesome partner to have in life. That'd be very joyful.

Kit Heintzman 1:32:05

When you've been in need of support over the last couple of years, who have you been able to turn to?

Maria Ignacio Ilas 1:32:11

Yeah. Well, one, my husband, who's out there. My number one supporter, and number one cheerleader, and number one guy, if you ever need an affirmation, just because he's got you, so definitely my husband, Um, my brother, who he's the one that's like, right after me, in like, the birth order, so we're closer because we're closer in age, but definitely turning to my brother. And then my best friends, those are people I turned to. My spiritual director, who's also, also a friend, he was my friend before he was my spiritual director. But yeah, just like people that I, people that I love, but people that I trust, and I know, I know that they'll be real, right, like, if, they're not going to be afraid to sugarcoat things because if I, if I'm going to be the, the best version of myself, and I want to be the best version of myself, I know that, that doesn't come from me just being the same exact person that I always am. Like, I'm, as I mentioned before, I'm not a perfect person, like people aren't perfect, and so if, like, call me out, be real, I don't know, tell me, tell me if there's something that I could be better at or that I can like grow in. And so when it's like times of, definitely when there's times of support, I know they won't be afraid to have hard conversations with me if it's got to be a hard conversation. They don't always have to be hard conversations, but... Um, and so people I trust, people that I love, and people that I know will be honest and authentic. And I'm

very blessed to actually, to have people like that in my life, so grateful for that. But yeah, my husband, my best friends, my spiritual director, just people that are like really in my, my circle of deepest trust, I'd say.

Kit Heintzman 1:34:25

And what are some of the things you do to take care of yourself?

Maria Ignacio Ilas 1:34:30

Things I do to take care of myself? I think just making sure I'm setting aside time for, for things that I really enjoy. Things that will allow me to reflect and really take in the, take in like maybe the events or the people that are happening like in my life. I think it's really important to stop and reflect and maybe look back on something that I've done because if I'm moving too fast, then I kind of, you know, just forget about stuff. And there's like, there's a mindfulness, this is something that I've kind of put into practice is like that stopping and reflect, like really helps in my mindfulness of others, but also of myself, right? Like, if I can't, if I don't stop, to reflect and look at maybe projects that I've been working on that are now coming to completion, and like, recognize, like, wow, I did that. You know, then I'm not, I don't take the time to celebrate it, and, and I don't say that to be like, not necessarily in like an arrogant way, right, but I think it is important to celebrate things that you have accomplished because, because you're a gift, I'm a gift, you know. And I say that with great humility, but um, but I think, yeah, it just, it helps me right, because, as I mentioned before, too, that, like I can, I can get in a place where sometimes things are tough. And sometimes I can feel in the middle of a pity party and say, like, oh man, like, I just don't contribute anything, I don't do anything, and so therefore, I'm not valued. But really, when it comes down to it, my value doesn't have anything to do with what I do or contribute. It's, you know, it's who I am. And I think when I like, leave that time for, for reflection, or like to just be mindful of, again, like of others, but also of myself, what I've accomplished, what I've done, or maybe even just like, always, I can grow, I could have probably, I could have, like, done that better, or like I had a conversation earlier today, and maybe I could have handled that conversation better, you know, whatever that looks like. That's something that I do to take care of myself, is setting aside that time, and that's really important of like that internal look. Looking in, but also, yeah, just like making time for things that I, I really enjoy. Spending time with people I really enjoy spending time with since life can be really serious, life can be heavy because sometimes there are hard things you do. But also spending time with people that you love and spending time doing things that I love really reflects back a lot of goodness in me and, and helps me to, to be empowered, to be supported, to be, to be loved and helps me to be myself, so yeah. Time for people, time for things I enjoy. I love playing games. I love reading. I love, I love art, so I like making stuff. I like doodling or painting or drawing, or the medium kind of changes from time to time. I'm never doing all of them all at once, you know, but I might be just drawing for like a year. And then for some reason, I might see somebody do something and be inspired by that, and I'm like, wow, maybe I'll go pick up a paintbrush and like do that. But it's just something I really enjoy, and it just, it's very peaceful. So, yeah.

Kit Heintzman 1:38:44

Do you think of the pandemic and the last few years as a historic event?

Maria Ignacio Ilas 1:38:50

Absolutely. Absolutely. It is, it's a significant, I mean, technically, everything is part of history, right, but I, but yeah, especially the last few years with COVID and any of like, the societal, like the things that just have been happening because they've just impacted especially like, I think if we're just thinking like of our country alone, because that's really like that's what I can think of, but um, we have been greatly influenced. I think the way that

society is talking and thinking and communicating and putting things out even on media has been greatly influenced by all of our experiences with COVID, with Black Lives Matter, and like George Floyd's like, death and that, all that that sparked after that. Yeah, absolutely. I'm trying to think of like other like things that after that there was like crimes on, like, Asian hate, right, or just, just the amount of shootings we have right now, but like, like all of this is influencing our society, and how, how we are relating with one another, how we are continuing to build our society, like when we go to, when we got to vote, what we're choosing to vote on, you know? So absolutely, all part of history because it's all, it's all influenced every single one of us, whether we realize it or not, and it is changing all of us in the ways that we respond to it, or don't respond to it. Yeah, it's gonna be interesting to read these in history books because it's definitely going to be there.

Kit Heintzman 1:40:50

What are some of the things you wished you had learned more about in history when you were younger?

Maria Ignacio Ilas 1:40:59

Things I learned... wished I learned more about... I really enjoyed history when I was younger, I still enjoy it now. I probably don't do as much reading on history as I did when I was younger, when you had to. Something that always fascinated me, which, I have no idea how they would implement this if they were gonna do it at like, the elementary, middle school or high school level, but like, I think more like of the personal, like stories of the people that are going through it. I think this is probably why I'm just, it's been a while since I like reached out to you, but like, why I was so interested in talking with you because I think it's important to hear from people who lived in that time because then you get a feel for the reality of what that time, or how that time actually impacted them. I think back to the history books, and you could read like one paragraph on a giant event that probably lasted a really long time, and significantly impacted people, but yet, here we are years later, and it's, it's got like a second of space in our brains. And then maybe people internalize it, and maybe they don't, which is, you know, but they're real people who are influenced by that one paragraph in your textbook, you know, so I think that'd be really cool. You know, what if, I mean, that's like, anthropology type stuff, you know, the cultural anthropology, like you put vignettes in these books, you hear from people, and not just the quotes from the famous people, but maybe it's just quote from real person in this real time, and maybe their name isn't as important as what they experienced that captured the emotion of the time or the impact of these events in that time, right, so... and maybe that means I should have looked at more books and read, because I'm sure there are like novels, or like nonfiction stuff out there about those times, the essence of those times. I think that's probably why I enjoy like historical fiction books because even though it's not, it may not be based on a true story, but it sort of gives you a glimpse into like, what was it like to live in that time. How are people impacted by... I don't know, World War II, or the Great Depression, or something, you know? So, yeah, that's something I wish I learned more.

Kit Heintzman 1:43:43

What do you think scholars in the social sciences and the humanities, so fields like political science, or literature, or religious studies, what should they be doing right now to help us understand the human side of the pandemic?

Maria Ignacio Ilas 1:43:56

Hmm... well, you know, I'm trying to think of something other than the obvious thing that's coming to my mind right now, but I will just say it, so what you're doing, I think, is really awesome because if you want, like in the humanities and the social sciences, right, like, if you want to capture the experiences of the pandemic, besides just the statistics that we know are already there, you got to hear from the people who've been impacted by it. And so I

think like, it's going to be easy if there are research institutions that have all these statistics, or if you go, you know, go to the CDC, and they've got all this record tracking for everything. There are a lot of numbers there, but there are people behind each and every one of those numbers. So what were their experiences like? How were they impacted by this? What changed? What made it different? What did they have to overcome? I doubt nothing changed for anybody; I think everybody was changed by it in some way, shape or form, you know. And so, yeah, I think this is great, like, hearing from people who have been impacted, which is every person, but actually like, collecting those stories, you know what I mean? And, and asking people to share in that. And so whether it's in a structured way, and the way that you are doing right, like we, we are talking about this now, and this is going to go somewhere, it's got some acronyms. I don't memorize what the acronyms are, but it'll be stored in GitHub and yeah, right. But I think even too, right, if just talking with people, it'd be great if those were logged, but even if they weren't just on a personal level, if people were learning more about each other and their experiences and how they're impacted by the same external factors, right, like COVID was a thing that, that everyone encountered in some way, shape or form. You either had it, you knew somebody who had it, you knew somebody who was maybe greatly impacted by it, or maybe not, you know, maybe they had very, like minor symptoms, or they had no symptoms at all, they just tested positive, you know. But I think just like even on a personal level for people, to just take some time and get to know how people were impacted by the last few years, which I think is something that we definitely naturally did, you know, as, as things sort of returned to a normal, I say, quote, unquote, because it's still, you know, what's normal? But as we're seeing more people, people are going about, going to events, and they're going outside, and there aren't people wearing masks all the time, you know. I think that's something that naturally, that we've done as we've been reintroduced to the people we used to see all the time, and now we're seeing them again. You know, what have you guys been up to? How are you? You guys doing okay? How were you impacted by all of this? Yeah, I think that could only benefit us by just knowing, getting to know each other more in that way, like, and knowing each other's experiences.

Kit Heintzman 1:47:55

This is my last question. I'd like you to imagine speaking to a historian in the future, someone far enough away that they have no lived experience of this moment. What would you tell them cannot be forgotten about COVID-19?

Maria Ignacio Ilas 1:48:09

What cannot be forgotten about COVID-19... So many things about COVID-19. Um... Wow, I'm filtering through my brain right now. Um, I think something that can't be forgotten about COVID-19 was how... trying to find the right words. I'm an external processor. I'm just gonna start talking. Okay. Okay, so I think a huge thing was that there was sort of a, a, we were united by the desire to protect each other, and ourselves. How that looked like varied from each person, I know, but there was just this general sense of, I want to keep you safe, and I want to keep ourselves safe, and so I'm going to do you know, fill in the blank. And I think that's pretty awesome like, just kind of that, I want to call it mindfulness, maybe for some people, it wasn't mindful, but I think generally, in my experience and people I encountered or talk to, there was just a mindfulness of like, I'm going to keep you and give you your safe space, so that I can also have my safe space, I mean, it was kind of mutually giving. And that impacted us on a very wide scale, so it wasn't, I don't think, right, it wasn't just like, just Maria and her group of friends, but I think we saw this in, like, every, every city, every circle, like wherever, where my family was in Minnesota, here where I am in Northern California, and for different friends. You know, one of my best friends was in Texas, like even there, we saw that it was still at the beginning, right, there was very much this shared experience of that's pretty scary. We don't know what it looks like, and so we're gonna do everything that we can

in order to keep each other safe. Again, it was different how everyone played that out, but I think that general, like census was of let's keep each other safe, is pretty awesome, like how humanity can kind of band together and that way, and I won't forget that. I think we see that in a small way, right? Like, to what I was sharing about how even now, like, our friends will just say, hey, checking in, our kids got a cough. I know you guys were coming for dinner today, but if you're not comfortable with that, you don't have to come over, you know, just like that, that care has come out of that or that specific way of showing care has come out of COVID, and I think that is something that shouldn't be forgotten. We have the capacity to care for each other and keep each other safe, even though sometimes, it doesn't always look like it.

Kit Heintzman 1:52:14

I want to thank you so, so much for the generosity of your time, and the thoughtfulness and kindness in your answers. Those are all of the questions I know how to ask at the moment, so right now I just want to open some space. If there's anything you want to share that my questions haven't made room for, please take some space and share it.

Maria Ignacio Ilas 1:52:38

I don't know, I think we had a, we had a very wide conversation that covered many things, and I think that in a nutshell of our entire time together, that does it, it gives a good overview of what the last few years, but especially like 2020, 2021 into 2022 and what that looked like. And it gave me space to also kind of remember and be mindful of those things as well, which is good because like wow, look at what we did, look what, look what I accomplished and what we overcame, like me, my husband, my family, look what we did, so this has been awesome. Thank you.

Kit Heintzman 1:53:29

Thank you so much.