

EPISODE 1072

“SF: I am optimistic that the entrepreneurs will get us out of the economic stress, because in the end, those are the people who create employment. I am optimistic about there being opportunities for new types of solutions to things.”

[INTRODUCTION]

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FT: Welcome to So Money, everybody. I’m your host, Farnoosh Torabi. You’re hearing from our guest, Sarah Farzam. She is the founder of a thriving business called Bilingual Birdies that she launched over 12 years ago. She launched it while working part-time in a restaurant and spending the rest of her hours handing out flyers to parents in the park.

Bilingual Birdies is dedicated to teaching foreign languages and cross-cultural awareness to young children through live song and dance. You can check it out at bilingualbirdies.com. It is a business that has learned to pivot well in this recession. Sarah shares how she and her team are transitioning the business to meet the needs of their market, supporting both clients and their staff.

Fun fact, Sarah and I have known each other for almost 12 years. We met because she reached out to me after seeing my name in print, a byline in a newspaper clipping and she recognized that name to be Iranian. She would know. Sarah is half Iranian, half Mexican. From there, a friendship began. I’ve always been so impressed with her dedication to growing Bilingual Birdies. Our kids have participated. It is absolutely unique and special.

In our conversation, we talk for the first time despite knowing each other for all these years, about how her money story evolved, how she learned about it growing up, the startup strategies of launching a business pre-Instagram and social media as we know it today. Bilingual Birdies has been around before the gram, before Tik-Tok, and her views on the economy, where it's headed and the optimism that she feels moving forward.

Here is Sarah Farzam.

[INTERVIEW]

[00:02:32]

FT: Sarah Farzam. Welcome to So Money.

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SF: Hi. How are you? So happy to be here.

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FT: Finally. Why did I think you were already a guest on the show? That's probably because I've interviewed you in many different formats over the years, just not on the podcast. Welcome.

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SF: Welcome. Thank you. Yes, it's full circle now. We're getting all angles here, books, podcast, the whole thing.

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FT: I really think the universe intended for us to meet, because you think about it the way that we first met, you fell upon one of my articles that you'd seen in a store that had been framed. I used to write a business column for a newspaper in New York. This particular business owner that I had profiled had taken the clipping and put it in her store. You saw the clipping and read my name and you thought, "Oh, this girl must be Iranian." I'm Iranian. You reached out to me. From there, we began this friendship, but also for me this intrigue. You were starting this business called Bilingual Birdies, which I'm proud to know you from all those years ago and to see where you've come. Now is just remarkable. We want to dive into that, especially given the world and how your business is plugging into the new normal.

We've since met serendipitously many times since that first encounter, where even just a year ago I ran into you in Brooklyn. What are the chances?

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SF: The stars align for us, you see. I really believe all the people who need to meet each other in this life somehow find a way to find each other. It is so true.

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FT: Let's start with Bilingual Birdies and then maybe we can go back in time. There's just so many different ways we could take this interview. I think it's most relevant to discuss Bilingual Birdies, which is this beautiful company you started from the ground up, which teaches foreign language, multi-culturalism to children through music and movement and dance and puppetry and all of these amazing action-based games and exercises. Initially, this was a company that was very much in-person. You had to go to a class with your child. How is it doing now in the era of COVID?

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SF: Yeah. The magic of in-person, obviously is something we're all trying to replicate online. When COVID first hit, we scrambled as fast as we could with my team to develop a wonderful, beautiful experience that transferred online and we were able to accomplish that, which I'm really happy about.

I would log on sometimes to the classes and see so many children, just 50 kids sometimes will come to a class and it would be so much joy. You see them laughing and dancing and singing along and identifying words in Spanish, or French, or Mandarin, or whatnot and just so happy. I missed all the stress of what was going on in March when we're trying to figure everything out. Going and seeing the online classes was really giving me life. I got very hopeful and excited.

Then another way in which it's changed since COVID is that with so many people out of work, many of which are bilingual people, and so many children at home and parents trying to figure out ways to engage them educationally. Our licensing opportunities started to pick up and people started contacting us like, "Oh, what is this thing? I can start my own Bilingual Birdies from home and share my language and culture and teach kids online through Zoom. That's super cool. I want to know how to get started with that."

I believe so much in entrepreneurship and I just think that in the US, so much employment is as a result of entrepreneurship, right? It's always an amazing thing when you can give a job to someone. Even more amazing in my eyes is to give an opportunity of entrepreneurship to someone. That's how it's changed.

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FT: Really, what we're hearing is a lesson in business mastery. Let's just highlight what the shift was, where you and this happened before the pandemic, but when we met in Brooklyn a year ago, you were talking about transitioning your company to this licensing platform. Whereas, maybe in the past you were employing, I don't know, a few teachers per city and there were a dozen cities. There was a limit. That was the model.

Now, so many more people can plug in to this work system, which is wonderful to your point, there are so many unemployed people right now, people who do speak more than one language. This is something that they can do from home. Wasn't it magical that you came up with this, not knowing where the world was headed.

[00:07:12]

SF: Right. I do think sometimes you arrive in a situation and you're like, "Oh, so this is – all these things in the past brought me to this moment. Now it's starting to make sense." Yeah. Even for people who are – what's really interesting is even some people who are not bilingual have contacted us to start their own Bilingual Birdies business, because they understand they can hire bilingual people to do the classes for them. They can set up their own team, which again is really fascinating.

Being online and essentially turning my brick-and-mortar business into a tech company, has allowed us to expand in so many cities across the US, Canada and Australia, which I mean, before how would that have ever been possible, right?

[00:07:55]

FT: Right. Tell us a little bit more about the licensing process. For someone listening who's like, "Oh, this is interesting." Who does it work best for? You used to talk about this as the Zumba model. I know about Zumba, because –

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SF: I know about Zumba. It's super fun, right?

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FT: I never did Zumba, but I feel there was a sub-culture of Zumba.

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SF: Yeah, there is. I feel I danced like that in my room by myself anyway to that music, so I'm a big fan. Yes, I studied the Zumba business model a lot amongst other business models and I came to the conclusion that I want to offer a quick, easy way for people to get trained and certified online so they can launch their own bilingual birdies business.

The process works like this, if you are someone who is passionate about children and early education and if you are bilingual, or you have access to finding bilingual people who can work for you and you are entrepreneurial, you can apply online to get certified, to have your own Bilingual Birdies license in your neck of the woods.

Then essentially, we set you up with all the infrastructure that you need to run your business. You get a website, you get the teacher training, you get a business boot camp, you get all the

marketing materials that you need to promote your classes and set up caregiver and child classes, like mommy and me classes online or later in person, how to connect with preschools and daycares to make partnerships with them to offer the service to their children and then you go into a peer-to-peer network of other Bilingual Birdies licensees who are serving their communities across the globe and everyone's supporting one another.

Then we send new themed curriculum every month, so that your classes are fresh and fun and it's a good time. Yeah, we mail you a classroom kit of instruments, all the maracas, drums, puppets, everything you need. Then in these videos online, you learn the methodology of how to teach Spanish, French, or English, or Mandarin to children all through music, movement, dance, puppetry. It's a very interactive, physical, joyful experience.

It used to be a \$1,000 upfront, but we have eliminated that fee due to COVID, so now it's just \$75 dollars a month. For 75 bucks a month, you can have your own business called Bilingual Birdies with Susie, or whatever your name is and starts to earn money from home.

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FT: What kind of money are we talking about? How much can you really make?

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SF: We believe that within the first year, there's always going to be a little bit of a ramp up the first few months. You might not be making the exact money that you set out to make month one or two. There's always going to be a ramp up period. We believe that within the first six months, you can definitely make about a \$1,000 a month, again depending on how hard you're willing to hustle.

This is really only off of a few hours a week of time that you've spent promoting and teaching your classes online. Then within the first year, we believe that uh you can make from \$2,500 a month up after 12 months. This really has so much to do with the time that you're willing to dedicate to it and how hard you're willing to hustle, like I said. It's also important to keep in mind

that you'll be making this type of money from the comfort of your own home, sharing your language and culture and teaching children online.

It's not like you're going to be working eight hours a day. You'll have maybe a class on Mondays at 10 and then another class on Tuesdays at 4 and then maybe something on Fridays. The majority of your time will be spent promoting those classes, but the actual investment of time spent teaching is only going to be a couple of hours a week. It can be a lot higher. Right now there's so many families that need children's activities. It depends on your ability to go into these Facebook groups and start to make alliances with different child activity places and parents really.

If you have a network of a lot of other moms, or dads that are looking for things to do, that's of course a big help. When I started, I didn't – no kids, no access to early childhood education world in New York City. I had to just pound the pavement. It was before Instagram, Facebook had just got started. I used to pass out flyers in the park and chat moms in playgrounds and that's how I got my first few clients.

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FT: I think living on your brother's couch for a little bit?

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SF: Yes. I mean, I was a high school teacher/waitress in the beginning and I saved up all my tip money and that was how I launched Bilingual Birdies. Yeah, when I first moved to New York, I was just like, on my brother's couch, trying to figure things out, make ends meet. When you don't have experience in running a business, you do whatever you can to try and figure out how to make it work; ask to find mentors from here and there, read books, study things as much as you can to figure out the art form of being a good businesswoman. I do believe that's an art form.

[00:12:49]

FT: It is. There's so many phases. Tell us about phase one. You painted the picture, like passing out flyers, learning on the go, gathering your pennies. What was it in the beginning that you felt gave you early momentum? Also, how did you come up with the idea in the first place?

[00:13:06]

SF: Yes. I'll tell you how I came up with the idea. I'm half-Mexican and half-Iranian and I grew up in a very obviously, multicultural home. I really always had a love for music and education and alternative forms of learning. I used to be a high school teacher. I have twin nieces and I have a nephew too. At the time, my twin nieces were only two-years-old and I would hang out with them at the park on my day off and chat with moms and people who are sitting next to me on the park bench, like nannies.

I realized that this was pre-recession, so everybody had a lot of money back then and they were taking their kids to classes. I had met this one mom that I'll never forget. She had a two-year-old and her two-year-old was enrolled in a different class every single day of the week. I'm like, "Well. I'm going to check this thing out." It was just a time in New York, where the baby boomers kids were having kids, so there was another baby boom and there was just strollers everywhere, literally stroller traffic everywhere you went.

I started chatting with these moms. I think phase one, I didn't even really know what an Excel spreadsheet was. I didn't have hard skills. What I did have was a very not-shy personality. I was not shy to talk to people and that I think when you first have a baby, it can oftentimes be a lonely time. You're trying to figure things out and find your flow. I would chat with all these new moms who were really happy to have a conversation with me on the park bench. That was the beginnings of my market research and surveying and asking questions.

I met a lot of moms and they told me what it was that they were looking for. They'd go to these classes and some of them were only okay. Eventually, I went to one of these classes with my nieces and I realized, "Okay, this is fun. It's like someone here playing the guitar, singing songs, but it's all in English. If I add language to that, then it becomes educational entertainment and not just happy fun times in English." You can walk away from this experience really taking something

that can profoundly impact the future and help you to be a more open-minded adult when you grow up, which who doesn't need that these days?

I think as I started to learn more and launch, I realized the value of celebrating diversity, which was something that was very much a part of my upbringing from my mom being from Mexico and my dad being from Iran and growing up with such a cultural heritage. Starting this business and growing it has also really empowered me to feel proud of who I am and where I come from. That's something that I want to give for other children.

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FT: You brought up the importance of mentorship. In our meeting last year, you mentioned that you had been connected to this amazing mentor, almost luckily by chance. She normally charges a lot of money to give people advice and she just took you under her wing. I think that's a story worth sharing, because wow, these people are out there and I think we often think that we have to spend so much money to start a business, or grow a business. Sometimes it's just literally putting yourself out there and asking for help.

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SF: 100%. I moved to San Francisco after New York to launch Bilingual Birdies in the Bay Area, and I knew – I had taken a lot of entrepreneurship classes and free courses from the city of New York and I knew that I wanted to find a business coach, because I had some ideas of what I wanted to do and I needed a person to really guide me into getting that. I was like, “I’ve taken all the classes. I need a human that's going to help me.”

I started researching time my people to find a business coach. A lot of the entrepreneurship networks that I was a part of had recommended me to different places. As I started calling them up, I knew I wanted to find someone who was a female and based locally where I was, which is actually a hard thing to do, because most of them are men. I started calling and everyone started saying the same thing, like you need to have 20 million dollars in sales for us to take you on.

I was like, “20 million dollars. If I had 20 million dollars in sales, I wouldn't need a business coach.” I just kept getting no's and I was very confused, because I didn't want someone that was just for if you're just starting out your business, because I already know how to start and launch and grow. I wanted to get to the next level, really identify what my growth opportunity was and execute.

I finally called this one place and they were like, “Well, we do have this one woman that's based here in San Francisco. She's really different than everyone else, so let's see. Let's try.” I just cold e-mail like, “This is who I am. Hi. This is my situation. I'm not there yet in 20 million dollars in sales, but I will be at some point. I have a lot of promise, so let's see.” Her name is [inaudible 00:17:56]. She has built lots of tech companies and she has her own tech company and she works in HR solutions.

Kirsty was like, “Yeah, let's meet. The way I do it is let's meet. If we have a good connection, then we'll continue. If not, then that'll be that.” She was like, “Next week, I'm going to Kenya, because I work there helping female entrepreneurs who are street side mango stand owners how to develop their business with the same strategy that I use with my entrepreneurs here.” I was like, “Oh, my God. This woman's awesome.”

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FT: You're like, “I'm going to Costco this weekend. That's how I spend my Saturdays.”

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SF: Exactly. She's like, “Let's meet next week when I'm back.” I was like, “Let's do it.” We meet up and I explained to her my whole story and what I want to do. It was just, I have to tell you, it was just magic meeting her. She's of Armenian descent. She's looked like me, but she was very new school and very cool. I loved her outfit and she's had such a lovely energy. Right away, you just feel at home with someone and comfortable, like family.

I explained my story and she was like, “Okay. What I think we should do is take a full day, go off site, identify what all the opportunities are, work through them and then make a plan.” I was like, “Yeah, that sounds really expensive. How much do you charge for that?”

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FT: I have no money.

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SF: Yeah. I’m like, “A full day.” I’m like, “Maybe we could do half a day.” She was like, “Don't worry about it.” I’m like, “What do you mean? No, no, no. I got to offer you something.” She was like, “Listen. Frankly, you can't afford me, but I’m going to do this for you because I know you're going to go on to do it for another female entrepreneur at some point.” I was just like, “Wait. What? No.”

Iranians are so – you can't just take it for free. You got to do this thing like, “No, no, no. Please, please, please.” They're like, “No, no, no. It's okay.” You're like, “No, no, no.” That goes on for a long time. I was just like, “No, I can't. How can I take this knowledge that you have for free? It's so valuable.” She just looked me dead in the eye and she said, “No. I’m going to do this for you, because I believe in you and you believe in you and that makes all the difference.” I was just convinced that she was an angel that fell from the sky to be in front of me and help me to get to where I want to be.

I said okay and we started working together. I started learning more about her work in Kenya. Eventually, I raised some money to – I did a kickstarter to take my team of teachers to work in the informal preschool to serve all the children of the female entrepreneurs that she trains. We did a cultural exchange where those preschool teachers showed us what they do with kids, we show them what we do with kids. It's just been this really – I say Christie is my sister-mother friend. We were very much meant to be and she's helped me to grow my company and really execute this whole licensing opportunity that we're giving to people. I’m very, very grateful that the universe crossed our paths.

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FT: Yup. It reminds me of my favorite saying, which is that when women make more, the world becomes a better place.

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SF: Oh, yes. Definitely. I mean, this is the case study for that.

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FT: Yeah. I think even in that anecdote where she said, "Look, don't worry about paying me," she still knew her value. It's like, "I know what I'm worth, but I'm doing this for you as a gift," because I want this gift to keep on giving. I think that is true wealth to be able to stand in your value and do something for someone else at no cost, but only with the hope and expectation that it's going to be passed forward and make someone else's life better.

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SF: Absolutely. I think that's how we're going to get out of this whole moment that we're living too. It's just such a beautiful thing to be able to share your knowledge with someone and when they're in a moment that they're at that tipping point to figure out how they're going to go forward into the world and they will do this again for someone else. It's amazing.

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FT: What I'm learning about Bilingual Birdies is that it's growing fast. You are not only impacting more kids now, because you can be virtual and in all places, but you're also employing many more people, so you've grown the economy where Bilingual Birdies exists. What's next?

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SF: Next is we are starting to look into alternative ways of educating children online, because I do think that in the future at some point, we'll go back to in-person, but the online thing of course is here to stay. There's a very unique opportunity for business owners, who can to develop a virtual experience of some sort and then to have two businesses later when we go back to whatever the new normal is going to be.

I've started exploring a lot of things in augmented reality and early childhood education and starting to figure out how to develop more and more content. I think that is really exciting, because not a lot of people are doing it in the way that we are researching and developing. Yeah, the future for us is going to be about inspiring content that educates young children to celebrate diversity, learn about languages and cultures and really ensure that they grow up to be tolerant, open-minded human beings.

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FT: Citizens of the world. I didn't ask you this question, but how did you learn about money growing up? I think I have gotten bits of this story over the years, because obviously, we can't get together and not talk about our Iranian heritage and money and entrepreneurship and what our dads taught us and what our moms taught us. What's one memory growing up as a kid that was a specific memory around money?

[00:23:52]

SF: Money was the ultimate stressful next door neighbor that you're just like – You're like, “Hey. Hi. Yeah. Okay. I can't deal with you. Why are you causing me so much stress?” It was always confusion. It was stressful and confusing. It's just like, “Oh, well we don't have enough money, well why don't you just get more of it? What's the problem?” I didn't really understand the functionality of it. When you're a kid, you see dollars coming out of an ATM machine and you're like, “Okay. Well, we could just go back to that machine and get more of it.” I was very confused.

What I did learn though about money from my family was the value of negotiating. I grew up watching my dad. I mean, he's Iranian. This is our legacy. It's in our culture. Historically, our people come from merchants and trading and things like that, and so I would grow up watching

my dad negotiate at Rite Aid like, "I'll give you this much for it." I'm like, "No, no, no. This is not a bazaar. This is not the way you do it."

I always started to see that the art form of negotiating and that whole act, like how interesting it is and I was very much intrigued by it as I started to grow up a little bit and just see the natural ways of my father. So much of that later was refined in me when I took a 10,000 small businesses program from Goldman Sachs and I had another amazing mentor by the name of Mori Taheripour, who taught me negotiations and really how to show your vulnerability with it and to –

In our culture, Iranian people roll out the red carpet for you right when they come to have visitors. That's really how I've learned to do negotiating and deal with money today is to access that cultural heritage of mine to roll out the red carpet for someone when we're going to talk about money and figure out how we're going to both walk away from this in a happy way and negotiate to the best of my ability, showing my vulnerability and making the connection. I actually love it now.

Now I look at money, like instead of this annoying neighbor it's actually one of my best friends. I'm happy when it's around. I respect it. I try to take care of it. I hope that our time will last long together.

[00:26:33]

FT: It's interesting. I was talking to another Iranian guest, Farnoosh Hariri. Yes, her name is Farnoosh and she was saying how in the Iranian culture, at least how she grew up, there's not really any room for vulnerability. That's interesting how linking vulnerability to a negotiation can yield more success. I never really thought of it that way. I'd have to look up her book. It's really interesting.

[00:27:02]

SF: Yeah, you have to look up her book. It's called *Bring Yourself: How to Harness the Power of Vulnerability and Negotiations* by Mori Taheripour. She's really awesome. She's the real deal.

It's all about how, yeah, contrary to popular belief that we have to be these hard negotiators and you're like, don't let your guard down. It's actually not about that. It really is more the Brene Brown angle of no, let's come to this and show yourself. Let's talk about it. Why do we have to be ashamed, or hide? We're all in this thing trying to figure it out and get up together.

The more we can get on the same page and learn about one another and build that relationship, in the end, everything's about relationships, your relationship to money, your relationship to the other person, how you're negotiating this thing. For me, it's been very effective to utilize her methodology towards it.

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FT: Lastly, so much uncertainty right now. I get a lot of questions from listeners about whether or not it's the "right time" to be doing anything that requires planning and saving, because maybe all we should be saving for is the rainy day. We can put everything else on the back burner. What are your thoughts on that? Are you optimistic about the future? Not your future, but just in general, this world that we live in. How are you thinking about your personal goals within that context?

[00:28:27]

SF: Yeah, absolutely. It's officially raining in terms of that rainy day. It's up to you. I mean, I work with preschoolers, so it's raining and it's up to you if you're going to look out and see a rainbow out there, or just dark clouds. For me personally, of course it's a stressful time. 40 million Americans have lost their jobs, mass protests against racial injustice, economy about to collapse in a big way. It's a very, very stressful time for so many families.

I think that I am optimistic about the future. I see things in a way where I'm an entrepreneur, so I feel there's always going to be an opportunity. Historically, recessions are the best times to start a business, because everything again is negotiable, rents and everything. I am optimistic that the entrepreneurs will get us out of the economic stress, because in the end, those are the people who create employment. I am optimistic about there being opportunities for new types of

solutions to things, really what are problems that are going to require essential businesses, right?

Educating your children. Healthcare. Voting. Someone needs to sort out the voting situation. There's going to be so many businesses that are going to be essential that humans are so resilient. I feel that if you look at history, we've always found a way to uprise and power through. I'm really curious to see what types of businesses are going to emerge and what types of creative thinking.

That's why I always tell people like, I know it's stressful, but have a good long cry about it and then have a nature walk, or do your 15-minute meditation, because it's only when I've been able to access my personal toolkit of meditation, yoga, therapy, Zumba, nature walks, emotional freedom technique, tapping, just writing, journaling, listening to podcasts, all that stuff is when I can then recalibrate and be like, "Okay. Now I can see a little bit clearly and focus and really assess what needs to be done here," because I do think that people are going to come out on top. It's going to take some time, but this can be a remarkably transformative transition into something really, really incredible.

[00:30:51]

FT: You know what else works, taking a shower.

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SF: Yeah, put a little perfume on. It's always good to smell good, even if you live alone you want to smell yourself nicely.

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FT: Light a candle. Yeah.

[00:31:00]

SF: Absolutely.

[00:31:01]

FT: Yeah, just get your mind off whatever it's on that's not making you happy. Sarah Farzam, thank you so much. It's so nice to reconnect with you my friend and I'm so glad I got to share your story with my audience.

[00:31:13]

SF: Thank you for having me. You're the best. I really am so pleased to connect with you in this way again.

[END]