



A PALESTINIAN REFLECTION ON WHAT WE LEARN

Mazin Qumsiyeh

WHAT WE LEARN in childhood shapes our future. Every day, this simple fact is emphasized to me because the experiences of my childhood have made me who I am today. It was the kindness of my mother, who is now 89 years old, to strangers, that taught me the real meaning of philanthropy. It was the commitment and hard work of my father that taught me not to waste time. It was accompanying my uncle, Sana Atallah, the first Palestinian zoologist, to the fields that taught me the love of nature. My maternal grandfather taught me to value and love books. All of these influences were there, even when I was 6–7 years old. I did not always appreciate how lucky I was to be born into a family of educators.

Let me tell you about just two of those people. My maternal grandfather was born in our small village of Beit Sahour, like his ancestors and most of his descendants. Located in the hills halfway between the Mediterranean and the Dead Sea, Beit Sahour was the “Shepherds’ Field” mentioned in the Bible where the shepherds, who some two thousand years ago saw a star and walked up the hill to Bethlehem where Jesus was born. My grandparents’ and my parents’ homes are literally down the hill from the Church of the Nativity, where tradition holds that Jesus was born. On my way back from school in Bethlehem, I would often stop by and look at the candles in the grotto of the Church, then go to visit my grandparents. My grandfather, or *Sido*, loved to tell his story of hardships during WWI, when he lost all his immediate family and how, as an orphan, he built himself up.

At times, a group of us children would head to the nearby hills for adventure. We would eat wild roots, the fruits of the *za’roor* (the hawthorn) and occasionally use slingshots to get a sparrow or a lark for meat. After these tiring trips, we could always count on a nice meal prepared by my grandmother who somehow knew when we would be stopping by. These visits were more frequent in the season of loquats, figs, apricots, grapes and almonds that were plentiful in the garden, which was so well-tended by my grandfather. My father and mother had no garden—we lived in a rented apartment—until after 1970, when we built our own house. I was 13 then. Thus, memories of my grandparents’ garden flood my mind some five decades later, as I tend my own garden as well as the botanical garden at the Palestine Institute for Biodiversity and Sustainability.

Sido also occasionally grew Beit Sahour’s most famous agricultural product, *faqoos*, a diminutive, sweet snake cucumber, that seemed to thrive in the rich red soil of the hills around Bethlehem. The townsfolk prospered on agriculture for more than 5,000 years, growing wheat, olives, almonds, figs, grapes and other assorted fruits and vegetables. Beit Sahour’s inhabitants

lived peacefully together but were not homogenous. The mosque and the church were—and are—right next to each other. Secular and religious people joked about each other but were best friends. We had leftists, even communists, including one of my uncles, and rightists, like my other uncle. I enjoyed the open debates among them that sometimes became heated, only to be followed, a few moments later, by even more heated quarrels over playing cards! There was at least one black family I knew of in Beit Sahour, an Ethiopian Christian family. Occasionally, there were issues, of course, though not between Muslims and Christians or over skin color. Rather, they were doctrinal differences between the majority Greek Orthodox and the Protestant denominations. These disagreements were more noticeable to us because my mother's family was Lutheran and my father's, Greek Orthodox. The nearby town of Bethlehem was even more diverse with Armenians, Sharkas, Copts and other religions and nationalities, all intertwined. Any family disputes were easily dealt with by wise and elderly leaders, whom only hot-headed teenagers like us dared to challenge.

Other occasional disputes occurred between the villagers and the nearby nomadic Bedouins, whose goats ravaged our crops. It was, thus, not unusual to have *natoors*—meaning unarmed guards—posted around fields for protection. Yet, we were also dependent on the Bedouin for milk, cheese and meat products, and they were dependent on us for agricultural products. Overall, harmony between humans and nature persisted there for millennia. Things began to change dramatically with the advent of Zionism in the late 19th century, accelerated in 1918–1948 under the British “Mandate” and peaked with the *Nakba*, or catastrophe, of 1948–1949. This seminal event made most of our people refugees and tore apart the ancient landscape. Palestine's vibrant multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multi-religious communities, understandably, rejected the idea of a “Jewish state.” (Qumsiyeh 2004). The Armistice line introduced in 1949, called the “Green Line,” divided families from their lands and from each other. My grandmother, living here in Bethlehem, hails from Nazareth and longed to see that ancient town. My mother still recalls her friend, Hayah Balbisi, who was killed at the age of 16 in her village of Deir Yassin, one of 33 villages where massacres were committed during the *Nakba*. But our *Nakba* did not end in 1949. The new state of Israel occupied the rest of Palestine in 1967.

Immediately after 1967, Israel started to confiscate Palestinian land in the areas it acquired and to build Jewish-only colonies/ settlements there. This was a settler-colonial project and not a mere military occupation. Israel was created to become a Jewish state and we, the Palestinians, were the unwanted “other.” Thus, there are now over 7.5 million Palestinian refugees or displaced people and the other 6 million live in isolated ghettos/Bantustans like Bethlehem. Palestinians were mostly employed in agriculture. As their lands were taken, many were forced to find other jobs. Thousands were forced to work in building the Jewish settlements and the roads that now cover much of the West Bank and Gaza.

Thus, what shaped my childhood and views included both family influences and the bigger national influences. If I were to pick one seminal event that made me who I am, it would be the death of my uncle Sana in 1970, who had taught me the love of nature. This was a turning point. Uncle Sana had just finished his Ph.D. and started teaching in Iran when his van, remodeled as a mobile research unit, was hit head-on by a truck that swerved to the other lane. Sana and his assistant were killed instantly. He was 27 years old. I, at 13 years old, promised myself and his father, *Sido*, that I would follow in his footsteps. Four years later, I graduated from high school and

embarked on a long career of education in biology—I still consider myself a student of knowledge. This included a Bachelor’s degree in biology (1978), teaching in schools in Jericho, Bethlehem, and Jerusalem (1978–1979), a Master’s degree from Connecticut (US, 1982), then a Ph.D. from Texas (1985), followed by postdoctoral stints in Lubbock, Texas and Memphis, Tennessee (1986–1989), then at last faculty positions in medical schools and hospitals at the University of Tennessee (to 1992), Duke University (1993–1999) and Yale University (1999–2005). I also became board certified in medical genetics and ran clinical labs, both affiliated with academic hospitals and also private.

Starting up new enterprises and organizations actually became most fascinating for me. As noted, formal education and formal professional services were not the ones I consider to have most shaped my thinking, collective activism or entrepreneurship. It was the informal observations and role models of family members that shaped my future very early on in childhood. My father, a schoolteacher, had started at least two ventures totally unrelated to his background as an elementary school teacher: a children’s toy shop and a factory for paint thinner. My maternal grandfather wrote books on subjects ranging from Arabic grammar to Palestinian proverbs, simply because he loved knowledge. This is why there is not a day that passes by without me thinking of these people.

Of course, there were people who influenced me as an adult, and I should mention some of them. My major advisors for the MSc and Ph.D. degrees were very kind and generous people. Ralph Wetzel was the Ph.D. advisor to my uncle Sana at the University of Connecticut 1966–1969 and my Master’s advisor 1979–1982. I was his last graduate student before his retirement. He was such a kind and hard-working man. I lived in the attic of his house for a while and enjoyed the excellent cooking of his wife. My major advisor in Texas was Robert Baker, who used to challenge me. When I was faced with difficulties, he would tell me: “What does not kill you only makes you stronger!” This support was critical, for example, when I had a stroke that paralyzed my left side or when a disgruntled ex-student tried to defame me to get back at Robert. I was so distraught on some occasions that I even considered quitting science. Robert’s wisdom and advice, and the help of fellow graduate students at the time, were critical to passing through that period and to coming even out stronger. Being away from home country, Robert and Laura were our family. Graduate students and undergraduate students from many parts of the US and the world melded together as a close-knit “mammalogy” family. I especially remember how some graduate students, with the help of Robert and Laura, took care of my wife as a new mom in 1985, while I was in Kenya for two months.

I tried to emulate these mentors in dealing with my own students. I endeavored to support them, not just academically, but in personal ways that are difficult to describe. As Robert Baker said to his graduate students, on several occasions: “The umbilical cord is never cut!” I knew that he meant that we should stay in touch, and that advisers are like parents who continue to care even after their children leave the house. Many years later, I also recognize that this “knowledge” umbilical cord transcends generations. Those who taught and shaped the lives of a previous generation have shaped our lives, even if they have never met us. This point is most evident to me now, more than ever. I have lost most of those good people to the inevitable death that stalks us all, and I lose friends and colleagues on a regular basis now that I am in my 60s. I have lost 19 close friends since I returned to Palestine in 2008, most of them killed by Israeli soldiers as they participated in non-violent resistance to the occupation. It is difficult, sometimes, to keep going,

while facing so many challenges, especially when you decide to take on big challenges. However, the strength that those earlier generations gave us is the main gift in life, which goes on and on, generation after generation. Therefore, I spend most of my time now with young people and focus most of my new projects on empowering young people.

When I moved to the US, I had always planned to return to Palestine, to serve by empowering new generations there and, thus, repay some of the debt I owed to my own formal and informal teachers. Delays in returning occurred, such as getting married and having a son who needed to get a good education in the US, combined with great opportunities like positions at Duke and Yale Universities. These delays, though, were also my way of getting better prepared financially, socially, academically and emotionally for the move. The move back to Palestine in 2008 was the best move I ever made in my life. I left a well-paid career to teach one or two courses a year here and to focus most of my energy on service to the people, especially the youth. In the USA, I had been politically active, co-founding a number of organizations and movements like the Palestine Right to Return Coalition and Wheels of Justice Bus Tour. I had published three books in the US, including *Sharing the Land of Canaan*.³¹ However, it was becoming clear that I could do more of service in Palestine, to more people. Thus, in 2008, I started a clinical laboratory here at Bethlehem University, and I started teaching, on a part-time basis at more than one university. I engaged in popular resistance and wrote a book on the subject.³² I passed out copies of my book—the Arabic version—to young people and was happy to listen to their ideas and to learn from them. Some of the young people I engaged with stood out more than others. For example, Basil Al-Araj of al-Walaja, was especially keen to learn and try out methods of non-violent resistance.³³ He and a group of young people blocked a settler road. He and I, and four others, boarded a bus—one of the segregated settler buses—to highlight apartheid in an action we called Palestine Freedom Riders. During the many times that I was detained, it was always a pleasure to chat with fellow detainees, all of them less than the age of my son. Basil taught me a lot. We miss him—he was killed by Israeli soldiers.

I have always believed that resistance is important, but that education, art, agriculture and hundreds of other forms of life's activities under colonialism are also resistance. It is called *sumud* in Arabic, which is a combination of resistance and resilience. Since returning here, I have always been looking for ways to use my somewhat privileged new status to help in this regard. I say “privileged” because I was economically self-sufficient, had a great educational background and even a US passport. So, all my actions were directed at helping people in *sumud*, whether by acquiring sheep to give to a needy family in order for them to build a source of income or paying for the tuition of needy students in the sciences or planting a few trees. To help young people, we established Master's programs in biotechnology at Bethlehem University and environmental studies at Birzeit University. In 2014, my wife and I donated \$250,000 to start the Palestine Institute for Biodiversity and Sustainability and the Palestine Museum of Natural History at Bethlehem University. The Institute has a motto: “Respect—for ourselves, for others, for nature.” These levels of respect help us achieve the vision of sustainable human and natural communities. The Institute's mission includes research, education and conservation, related to our cultural and natural heritage.

Jessie and I have been full-time volunteers over these seven years. With the help of other volunteers and later, a handful of staff members, we were able to do much in the areas of environmental education, research and conservation. Again, this is all a form of resistance, after all.

Thousands of school and university students have benefitted from having this center in Bethlehem. The garden and facilities have become an oasis of refuge for people and wildlife, amidst the uncertainty, even outright mayhem, in Palestine. The botanical garden now boasts more than 380 species of plants. We have a good natural history museum and an ethnography exhibit. We have a library of thousands of books. There is a community garden, an exploration playground for children, an animal rehabilitation unit, research units, herbarium and models of sustainability—biogas, solar panels, a compost and recycling center, hydroponics and aquaponics, etc. Yet, all these “facilities” are small compared with the spark produced in one child or one university student who, like me so many decades ago, became hooked on knowledge with the aim to serve others.

The best form of flattery is, of course, imitation and I have tried to imitate those who preceded me and also influence the next generation. The memes generated do not need to be identified with their originator: who invented the wheel anyway? When my son, Dany, saw the map of a shrinking US after colonization and drew the map of a shrinking Palestine in 1998, I used it and then hundreds of thousands have used it, after—this is a ripple effect. Those who shaped lives are, essentially, immortal through actions of those they influenced, which shape other generations and so on, ad infinitum. We must not underestimate this ripple effect, the reality that small initial causes may have large effects, commonly referred to by scientists as “the butterfly effect,” first voiced by Edward Lorenz, who contended that a butterfly flapping its wings in Brazil could set off a tornado in Texas. We vaguely know who influenced a previous generation and it is, sometimes, fascinating to speculate. If I were to go back in a time machine, would I be able to go back, generation after generation, to find, perhaps, that a spark that influenced my grandfather and, hence me, came from a disciple of Jesus here in Palestine? A more practical way to think about it is to decide how we spend our own time to help others. I am most proud when I see students whom I helped are now well-established and helping others. When I witness the passion of one of our volunteers or employees working with a child, I cannot help but become emotional. I recall the immortal words of Khalil Gibran, and wonder who influenced him and who he has influenced:

You give but little when you give of your possessions. It is when you give of yourself that you truly give. For what are your possessions but things you keep and guard for fear you may need them tomorrow? And tomorrow, what shall tomorrow bring to the over-prudent dog burying bones in the trackless sand as he follows the pilgrims to the holy city? And what is fear of need but need itself?³⁴

If we are hopeful that humans will transcend the challenges of colonialism, racism, wars, technology, pandemics and climate change, then that success can only be attributed to such a ripple effect. If a candle lights another candle before it is extinguished, is it really extinguished? Further, it would be a cliché to say so, but the brightness of a light is only made more obvious and more appreciated in the darkness.

³¹ Mazin B. Qumsiyeh, *Sharing the Land of Canaan: Human Rights and the Israeli-Palestinian Struggle* (London: Pluto Press, 2004).

³² Mazin B. Qumsiyeh, *Popular Resistance in Palestine: A History of Hope and Empowerment* (London: Pluto Press, 2012).

33 Mazin B. Qumsiyeh, “Basil Al-Araj of Al-Walaja: RIP,” March 8, 2017, <https://peacenews.org/2017/03/08/basil-al-walaja-rip-mazin-qumsiyeh/>

34 Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1923).