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As told to René Kladzyk, 2510 words.

Tags: Poetry, Writing, Adversity, Family, Education, Politics.

# On processing trauma through writing

*Post Mosab Abu Toha discusses the role of artists during war, finding your purpose, and planting hope in the rubble.*

**I first became aware of your work when I read the essay that you wrote for *The New Yorker* about your experience fleeing Gaza, which included being kidnapped by the Israeli military. I was wondering if you could tell me a bit about the process of writing that essay, because it was published quite soon after that happened.**

I was kidnapped on November 19th (2023), and I was released on November 21st. I stayed in the hands of the Israelis handcuffed and blindfolded for about 53 hours. During that time, I was in constant fear for my wife's and my children's lives—I did not know where they went. I was worried about the safety of my parents and my siblings, who I left behind in northern Gaza. And when I was temporarily placed in a tent along with other kidnapped people from Gaza, I could hear the artillery firing shells into the parts that I evacuated [from].

Thanks to everyone who wrote about me, I think a lot of pressure was put on the Israelis to release me. So, I was released and I was really surprised because it was very quick. The second day I was called by some Israeli soldiers to go out. And then it took them a few hours to drop me at the same checkpoint where they kidnapped me from, and that would be the next journey for me to find my wife and my children. I did not know where they were, there was no internet connection, there was no phone signal. So, I started to look for them and it took me about three hours to find them. And luckily they were staying with my wife's relatives in a school shelter in the south of the Gaza Strip.

The moment I was released, I was [contacted] by *The New Yorker* editors, especially David Remnick, who asked me to write about this. So, of course, immediately I started writing down everything I could remember.

**Did you know right away that you wanted to write about this experience?**

I'm the kind of person who—I don't know if I'm lucky or unlucky—reflects on his experiences. Because these experiences are not superficial. These experiences have been imprinted in my heart, and I felt every bit of it. So, I found myself retelling the story from the time we decided to leave North Gaza. We were, of course, scared to take the journey because the Israelis could bomb us any time. That had happened with a few families. So I started to narrate these stories of some of the bombings that happened the night before we decided to leave North Gaza. My wife's grandparents and her uncles were in a school that was bombed in the early morning one day before we left. That was one reason why we decided to leave.

I have these stories with me. The hard part was about reflecting on my feelings, not my experience. There are two parts to any story, the experience and the feelings. The emotions that come with this experience. And this is what poetry is to me.

So, I started writing everything down. I wrote about half of the piece in [the shelter] I was in. I sometimes had to walk in the street to look for an internet connection. I was sitting in the street along with hundreds of other people. Then the second half [of drafting] and editing process took place in Cairo.

**Did the experience of writing this essay helped you to process what had just happened to you?**

Whenever I write, whether it's poetry or essays, or even a short story in the Arabic language, the fact that I'm writing about myself is also representative of what other people are going through. Writing about these things helps me to relieve some of the pain that I'm feeling for myself and for others.

Writing about the collective story, the story of so many people who were killed, or who lost their parents –I know of two people who are still buried under the rubble of their house. And I met with two survivors of that airstrike, which killed at least 40 people and destroyed the building. They were in Egypt. They told me that they wanted to go back to Gaza, and I [asked], "Why? A lot of people pay money to go out in Gaza." She said, "I want to go back and retrieve the body of my father and my sibling." So, the fact that I'm writing about these people gives me a sense of victory that I am still alive to tell these stories. My life has a meaning not only to me, but also to other people.

**It sounds like along with feeling that you've survived, there is also maybe a sense of responsibility to share those stories of the people who have been lost?**

Yeah, the fact that I am alive is one thing, and the fact that I can continue to write is another, because many people survive atrocities. It's not that they kept silent, but they were forced to be silent, either because they're still traumatized. I myself am traumatized. I still have nightmares. And also my children have nightmares. For me, it's about writing about myself, whether it's something that happened to me last year, last month or yesterday, or things that other people experienced, but they did not survive to tell us the rest of the story. So, my position as a poet is to either rewrite the story or to complete it.

**How and when did you find poetry as a vehicle for sharing your creative identity or words with the world?**

I was born in 1992 in a refugee camp. I've never seen a foreigner who came to visit Gaza for the sake of visiting. I mean, the only foreigners that would come to Gaza were journalists, or doctors, or human rights activists. No one came to Gaza to talk to the people of Gaza. So, the first time I found myself writing, I didn't realize what I was writing, that it had some effect on people, and it had some art in it. It was in 2014. I was posting about everything that I was witnessing, every feeling that I felt. I think having a platform [on] Facebook at the time helped me realize how important my work would be, because people started to follow me and to comment on my posts and compliment my writing.

The fact that there were some people who were listening encouraged me to continue holding my pen and penning more and more pieces of writing. I wouldn't call them poems at the time.

When I write in Arabic, I'm talking to myself about myself. I'm talking about humanity addressing myself or trying to understand it. But when it comes to writing in the English language, of course I'm not talking to myself because it's not part of me. I was not born with it. I found it in me later. So, writing in the English language means that I'm talking to someone else, because the people outside are eager to learn. Having that audience in front of me meant that I should continue addressing these people, and that's where poetry came from.

**You've emerged as one of the most prominent voices responding to the war in Gaza through poetry. Why is poetry needed in times like these?**

I think poetry is one of the most successful mediums for someone to reflect on the horrors of war. I can't imagine a painter painting something about the war these days. I can't imagine someone writing a novel these days about the war. But when it comes to poetry, because poetry is about the experience and emotions, we are quick. I mean, writing a poem could take me five minutes or 10 minutes because it's just there. It just needs a pen or maybe a table to start and write it.

So, I think poetry is maybe one of the only tools that emerges from under the rubble of a bombed city. Israel is not only killing houses or neighborhoods, they are killing the city itself. Because if you look at Gaza, it doesn't look like a city. It looks like a graveyard, really. I think poetry is the most direct way of communicating the horrors of the war and the siege.

**In terms of using poetry to push for change, is there any advice that you'd like to share with other writers?**

I think a poet does not have too many options. The poet can find themselves talking to the human in others. So, I'm not talking about the history of Palestine [or] Israel, I'm talking about now. I'm just talking about this moment. Let's put history aside and talk about the central issue, which is humanity. Humanity comes first here.

So, in moments of war, and when it comes to writing about us as human beings, put everything aside. Just talk about what has been brought to every single one of us human beings, not as a Palestinian, not as a Christian or a Muslim or a Jew. Just forget about these things. These things came to us after we were born. I was not born Palestinian. I mean, I was in my mother's womb without knowing Arabic or Islam, or knowing even my name. The priority should be to every single human being in this world. So, I think poetry's focus should be on the I. Not on he, or she, or they, or it. I, let's protect the I.

**Yeah. It sounds like part of your advice is to find the universals of humanity that can take us beyond all the boxes that we use to define and categorize humans.**

Exactly. If I'm going to read a poem about what happened to Native Americans or what happened to Jews in the Holocaust, I'm going to relate to everything. If I'm going to read a memoir that was written about the

genocide in Bosnia, I'm going to relate to everything. I mean, what is the purpose of writing if we are not going to learn from it?

**Our readers are largely American artists. And I was wondering if you have any messages or requests that you'd like to convey to working American artists in this political moment?**

We are both part of this world. Not only are [Palestinian artists] the ones who are supposed to document the horrors of what's happening in Gaza, but everyone. Not only artists, but everyone, everyone in the outside world who is witnessing this. Whether they're watching news, looking at images, photos, and videos that are emerging from under the bombardment. Everyone is supposed to reflect on what they see. Because not only am I in pain as a Palestinian, but everyone who's watching us [is] also in pain.

So, their part comes here. Everyone in the outside world needs to be part of this moment. Because this attack is not only against the Palestinian people, it's also against the people who see value in the lives of the Palestinians.

**Can you tell me about your plans for the future?**

Of course, I'm writing more and more poetry. I have a poetry book that's forthcoming from Knopf in October this year. It's called *Forest of Noise*. I'm writing an essay for *The New Yorker* about [being] a Palestinian, trying to travel from one country to another, from one state to another. And I think my next project would be a memoir. This is a big project, but I haven't yet started on it. I can imagine myself writing about so many things.

I have some short stories in the Arabic language, but I don't think that I'm going to work on this right now. There is no urgency or any necessity, especially during these times. But rather, I think talking and addressing the outside world, especially the English-speaking world. I mean, I talk about the English-speaking world, because the Balfour Declaration, which unjustly promised Palestine to the Jews in 1917, was written in the English language. So, unfortunately, the English language is of course the language of colonialism, and not only for the Palestinian people, but for many, many nations.

**It's interesting to think about using the language of colonization and imperialism in an effort to combat them. It seems like is part of what you're doing through writing in English is using it as a way to reach the people who are in those seats of colonial power.**

Yes, exactly. I hope that my first book and my second book will be read by people who are unfortunately contributing to the misery and the devastation of my country. My message is peace and justice in this poetry. I think that in times of atrocities, the people who should speak to the public, speak on TVs, should be the poets and the artists—not politicians, not political analysts.

**At the end of your *New Yorker* essay, you talked about the concept of raising hope, and likened it to cultivating crops. And I feel like when I read your poetry, I see so much resilience and hope in your work. How do you cultivate hope?**

Hope lies in the fact that we are here and there are things around us that wish us to continue growing. When I see the thousands, hundreds of thousands and millions of people taking to the streets and asking, demanding a ceasefire, I can see hope here. Because these younger generations are the generations who hopefully will be leading the world in 10, or 15, or 20 years from now.

These people who are taking to the streets and who [made the] encampments give me hope because they are watching the history in front of them. They're not reading about the past. No, they are watching the present. So, I see hope in that generation. And I see hope in the fact that Palestinians love life. I can tell about my father who planted some plants in our bombed garden, and he's eating some eggplant, some pepper, some cabbage. I mean, we are planting this hope next to the rubble of our bombed house. [The Palestinians] continue to plant. And this is what hope is to me. They continue to plant their hope next to a bombed building. Here lies hope for me.

**Mosab Abu Toha recommends:**

A song by Marcel Khalifa called "My Mother," words of Mahmoud Darwish's poem.

Drink black tea with dried sage leaves. You will love it.

Read Out of Place by Edward Said.

Visit the children of Gaza when the genocide is over.

Eat a lot of strawberries if they were planted in Gaza. My friend Refaat Al-Areer would recommend this highly.

Name

Mosab Abu Toha

Vocation

poet, writer, librarian

Fact

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