

Being Human, Adelaide Writers Festival 2020 5th of March 2020 – Closing Speech.

From the channel of birth, to the narrow confines of a grave, our journey of life might be as short as a brief opening of our eyes - or long enough to make us wonder whether our place in the universe - is privileged. Situated on a crust of rock and water, rotating around a ball of fire, drifting through the infinity of whatever space might be - one would think we'd have a vision of some kind, something worthwhile - but this does not seem to be the case. No-one will deny - this *is* a complex world. The stupid are cock-sure while the wise have doubts. We're acting as if our existence is not a relationship with one another and our environment - and in our confusion, we seek answers through deities in the sky or identities prescribed through colours and concepts on patches of cloth – and we end up huddled with those who share our fears.

Today, you and I are together for ten minutes – and I invite you to close your eyes, for just two of them. Let me share with you one story that might bring us closer together, closer to being courageously human.

Eyes closed?

I'd like you to meet my friend Fathi. The first time he opened his eyes was in Gaza. Like the rest of us, he brought light to our world. He fell in love when he still had thick and wavy black hair on his head - although tonight - we're meeting him bald. He could have been my brother, perhaps yours. When I first met Fathi, we shared bread and salt. Our chests drummed the language of friendship. Fathi is almost as tall as I am. He walks with a straight back. He sees his world through shiny pupils – almost invisible in the surrounding black iris'. He wears classic shoes, pulls his pants up a bit too high over the waist and tucks in his shirt. It's usually covered in grey cat-hairs: "I love cats, they speak without words." Fathi says whilst sipping a tea with milk - *white* tea in English. Fathi shines the most beneficent smile. He has a good sense of humour and patience for people's differences. If we're smiling now – we can see him. For he is smiling with his lifelong sweetheart Farida. She has this beautiful shiny skin, an almost golden hue. Her eyes are stunningly brown with a smidgen of honey. Farida's crown is her hair, long and straight, reaching her waist in a ponytail made up of thick black & white strands. Fathi will tell you she appears to be showered with the dust of legends – in English, fairy dust. Yes, she's a dish! Farida is witty with a cheeky grin on *almost-drawn* lips. An air of magic surrounds these two – and their little Hamada is the golden pot at the end of the rainbow. Or perhaps the sea, where he dreams of surfing the waves to the envy of Kelly Slater. Hamada comes with curls grandmothers dream of, eyes radiating light brown. He's slender, agile and has a smile to die for. His will and spirit, as hopeful as any - *nine-year* old. You see, it took twenty-two years from

when Farida and Fathi met before Hamada was born. Like a hesitant mango tree, Farida and Fathi flowered for many years before they carried fruit. Before being blessed with love's sweetest miracle – a child – for without a child, without the eyes, there would be no light. The light by which they see their world at the Palestinian shores of the Mediterranean - in the Bedouin enclave of Al Mawasi - in Gaza. Their home is a small white-rendered brick house with a plywood pet door for Haroun the cat, and a grab box for their son. He drops his school bag, takes a towel, his surfboard and chases through the shrub, pines and palm trees - to ride the northern swells.

You can open your eyes now.

A family comes to life in our minds as our hearts drum the beat of oneness, of connection. Their names are made up, their story - is true. The end of it? Hamada was killed - decapitated by a *knock-on-the-roof* bomb. And since we are talking about *being human* tonight – we might include something from the dark side. The Israeli military, who devised this package of merciless steel, refers to it as a 'humane bomb'. Its intention is to give people – paradoxical as this may sound - a chance to escape before their homes are obliterated. It penetrates reinforced steel like a hot knife through butter. Let alone human flesh. Wouldn't a flutter of paper flyers dropped from a plane serve just as well? But we're not in Adelaide.

The story of being human in Gaza – is usually tossed in a stir of dehumanising discourse. An excruciating composition of confusion, fear and guilt. On both sides, confident doctrines, ideologies and religious righteousness, separate us from the palpable realities of being human. Instead we are imposed factions of opinions, hatred, anger and blame. Consumed through the meretricious allure of the Internet or the corporate media - we have no time to stop, no time to think about Farida, Fathi and Hamada - and what their life means to us. This Moloch-like convenience is consuming our hearts, minds, even our children – and in the process also our yearning for a sense of belonging in each other, in love and in justice. On this arena, those greedy for power and control play out their agenda well. We are turning into a mindless crowd, in close *virtual* proximity to each other but with no real sense of communion.

Had that been the case, we would care about the light we have lost with Hamada.

Before Hamada was lowered into his shared little grave, Fathi grabbed what was left of his son's body and shook it furiously. He yelled: "Why are you telling me you are burying my son? Are you sure this is my son? Are you sure my son is dead?! Are you sure *this* is my son?!"

Everybody wept. Mourners gently separated father and son. In *forever time* - love drained from Fathi's heart. It fell through his tears and seeped into the eternal well of my soul.

I moved between the imaginary and the real. I lost track of what was dark or bright. Preconceptions came tumbling down – amongst the words, tears and brave smiles of those who shared their devastating loss, forbidden love and deep hope. I met numerous Israelis, equally with Palestinians who believed being human meant co-existing. These people far outnumbered those who believed in separation. Those voices who believe there's another way - were - and are rarely heard. This is not what the media shows. Pictured is an atmosphere of danger - of supposed reality, of fear. Words are twisted – and twisted into the false dilemma of choosing a side. A display of love or connection is considered dangerous – more than the dehumanising behaviour of those in power. We might ask ourselves *why?*

I believe we all hear the subdued conversation between life and death - but we pretend we do not. In our abstraction of who we imagine ourselves to be -- In our arrogance -- being human has become a delusion. We indulge in an imagined self-importance and we are, perhaps without intention, losing sight of who we truly are. Privilege is when something doesn't matter to us - because it doesn't matter to us personally - *Being human* must never become a privilege.

We cannot profess values which apply - only to some of us. Trump, Netanyahu, Boris, Scomo and others are but reflections of what many of us have become – lacking empathy – nursing near-sighted ideas, expressed with hate and not with love. We do not have to be politicians to know that it is hard, if not outright impossible for us to hate one another - if we truly know one another.

Being human is not US vs THEM. That is our *prequel*.

We are all of us Faridas, Fathis and Hamadas.

We are all of us Adnan and Linah, another true story about a Palestinian man and an Israeli soldier who fall in love despite being raised to hate each other.

Being human means connection, not separation. The apathy towards the Palestinian question is a collusion with hatred – it is our spiritual death as human beings. When people in power today are building walls, separating people and taking away their very essence of being human, WE must act. Otherwise my talk will be merely a batch of words you clap off the stage and forget. Please don't. Change comes from having the will to make different choices. That is being human. That is being truly free. Nelson Mandela said: We know too well our freedom is incomplete without the freedom of the Palestinians. So let us be free. Let us be human.

Free Palestine.