

Gaza doctor strives for peace, human dignity despite personal losses

Patrick Whelan | Oct. 5, 2011

I SHALL NOT HATE: A GAZA DOCTOR'S JOURNEY ON THE ROAD TO PEACE AND HUMAN DIGNITY

By Izzeldin Abuelaish

Published by Walker & Company, \$24

How do we take someone else's suffering and make it our own, so that we may be spurred to action and self-sacrifice in service to this troubled world? A few years ago I cared for a young boy who died an awful death from a disease that was rare and unforgiving, and I began wondering about the power of creative thinking to overcome the seemingly insurmountable obstacles of life.

This moving book, *I Shall Not Hate*, brings that kind of doctor's sensibility to a subject at the heart of religious and humanitarian compassion: finding creative ways to overcome the bloody conflicts of our time. While Giuseppe Garibaldi and Teddy Roosevelt and Winston Churchill oiled their war machines with talk of blood and tears and toil and sweat, the author of this book -- a Muslim gynecologist named Izzeldin Abuelaish -- harnesses the same passion to advance the countervailing cause of nonviolence, with a tale of personal loss that leaves the pages turning themselves. His family tragedy brings the kind of tears that makes our war-drenched popular culture appear childish in the extreme.

Abuelaish grew up in a Gaza refugee camp, completed his medical studies in Cairo, Egypt, and in London, and went on to work as the lone Palestinian doctor in a prominent Israeli hospital. He details here the long odds he overcame as a child, himself suffering from juvenile arthritis, to make it into college and ultimately complete his medical training. From a large family, he recognized early in his life how central children are to the way we order our lives. He dedicated himself to a career helping couples overcome infertility, while practicing his trade amid the violent circumstances of the shifting relationship between the state of Israel and the embattled Gaza Strip.

His family had been prominent landowners in the British protectorate of Palestine. They were exiled in 1948 to one of the overrun refugee camps in nearby Gaza. "Like most Palestinian children, I didn't really have a childhood," he says as he describes growing up with 11 people in one room, a space partially shared by goats that provided their milk, and pigeons that laid the family's eggs.

Abuelaish's story does not demonize Israelis. Indeed, it often relates instances through his life when principled Jewish people stood up for him and helped him realize his ambitions. He tells of being a 14-year-old boy working for an Israeli farm family for a summer; of the Israeli doctors who helped save the legs of his nephew, who was shot by Palestinians during the conflict that put Gaza under the control of Hamas; and of the Israeli television anchorman who helped save the life of one of his daughters. "From the time I was a very small boy I have been able to find the good chapter of the bad story," he writes.

Each week as a doctor he would travel through the arduous routine of the checkpoints, and then put aside his animosities to care for people at Soroka Hospital in Beersheba, Israel. "I love my work," he writes, "because a

hospital is a place where humanity can be discovered, where people are treated without racism and as equals. In the brotherhood and sisterhood of medicine, we take an oath to care for the sick when we graduate. Despite his accented Hebrew and his Palestinian surname, he felt generally well-accepted by his Jewish patients. Disease doesn't recognize borders," he says.

From his humble origins, through his labors to become a good doctor, his convictions about mutual respect and equality took him to some unexpected places. He received a scholarship for a yearlong master's program at the Harvard School of Public Health in Boston. In 2005 he ran for office in the Palestinian Legislative Council as an independent candidate, ultimately losing to the better-organized Hamas Party. He then worked for the World Health Organization in Afghanistan, trading on his experience in one conflict zone to the benefit of another. His time there led him to reflect on the futility of hatred.

The last part of the book turns from his personal and professional struggles to a narrative about dual catastrophes in the life of his family. He is traveling abroad when his wife becomes suddenly ill with what turns out to be leukemia. As he struggles to get through all the checkpoints, she slips into unconsciousness. Her death sets the stage for what seems like the impossible task of raising eight children on his own. But then in 2009 the Israeli Defense Forces invaded Gaza. In the last hours of the three-week conflict, two mortar shells crashed into his home and killed three of his daughters. In gripping detail, he describes his pleas for help in a phone conversation carried live by Israeli television, his friend Shlomi Eldar arranging for ambulances that may have saved the life of Abuelaish's brother and niece and a fourth daughter.

In the days that followed, Abuelaish called for mutual reconciliation, and was interviewed on Israeli television about what happened. Eldar, the Israeli anchorman, later wrote, "The broadcast had a huge effect on Israelis who until then didn't want to hear about anything from Gaza because they were so angry about the eight years of rockets being fired into Israel by Hamas. ... I was very close to crying as I listened to [Izzeldin's] agony. That same agony affected the Israelis who were watching the program. Even the prime minister of Israel told me he was crying when he saw this on TV." In the aftermath, Abuelaish endures the kind of guilt that many of us as parents have experienced in the face of tragedy. "I do wonder at times why I was not the one to die," he writes.

As a pediatric specialist myself, I was reminded of this the other day when my young son asked me about my 5-year-old patient I mentioned before. My son posed the question, "Dad, did you ever wish that you had died instead of that boy?" I replied by asking him, "If that had happened, who would take care of all my other patients, or who would work to figure out how to keep other children from getting the same disease?"

Abuelaish answers the same question. "I am a physician," he concludes, "and as a consequence I see things most clearly in medical terms. I am arguing that we need an immunization program, one that injects people with respect, dignity, and equality, one that inoculates them against hatred."

Abuelaish offers an Islamic and medical perspective on a calling deeply familiar to most Catholics: to respond to the blood and tears of our time with a mixture of toil and sweat in pursuit of the common good. Perhaps when Jesus said, "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13), he was speaking metaphorically about dedicating one's life to helping solve the world's seemingly insoluble problems -- not fighting eye for eye, or exchanging one bad end for another.

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