

Courage My Friends Podcast Series VII – Episode 4
Palestinian Storytelling as Resilience, Recuperation, and Resistance

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ANNOUNCER: You're listening to *Needs No Introduction*.
Needs No Introduction is a rabble podcast network show that serves up a series of speeches, interviews and lectures from the finest minds of our time

RESH: What is the role of traditional stories within Palestinian culture and cultural survival? Who tells them, and what do they mean for those who listen? Can these stories counter deeply entrenched anti-Palestinian narratives, and if so, how? In these times, what do the stories of Palestine and the Palestinian people mean in their recuperation, resilience, and resistance?

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COURAGE MY FRIENDS ANNOUNCER: Welcome back to this podcast series by rabble.ca and the Tommy Douglas Institute at George Brown College and with the support of the Douglas Coldwell Layton Foundation.

In the words of the great Tommy Douglas...

TOMMY (Actor): Courage my friends, 'tis not too late to build a better world

COURAGE MY FRIENDS ANNOUNCER: This is the Courage My Friends Podcast.

Welcome to episode four of this season's Courage My Friends podcast, *Palestinian Storytelling as Resilience, Recuperation, and Resistance*.

I'm your host, Resh Budhu.

This week, Palestinian storyteller of traditional Palestinian stories, Sarah Abu-Sharar, joins us for our third annual *Mouth Open, Story Jump Out* episode.

Through Palestinian traditional folktales and stories of her father, Sarah reflects on the power and healing of traditional stories and what they mean for Palestinian recuperation, resilience, and resistance in these times.

SARAH: In the village of Saris, there lived a farmer with his wife. They lived in a small, humble house. And in front of the house, a lemon tree on each side. And in front, a small garden, which the wife kept every day. And even though the couple had seven children, all who worked with the farmer in the fields every day, somehow money was always scarce.

And one day, when the farmer was having breakfast with his wife, his wife said to him, You look really deep in thought. What is going on?

And he said: Last night I had a strange dream. And in that dream, I was in Jerusalem, and I was standing next to Damascus Gate. And I was waiting. But I don't know for the life of me what it is that I was waiting for.

And then he finished his breakfast and he went out to the fields to work. And by the end of the day he was so tired that he had already forgotten about his dream.

But do you think that that dream forgot about him?

No. He had that same dream the following night, and the night after that, and the night after that, and the night after that, until his wife said, Why don't you go? Go to Damascus Gate. And see what it is that you are waiting for.

And so, he took a bag of provisions and he walked. He walked for a day, he walked for a night. He walks for two days, walked for two nights. He walked for three days, he walked for three nights. Until he got to Jerusalem. And he stood in front of the Damascus Gate. And he waited.

People came, people went. People bought, people sold. Shops opened, shops closed. People dispersed until all that was left was one stray dog. And he looked at him as the farmer waited.

And the following day, People came, people went. People bought, people sold. Shops opened, shops closed. People dispersed until all that was left was one stray dog. And he looked at the farmer as the farmer waited. And then, he too found some kind of a home to go to. As the farmer waited.

And on the third day, people came, people went. People bought, people sold. Shops opened, shops closed. People dispersed, until all that was left was one stray dog. And he felt a presence behind him.

It was the wealthy merchant from Al Khalil, from Hebron city.

Now, I know that merchants from Hebron city are the wealthiest and the best merchants in all of Palestine. I know because my father is from Hebron.

And he was so wealthy that his shop was the very first shop right inside of the Damascus Gate.

And he asked them, he said, I saw you here now for three days and three nights waiting. What on earth are you waiting for? And he told him the entire story, from the beginning until the end.

You mean to tell me that you left your wife and your job and you walked for three days and three nights all because of some kind of a dream?

Yes. Because of a dream.

Well, if we all left our wife and our jobs to follow some kind of a dream, well, nobody would get any kind of work done.

Just look at me. Just last week, I had a reoccurring dream. And in that dream, I was in a village. And in the village, there was a small house. And on each side of the house, a lemon tree. And in front of the house, a garden.

And underneath that garden, there were treasures of gold.

The village was called Sss, Sss, Sss. You see! It was so insignificant that I don't even remember the name of the village.

Well, if everybody left their wives and their jobs to follow some kind of a dream, well, nobody would get any kind of...

But before he was even finished his sentence, the farmer was already back in Saris digging up his treasures.

RESH: Sarah, thank you so much. And welcome to our third annual Mouth Open, Story Jump Out episode on the meaning, power, and art of storytelling. And Mouth Open, Story Jump Out is a phrase borrowed from Caribbean storytelling tradition.

So, Sarah, is this a traditional Palestinian story?

SARAH: It is a traditional story, and the version I tell you is a Palestinian version.

Because we all have dreams, and we all have a dream of some kind of a better life, or some kind of a success we want to achieve, a goal we want to achieve. That story is widely told worldwide in many different countries, but different versions of it.

I don't tell the other versions, but this Palestinian version, I tell a lot, because this really is our story. It is the Palestinian dream. We know that our dream is inside of the land. It is in Jerusalem, in particular. It's the land of Palestine.

And for Palestinians, this story has very different meaning. That if we wait, even if it's for three days and three nights, even if everyone else leaves us behind. Even if everything around us closes and all our doors towards freedom close. Even if the stray dogs leave us.

If we continue to wait, if we continue to resist, we will get our dream. And that dream, that treasure is in the land and it is in Jerusalem, it is in Palestine.

So for me, that story is really a story of resistance. A story of the persistence that Palestinians have had. That they've resisted with for 76 years, actually more than 76 years.

In my opinion, our struggle began before the current occupation. It really started with the British rule with the British Mandate, as the Zionists were being encouraged to come in.

Right now, we're in a really tragic political time and we just passed what some say is a year anniversary of genocide. And I refuse to call it a year anniversary of genocide; because to me this year is just another year of those 76 plus years that Palestinians have been resisting. It's just another form of enduring oppression, occupation. The horrors of occupation.

When I tell that story in front of an audience, it's very interactive. And they're the ones who are chanting and they're having fun and they're laughing. But really the story is a serious story. It's a story of hope to me. It's a comical story, but it's a story of hope.

RESH: What brought you to traditional Palestinian storytelling?

SARAH: Well, I am half Palestinian and the other half is Croatian.

I actually was not born in Palestine, but I was born in the Arab world. I was born in Libya and I lived in Jordan. I moved to Yugoslavia. It was then Yugoslavia, now it's Croatia. And I lived in former Yugoslavia. Then I moved back to Libya. Then the Americans bombed Libya in 1986. I was six years old. And we moved back to Yugoslavia. And then just before the Balkan war we moved to Canada.

I come from mixed identities. And there was always a loss to me, because I always felt, even as a child... I read some of the essays that I wrote as a teenager and even as a preteen and there was a sentence that I kept repeating even as a preteen and a teenager, which was, I am an attempt to genocide unsundered.

Now when everyone's using the word genocide for Palestine, back then nobody was using the word genocide, but that is what we were going through. I was using that word. But I was using that word in a sense of, I'm an attempt to genocide because my father left Palestine when he was 18 years old. He left in order to study in Yugoslavia and to get an education. But a year after he left, Palestine was occupied and he could not go back to Palestine. So he ended up marrying a Croatian woman and I was born. And I always felt that me being mixed, meant that I was an attempt to genocide.

You can look at it that way. You can also look at it as now the genes have been carried farther. But I always felt that way as a child that if the occupation didn't happen, my father would have been able to go back home. And he would have probably married a Palestinian woman. And I would have been fully Palestinian if I

was even born. His child would have been fully Palestinian, but that didn't happen. And so I was born mixed. And I was born uprooted from my land, Palestine, because my father couldn't go back. I couldn't go back. And I then lost my language. My Arabic is terrible. I understand more than I speak. I lost my language. I lost aspects of my culture. I lost aspects of my religion.

I was always involved in Palestinian activism and in activism as a whole. And when I started storytelling, it had to be for Palestine because it was reclaiming my identity. It was a way of saying, the occupation might have deprived me of my land, of my culture, but I will resist by telling our stories.

And if it's not for me regaining my Palestinian identity. If it's not for me fighting to be whole, because I've always felt like I was cut in half, it's then for Palestinian children and adults and also those in diaspora here and then also Canadians who are listening or anyone. I give those Palestinians listening to the stories back their identity. And I also expose others to a Palestinian identity with these stories. So to me, that was really important.

But most of it was a self-exploration. A way for me to go to my land .And to go without any hassle. To go without the fear of being deported at the airport, without the humiliation of being in that airport for four hours interrogated. Without all the checkpoints. Without guns being held to my head at checkpoints, even with a Canadian passport because my last name is political.

To be able to go into a Palestine that's free, a Palestine that's not occupied, a Palestine from long ago and a Palestine that has magic.

So when I tell a Palestinian story, for me, I am transported to that land. And I'm able to visit that land, the way I want to visit that land. I'm able to be in it the way I need to be in it.

And so when I tell Palestinian stories, especially the longer ones, wonder tales, fairy tales, I describe the land a lot. I describe those mountains. I describe the sea, the orange trees, the lemon trees, the olive trees. And that's because I'm walking through there and I want to see it.

It's not even that I want the audience to see it. I want to walk through that land and in freedom to walk through that land. And then when I'm seeing that land and that landscape, the audience is seeing it with me. And I'm not walking through that land alone. I'm walking with that land in safety of an audience.

RESH: Interesting. You're connecting with the land, but as I understand it as well, you are from a long line of storytellers.

SARAH: Yes, and I actually did not know this when I became a storyteller.

I often say my mother told me fairy tales growing up, but my father did not. He stopped believing in magic. He told us real life stories from his life in Palestine, from his childhood. But he never told me my grandmothers were storytellers.

There was a lot my father withheld because of the pain of him remembering his childhood and remembering a land that was taken from him. That was stolen from him, not taken from him even. And so he didn't tell me this. And I studied acting. From the time I was 12 I was doing theater. And my father never told me.

Then when I became a storyteller completely by chance, I took a 10 year break from theater to do social work because I thought real life was much more dramatic and I took that break. And when I went back into the arts, I went back to study a Master's in expressive arts therapy. And there I took a storytelling class. And I fell in love with it. I love the fact that there was no fourth wall. That I could play with the audience. I could improvise.

When I first started doing storytelling, I was working mostly with traditional material and not Palestinian. I knew that my goal was to tell Palestinian stories, but I was afraid.

I was afraid because at that time, I was the only Palestinian storyteller in all of Canada and possibly in all of North America that was telling traditional stories. Nobody else was telling these stories. Some were telling traditional Palestinian stories, but they're not Palestinian. But nobody was telling Palestinian stories of the occupation and connecting it to themselves.

I was telling Croatian stories Balkan stories, Bosnian, Serbian, because my mom was from there and I needed to get my feet wet and get inside of the storytelling community. And charm them. And then I could give them what I wanted to give them.

And then I was at a cottage with one of my mentors who passed away last year. She was Greek Canadian, she was in her seventies when I met her. And we were talking and sharing real life stories.

I had already compiled my father's stories. I already started working on them, but I wasn't telling them. And I started telling her these stories because I felt safe with her. And I was crying telling her these stories and really we were sharing. She was telling me then stories of Greece. And then she said you have to, have to share these stories with everyone because they're powerful stories. And that's when I felt like I got an okay.

And then I started working on these stories with my father and he looked at me and he said: Sarah, it's interesting that you decided to be a storyteller.

And I said: Why is that interesting? I used to do theater. I was always in the arts. I mean, storytelling is kind of an extension of theater.

And he said: No, no, no, no, no. It's interesting because your grandma Sarah, who you were named after was a storyteller and your great grandmother was a storyteller and her mother was a storyteller. You come from a long line of storytellers on my side. And after the occupation, none of my sisters took it on, he said. None of your cousins took it on. And here you are in diaspora. And you are telling these stories. And not only that, you're telling the same stories your grandmothers told. The same traditional Palestinian stories.

And then I thought to myself, I need to continue telling these stories because they're in my bloodline. And I need to preserve this tradition that was so much part of the Palestinian identity and the Arab identity in particular for the women. And then it was silenced and stolen away from us by the occupation.

RESH: And this tradition, it's called the Hakawati or the Hakawatiya? And Could you tell us a bit more about the importance of storytelling traditions within the culture of Palestine as well.

SARAH: Yes. And what is really beautiful about those stories is that they were told by women. Because it's the women that hold the tradition. And they were passed down precisely by women in the villages. And to me this really resonated. Because first of all, those are stories I'm naturally attracted to. But second of all, because this means that it's really the voice of the voiceless.

Folk art in general is the voice of the voiceless. But with folktales, because it's the villagers telling them, it's the women telling them, it is not high art that is being done by the wealthy or by the royalty, it was done in the villages, which means it was an accessible art form and the voice of the people. And so when these stories were told, often they're told as teaching stories. It's a way of the people sharing their knowledge with each other, sharing their woes with each other. And empowering each other through stories, listening to each other.

And when we listen to each other, what do we do?

We tell each other, you are important. Your voice is important. You are elevated when somebody listens to you. And it's a privilege. So we've given that identity and that privilege to the villagers and to the village women. And to me this is really the highest form of activism. Because it's an art form that really is coming from the people.

I'm someone who identifies as an anarcho communist and it's important to me that there isn't a class hierarchy and a class division. And with storytelling in particular, traditional stories, there really isn't. So that's what the women were doing for generation, to generation to generation.

Whereas also there's another tradition with Hakawates, which was primarily done by the men. Storytelling worldwide was told in the villages and in the markets. But what the Arabs did, and in particular in the Levantine, what the Arabs did and the Persians as well, is take that folk art and elevate it.

They put storytellers on the stage. the way actors were on stage. It became not only a circle where people shared stories amongst themselves and villages, but it became a high art, a performance.

Now the Hakawates were mainly men. And they were telling religious stories and then fables like Kalīla wa-Dimna, I could tell you one of those. They're really important stories for the Arabs in particular, because they were used as a form of resistance. They're stories that I tend to tell a lot. But they were telling Kalīla wa-Dimna, teaching stories, religious stories from the Quran, they were telling myths and epics.

But just because this art-form was elevated to the stage and to the cafes and the souks, the women never stopped telling their stories in the villages.

I, see that really as a feminist act, that the women were the ones who were carrying the tradition and the voice of the villagers and the people. Because not all villages worldwide, storytelling was not carried by the women. In some villages, yes, and some no.

On my mother's culture, majority of the villages, it was the men that carried the traditional stories, not the women. But with Palestinians, it was the women. And to me this is so important because I feel a real warmth and safety and belonging when I tell my traditional stories, because I know I'm being connected to my grandmother and my great grandmother and my ancestors, my female ancestors.

And I feel that even in diaspora, I'm able to connect with my culture and what it would have been like to grow up in a village as a woman and have that empowerment of my voice as a woman is heard, is known, and the men would listen to the women telling the stories and the children will listen.

In the summertime, it was mostly women telling to other women and children because men were working in the fields. And in the wintertime, as my father recalls it, the men would join in and sometimes they tell the stories too . And sometimes they would sing folk songs as the women would tell. And it was a really vibrant time around the fire, in a circle, where the community could get together. To me, this is something that we really need to hold on to as Palestinians, especially as our mere existence is being questioned.

RESH: You had said that you could share one of those stories. So do you want to share one of those stories now?

SARAH: I would love to share one of the Kalīla wa-Dimna stories because they're so dear to my heart. And this is my favorite Kalīla wa-Dimna story.

Once there was a bird man. And he set his net down and he went and hid behind a tree. And when he did, the leader of the birds flew inside of that net, and all the other birds followed him, and they got trapped inside of the net.

They began to flail their wings back and forth, and back and forth, and back and forth.

But the leader of the birds said, No, don't flail your wings, each on your own side. Flap your wings in unison. Only together can we get out of this net.

And the birds flapped their wings in unison, and they went flying up, up, up to the clouds. And the leader of the birds said, I have a friend who's a rat. He will surely be able to get us out of this net. And they landed the net down by the tree. And the king of the rats arrived.

How did you get yourself in such a predicament?

It was our fate to get stuck inside of this net.

But it was not your fate to be stuck in this net. For I am your friend, and I will get you out of this net.

And the leader of the rats began to gnaw at the part of the net where his friend, the leader of the birds, stood.

But the leader of the birds just said, No, free the other birds first. Free me last.

But the leader of the rats could not accept that. He continued to gnaw at the part of the net where his friend, the leader of the birds, stood.

But the leader of the birds repeated himself. No, free the other birds first, Free me last.

But how could you say that? Don't you value your freedom?

Yes, I value my freedom. But you are my friend. And if you were to free me first, you might get too tired to free the other birds. But if you were to free the other birds first, No matter how tired you get, You will continue to gnaw at that net until I, your friend, am free.

Free the other birds first. Free me last.

And the king of the rats began to gnaw at the part of the net where all the other birds stood, freeing each bird one by one by one.

And yes, he got tired. But he continued to gnaw at that net until his friend, the leader of the birds, was free. And then all the birds flew away in unison.

RESH: That is beautiful, Sarah. Thank you so much for that.

Stories convey so much, histories, culture, values, philosophy, events. But the act of storytelling is also bound to its moment in history. What you're telling is as important as when and where you're telling it.

, For over a year, we have been witness to Israel's overwhelming violence against the Palestinian people. As you say, the backdrop to this is far longer going back to the Nakba, the original dispossession of Palestinians from their land in 1948, but even further than that, to the British Mandate.

How has the last year impacted you and the stories you tell and how they're being received?

SARAH: Well, this situation has impacted me a lot as a human being, as a Palestinian, particularly as a storyteller.

I've always told Palestinian stories in order to revive this tradition, in order for our voices to be heard, in order for me to go to that land. But now I understand why it is that after the occupation, the storytellers, and particularly the women, because women are by our nature connected to the land. So I understand now why the women stopped telling those stories. Because how could one share stories of their land, if that land has been deprived from them in the most violent way. And so they stopped. If they cannot be on their land, how could they tell their stories?

Ever since the violence got extreme a year ago, I want to tell these stories. I have to tell these stories. But I suffocate as I'm telling these stories. And it's no longer, I am going into these stories and I'm going to have a beautiful time going back to my land. And I'm going to go to a free Palestine through these stories.

When I tell these stories, I could hear the screams of those children in Gaza.

And when I tell these stories, I could see and feel the bombs that are destroying the nature, the nature of those mountains, of that land. And I suffocate. I literally feel like I'm suffocating when I start telling these stories.

It happens so often where after a first line, I stutter and I can't breathe, but then I go on and then I tell the story.

Like Beckett says, "I can't go on. I must go on". And it's kind of like that. I can't go on. But then I forced myself to go on. And it's a painful experience in some ways. And it depends which stories I'm telling; particularly the ones that do relate to the land.

And part of this suffocation that I'm feeling is coming from the fact that the Canadian government and the wider Canadian population even, is taking a very Zionist stance.

And here I am a Palestinian on this land. And here I am sharing these stories as a political act, as activism and being open about the fact this is a political act. And here

I am telling these stories of protests and I suffocate because I know that I'm being forced to be silenced by this system.

When I'm telling these stories in the Arabic-speaking world - I was at a festival in July in Morocco in April, I was at a festival in Tunisia, and I was telling Palestinian stories. In fact, in Tunisia, the whole festival was on Palestine, and I wasn't suffocating. I was enjoying telling these stories. I was feeling free and I was feeling well received. I was feeling like those stories want to come out and they want to be heard and the people want to receive them and hear them.

Whereas here, I don't always feel that way. I've had gigs canceled since last year started with the genocide. And it's not, we're canceling you because of Palestinian necessarily, sometimes it is that. But it's, we're being canceled, you're no longer needed. And I'm no longer needed because my stories are Palestinian.

And at this time I'm telling solely Palestinian stories. Because I feel a guilt telling my Croatian stories or any other stories right now. Because the stories that need to be heard right now are the Palestinian stories. And there aren't too many other Palestinian tellers here in Canada that are telling them. And so I must.

And I'm wondering if this is precisely why we don't see too many Palestinians who are storytelling here.

RESH: I was going to ask that. Yeah.

SARAH: Because they do feel their voices are silenced. And in some ways, maybe I have a little bit more privilege because I am mixed and I can pass.

I've also resigned from a certain storytelling related position. I wasn't willing to compromise. Even though I wasn't being asked to censor myself so much, but I knew that I couldn't fully be free with using my storytelling as activism. And there are just less gigs for me.

Some people will call me to do shows simply because I tell Palestinian stories, but that is not the norm. In general people don't necessarily want to hear Palestinian stories at this time.

It's not that they don't want to hear those stories is that they feel that they shouldn't be hearing those stories right now. They might feel that it's too controversial to exhibit my Palestinian stories.

RESH: Well, there certainly seems to be, I mean, seems to be, there has been a chilling within discourse around Palestine.

As you said, you have been one of the few professional tellers of traditional Palestinian stories in Canada for years.

And for decades in Canada, in many Western states in mainstream media and politics, Palestinians have been and are regularly dehumanized, their voices and experiences diminished and their histories and identity denied.

Are your stories also working as a type of counter-narrative to really powerful and entrenched anti-Palestinian narratives and propaganda?

SARAH: I'm so glad you asked this question because this is something that I was really reflecting on this week. It's an important question for me.

I'm going to a festival in Sarajevo, in Bosnia,, a storytelling festival next week. I've been asked to tell my Palestinian stories. And every time I go there, I do tell my Palestinian stories in Croatian.

And I was wondering how will they come out? Because here I'm suffocating. In the Arab world I'm not suffocating as I'm telling them. And there I'll be telling them in my first language and in a place that really knows war and really is pro-Palestine. But I've been having a hard time even translating my stories into Croatian because of that pain.

I was going in there to do my new show, which is called, *They Should Have Told You Fairy Tales*. When I was in Tunisia we were sharing a hotel with Palestinian refugees who were receiving medical treatment in Tunisia. And one of those patients was a little two year old girl who was bombed and was in a coma, lost her vision, regained her vision. And I just instantly loved this baby. She was so special to me. And I decided to dedicate a whole show of stories to this baby.

And so *They Should Have Told You Fairy Tales* it's me as a Palestinian storyteller in diaspora sharing fairytales and folktales, Palestinian folktales that this baby, Palestinian baby who is also now in diaspora, should have heard instead of those bombs.

So that's what I was going to Sarajevo to tell. And then they asked me, will you also be telling this show to the children in the schools?

I said, absolutely not. It's too sad. And I can't. And then I realized I'm suffocating even at the thought. And every time I try to work on this show, I can't work on it.

And then I realized, no, what I'm going to tell these children are funny Palestinian stories. Palestinian stories are really humorous. They're very magical. They're crazy in some ways. And that is our culture. And those are the stories that should be told right now. Humor is the freedom of the oppressed. It's a form of power for the oppressed.

RESH: And I imagine resilience because resilience, this is a word that is so often applied to Palestinian people. So stories, I guess, would also be part of this resilience.

SARAH: Resilience and it gives us humanity.

Right now those children, their parents are my generation. They've experienced the war in the Balkans and they are siding with, for the most part with Palestinians. And I'm sure they're telling their children Palestinians are suffering. But I don't want to be seen as a victim. And Palestinians have never allowed themselves to be seen as victims. This is why they were able to be so resilient.

No matter what happened for 76 years, we have never ceased to continue with trying to break our chains. We've never stopped the resistance, not even for one moment. They were never swayed by the oppression. We continued to fight for our land.

But also never once did we stop laughing? Did we stop dancing? Did we stop singing? Did we stop being human?

I could tell the adults, they should have told you fairy tales and the sad stories of what is happening in Palestine now. I cannot tell that to the children. Because the children are very important to me. Because they are the ones who will inherit the resistance, be they children in Sarajevo or be they children in Palestine. I depend on them to free Palestine. It's not going to be my generation. It's going to be theirs. And if they see me or Palestinians as victims, they might fight for my freedom because I'm a victim.

But if they see me as a human. If they see me as a human who made them laugh. If they see me as a human who has a vibrant culture with stories that are so magical and so incredibly funny, full of farts and poop and ghouls, they will no longer see me as a victim because I'm laughing with them. I'm not just making them cry and I'm not just crying in front of them. They're laughing with me and so I become human to them.

And so they will see what's happening to my people. And they will remember me and my stories. And they will remember that they laughed with me, and that it was a good feeling when they laughed with me. And they will fight for me no longer to be a victim, but they will also continue to fight for me when I do get my land back, and continue to be there on my side in case my land gets attacked again, because I'm human. And that is the most important thing to me as a storyteller.

I was a I would say even radical activist in my teens, in my twenties, I was on the streets protesting. At age 16 I was very, very involved in activism to the point that I was organizing nonstop. But I stopped doing that. I lost my voice doing that. And I realized it wasn't having the same impact as I wanted.

So I switched to storytelling because it still is activism. But when I was yelling on the street and I still yell in the street. But when I was yelling in the street only, they would see me as an activist and as somebody that might have a message, but they might not be into that.

But if I am sitting and I'm telling them a story of Palestine, of the land, they might enjoy the art, and they might hear my story more. They might then see activists on the street and understand them more, and they might join them on the street as well. They might join in on changing policies, because that's the power of art. It approaches the problem through the heart, rather than just the intellect. So when the heart gets involved along with the brain, then it's a full experience. Then people are more likely to receive it or they receive it in a different way, I hope. So this is what I'm offering right now. But humor is the important thing for me right now.

Perhaps I was suffocating because I was matching the energy of the world and the energy of what is happening in Palestine.

But the same mentor I quoted before, she said to me, "Don't give them what they want. Give them something better."

Perhaps what people want is to hear the stories of Palestinian pain. And maybe I can give them some of the stories, but I could also give them something better, which is the stories of how Palestinians overcame that pain and were able to laugh.

RESH: Indeed. And stories are so multifaceted, right? About resilience and about overcoming. In past episodes, we have talked about with people who come from particularly colonized, histories, Indigenous peoples, that it's very much part of decolonization as well. And healing.

And right now we're witness to the destruction of Palestinian institutions of learning and culture in Gaza. We had done an episode about that. And in this targeting of mind and memory, stories and storytelling take on that added significance of healing. And I know that you in the past have worked with particularly children in refugee camps. I don't know if you are in touch with storytellers who are now working on the ground. But could you speak to the healing role of stories or the role of stories with those who are right now on the ground dealing with violence and trauma?

SARAH: Yes, again, it's that idea of being heard.

Prior to even my social work background, I studied feminist counseling, actually at George Brown. The big part of feminist counseling and of counseling in general and therapy, is simply hearing the person and repeating back to them what their experience is so that they could hear it back. And I'm still a therapist. I'm an art therapist. But that is also storytelling. Therapy and storytelling are really overlapped.

In the traditional storytelling circles, it was never that I just tell a story and the audience listens. The audience tells a story with the storyteller. Isn't that the same thing as the role of therapy? If you are my therapist and I'm telling you my problem and then you repeat it back to me in your words, that to me is very healing because I'm hearing it back.

And this is exactly how storytelling is set up. Like the first story that we told today.

People came. And then you repeat, people went. Shops opened. You repeat, shops closed. That's therapeutic in itself. It's that involvement, the breaking of the hierarchy. And there's no fourth wall, audience and storyteller are the same.

But it's also a way of getting, a refugee or a person in a refugee camp or somebody who is going through a traumatic political event out of that event momentarily. So bombs are falling, but I am able to get my audience into a story where, for a moment, they can get away from those bombs. And they could be in the world of djinns and ghouls and magical events that are happening within the story. And then that story gives them a sense of hope that this could also be in their everyday life.

If it's possible in a story, it's possible in their lives. If we can imagine it, it can happen. And so that element of hope is so important when one is going through any traumatic situation.

Most traditional stories are set up that there is a conflict that happens, there is a climax, and then there is usually a resolution to that problem and a happy ending.

And stories then teach us that every moment passes, and we're approaching the valley, and light will beat out the darkness. And so it gives people going through the situation in Palestine hope, those stories give them hope.

When I was working in Al Fawwar Refugee Camp, it was with ten year old boys doing expressive art therapy, and it was precisely for that reason. Because that's around the time that they start with the stone-throwing and the resistance in a mild way, but in their way. And it's not up to me as a Palestinian living in the diaspora to tell Palestinians living on their land how to resist. It is my responsibility as a therapist to give them tools that are going to help them with self-care after they chose to resist or not to resist.

And it was a really powerful time. And these boys, as soon as they began with the art, with the drawing, with the writing, with the storytelling, they transformed. And I could tell they were in a different world. And they needed a break from their world and they were in a different world.

When I gave these boys an opportunity to draw home, majority of these children - they were in Al Fawwar Camp, which is in Hebron, far from the seas and the mountains. Most of them, their families in 1948 would have been displaced from the coast. And most of them drew the sea as their home.

They've never seen the sea. They've never been out of the refugee camp. And they were third generation refugees.

It's difficult for some Canadians even to imagine being a third generation refugee. But many Palestinians are. And yet they drew what their home is, and that is the sea.

So these ten year old boys really never lost that sense of home. And through art, they were able to go back there. They were able to imagine what the sea would look like.

Of course, there were some other children who drew different things. There was one little boy, and I will never, never forget him. And I still have his drawing. And for his home, he drew an erupting volcano. And it's not far from the truth because Al Fawwar Refugee Camp is I think the worst refugee camp in all of West Bank. They have not just checkpoints, but flying checkpoints.

So just to explain what flying checkpoints are, because they're not common. There are certain points where the checkpoints are located, and we know where they are. With flying checkpoints, at any point, the Zionists can decide to put a checkpoint anywhere around that camp at any point. There might be no checkpoints one minute and the next minute they're surrounding the camp.

So imagine growing up in a refugee camp. Never leaving that camp. Feeling there is very slim chance that you will ever leave that camp. And on top of that, you know that it's so militarized that, unlike other parts of West Bank that the checkpoints could get so extreme that you don't even know where they're going to be.

So the stories were so important because then it gets them out of that space and into a moment of peace.

Also the therapeutic thing about stories is the rhythm. Folktales and fairy tales have a natural rhythm built into them. In the Arab culture, as well as in the European stories, there is the three, the repetition of threes. Pretty much all in all of the world it's a three, but it's not in Indigenous stories. So I will not say all the stories. In Indigenous stories it's the four. It's the four directions.

But in Arab stories it's 1, 2, 3, 1, 2, 3, 1, 2, 3 And that in itself, that repetition is calming. But it also takes on the rhythm of your heartbeat, which is the very first thing that you would have heard in utero when you were in your mom's womb. The sound of their mom's heartbeat, which is rhythm. It's very rhythmic.

The repetition of the rhythm lulls us, not only because it reminds us of a time of being babies and in hopefully the safety of a mother's arms if we were privileged enough to have a safe home. But when people have a level of anxiety, which is often a case where we're in a traumatic situation, it's because we cannot predict what's going to happen next. We cannot predict that we'll ever get past the point where we're at.

But the rhythm in the stories tell us that we will get past any point that we're in the stories and we'll go back to the circle because story is going to circle. So that predictability of the storytelling, of traditional stories in particular, gives us that feeling of safety.

We know where the story is going to take us. And we know that just because we're in the climax, and the world is dim in that climax, we will get to the ending, and everything in the story will be resolved. And that's what we need to feel when we are in a traumatic event.

Whether in fact we will get our happy ending as Palestinians or not, we need to have that hope that there will be that. And the stories give us that.

But also there is that spiritual component to stories in every culture. And that spirituality is also something that gives people safety.

Indigenous folktales in Canada, Turtle Island, these stories had a real spiritual elements and still have all the spiritual element. And that is also true with traditional stories in the Arab world, in Palestine. It's true with traditional stories in the Caribbean. It's true with traditional stories all over Africa. Traditional stories were often used by shamans, by healers to pass down ways of living our life in an ethical way.

In the ancient times, that would have been therapy for people, storytelling.

I come from a family of storytellers and I come from a family of healers. My great grandmother was a healer woman. And I also didn't know that until I went to Peru and found myself with a group of Indigenous healers. And they told me, you had a female family member who was a healer. And when I went back home, I asked my father and he said, yeah, your great grandmother, who is the storyteller.

Often a lot of storytelling families and storytellers, they also had women who are healers, because storytelling innately is a way of healing the community. It's a way of bringing the community together.

Let's get together around the fire. And let's listen to each other. Now, what does that also parallel? Restorative justice. If we brought back storytelling in a more mass level, we wouldn't actually need the court. We wouldn't need therapists. We wouldn't need teachers. Stories are our teachers. There our spiritual healers. There our therapists. They are our medicine.

RESH: And we carry them with us, right? Particularly oral traditions, and this is so true of so many colonized people as you're talking about, that stories become part of the meager possessions of the dispossessed, no matter where they are. And we're seeing so many people in exile, as you said, fleeing, as you said.

We're also seeing powerful and growing pro-Palestinian solidarity coming from all corners of the world, including here. Are you feeling this shift as both Palestinian and a storyteller? Is this giving you hope? And is this changing how your stories are received?

SARAH: Huge. Really, I'm seeing a huge shift.

I've been in the Palestinian movement since the second Intifada started, which is since I was a teenager and the narrative behind Palestine has completely changed even within the activist circle. The language you use now. The way we choose to resist. The way Palestinians are received.

And at least in Turtle Island, I think that partly we have to thank the Indigenous activists and the Indigenous movement for this. In the nineties, in the start of the two thousands we didn't have the Indigenous people working as closely to the Palestinian activists as we do now. We were starting to work together then, but it wasn't as close. And the Indigenous resistance and the Indigenous land rights were not in the forefront, even in the Canadian eyes. It's recently that Indigenous people are starting to get heard by the wider "Canadian" population.

But it is the fact that now we are starting to hear the Indigenous stories, we're able to link that to the other Indigenous peoples all over the world. And that includes the Palestinians. We're able to relate the land rights struggle here to the land struggle in Palestine.

And I really would like to give credit to the Indigenous activists and people for that, whether it's Indigenous activists who are doing the jingle dancing and who are really in the front of the protests, every protest. Or whether it is the Indigenous people who are simply fighting for their own land rights, that energy is also going into the Palestinian resistance.

So I do think that's part of it. And also just the extreme nature of the current genocide has really opened people's eyes. It is like the people of Gaza, the people of Palestine, of Beirut are sacrificing their own lives. They're sacrificing their own privileges so that the world could open their eyes.

So I think it's the extreme nature of the genocide too that has changed the narrative. But also I do want to credit the Palestinian activists that have been resisting all this time for, you know, 76 years. Finally, maybe their work has been received.

But yes, it does give me hope. It does look to me like Palestine will be free. This now is not just a resistance to end the occupation. It's a liberation resistance.

And it gives me hope not only for the Palestinians, but for Indigenous peoples everywhere. And for oppressed people everywhere. Because the freedom of all people is really dependent on the freedom of the Palestinians. Because it's the same oppressors that are responsible for the occupation of the Palestinians and the genocide that are also responsible in oppression of other nations all across the world. And those are the imperial powers.

Yes, I do feel a sense of hope. And also I feel a sense of hopelessness because things are so extreme. And I fear that it also could be the end of the Palestinian people. But somehow the hope is a little bit stronger. Even though it's really been a terrible time there isn't a single moment of my day for the last year that I haven't been consumed by the images of children, bleeding children and the death of

women and young men. It's this constant state of depression. But yeah, there is some hope and there is some light. There's a flicker.

RESH: Indeed what you said, and of course, Nelson Mandela had made that statement too, about linking the freedom of South Africa with the freedom of Palestine, because again, these are all anti-colonial struggles.

This also brings to mind the by now famous and final poem of the poet and scholar Reefat Alareer, *If I Must Die*, where he says, "If I must die, you must live to tell my story", which seems to bring together that dichotomy of hopelessness, but also hope.

What does this mean to you? And how can we support and preserve and grow Palestinian storytelling?

SARAH: That line is very powerful to me, especially as a storyteller, if I look at it literally, because that's what we are doing. That's what my role is as a storyteller, to tell the stories of the Palestinians. Not because I'm Palestinian, because I'm mixed, because I'm in diaspora, but because Palestinians are so oppressed. And also actually as a note to my father who's Palestinian. Whenever I tell a Palestinian story, it's a gift to my dad.

But what that line means to me, I mean, really, it's very deep in a sense that the people that are dying right now, not dying, that are being killed, they're being murdered in Gaza and in the rest of Palestine. A relative of mine was recently beaten to death in West Bank and in Hebron.

So all these people that are, being murdered by the Zionists and by the imperial powers internationally, including our own government here, they are the storytellers.

What that line is telling me, If I must die, you must live to tell my story. Now I have an obligation to tell it. The tradition of storytelling in most traditional cultures has been passed down from family member to family member in Palestine through the women.

And so in that sense, he has died. He was a storyteller. His death told me a story. And now I am the second generation storyteller who will tell that story to a child who will then tell that story.

And so it is powerful because they do say that as long as your name is repeated, you are still alive well past your death. His story will not be forgotten.

It also puts a sense of obligation on me as a storyteller that my role is not just to entertain - well, I've never felt that was my role. It's never just to share a story that's been passed down. It's to keep these stories alive. Because some of them were dying out. We've lost some of our Palestinian stories because for three generations they were not being told as widely.

And what I found interesting about that time where the stories were not being told as widely, they continued to be told in refugee camps more than they were in Palestine. And I think that's because the people in the refugee camp are trying to preserve their identities and to preserve something that's been stolen from them. And so they kept those stories. But now some of those stories are actually a mishmash of several stories because the people that were repeating these stories are starting to form memory issues, but they're still telling them and that's still our story, even if it's a mishmash of stories,

RESH: Well, stories are living things. We're a mishmash and our stories will be a mishmash and will continue to develop.

SARAH: That's beautiful.

RESH: Sarah, and I do want to, again give you my condolences on the killing of your relative. These are becoming all too common as well.

Given what has been happening, what stories do you want to tell and what do you hope your listeners, your audience, take from your stories?

SARAH: I definitely want to tell the humorous stories, the resilient stories, the stories with the magic, because it's important that we see Palestinians laughing.

Yeah, we're being targeted. We're being murdered. We're being bombed. But we still have our laughter. So definitely those stories. But I also want to continue telling my family stories. It's a gift for my father. It's a way of keeping my father's very painful childhood alive, giving it recognition.

I want to tell all kinds of Palestinian stories, including the stories of our martyrs, like Ghassan Kanafani. My father's cousin was also one of the martyred writers. And then also generally Palestinian folk tales.

Any Palestinian story right now is important. Even just saying the word Palestine is important. Just merely the word Palestine is a form of resistance because in the eyes of the world, we shouldn't exist even. So any Palestinian story.

But right now, and that might change in two weeks, it might change in a month's time, but right now I really, really want to tell the humorous stories. The fun stories. The magical stories. To show the world Palestinian culture beyond pain.

RESH: That's beautiful. And with that is there one more story that you would care to share with us?

SARAH: Yes, I'll share a family story, actually. This comes from a collection of my father's childhood stories. And they begin in the year 1948, when my father was born. He was born in 1948, and they continue on until 1967 when Hebron was occupied, where my family's from

My father never told us fairy tales. He stopped believing in magic. He told us real life stories that, like fairy tales, contained kings, brave young men, and monsters.

SARAH: He didn't share those stories much, but when he did, He paused frequently to stop his tears from falling.

See that mountain over there, Sarah? When I was a child, there was a helicopter parked on that mountain every day. Every day they watched us. They watched us as we ate. And they didn't pause to stop watching us as we played.

It was as if that helicopter was part of the mountain. Times were different then.

My father's stories always began this way. And in the end, my brother and I wonder how different they really were.

Times were different then. The poverty was harsher and the winters were longer. World War II had just ended and poverty quickly seeped into the Hebron Hills. Most could not afford clothes or shoes for their children. The refugee children walked barefoot from their camp in Al Fawwar to my father's school in Dura, Hebron.

Barefoot they walked with the cold wind slapping their faces. Lips cracked, cheeks chapped, they walked with haste, all the while shivering.

You've experienced the winters in Hebron, Sarah. You could hardly take the cold. The wooden stoves you see in the classrooms now were not there back then. The only thing keeping the children warm were the stone walls.

The children walked inside of their classrooms, rubbing their hands together, blowing upon their fingers, trying but unable to focus on their lessons.

The school bell would ring and the teacher would go inside. He would immediately pick on one of the children with bare feet and ask them a question. More often than not, the children were too focused on their own shivers to reply.

And the teacher would take a ruler and sometimes even his belt and hit the child on their frozen hands.

These were segregated classrooms. The West Bank children were in different classrooms than the refugee children. The principal, who had come to Hebron from Nablus and did not know the Hebron refugee experience, thought that the refugee children would be bad influences on the West Bank children.

They were not raised in a proper manner and must be segregated.

He told the teachers to treat the refugee children differently than the West Bank children. They endured heavier punishments and abided by stricter rules.

And while the teachers had to be careful how they treated the West Bank children, for their parents would complain, they could do as they wish with the refugee children, for their parents had no say, for they were just refugees.

But slowly, slowly the children began to see each other in the schoolyard. They began to play together. And to hear each other's stories. And it is through those stories that the West Bank children quickly learn that what they were told about the refugee children was neither true nor fair.

Just then, one of the refugee children came out of the classroom with his little hand bleeding.

The refugee children were outraged. The West Bank children were outraged. They huddled together. And they came up with a plan.

These grade two boys decided not to go back inside of their classrooms until everybody shared the same classroom and abided by the same rules. These seven year old boys decided to walk from their village in Dura all the way to Hebron City to demand the segregated classrooms be abolished.

These seven year old boys walked, my father amongst them. And when they arrived, the Minister of Education was surprised to see the boys.

Ahlan! he welcomed them inside. And my father watched as the Minister of Education leaned upon his desk. My father watched the line on the Minister of Education's forehead deepen with each word that he heard.

And when he was finished, he rose up. He told the students that he had no idea of what was happening in one of his own schools. He thanked the boys, and he immediately fired the principal, and the segregated classrooms were abolished.

And what of the boys? The boys walked back to their classroom feeling an inch taller. And that was the very first of the schoolyard resistance, and my father took part in it.

And just to end in a positive note, I mentioned working with the refugee children and when I went in, I didn't realize it was the same refugee camp where my father's stories were from.

I was working with the boys and many of the boys decided to work in groups. And there was one little boy, he was smaller than the rest. He decided to work alone. And while the other children were finished drawing and they went on to writing stories, this little boy was still drawing something.

And when I went to look at what he had drawn, I noticed that he had drawn a Star of David in the middle of a Palestinian flag. And I called the teacher and I asked her to

come and see what he had drawn. And she asked him, why is there a Star of David in the middle of the Palestinian flag?

And he looked at me and he said, because she's Jewish and I like her. And so she's welcome inside of my home.

And for a minute, there was peace.

And then the teacher rose up and she said to all the students, this is Sara Abu Sarar. She is from the Abu Sarar family in Dura Halil and she looks a little bit different because her mother is Croatian and she's speaking English because she lives in Canada, but she's Palestinian.

And the little boy looked at me sadly, and he took his pencil, and he scratched out the Star of David, and he left the Palestinian flag. But for a minute, there was peace.

RESH: Thank you so much, Sarah , for that story and all of the others and for a wonderful conversation. It has been a pleasure.

SARAH: Thank you. Thank you for inviting me. And it was, a really nice conversation with you.

RESH: That was Sara Abu-Sharar, Palestinian storyteller of traditional Palestinian stories.

And this is the Courage My Friends podcast. I'm your host, Resh Budhu.

Thanks for listening.

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