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Performing Oral History: The Creation of "A Land Twice Promised"

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Since 2002, Israeli-born storyteller Noa Baum has performed "A Land Twice Promised," a one-woman show based on her dialogue with a Palestinian woman also living in the United States. The piece weaves together both the women's and their mothers' memories of war and occupation. Baum's work illuminates the complex and contradictory history and emotions that surround Jerusalem for Israelis and Palestinians alike. This reflective essay interweaves process and product by presenting the emotions and choices behind the work as well as ancillary material including recorded interviews and excerpts from Baum's script.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict seeps despair into the Western consciousness, with more than 60 years of war, thousands dead, and no end in sight. Yet rarely do Westerners have the opportunity to hear the stories behind the bloodshed and the headlines. Neither do most Israeli Jews and Palestinians know what it is like to live "on the other side," less than five miles away. "A Land Twice Promised" is based on the experience of dialogue and friendship between myself, an Israeli, and a Palestinian woman. Through it I share our families' stories, attempting to give voice to the parallel and often contradictory narratives of the Israeli and Palestinian peoples from a highly personal perspective.

That is why I chose the title "A Land Twice Promised"—because two parallel narratives stand at the heart of this conflict. One is the claim to the land by the descendants of Isaac and his son Jacob, promised in the Old Testament, and again by the British in 1917 and U.N. charter in 1948. The other claim is that of the children of Ishmael, Isaac's half-brother, reinforced by the British in 1939. Endless layers of pain on both sides stifle a willingness to legitimize the other's narrative.

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I believe that acknowledging the story of the Other is the first step toward dialogue and relationship building, the only alternative to the spiraling vortex of violence.

THE STORY BEGINS

Jumana and I met at a Davis, California, playground. We were both raised in Jerusalem. As our children grew up in Davis, we conversed frequently; still, it took us years to build the trust to share our personal stories of Jerusalem from opposite sides. Those memories now form the backbone of "Land." This is how the piece begins:

> Jumana and I met on the green grass of Davis, California. It was a family potluck. She was holding her baby boy, and I was holding mine. She had the kind of dark beauty I recognized from home, and something about her eyes reminded me of a shy gazelle.
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> So I walked up to her:
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> "What's his name?"
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> "Tammer, and yours?"
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> "Ittai. Where are you from?"
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> "Jerusalem. [hesitation] Near Ramallah, actually."
>
> "I'm from Jerusalem, too."
>
> Her American husband stepped in. "My wife is a Palestinian, you know." I knew. I didn't know if she'd want to talk to me. She didn't know if I'd want to talk to her.
>
> I grew up in Jerusalem, a divided city where the buildings are made of chiseled stones, white, cream, and many shades of gray. When I was a little girl, before 1967, there were always places at the edge of the city you couldn't go to. It was the border.
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> Once my mother took me to such a place, where rusty orange signs read: "Caution! Mines!" "No man's land—No passing beyond this point!"
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> She took me by the hand, and we climbed a heap of stones. Through a large roll of barbed wire, I could see a vast field full of rubble, slabs of concrete with iron beams sticking up like crooked fingers. Beyond, filling the entire horizon, was a wall. It looked like a fortress from the fairy tales, with rounded roofs and minarets peeking behind it.
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> My mother pointed. "You see that wall, Noali? Behind it is the Old City. The wall surrounds the Old City all around, no cars can go through, the streets are so narrow, you can jump from roof to roof. Inside there are four quarters: Muslim, Christian, Armenian, and the Jewish Quarter. That's where the Wailing Wall is. The only remaining wall of the Temple that King Solomon built. King Solomon, from the Bible! Jews lived there for thousands of years. But now, they don't even let us pray there anymore. We won the war, we have our independence, but the Old City . . . we had to surrender. Ach . . . when you're older I'll tell you the stories. . . . So many gave their lives. . . ."

> My mother is always sighing and telling stories about the dead heroes and the blood that spilled. I didn't like it there. I wanted to go home. I was scared of Them. The Arabs. They could be watching us from behind those walls! They could shoot us. . . .
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> When my grandmother hears the word Arab she says: "Tfoo . . . [spits] *yimach shemam*, may their name be erased, they took my Yaakov, *yimach shemam*." Yaakov was her son. He's gone. Where I come from, we say: He fell.

Here is how it started: In 2000, I was creating a story from my memories from the 1967 Six Day War. As I was reliving those times, I realized that I knew this Palestinian woman for almost seven years, and though we talked a lot and our children went to the same kindergarten, I had never really heard what it was like for her, a Palestinian during that war. So I called. We had not spoken for a long time; she was now living outside student housing and had her third child.

She laughed when I suggested we create something together telling our stories of that war.

"Noa, I'm an engineer. I don't perform in front of people; that's your job. Besides, I don't really have any memories. Only fear. I grew up under Israeli occupation, so all I remember is fear. I don't really have any stories to tell. Definitely not horror stories like most of the others have. I'm not a typical case. I've always lived a sheltered life. And besides, I'm now here, in the U.S. My people are being killed every day and I'm here in my sheltered life. I'm not a typical case. Anyway, I was too young to remember anything from that war. Why would you want to talk to me?"

That was hard to hear, but Israelis do not take no for an answer. I said, "I've never had a friend who was Palestinian. I just want to know how it is." She invited me over to her house, and we started to talk. I started by asking questions. As she began to respond, the answers became longer and longer. I began to hear many stories.

Our friendship entered a new phase. We found ourselves talking for hours and often arguing. She would say something from her history, what was "the truth" for her. And I would say, "Wait a minute! That's Arab propaganda! That's not how it was at all!"

Then I would launch into my "truth," history as I knew it, as we learned in school, and she would say, "Wait a minute! That's Zionist propaganda! That's not how it was at all!"

We would argue, but then she would say, "Look at us! We're becoming defensive again!" and I would pick up the baby so she could make the soft-boiled eggs for the other two children. We would continue to talk. There was never a moment when either of us felt it was impossible to continue to talk.

This was such a powerful experience for both of us. All of a sudden I was not just hearing the story of "a Palestinian," I was hearing the story of my friend. She was not just hearing about "the Jewish people and their struggles," she was hearing

about the grandmother and mother of her friend. This transformation of perception through story, I believed then, as I do now, is the foundation on which peace is built.

In the midst of our intense conversations, I had a meeting at the Israeli Consulate in San Francisco. This relationship with Jumana was so inspiring that I thought I needed to do something, perhaps create a performance piece. I did not have anything, just an idea, and I wanted to float the idea by the cultural attaché, hear if the idea had potential to interest anyone, perhaps get some sponsorship. The diplomat's cynical reaction was typical but not what I needed at that moment. He reminded me that the situation was hopeless, which made me feel useless and naive.

At the time, storyteller Loren Niemi was encouraging me not to shy away from difficult stories. I frequently called him, weeping, sometimes three times a day during this process, with many of the same questions put to me by the diplomat. That night, I wrote Loren this letter:

> February 16, 2001: So we talk, Jumana and I. The kids are tugging at our clothes; the phone's battery light is blinking. We talk. We cannot stop. If we were the ones making decisions, there would already be peace. She fills me with hope. Her optimism, her quiet logic, her endless compassion.
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> Her son fell asleep without her reading *Harry Potter* like she promised. My son and daughter went to sleep without "a story in the dark" like I promised. We were still talking. They should put us away for child negligence. . . . We come to the hardest places. We acknowledge the hardships. I think that's it. If only our people could give that to each other—just acknowledge the hardships, the injustice. Ah, but that is where everyone goes under the table, into their little fortress of being the righteous victim. So much I learn from her that I do not know from the papers. So much she learns from me about my people that she never knew. How is it that we manage this? Is it because we are able to listen? Put away the judgments? That we see the goodness and are not afraid and are willing to open our hearts, willing to look at ourselves? We even see how we get defensive. . . . Is it because we're women? I can't talk like this with her husband or with Israeli men. With them it's endless arguments.
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> This phenomenon—our talks, our ecstatic, endless conversations, with babies and phones and the laundry and cooking all demanding our attention and we still talk. . . .
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> I hear my own voices—all the stereotypical boxes I grew up with—I hear them and then I listen to you Jumana and my heart opens up in wonder. How easy it is to put you in the "them." Just a tilt of the head, a bit less effort—how fast we fall into these generalizations. But there is a sea of people out there and they are all full of so much, so many stories to discover. And we are doing it in this kitchen. I have this image—I see us meeting on a little island. Standing together on a space barely enough to contain us. We hold on to each other, we balance, we hang on. Around us the sea is raging, waves come in circles, one after the other. The further it gets from

> our little island—the higher the waves, the stormier the seas, the deeper and colder the water.
>
> She said how she thinks I am courageous for wanting to do something with this, my crazed idea that I can create a storytelling piece from this. She asked if I'm not afraid of reactions that will be hostile—an Israeli telling stories from a Palestinian point of view. . . . I vaguely thought about it in "danger" terms. My struggle is with the voices inside: how to do this and be true to myself and not "look like a traitor." The guy at the Israeli consulate today with his condescending tone: "Well, there's always two sides but. . . ." He *was* supportive of the idea but I didn't feel that he really listened. I was so depressed after that meeting but now I feel better. I am filled with hope again after talking with her tonight. I know that no matter what comes out of this—what we are doing together is important. I only wish I can turn it into some communicative art form that won't be a political manifesto or some Hollywood schmaltz.
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> I write to you though it's not really for you. It's for me, writing down all this emotional jumble helps me sort it out, but you're part of all this. You're one of the voices I'm talking with. I need your help. Your support helps me feel strong. Your believing in me has tremendous power and I don't know how to tell you how grateful I feel!
>
> Everyone is sleeping. The Shabbat candles are almost gone. I left that consulate feeling stupid and useless and naive. But now I feel that I'll just continue. I have to have faith and be naive to do this. I just have to go on.

I had no idea how to do it yet, but I wanted to create something that would enable other people to feel some of that compassion we experienced and offer a glimpse into the human story that lies beyond and beneath the rhetoric and the headlines. There was more in our recorded conversations than the initial 1967 story, but since she had no actual memories of the '67 war, we asked her mother to share hers.

I had met her mother several times before, but at this time she was in Jerusalem and agreed to write the story in Arabic for Jumana to translate for me (she felt insecure about her English). At the same time I had a conversation with my mother in which she suddenly told me stories that I had not heard before about the three weeks she spent in 1948 fighting in the Old City. I still had no idea what I was doing, but knew that somehow our mothers' stories belonged here.

CREATING PERFORMANCE

Art is the product of endless subjective choices. From an infinite supply of input, the artist must determine what is important, emotionally resonant and evocative, and what is not. I now had hours of transcribed conversations and memories. The conversations tended toward an abstract give-and-take of shared feelings and impressions; the memories were more imagistic and concrete.

Loren Niemi, who became my mentor and coach for this project, sifted through the material and helped me identify the potential stories that emerged from the interplay between the two types of material and put them in a historical sequence going from the present, to the past: 1981 and 1974—Jumana's memories, 1967—my memory and her mother's memory of the same war with references to 1948, and my mother's memories of the 1984 war and the loss of her brother.

The stories:

- 1981 – Jumana was arrested while a student in Bir Zeit University.
- 1974 – Jumana and her sister and friends found themselves in the midst of a demonstration trying to get to the bus home from school in the Old City in fifth grade.
- 1967 – I was in the third grade when the war broke, and we slept with all the neighbors of the building for four nights in the furnace room that became the shelter. It was there that we heard that the Old City was freed and Jews can pray again at the Wailing Wall. We watched our parents cry with joy.
- 1967 – Muna, Jumana's mother, was alone with three little kids, separated from her husband for six days during the war. She tells about the first time she saw a Jew and the beginning of the occupation.
- 1948 – Tziporah, my mother, was just out of high school, stranded in Jerusalem when the war broke out. She entered the Old City and cared for the wounded until the surrender of the Jewish quarter to the Jordanians. When she returned home to Tel Aviv, she learned that her beloved brother was killed in the war.

The decision to create this back-in-time flow from 1981 to 1948 allowed me to offer a look at the historical roots of this conflict from the perspective of personal narratives. I see at the heart of this conflict two narratives of victims: memories of pain passed on from generation to generation. For healing to begin, we need to hear not just the stories of the recent past but also to go further back in history. I wanted to communicate that our experience of history creates who we are and how we see the world.

For Jumana and me, 1967 is the focal point: our stories and memories stem from the consequences of that moment in history. For our mothers, 1967 is an extension of what went before in their lives, in the earlier history of 1948 and before. So it was not enough to hear Jumana's story and for her to hear about my life on the other side of Jerusalem. We needed to go back into the past. I needed to hear her mother's story, and I needed her to hear my mother's story. Their personal stories were the window into the narratives of our people.

Now I needed to create stories from these memories that would somehow communicate something beyond the political rhetoric and "historical" renditions of our people's narratives. But how?

The process was long and complicated. I interviewed my friend, her mother, and my mother many times; I created many different versions.

I have included here some of the initial recorded conversations. However, many more interviews and numerous specific questions on the setting, people and emotions were involved in the process of creating the stories. Eventually I created the piece with a small grant from NSN and started performing, shaping it in the interactions with the audiences during the first two years of performances. I had a first work-in-progress version before 25 people in the Bay area in March 2002. Then very sporadic occasional performances through 2003 and part of 2004 before it took the shape it has today.

Translating oral history into story poses a variety of challenges. For one thing, because Jumana and I had established trust between us over seven years before beginning this process, we avoided the problem many people experience when first approaching the Other. In such situations, people tend to come from a place of mutual suspicion, or at the least ignorance, that must be addressed. It is therefore useful to first cultivate a mindset of curious, compassionate listening, perhaps by finding and sharing a story connected to risky issues, and encouraging listening and asking questions without judgment.

Here are some additional challenges I faced and choices I made:

Telling the Story of the Other in the First Person

The first decision I made (after several frustrating attempts at monologues that came out hollow and artificial) was to tell all the stories in first person. As I listened to my friend, I found myself experiencing the empathy we all feel when listening to a friend recount their trouble or pain. It became clear that if I wanted that experience of compassion to come through, I had to tell in first person so that people will be able to hear our voices in the way we heard each other.

I spent many sleepless nights struggling with the voices in my head. Some were my fears and many echoed the familiar voices of my family and our people. How will I be able to do this? How will it sound? How dare I, an Israeli, give voice to the Palestinians? How dare I give a voice to anyone? How can I presume to understand how it feels? Even more perplexing: How in the world can I tell a story about the frightening soldiers while these are *my* people? Every one of my family and friends becomes a soldier when they turn 18. Am I a traitor to my people? Will this be balanced? Will it give the correct picture? Who will want to hear this? Will people listen? If it is too painful, people will recoil and become defensive. How can I create something that will open the heart to listen beyond the defenses? Is it too long, too heavy, too much?

Staying with the decision to tell in first person helped me get through this challenge. I discovered that listening to Jumana's story, shaping it, and telling it as if it happened to me enabled me to gain a lot of insight and compassion. Also

contributing were my friend's unending support and permission. She not only encouraged me but also told me how important it was to give voice to their story, and she had complete confidence that I would do it justice.

Creating a Sense of Place

Storyteller Donald Davis says that telling a story without a place is like trying to hold water in a sieve. Place is the container of story. Before we can imagine what is going on or even open ourselves to listen, we need to know where we are. When my mother says "The Wailing Wall," she does not need to describe it to me. I have a very solid and detailed image in my mind of what it looks like. But my audience may have never been there. I needed to add short descriptions of the places so my listeners could imagine the story. So I "put" words into my mother's mouth to help others understand the picture:

> "That's where the Wailing Wall is. The only remaining wall of the Temple that King Solomon built. King Solomon, from the Bible!"

When Jumana and I talked, she referred to places we knew. She did not need to describe the alleys of the Old City, or the *souk* (the market) near Damascus gate. But I had to create the place for the listeners, again, adding words to hers:

> "I loved the *souk*! How it's crowded and full of smells and the embroidered dresses how they hang above the shop doorways and the trays with mountains of sticky sweets, halkum, baklava, and the little camels and donkeys made of polished olive wood. . . . I always wanted to buy one of those but it was for the tourists, the tall blond men and skinny, skinny ladies. . . ."

Her description of the tourists and her relationship to them were described in a separate conversation.

Creating the Picture/Images

The details of each memory were crucial to create the most truthful picture. Once again, to use the *souk* story as an example: Jumana, in our interview, said, "When I was 10 or 11, there used to be a lot of demonstrations before the Intifada (1987) . . . there would be demonstrations that would happen on a regular basis. Many times we would be sent early from school. The teachers couldn't take responsibility for our safety once the demonstrations started."

I went home and created a whole scene of boys marching through the alleys with banners and chanting slogans. This is how I imagined the word *demonstration*. When I read the scene to my friend, she laughed. "*No*," she said, "this is before the first Intifada. They would sneak around, two or three boys, dump their school bags at a street corner and run to where a soldier was standing, throw a stone and run away

and then try to get there from another alley. My father said it was like a daring game, who can get closer without being caught." I asked more questions, collected as many details as possible, and the scene was reshaped to appear in the final story version:

> Once, in fifth grade, it was the beginning of summer, we were at recess when we heard a loud banging on the gate. We thought it was the soldiers, everyone became quiet. But it was the boys from the other school, shouting, "*Y'alla, ta'alu, tjaharu*, come on, protest." It was the commemoration of the Six Day War, the beginning of the Israeli occupation.
>
> The boys were starting something. They would go see where the soldiers were and throw a stone and run, come through the back way and throw again and run. It's almost like a game—who can get closest and not get caught. Many kids from the other schools do this but at our school they never allowed it, like my parents. The head nun knew there would be trouble soon. The soldiers get mad, start shooting, toss tear gas and close the roads. You can be stranded inside the walls of the city and not be able to return home!

Creating Emotional Resonance

The job of the storyteller is to touch hearts, to connect emotionally with the characters in the story in order to trigger the audience's emotions and memories and help foster a relationship with what they are hearing. The language and speaking style a person uses when remembering in an intimate conversation are often different from those needed to create a story that will resonant emotionally for an audience. In Jumana's and her mother's story, I had to bring the moments/feelings that were muted back into the present. When Jumana was telling me about her *souk* experience for example she said:

> There were five of us: my friend Nadia from my class and her two sisters: Maha, about nine and Afaf and my sister Maysoon, who were both five. We were running down those narrow alleys and stairways, we were trying to get to Nadia's father's work, he had a stall in the market for fixing shoes. We were extremely terrified. We could hear yells and shooting. We came there and he wasn't there. So we kept on running. We were coming down some steps and all of a sudden it became very, very quite. Whenever these demonstrations would happen, the soldiers would force the shops to close and the whole market would shut down. Also because of the tear gas that would get thrown around, people would close shop and hide until it was over. We were in the middle of the *souk*, it was very quite, the shops were closed, no one around. We were terrified. We tried to hide so when the soldiers come or the tear gas we wouldn't be in the way. We got lucky; we saw someone was banging on one of the shop, apparently the shop owners would stay inside and when things calmed down would open up for business again. They opened and this guy said, "Get these kids in," so we managed to take refuge in the shop. It was one of those touristy shops, lots of little camels made of olive wood and finjans. Until then me and Nadia, we were the older ones, we were in control. The little ones cried, but we didn't.

Noa: "You didn't cry?"
"No, I was the oldest. I remember thinking I can't cry."

Again, telling in first person, asking many questions, helped me imagine and understand the emotional truth behind her words. Here is another part of the *souk* story from the performance:

> . . . so the headmistress said, "School is over today. Go home, girls, straight home. Be quick!" I got my sister, Nadia got her sisters. When these things happen, we go to Nadia's father. He has a shoe shop not far from the school, and he knows the safe streets to get us to the bus. Because no one can know where the boys are protesting and you can be caught in the middle of the shooting. We ran fast and came to the shop. It was dark. Nadia banged on the door: "Baba, Baba!" But no one answered. On the other side of the alley walls we heard the shouts of the kids: "*Hunac*"—over here, and "*Dir balack!*"—watch out! "*Allahu acbar*. . . ." There was a banging, like stones on metal. My sister started pulling on my skirt: "I want to go home, now!" Nadia looked at me and I looked at Nadia. It was up to us now. We're the oldest, we're in fifth grade. So I started to lead the way. I figured the best is to get to the *souk,* it's crowded and safer and from there it's not too far to the bus. We ran so fast! We ran down the steps of a long street, around the curve and we came to the bottom, we were in the *souk*. It was so quiet. All the shutters were closed. No dresses. No tourists. They say it gets quiet after they run and before the soldiers start shooting. My sister grabbed my skirt. "I want home, I want mama!" Nadia whispered, "We have to hide. They can come down and shoot us."
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> I knew we had to hide, but my legs were like stone, I didn't know which way to go.
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> Suddenly a man ran to us, "Quick, this way, children." He banged on one of the green shutters and it opened up like Ali Baba's cave and banged shut behind us.
>
> It was one of those tourist shops we passed every day. All the little donkeys and camels were piled on tables in the middle. Outside I could hear the bullets whistling, and the pinging against the stones. Inside it was dark. A man told us to sit on a pile of rugs. "It's all right children; don't be afraid." My sister was crying, and I held her hand. I decided not to cry. I was the oldest, I was in fifth grade.

Where the challenge with my friend's stories was to bring the emotion and animation back into the muted, restrained narrative, with my mother I had to find a way to tell it in an authentic way, of which she was incapable. As I was growing up, I hated hearing the stories about her brother. He was always such a God-like figure. She and her brother were always so perfect and poor and heroic victims. I knew that if I told the story as she tells it, no one would be able to open up and feel compassion. My mother, like many who suffered trauma, shields the place of authentic pain by telling the stories in a very set, repetitive, highly dramatized fashion. She has created her structured narrative that enables her to deal with the mess and pain of the loss in her life. Any attempt to ask questions, get the details I needed as a storyteller or inquire about background and side stories was met with irritation. This is one of our phone conversations:

"Do you remember where you were standing when you found out Israel declared independence?"

My mother (very high pitched and clearly upset): "Who remembers such things? Do you think we knew where we were? Did I know even if it was night or day? They were bombing us night and day I tell you . . ." and she continues to tell the story of the battle in the set structure, words, and phrases I have always heard.

I make another attempt. "Do you remember a moment when you thought about Ya'akov and what you were thinking or feeling?"

"Who remembers? Do you think we had time to think? We were being attacked, I tell you. Day and night they were shooting . . ." and she proceeds to tell the story her way.

Two minutes after we hang up the phone, she calls. "But I missed him all the time. There wasn't a moment that I didn't miss him."

I used these little clues, and the stories about him that I had grown up with all my life, and I put myself in her shoes and told it in first person; I imagined how it would be if it happened to me, at age 19. I worked hard to try and get to the emotional core, the pain that she hides. I had to find compassion and be able to tell the authentic story that hides under the dramatic façade.

The result was transforming: telling her story in this form allowed me for the first time in my life to feel genuine compassion for my mother. More than that, not only did my mother love the story, but also, for the first time in our long and volatile relationship, something shifted. It was very subtle and completely unconscious on her part, but after she heard it there was a different energy between us, as if some of the anxiety had calmed down. I could only attribute it to the fact that, for maybe the first time in our relationship, my mother felt heard, felt that I knew who she was and what she went through. I knew then that I had touched her truth.

This transformative power of storytelling was one of the most powerful for me in this process. By transforming attitudes and relationships, we *do* transform facts on the ground. After all, perspective is the only truth we possess. Only through a shift in our inner reality can we hope to effect a shift in our shared experience. Here is part of my mother's story:

. . . I was young and I wanted to contribute to our struggle for independence, like my brother, so I volunteered as a teacher and entered the Old City at the end of April. But they didn't need teachers, there were so many wounded . . . they gave me a white coat and tennis shoes (if you walked in the cobblestone alleys the Arabs could hear your footsteps and shoot you). White coat and tennis shoes: I became a nurse.

The commander took me to the hospital. There were very few beds and the floor was covered with blankets and people everywhere, lying there, groaning. . . .

I had no idea what to do; I was never trained as a nurse. I saw a man in the corner, his shirt was soaked with blood, the smell was so strong I felt dizzy, I closed me eyes, I thought: What would Yaakov say? "Zipili, it will be all right." I could see his smile. So I took some water, and I put my hand under his head to help him drink. I smiled to him. I said, "It will be all right." But the water just dribbled down.

> I wanted to give him some more and the other nurse said, "What are you doing, can't you see he's dead?"
>
> I didn't even know. I never touched a dead person. But I learned. I learned to do things my brother wouldn't imagine I could do. I took care of the wounded, I became strong, the smell didn't bother me, the blood didn't frighten me. There was no time to think or be afraid, no time to sleep or eat. I did everything they told me. . . .

Truth vs. Fact

The relationship between truth and fact in story was summed up for me by storyteller Carmen Deedy: "Tell the truth of the story. If it happened exactly like that or not is not important. What's important is the truth of it." As I was shaping the memories, my intention was to stay true to the spirit and sense of the experience, not necessarily to a complete chronological accurate account of events.

In service of this and the dramatic shape of the story, I had to consolidate events. Below I use examples from Muna's story, Jumana's mother. Here is part of her written narrative, sent to and translated by her daughter, which formed the base from which I started interviewing her and shaping the 1967 story. Here are other memories from 1948 which I eventually incorporated into her story elsewhere:

> I'll start from the beginning: on Sunday, the fourth of June 1967. We were going down to the Old City for your uncle's engagement. Everywhere we looked there were newspapers on the ground, in the shops. In bold red letters it said, "War at the doors" (or it could be war at our doors).
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> A lot of people had been saying that there will be war, while others were saying no way, there won't. Your father was saying no, there won't be a war, if there was it would be a major war with a lot of destruction and that's why there will not be a war (they won't let it happen). That's why he refused to buy and store a lot of food; he was just convinced that there could not be a war. But when I saw that phrase (war at the door) I was very scared, this would be the first time that I will experience war, and I have the responsibility of three children, the oldest of whom is less than three years old.
>
> The next day, Monday June 5, 1967, your aunt Widad was with us, she was preparing for her preparatory general exams, and we had asked her to come stay with us so she can study more efficiently (they lived in the village were instead of studying she would have chores like getting water, tending to animals, and other such things).
>
> I remember being with my father in one of our orchards planted with figs and grapes. . . . I remember being in the orchard when I saw the trucks and cars and wagons loaded with refugees coming from the direction of the coast. I looked up at my father, and I'll never forget that moment or the look on my father's face. He was smoking his cigarette and looking at the trucks full with people as they entered Bir Zeit. I was very excited because I saw that the trucks were loaded with boys and girls and all I could think of is that these are children to play with and make friends with (I was ten years old), but my father was thinking differently, and I only understood

> after I was older. . . . I was happy about getting new friends, and he was contemplating how stark the situation was: how all these people left their homes, their lands, their villages. I think he was also thinking how will the town ever be able to absorb all those people, how will they live, who will care for them; with lack of food there might be thefts and hostilities. And it really was a difficult time: there was no government; there was chaos, no organization. I remember this clearly, this scene I saw with my own eyes there was a family under every tree, there was no rooms in the homes, so they lived under trees. Later they would put out rags, tin cans, anything to give them privacy. Later on the UNRWA (U.N. relief agency) distributed blankets and tents and they moved on to camp sites. Then they started giving them a little bit of flour oil soap rice—that kind of stuff. The UN is still taking care of some of them to this day. To this day they're still debating what should happen to them; will they go back, should they or not go back to the homes that they left. They of course want to go back to their homes but Israel won't let them so the struggle continues to this day.

My job as a storyteller is to help the audience to imagine and connect emotionally as they co-create the story in their mind. Every place in a story is taking the listener on a new journey, another place to create in their mind. It was too much to create the picture of the day before the war, with another event (the engagement party) and place, the Old City, and then have to create a new place—the neighborhood, house where they lived, and so on—so her husband's saying "there will not be a war" was "relocated" to the next day when the war started. For similar reasons I eliminated Widad, Muna's husband's 13-year-old sister who was staying with them. It became too complicated to add another character when already there were so many to keep track of. Unlike a written story, an oral telling relies on the audience's ability to follow with their imagination. If they lose track of who is there, they cannot turn the page to check. So keeping the number of characters to a minimum was another way of staying true to the truth of the story and not to each factual detail. Also, since the background of 1948 is so crucial to the historical and emotional context of the story, I wove her memories of 1948 into her story of 1967.

> We lived in two rented rooms on the second floor above Um Mustafa, the widow who owned the building. We were just starting, a young couple. It was very early in the morning, and already hot. I was hanging the laundry on the roof. Everything looked so peaceful and quiet. I could see the road at the bottom of the hill. The bus just left with Halil, my husband, he worked near the walls of the Old City. He smiled and told me not to worry, there will not be a war.
>
> . . . I thought, "Maybe he is right. Everything looks normal and so quiet, maybe there will not be a war." I couldn't imagine being in a war, I was never actually in a war, but I remembered the refugees in 1948 coming through our town Bir Zeit. So many of them, the trucks, wagons, loaded with people, they were in every house, under the trees. They had nothing. Later the UN brought tents and they made makeshift shacks. But I was just a child then holding my father's hand, and now I had

> three little ones of my own. Jumana was three, Waell just turned two and was still in diapers, and Sami was only six months . . . I couldn't imagine being a refugee!
>
> When I went downstairs, someone outside yelled: "The war has started! The radio said that the war has started!"

There are many other examples of consolidated events. Jumana's experience of feeling hatred for the first time actually happened at another day in another place. This is an excerpt from her recorded narrative:

> One time that made me really hate the soldiers was when we were sitting on the veranda overlooking the street and we saw this kid running, trying to get away from the soldiers, he was 13 or 14, and then he got caught. They beat him so bad. We were watching, we were crying and yelling "Let him go let him go!" It was really hard to watch. They got him on the ground and three or four were kicking him, beating him with the butts of their guns. They couldn't hear us. Then they took him in the Jeep. They arrested him. That was the scariest of all to be arrested.
>
> If you're arrested, they can just take you to jail, and by "law" they don't have to let anyone know where you are. We have no human rights. They can do anything they want for 14 days! So you can disappear for 14 days, and no one would notify where you are. After 14 days if they want keep you, you can ask for a lawyer. Otherwise they let you go, no trial, no explanation.

The shaped story[1]:

> . . . we were too young to have an ID, but we knew we had to stop. I stared at the shoes of the soldier. I didn't want him to see me cry, even though it was from the gas.
>
> My sister, she couldn't stop crying. I passed through the barbed wire first and held out my hand for her. The soldier bent down and lifted my sister over the barbed wire, then he lifted Nadia's sisters, too. He smiled to us. . . .
>
> After that, we ran so fast, I don't even remember how we got on the bus. From the window, I saw a boy, 13 or 14 years old, running out of the gate. Four soldiers were chasing him. They caught him and threw him to the ground. They kicked and beat him with their rifles. When the boy stopped moving, they lifted him into a Jeep and drove away. I wanted to yell, but nothing came out. I was only a little girl; they were big with guns. But for the first time in my life I understood that word hate. I hated them.

The Choices of Structure

As I listened deeply to the experience of my friend and our mothers, as I revisited my own experience, trying to understand its meaning for me, I was struck by the parallel images I was continuously hearing. It brought into focus once again that it is the stories that can show us our common humanity and open the way for dialogue and peace. Too often we believe that our personal experience is unique.

One of the most striking moments in the process happened when I heard Jumana tell her mother's story, their family's central mythic "flour" story. Suddenly it brought up a memory of my mother a day before the 1967 war, stashing the cupboard with oil and flour and filling bottles with water: "If you have flour, a bit of oil and water you will never be hungry," she said. I never understood my mother's strange teaching/instruction until I heard Muna's story. Now as an adult, she told us how, on the last day of the war, "I took the last bit of flour I had left with oil and yeast and water and baked in a cake mold for the children." Of course, now it all made sense: you mix flour, oil, and water to make bread. . . .

The parallel images of our mothers, primarily concerned with survival and bread at the same time, were powerful reminders of our common humanity and affected my choice of structure. I placed these two stories of the 1967 war side by side at the center of the show. Each story gives another perspective, one of a child and one of a mother, one from the Israeli experience, the other from the Palestinian, but the parallel images became a powerful symbol of our shared humanity, echoing the parallel narratives of our people.

The following are the excerpts from the two 1967 stories:

(My first war):

My mother came in carrying my three-year-old sister. She thrust a bag into my hands:

"I got flour."

"You ran under the bombs? Are you out of your mind?"

"Oy, don't ask, the teachers at the nursery school were panicked, I had to keep everyone under the table until all the parents came. Then I realized I forgot flour. Who knows how long this could last. It could be like in '48, heaven forbid! So I bought 2 kilos of flour. . . ."

"Flour?" I asked. "What do we need flour for?"

"Noali, if you have flour and water and a bit of oil—you can never go hungry!"

My mother is always saying strange things.

(Muna's story):

When I went downstairs, someone outside yelled: "The war has started! The radio said that the war has started!"

I only had one thought: "Flour and a lantern!" (You know, if the electricity stops.) The children were still sleeping. I left the door open and ran up the street to the little store. I only managed to say, "Two kilo flour," and there were gunshots!

Many other parallel images resonated for me and are woven throughout the piece. Here are some of them:

- Living in the shelter with neighbors.
- The sound of the bombs, the experience of fear as bombs fall in the night.
- The use of the phrase: "The Old City fell." I was shocked to discover that "on the other side" they used the exact same language that we did. For my mother, the Old City fell in 1948. For Um Mustapha (the landlady of

Jumana's mother in 1967), the Old City fell in 1967. Both my mother and Um Mustapha used the exact same words to describe their anguish and highlighted the emotional connection both people have to the holy sites of Jerusalem.

- Standing on a hill and looking at areas beyond "the border." My mother showed me the Old City before 1967, when it was under Jordanian rule. Jumana's father showed her the coastal cities that the Palestinians were forced to leave in 1948 and were now under Israeli rule.

CONCLUSIONS

In March 2002, after I moved to the East Coast, Jumana and I found ourselves calling each other, sick with worry and concern for each other's families after the bombs in Netanya and Jerusalem, after the tanks moved into Ramallah and the siege of Bethlehem. Now that our friendship had deepened by hearing each other's stories, it was impossible not to think about one another. I added it in.

> Jumana and I don't live in the same city anymore. She's in California; I moved to the East Coast three weeks before 9/11. It seems that every time I think it can't get any worse, it just does. That spring of 2002, at the height of the suicide bombing inside Israel, when all of my most left-leaning friends became angry if I even mentioned the word Palestinian, my friend called. She couldn't help think about my family. I could not stop thinking about hers. We talked. We still talk on the phone.
>
> "Noa, I heard about the bomb in Jerusalem. Is your sister all right?"
>
> "Jumana, I heard they bulldozed houses in Beit Hanina. Are your parents all right?"
>
> "Noa, there was that terrible one in Netanya. I don't have words for my pain and outrage!"
>
> "Jumana, there are tanks in Ramallah. . . . Is your brother all right?"
>
> "Noa, my cousin was shot at the checkpoint trying to get to work. He is severely wounded; the family can't see him because of the roadblocks."
>
> "Jumana, a bus blew up two streets away from my sister."
>
> "Noa, my father said they can see the wall from their house; it's cutting them off from the entire neighborhood. . . ."
>
> "Jumana. . . ."
>
> Jumana and I stand together on an island in the middle of a raging sea. All around us the waves are crashing violently, splashing us until we're soaking wet.
>
> But somehow, we hold on. We talk above the roaring storm. We hold on to our compassion. We bake a cake with pink and white frosting and eat together under the tree. We hold onto our little peace. We have no choice.

I believe that we are all survivors of trauma in one way or another. We have a choice: Do we harden and recoil, or do we let the trauma transform us and open our hearts?

"A Land Twice Promised" is an offer of my choice. I do not pretend it is easy. The closer you are to the trauma, the harder it is. When you are deeply wounded or suffer a huge loss like my mother or grandmother, you do not always have room for the story of the other. This is especially true for the ones that are in an ongoing trauma like the Palestinians and the Israelis. But this is my personal story of the choice that I chose to make, which is different than the one my mother and grandmother made.

Peace can be a risk. It asks us to make compromises, to go beyond our comfort zone and venture into the unknown. Since we often have a certain picture of a situation and specifically of our enemy, it is hard to imagine something different. When you cannot imagine what it would look like, it is hard to take the risk for peace. Storytelling can break through assumptions and stereotypes and allow us to see the humanity of the Other. Listening to someone's story is in itself an acknowledgement of his or her humanity. I have learned that by shifting the focus from debate to personal story, I can invite people into a different realm, where it is possible to listen deeply past opinions and frozen perspectives and allow space for potential change.

I am not here to represent The Suffering of The People, Jews or Palestinians. I am here to tell about *my* experience. I choose to speak the truths of my experience of my friendship with my Palestinian friend Jumana and the stories that emerged from it. I can only tell of what I know. That is what I have to offer as a storyteller. I am not a politician. I am here to give the personal that transcends the rhetoric, and through it I hope to call to all of us to listen. The path to peace has to include the listening to the experience of the Other through which we can discover our common human experience. In this specific conflict it also means to recognize and acknowledge the existence of parallel narratives, two perspectives to the same historical events. My hope is that by listening to this piece one will experience some of the compassion that is needed for healing and peace.

So this is the way that I have found to support peace. My hope is that more will choose to listen to each other and acknowledge the story of the other. It is the stories that call out for all of us to surrender prejudice and fear, turning instead to listening, compassion, dialogue, and peace.

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NOTE

1. The description of the feelings around being arrested were used to create Jumana's "Bir Zeit" story.