

Poetry Dialogues

by Tahani Salah

I was in the sixth grade when I started writing poetry. I had never realized how special poetry was to me. I started writing not just as an assignment, but almost as a way to let myself be free from everything around me. As I grow older, my poetry seems to evolve from blue hummingbirds to the dark and sorrowful days of oppressed Palestine. Writing has been a great foundation for me to build on my identity as a Palestinian Muslim.

My experience as a poet had been great but got even better when I started workshops with the Def Jam Poet Suheir Hammad and City Lore as part of a program called *Poetry Dialogues*. In the ten-week workshops, we experimented with many different writing techniques from haikus to page-long master-pieces and different writing styles. We loved it, and with the weeks flying by we managed to create two wonderful performances.

One of the Dialogues was held at the Bowery Poetry Club. After my group read, we held a dialogue with the audience. The moderator, George Zavala of City Lore, asked us to respond to certain questions. One of the audience members asked me what it was like to be a Muslim American after September 11th.

I explained that, after the whole September 11th thing, I felt that I had to turn more to my religion for comfort. I am very religious—I don't pray five times a day, honestly, but I do cover my head and I do study my religion a lot. I thank God every day for giving me my religion. It makes me stronger to be a Muslim and to be in America, where I can voice my opinions and say what I have to say without getting into too much trouble.

At the Dialogues, someone asked our opinion about how the media had portrayed the events of September 11th. The deficiency of the media is that they don't convey any information about Islam and about what it means to be a Muslim. I remember how they portrayed people dancing in the street after September 11th in some Muslim countries. It was as if they wanted to prove that every Muslim American was against them. I cried on September 11th. I personally didn't lose anyone, but I know a lot of friends and a

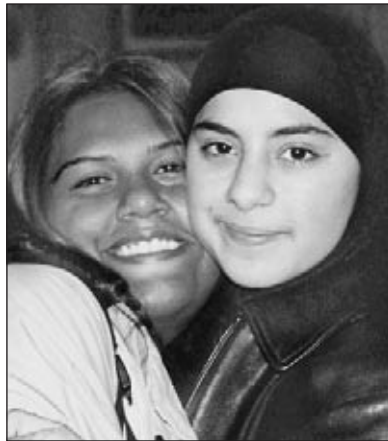


Photo by Steve Zeitlin

Sheila Mirza and Tahani Salah at a Poetry Dialogues event

lot of families that did. I don't understand why the media has to blame every Muslim instead of the ones who did it. I don't live too far away from Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn, and I can tell you that many people feel that they have to hide now. They go inside, and a lot of them closed their stores down. You see other people moving into the neighborhood. That's fine with us—we welcome you, with open arms. But we welcome you hoping that you're going to want us, and that you're going to appreciate us for what we are and for what we believe in.

Our second performance was at The Geraldine R. Dodge Poetry Festival in Waterloo Village, New Jersey, on September 19, 2002. My group performed in a tent with about 80 to 100 people in the audience. It was a very diverse crowd. After my group read, we held a dialogue with the audience. Afterwards, a young Israeli girl named Isabella came up to me and thanked me for reading. She expressed her feelings about the issues of our people. She felt bad that we couldn't have met when our people were at peace. We were both happy to have met doing something so great—she, writing a news article for her school paper, and me trying to spread the word of a Palestinian poet. We talked a little more and to our surprise, we had much in common and it was great meeting someone with Isabella's background who didn't automatically think I was against them, or even hated them. Isabella and I hope one day that with people with

Celebrate

Stories told by old and grown
Claim your religion, I was told
Morning prayer, the best of wear,
Toys I shared, chickens I scare,
The lamb I asked my grandfather
to spare,
The fresh smell of baklava in the
morning,
Save it for dinner,
Kicked out of the kitchen by the
crazy old woman,
As I sat on my father's lap, and
he tapped me on my back,
And sang me his favorite song,
"Habibi al noor al ean."

The Effects of Life

My blood is PLO
My blood flows through the
Ramallah roads
My stone bones as the ones that
are thrown
My skin, one shade lighter than
peach
My home, destroyed by the
order of Ariel Sharon,
Can we do something, I asked
and pleaded,
Get out of the way, or they'll
make you bleed
The road home is just too weak
Why can't I speak the same
Arabic?
I am a Muslim, Palestinian,
That has never been so real to me,
Can't you see, I've never been
home
When will it ever be safe to
go home?
—Tahani Salah

open minds and hearts can help our people live in peace.

After 9-11 I have had a hard time with just everyday life, but performing was different. I've gone from shows with open arms to shows where I had my mic cut. The *Poetry Dialogues* was a safe and unforgettable time for everyone. Doing the *Poetry Dialogues* showed me that with poetry people can really open up to one another and share how they really think and feel. Poetry can open up a conversation when both sides are heard. It can take us one step closer to peace.

Tahani Salah is a junior at the Brooklyn School for Global Studies. She serves on the Youth Board of Urban Word NYC.