The Path Less Travelled:

A Personal Essay

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Beirut After the Civil War

I was born in Beirut shortly after the Lebanese Civil War between Muslims and Christians came to a bitter halt and as the country began to rebuild itself—although not without lingering resentment between both parties. Only grey, desolate, and ravaged buildings covered with holes the size of bullets and bombs were left in the streets of Beirut. The city was fragmented and devoid of colour, seeming to disintegrate at every sunset only to rebuild itself from the debris at every sunrise.

After the war, the Lebanese people’s bustling spirit and hope for a better future was palpable like moisture in the Mediterranean air. Beirut was a key global place of trade, where one could always feel the exchange of not just goods, but also ideas. Yet human rights violations were all too common in war-torn Lebanon, for the war not only left behind demolished buildings but demolished social provisions, protections, and political institutions as well.

In our cramped living quarters, my mother, siblings, and I suffered severe physical abuse at the hands of my father, who found comfort in culturally propagated notions of male superiority and religious extremism. He found additional confidence in society’s silence and apathy towards such issues and in its impotence to arrest them in the first place. Our small dwelling left us with little room for movement or freedom. The first two decades of my life were hard for my three siblings and me to endure, but harder still for my mother, who suffered a spinal injury, blackened facial skin, and a perceived necessity to isolate from those around her. Fear not only limited her physical ability to flee, it also limited her ability to think freely about this prospect. Being naive children, my siblings and I did not understand what normal and abnormal parenting looked like, what community resources we could have availed ourselves of, or what acts were deemed socially permissible and impermissible. Our thoughts, like our mother’s, were
severely constricted: while hers were constricted by fear of physical injury and death, ours were additionally constricted by lack of knowledge, experience, and development.

**Good and Evil**

My father was an eccentric character. He was peculiar in his speech, gait, emotional lability, and his social and political ideologies. When he would speak, there was no room for anyone else to chime in. This was not only because he often spoke and thought so fast so as to be barely intelligible, but also because others’ views were simply unwelcome. He monopolized conversations, and it was always his turn to perform a monologue in the drama or play to which we all bore witness. He walked in a haughty manner, his nose elevated and gaze scornful of everything it graced. Each day, he would share with us golden rules about the mechanics of the world, tales that exemplified how dark and treacherous the world is. It was only dangerous, he would qualify, because of the people in it. To him, human nature was intrinsically evil.

Whenever social eyes were present, my father would feign normalcy by fabricating empathic reactions to the misfortunes of others, only to laugh at them later. If he ever shed a tear, it was at some perceived injustice he felt he suffered at the hands of some individual, and the targeted rage that usually followed always recuperated whatever was rightfully his.

Despite these descriptors that construe my father as a villain and antagonist, it is important that I qualify these assertions and paint a fuller image of him as a character in my tale. Over the years, I have come to learn that his persona was likely coloured by a multitude of influences in his life as a young boy and man: the rigours of a harsh civil war, the unrelenting poverty he experienced as a child, and lastly, the child abuse he himself endured at the hands of his father.
My father was born in the village of Bseba to an illiterate family of farmers who struggled to make ends meet on their rural family farm. He and his eight siblings would work on the mountain fields during the earliest hours of sunrise, until it was time for them to make their hour-long journey to school by foot. Each would carry a cucumber, tomato, and few olives to eat along the way. Upon his arrival, my father’s teachers would request to see his homework and, receiving no response, demand he open his hands to receive the due punishment. Paddles in hand, only then would they notice that his hands were all sorts of green and brown, grubby from a morning’s earnest work. According to my father, they would ease up on him in light of this scrutiny.

One day, after upsetting his father, my father ran for hours in hopes of procuring safety in his aunt’s distant village. He hid there for days, hoping his father’s rage would dwindle. When his father finally found him, the beating he received was enough to leave him unconscious for hours.

Resilient Together

My siblings and I never owned any toys. “It is wasteful and sinful,” my father proclaimed in Arabic, “to spend money on such frivolous activities.” Our spirits and imaginations, however, remained un tarnished. With pieces of paper and coloured pencils, we secretly drew elaborate personas and scissored them into life. “Do you want to play ‘Papers?’” we would eagerly ask one another. Unlike other children, we were not bound by the morphology of store-bought toys. Our imaginations alone dictated the physical features, clothes, and countenances of each paper-thin character. In time, we amassed a sizeable cast, each member ready to be deployed at will. Side characters, main characters, and passing acquaintances, we had them all. A main character in one
storyline was a passing contact in the next. Today, to no one’s surprise, my sister is a visual arts hobbyist.

**Freedom and Rebellion**

My siblings and I ultimately escaped my father’s clutches by leaving the Middle East to continue our education at North American universities when we were eighteen and nineteen years of age. We experienced a culture shock upon discovering that domestic violence was socially and legally prohibited here, having lived for almost two decades in a region where impunity for private familial matters was the norm. In Canada, the rule of law protects everyone; in Lebanon, it protected a select few. I studied psychology and philosophy at the University of Waterloo, understandably needing to make sense of my past and the individual, societal, and global factors implicated in it. Additional courses in sociology, ethics, and legal studies fed my intellectual curiosity. My studies were not only a form of enlightenment, but also a form of self-imposed therapy.

As an undergraduate, I was intrigued when my philosophy professors would make hypothetical referrals to life-threatening situations that required us to quickly conjure up moral decisions. I had experienced these hypotheticals in real life. On being introduced to the renowned “trolley problem” in a first-year philosophy course, it struck me as all too familiar. I experienced flashbacks of my siblings and I deliberating whether we should run away from my father to save ourselves only to leave my mother behind, who was too debilitated by fear to flee. Instead of an impending trolley, however, there was looming violence and incapacitated societal institutions to the aid; instead of a classroom full of bright philosophy students calculating the ethical utility of every alternative, we were children grappling with the very real consequences of our decisions. We never did leave my mother behind.
In the end, the most rebellious thing we did was pursue an education. It not only allowed us to quite literally escape Lebanon, but it also broadened our intellectual and cultural horizons. It endued us with a silent understanding of the systemic sociological and global factors from which our adversity sprung. Ultimately, it allowed us to break free of an endemic cycle of adversity.

**Gratitude**

When people ask me how I am adjusting to life in Canada, I playfully comment that Canada is as cold as the Middle East was hot. Yet to me, this juxtaposition transcends physical and meteorological features: the physical contrast mirrors the emotional contrast I felt living in both regions. In the winters of Canada, I found safety, healing, independence, agency, and support; I found warmth. I found none of these in Beirut, regardless of the season.

In time, my studies in psychology proved to be immensely valuable as I supported my siblings, my mother, and myself as we navigated healing from the past decades of trauma. Post-traumatic stress disorder, recurrent nightmares, depression, and other mental health afflictions gradually began to creep up on each of us. Curiously, we each suffered a different condition. Today, our history gives us a shared understanding that others cannot transgress. Our bond is unbreakable, a bond formed under harrowing conditions in a small abode in Beirut, Lebanon. Just as diamonds crystallize, so did our bond form under pressure.

Ultimately, a two-decades’ long journey into the trenches of adversity has given me perspective, which has bred immense gratitude for the little things and an irrevocable zest for life. Interestingly, my past has equipped me with both emotional strength and a contrasting sensitivity to the perspectives and feelings of others.

**Educated Individuals and Communities**
Often, we find that violence, addiction, poverty, ignorance, mental illness, and family dysfunction permeate family trees. The command of the past echoes through generations, forcibly penetrating our psyches and identities. Out of sight, yet the past refuses to be forgotten. Unaware, we unconsciously tread pre-drawn cycles of inequity. Like puppets, we unknowingly tread full circle. Yet, at any point, we may ask ourselves: will I be the one to deviate from this path, the one to sever the strings and liberate myself from the puppeteers that unrelentingly controlled my family members?

How can we rupture malignant cycles of violence and marginalization endemic in communities, both at the societal level and at that of the individual? I believe education is the answer. Opening a book in the dark will enkindle a candle of hope, however dim. Engrossed in the story of another, transported to a distant land, we encounter a truth we never knew existed. Stumbling on manifold worlds beyond our own, too many to count and at times too different to comprehend, our mind is awakened. Divergent paths begin to open up to us; finally, we can tread that which is less travelled.