

Healing Culture in War Time

Evelyne Accad

Forty-one years ago when we organized the Common Differences conference on the University of Illinois campus, I was a young professor, already quite engaged in women's issues which had led to my research, writing, travels and overall commitment.

When I retired from the University of Illinois, I felt it was not enough to be writing, researching, teaching on the subject. I needed to get involved concretely in the domain, on the field, and that's when I joined my sister, Jacqueline Hajjar in Beirut to open a center for abused women in 2009. We both put our savings to purchase an apartment in the Center of Beirut and it has been functioning since then, welcoming about 12 women, sometimes with their children, sheltering, feeding them, providing health, psychological, spiritual healing and helping them rebuild their lives by also providing education, learning a trade to be independent, etc. We have had more than 500 women welcomed throughout the years, some of them with spectacular healing stories, some of whose testimonies I have gathered in one of my latest books (some of which, the women themselves asked me to write).

When the Beirut port blast occurred on August 4, 2020, I almost died in it. Upon recovering, I decided to open a Center for Culture and Healing in the area of the Beirut port blast, in Achrafieh. I found a beautiful Lebanese house which I purchased with my retirement savings, renovated and I am in the process of structuring it with rooms for music, painting, healing exercises, trauma workshops, psychological support, small library with books to read (my whole collection of feminist books I transferred from Illinois, Paul Vieille's, my lifetime companion collection of sociological and anthropological books his son sent me from Paris), a little garden for learning healing through plants and flowers, a little café I named tante Malaké café after my aunt who died consequently to the blast. All this is still in the making but we have already held several conferences and workshops on healing, trauma, literature, writing, women's day celebration, painting exhibitions, memorial to honor my sister who died about a year ago and whose name I have dedicated to one of the rooms.

All this takes time, efforts, funds and perseverance, specially given the disastrous situation Lebanon has been facing almost my whole life long, but specially in these last years:

--The country is in deep economic crisis, getting worse and worse. The Lebanese pounds has lost 98% of its value since 2019. People cannot get their money out of the banks since then, their savings have been hijacked by a corrupt system and politicians looking mostly after their own careers. The Lebanese deutes have been unable to agree on a President paralyzing & blocking the country through their failure to elect one.

--We have 2 wonderful women (Tracy Chamoun and May Rihani) candidates who would make great leaders with their well-conceived projects to redress the country, but they are not even mentioned most of the time by a patriarchal system set on keeping their macho privileges. Thus violence against women and children is increasing.

--Electricity is being provided by the government for only two to four hours a day which means that most families must pay for generators which have outlandish costs.

--Internet connections are poor, drinking water is scarce which means most people must pay huge prices for drinking water as well as sometimes having to purchase water to fill up their reservoirs with water tanks to be purchased at high cost.

--Transferring funds is quite difficult even with NGO money going to Humanitarian causes in Lebanon; one often has to establish personal contact to be trusted and even that is not guaranteed.

--Discrimination against various groups that don't belong to the traditional thinking ethnic, political groups has increased. Several progressive associations (Kafa, Abaad, Dayna, Amel, Doria, etc.) have been working to change laws that terribly affect women: equality, rape, domestic violence, ecosystem, etc., but the changes are very slow in coming given the situation. For example, the Lebanese law acquitting a rapist if he married his victim has been repelled but it is not enough. Women should be made part of decisions making in greater number.

--Education should be a priority, but it has deteriorated considerably in these last few years given the lack of funding, the draining of good teachers who left for better positions abroad. Vulnerable and marginalized people should have access to it, but it is not the case and future generations are going to pay the price of this terrible impoverishment.

--Likewise the health sector has also considerably suffered due to the running away of good doctors and nurses for better positions abroad and the cost of medical care has become completely unaffordable for the poor and even the middle class. Medicine is often not found or at a price beyond any understanding.

--Most religious deciders and most political party leaders are against feminism which they consider a threat to their power. They prefer to keep women at home, cooking and taking care of the children. Women must denounce these discriminations.

--Women groups in Lebanon should unite and combine their efforts more in order to reach better results.

--The situation in the South of Lebanon has considerably worsened:

--Since October 8, there has been a continued exchange of fire at the Lebanese southern border between armed groups and Israel. The tension along the Israel-Lebanon border has continuously escalated including targeted attacks against armed groups personnel beyond southern borderlines, getting closer to Beirut and increasingly targeting the Bekaa valley.

--Civilians, hospitals, homes and schools have been attacked indiscriminately; olive trees, agricultural land and crops damaged by phosphorous bombs. Medics and ambulances attacked. White phosphorus is an incendiary substance mostly used to create a dense smoke screen or mark targets. When exposed to air, it burns at extremely high temperatures and often starts fires in the areas in which it is deployed. People exposed to white phosphorus can suffer respiratory damage, organ failure and other horrific and life-changing injuries, including burns that are extremely difficult to treat and cannot be put out with water. Burns affecting only 10 percent of the body are often fatal. Phosphorous bombs have been used in Gaza and Lebanon by Israël against civilians which is prohibited by International law.

--As of 23 January, 86,874 internally displaced persons (IDPs) were seeking refuge across Lebanon, showing a five per cent increase since 16 January. As of 23 January, the Lebanese Ministry of Public Health reported 151 killed and 535 people

wounded as a result of the hostilities. And this is not talking about the Hezbollah fighters who have lost their lives: about 300 of them.

--The socio-economic vulnerability of communities in hard-to-reach areas, where many rely on agriculture, is worsened by the ongoing conflict increasing the number of people in need of assistance.

In the midst of such extremely difficult circumstances on all levels, the project of creating the Center for Culture and Healing has given a ray of hope in the midst of despair. The

project has also been very therapeutic for my own recovery from all the tragedies I have witnessed. It has personally helped me heal and I have felt the need to spread this recovery to all those who have suffered and bled due to the horrors they never stop experiencing.

The goal of our Center is to create an environment where healing from multiple traumas (e.g.: war, family separation, exile, environment, pandemic, inflation, the Beirut blast, etc.) can take place – through cultural and educational workshops, support groups, writing, theatre, reading, music, singing, painting, engraving, circus activities, physical and spiritual exercises, coaching, cooking, gardening, etc.)

Beit El Fouad is a place dedicated for healing and emotional growth. The people of Lebanon are living in very challenging times – post pandemic, absent government, economic collapse, banking system collapse and currency devaluation, aftermath of Beirut Port blast, ... People's physical wounds may be healing, but their emotional stress, fears, traumas & loss of a sense of safety is ever present. Home, streets, workplaces, the market... no place feels safe. Nothing feels safe. Domestic violence has been increasing; a study by ABBAD found that 96% of domestic violence in Lebanon went unreported in 2021 by young women & girls who had experienced it.¹ Information International, a Beirut-based independent research company, has conducted a recently published study showing a worrying increase in the number of suicides among the Lebanese population.²

It is these realities and the personal experience of Dr. Evelyne Accad, the Founder of Beit El Fouad, who herself was severely injured by the Beirut Port blast and she continues to deal with the latent blast-related health issues, that was the genesis of the creation of Beit El Fouad's Center for Healing.

At Beit El Fouad, we aim to create a safe space for anybody, especially girls and women to come, to rest, to breath feely, to interact with others, to learn, to share, and to heal emotionally. Our vision for Beit El Fouad is that it will be a safe space where our community will gather to share ideas, engage in constructive dialog about the traumas which plague us all, and find common ground where we could heal together, find our voices, and inspire each other, a place of growth and empowerment.

Our planned activities are :

- Healing Workshops: Our participants will be helped to learn healing techniques that they can continue to use in their daily lives. They will be taught via short trauma

¹ <https://www.the961.com/most-women-dont-report-domestic-violence-abaad-campaign/>

² <https://www.atalayar.com/en/articulo/society/rise-suicides-lebanons-other-crisis/20230307154941182074.html>

healing support groups, drama therapy, therapeutic exercises and home exercises programs, writing, painting and music workshops, and a 2-day conference on wellness and wellbeing from a feminist social justice perspective.

- **Culture:** We will invite local, regional and international researchers who critically study trends, changes and culture in historical perspectives to do reading and conduct seminars on their research.
- **Art:** We will offer a space for artistic exhibitions from local and international artists providing. Have these artist conduct workshops on their work and have discussion about the healing power of art.
- **Healing Space:** where people can meet, exchange and support each other, learn from each other, talk about their wounds and their healing. We will invite experts in various healing techniques and approaches to give educational sessions and multiday workshops on their areas of expertise.

We are establishing ourselves. While our founder (Dr. Evelyne Accad) who is a well-known feminist, (who has published several books in which she portrays the struggles and strengths of women from the Global South), has invested her retirement money in purchasing the building for Beit El Fouad, renovating the building because it was also damaged during the Beirut blast, and she has been funding the first year of operating costs, now securing funding for this innovative peace, healing and empowering project is one of our key challenges.

Another challenge is that we are committed to creating a space and an environment that is welcoming to everybody who want to use it, within the context of Lebanon, which is a society so fractured and divided by religion and nationality. That said, we are committed to break this cycle, to encourage constructive dialog and build understanding and tolerance across all who live in our vibrant Beirut and beautiful Lebanon.

Our priority is to establish Beit El Fouad as a safe space for all who are looking for safety, peace, personal emotional growth. We're also focused on establishing a coffeeshop within the Center, because: (a) to honor the aunt of our founder who passed on as the result of the blast; (b) to provide drinks & pastries for purchase as people attend events, or if someone is just taking a break & relaxing at the Center; and (c) to create an income stream for future sustainability. d) we are also establishing a library with mainly feminist books that Evelyne Accad gathered throughout her life and brought to Lebanon in order to benefit those doing research on the topic; there will be a space where can come and study and write in tranquility and safety. e) we are also reviving an important journal Mediterranean People which originally was created by Paul Vieille, a renowned French sociologist/anthropologist which deals with many multi-disciplinary issues of our contemporary world.

The new project Culture and Healing Center presents itself as the crowning achievement of Evelyne Accad, President of **Beit el Fouad** Foundation. As Professor Emerita of the University of Illinois and of the Lebanese American University, a writer engaged for peace, justice and women's rights, the Lebanese-Swiss-American artist has never stopped working for a wholesome society. Friendship, tolerance, generosity, gentleness, unity and fraternity are, in her eyes, keys for the freedom of Lebanon and its enlightenment.

In 2008, Evelyne Accad and her sister Jacqueline Hajjar founded The House of Tenderness (Beit el Hanane), an association to which the writer has moreover devoted a collection of short stories published by L'Harmattan, in 2021. With **Beit el Fouad**, Evelyne Accad intends to dynamically pursue her quest of a nation purified of the nuisances that corrode citizen harmony: the cessation of violence certainly requires testimony, but mainly action, condition *sine qua non* of change, more so, transformation. It is therefore important to denounce the social abuse by working in the field, through an anthology of cultural, artistic and healing ways. The Journey to Equality and Homeostasis takes on a new name from the pen of the author: « Femi-humanism ». In her essay *Women, Men and War. Fiction and Reality at Middle East* – winner of the France-Lebanon prize from ADELFF in 1994, the writer explains her pacifist vision: « [...] This is how a new movement is conceptualized associating a “(femi)humanism” (I use this expression in preference to feminism, because men and women must work together for things change) with a reformed nationalism, rid of male chauvinism, war and violence. » (1993, 41).

It is in this conciliatory perspective that the humanist mission of **Beit el Fouad** fits: targeting the healing of many traumas – related to war, family, exile, environment, pandemic, inflation, etc. – through culture and therapy (writing, theatre, reading, music, singing, painting, engraving, circus activities, physical and spiritual exercises, coaching, cooking, gardening, etc.). It is also a question of revivifying and polishing the rhizomes of the country of Cedar, by giving hope to citizens, certainly resilient, but bruised by so many years of war and chaos. They will be able to benefit from means to rejuvenate in **Beit el Fouad**, a Center that puts balm to the heart. Artistic, cultural and ecological, **Beit el Fouad** is conceived above all as a space of union and tranquility between the communities; it invites participation through various workshops, seminars, exhibitions, concerts, plays, cine-clubs and other formative activities. Moreover, a library room, music, dance, psychotherapy, physiotherapy spaces, etc. will be accessible to the public. Filled with compassionate understanding, such environment hopes to reflect on the individual, as a whole being in its vital role for society. **Beit el Fouad** is thus at the antipodes of political sectarianism and any system of coercion that generate inter- community religious conflicts, segregation and corruption.

Furthermore, the restoration of a house in the locality of Achrafieh, in memory of the port of Beirut explosion's victims, symbolizes resistance to the evils that beset the Lebanese. Encouraging (re)creation prevents destruction. Under the aegis of multidisciplinary, many founding projects are designed in collaboration with institutions, artists, creators, thinkers from Lebanon and around the world. Committed since 1965 in several academic, cultural and social networks, Evelyne Accad relies on the support of several organizations, in addition to embassies. Eager to put heart in her project, the Founder of the **Beit el Fouad** Foundation wishes to continue her quest, despite the stumbling blocks of life, and this, with the association of humanitarian organizations who try – just like her – to build bridges of hope towards a *Horizon of Light*.