

A Palestinian boy, an Israeli soldier, and my American sons

The stories we tell can do real damage. Or they can heal.

by [Meredith Dodd](#) in the [September 27, 2017](#) issue



A Palestinian boy and an Israeli soldier in the West Bank. [Some rights reserved](#) by [Justin McIntosh](#).

Outside a café in al-Am'ari refugee camp in the city of al-Bireh on the Palestinian West Bank, where adults sip Turkish coffee and smoke a hookah, a Palestinian boy sits holding a toy machine gun. Looking carefully through its sight, the boy aims at my head and pulls the trigger. I am not scared. This boy is about nine years old, and the gun is a toy.

But when I notice the posters of dead teenage boys on the wall behind him, martyrs for Palestinian causes who are carrying real guns, I start to feel nauseous. The boy is only a few years younger than the teenage faces on the wall. I watch him wiggle and laugh outside the café, and I imagine a faded print of this boy's face staring down at me from these walls. It hurts to know that a child so young is already rehearsing the end of his story.

As I leave the refugee camp, I think about my own three sons. I remember their toothy grins, their disheveled brown hair, their skinny arms around my neck, and I wonder how I would feel if they were shot and I was left with only a poster. My muscles tense as I also remember my boys in the backyard pointing their sticks like guns, filling their pockets with sharp stones. They don't have toy guns, but when they reach into their pockets, lay their stones out on the grass, and hold their sticks up, they remind me of tiny soldiers standing at attention, ready to fire the minute they perceive a threat.

The tour bus passes through an Israeli checkpoint, and I notice a teenage soldier slumped forward in the manner of teenagers everywhere, studying a chiming cell phone. When he turns, I see a rifle strapped casually across his shoulder, and I remember that this soldier is not just any teenager. With the cell phone, he still seems a boy; with the rifle, he is a man whom I must obey if I want to travel on this road.

This is a land of competing narratives, stories that push and pull on each other like brothers striving to be the best beloved, the most important, the most moral. Jews and Palestinians tell different stories about their relationship to this land and make different claims about how to tell the sacred story.

In Jewish tradition, Abraham trudges up a mountain with a bundle of wood, readying himself to sacrifice his first-born son Isaac from his wife Sarah. In Muslim tradition, Abraham prepares instead to sacrifice Ishmael, his firstborn son from his wife Hagar. Which son was it really? Which mother? The religious traditions do not agree. When it comes to this story and others, people argue about what needs to be sacrificed to meet the demands of faith, what needs to be preserved at all costs. Such arguments seem to require winners and losers. A people's story is either right or wrong. There is no in-between.

I'm not sure any story is completely right or wrong. But I am convinced that some stories do real damage. It seems to me that the Israeli soldier, the Palestinian boy, and my American sons have all been conscripted into stories of redemptive violence before they were old enough to give their consent. I worry that their worlds never stop whispering these damaging stories in their ears. The soldier hears, "Show dominance. Fight for your people, who are besieged on every side by those who would hurt and destroy them." The boy hears, "Kill the other in the name of your people, for it is the only way you can protect the places that you come from." My boys hear, "If you can take it by force, it's yours. As long as you are strong enough, you can take anything you want. You deserve it."

But in Israel, as in every land, there are people working to give young people life-giving stories. In the mixed Arab-Jewish city of Lod, for example, high school principal Shirin Natour Hafi has been working since 2009 to help students learn a different narrative from the one handed to them. In a 2016 interview with the newspaper *Ha'aretz*, Hafi said that a child growing up in Lod "listens to the militaristic conversation ongoing in this country, and sees armed soldiers on the streets. . . . There is something about this militarism that affects all of us." Hafi, an Arab Muslim who is a scholar of Arab and Hebrew literature, shows students at the ORT Arab School what it looks like for individuals to reconcile their differences directly, before violence escalates into a family-against-family feud. Students assume responsibility for their behavior by publicly issuing an apology at the school assembly.

Hafi thinks Arab youths must be able "to speak freely and clearly" about their own narrative, and she believes violence will diminish if Arab voices are incorporated into the Israeli national narrative. If her students were allowed to become storytellers rather than characters in someone else's drama, Hafi suggests, they could create a future that is less violent, more inclusive, and more filled with hope.

Religious traditions can help change the stories people tell. Although there are certainly narratives that the Christian tradition needs to jettison—using Exodus to justify manifest destiny comes to mind—the tradition has stories that are life-giving and transformative. For example, Christians tell the story of the God who created the world and called it good, and who calls human beings to live into a vision of abundant life for all, where no one will hurt or be destroyed on God's holy mountain. As cocreators, human beings are characters within God's story but also coauthors with God, helping to determine what happens next, working alongside the Spirit to

shape the world. Made in God's image, they are called to help God finish the holy work of creation.

Like Hafi's students, we can help write a story in which people are transformed by the power of forgiveness. We can write stories about a world where who we are and how we love matters far more than the weapons we carry. We can be cocreators of God's kingdom which is already here amid the smiles of little boys and the texting conversations of teenagers and cocreators of God's kingdom which is yet to be, in which little boys play side-by-side with their older brothers because none of them will have died young.

When I return from my travels, my sons are playing in the backyard. They are still holding sticks and stones, but as I watch them out the kitchen window, I see them drop their makeshift weapons, throw their arms around each other, and use their sticks to sort their stones by color, playing a game with no winners and no losers. Although they do not know it, they too are cocreators with God, writing a new story with their laughter. My hope is that new stories can also be written at Israeli checkpoints, and in the city of Lod, and in the al-Am'ari refugee camp.

A version of this article appears in the September 27 print edition under the title "Creating better stories."