

HANAN

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PART I

If you could start by giving your name and a bit of background about your life.

My name is Hanan. It's an Arabic name which means, caring and love. I was born in Saudi Arabia to a Palestinian Mum and Dad. They left Palestine - Dad left Palestine when he was fourteen years old, fleeing war, and Mum was born in Jordan but comes from Haja, Palestine. Then, because of financial reasons, my Dad's family moved to the Gulf countries, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, because business was very good there and they wanted to provide for their families. Usually our families are big families and so, providing for twelve kids is not an easy job.

My Grandpa moved to Kuwait. He actually walked on foot all the way from Jordan to Kuwait and then they eventually settled in Saudi Arabia. Dad, when he was in his twenties, he was in Saudi Arabia, then he got married to Mum. She was in Jordan and

he stayed in Saudi Arabia for the first three years of their marriage, because Mum wanted to study at university in Jordan. She's a bit of a warrior.

My Grandpa, Mum's side, he was like, "No. No studying at university. I don't want girls to study at university. You either get married or stay at home". So she had a deal with Dad, "I will marry you if you let me study at uni". So, she got what she wanted without fighting, which is really to me what peace is about! And, it was a win-win situation for everybody because all the younger sisters after her, they all got to go to uni, because Grandpa was like, well, uni isn't bad. He was convinced of the idea and she got to get all of her younger sisters to university. When I was a little bit older, Dad had some financial difficulties but Mum was then able to work and to help provide for the family. So, it was a win-win for everybody. We were very good students at school because Mum was a university graduate and so she would give lots of attention to our study and homework, so it gave everybody that advantage.

Can you explain what peace means to you?

Although I didn't witness war, but I didn't really realise what peace meant until I moved to Australia. I actually really got the sense of it two or three years ago. A war-free place is different from a peaceful place. It's two different things. Living in a place where it's full of fear, either the financial fear because the country was at war or in war, either in the place you are in or outside, the fear of lots of enemies nearby. You know that you're bordering with a country that could invade where you live at any stage. People's mentalities when they survive war, it doesn't have that peaceful essence in it. So, although I didn't witness war where I used to live, I would not call it a peaceful place. It was not a peaceful place, it was a by-product of war. Not war, but its by-products.

So yeah, the way I would relate to peace is that sense of when you wake up. It doesn't even cross your mind that you're going to be in danger, either today or in the near future. That doesn't cross my mind at all. So, that is completely different from Oh, we're not fighting but we could be at any stage. That's different.

And, do you associate peace with other conditions and values?

Yes. I think it's a circle. When people are happy, they're quite peaceful. When peace is around, people are happy. Happiness? I see it very much related to peace.

Has the significance of peace changed for you over time? I guess you've answered that in a way, that coming to Australia made it profoundly different.

Yes, absolutely.

Is peace a real thing in your life or is it more imaginary?

Well, most of the year, it is imaginary. Until you get to a situation where the practices then show you that you are in a peaceful place, or not. We were actually having a discussion, me and my friends, the other day. We all lived in [name of country omitted] so we were quite familiar with how the system runs there; we're familiar with the lifestyle, and what peace means, or not. And, we were actually talking about, well, it's quite a peaceful country. And I was like, sorry I don't agree because when I went through difficulties with my life. The idea that

I had in mind was thank God, I'm in a peaceful country where I know my rights will be served to me , whether I'm poor, rich, stronger or powerless. And this is where I felt this fairness and real, grounded peace. That I go home and I feel it's been a difficult day, but I know I'm safe, I'll be fine and it's not going to be an issue. Whereas I never felt that way when I was living back in [name of country omitted], especially when there is something that you have to fight for to achieve. That sense of insecurity comes to the surface and you feel like you're not safe at all. At all, I'm not safe. There is no war but I'm not safe. If you cast your opinion even, you could risk being unsafe.

Yes, that's huge isn't it - that freedom of expression is so important.

Yes. I'd like [name of country omitted] as a country not to be mentioned in the interview or the book at all. So you can say that the Middle East is where I lived but please don't name [name of country omitted] as a country.

Ok, yes.

And I can't believe I just said that.
[laughs]

*Because that says everything, doesn't it?
Right there. So you haven't experienced
war but you are still in that mentality.*

Yes.

So, how do you live a peaceful life?

I think it is about enjoying the little pleasures in life. Just being able to post whatever you want to post on Facebook, or whatever platform you choose to express your opinion on, about whatever you want to talk about. Go outside and play with your son in the water with no restrictions, in the way you want to do it. Just being able to express who you are without fear that something will happen. That's pretty much freedom. I'm not sure why it's related so much, for me, with peace. I think being able to express your freedoms without fear that is, to me, peace.

*So is there a difference between social
peace and personal, inner peace?*

Yes. Absolutely, there is a difference. The difference was very clear to me when my Dad visited me. A few months ago, he spent seven months with me, it was absolutely lovely. And it was the little practices that I thought, Oh, my god Dad, this isn't

applicable here any more. For example, when he goes to the shopping centres and we want to enter into a shop, he goes, "Well, I have bags, will I be in trouble if I get out with bags?" Those are the things I remember myself thinking when I first moved to Australia. So, although internally, how I internalised a peaceful way of living, was completely different to what was outside. Until I became at total peace with, "It's fine, it's ok, relax, you've got the freedom to do what you want without fear", that's when I felt deeply peaceful. And it was completely different from what's outside. So I was placed in a peaceful country but until it got into me, inside, it took a while. And I could see that in my clients whose parents are war survivors because they were born here in Australia so they have that, that natural thing of feeling it's ok, nothing will happen, nobody will die, just relax. Their parents though, war survivors, they're like "Oh!" If they're five minutes late it's a catastrophe for them. But for the kids it's fine. So, I could see how, although they live in a peaceful country, peacefulness for the parents and the children are completely two different things.

So, do you think peace is best found by yourself or with other people?

Inner peace has to be found by yourself. It's a personal journey. You've got to dig deep into your own soul, all the corners, all the rocks upturned, to see what's making you unpeaceful. And then to find a way to be at peace with it. It's one of the highest values a person can reach, to be at peace. So, inner peace is absolutely a personal journey and you can't push anybody to do it. You could encourage them, but it is a person's responsibility and hard work. However, preventing war is definitely a collective work. Surviving, building, fixing and healing after war is collective work as well. And I think we need the majority of humanity on board before we can make real, profound change.

Do you think that's going to happen?

Well, I live for it! So let's hope before I die, I will see a day where I'll tell my grandkids, "'You know we used to do this'" and they'll laugh their heads off.

I'm really hoping that I will be able to tell them a story and they will say, "Ah you used to kill each other? Ha ha! That's silly!" I really wish that! Let's see!

It seems almost impossible until you meet people who walked the walk before you. Last Friday, I was invited to an award dinner with WILPF - Women's International League for Peace and Freedom - it's been in Brisbane for more than one hundred years and it's an international, not-for-profit organisation. They've given awards to a few people, one of them was Dr. Nora Arman, a beautiful example of a Muslim woman here in the community. I feel proud whenever I see her achievements. And there were a few other award winners, much, much older than Nora Arman and they were like, "Oh, we've been in this field for the last forty years or fifty years". One of them showed her experience with going on the streets of Brisbane and protesting to stop the war. She told her story about how she was arrested 18 times for protesting to stop war in the Brisbane streets. I thought to myself, I am sure it seemed impossible to her back then to achieve the freedoms we have now. We have gone a long way but we still have a very long way to go.

So, do you think Australia is a peaceful country?

Politics, no. Not at all. Not at all. Not even close. And that's one of the reasons also that I am seriously considering maybe in ten years time, going into politics. Because when people take politics as a career, they will have to go with whatever the party wants, whatever the power body goes with. And, to me, it was absolutely disappointing when the Labor party changed all their views about asylum seekers and calling for pulling out of places where we shouldn't be in the first place. People vote for a party because of their values and changing them because people voted for another party is silly. Instead of stopping the fight for power and working on doing the best for the country, they changed their values. They lost both sides of the nation. So to me, it's very frustrating to see that. The Liberal Party is, to me, an absolutely ridiculously sexist party. It promotes discrimination against minorities and to me, it's all about power and money. This is how I see it.

Yes, this is how I feel. I felt extremely marginalized when the government changed to Liberal. I thought, 'This is horrible! Why do you pick on me to win the next

election for god's sake? Do you have a better strategy?" So, politics-wise it's not healthy, it's not peaceful, it's not even near there. Not at all. The people, though, I have big faith in them. I really do. I think in Australia, they're pretty tolerant. Very aware, loving in nature, quite peaceful, yes. Very peaceful and lovely, I guess. Sometimes, even I could see how they don't know but they try their best to accommodate your differences. I remember a situation when I was living in a woman's refuge and they didn't know what to do, really. But the way they approached it, I thought it was one of the sweetest things that was ever done. It was, "Is that ok with you? Do you mind doing this?" and they would ask all the questions before they do anything and it was so sweet that they were that considerate. So people, I think they absolutely are quite in a good place and quite peaceful. Politics and people in power, mostly not.

You're right. The average person doesn't want war, do they?

No, they don't. They don't want to send their kids to war. They don't want to solve their problems after they come back. They don't want to see other people

killed. Because, at the end of the day, it's someone else's child. And I think it's political decisions - politics and power.

And how do you make peace with yourself?

Well, I think it's a very broad thing. I mean sometimes, it's just about the little things, about making peace with my weight after having a baby and not being able to lose it. Sometimes, it's much, much bigger than that. So, it's a very wide spectrum. Sometimes, it's being at peace with something that I did with my son that wasn't very much loving and nice to him, but it's very important for him to learn that there are rules and discipline and there is bed time and shower time. So, sometimes, it's that little small thing that you feel that, "Oh, I'm not at peace with this one", and you're just working through it. And sometimes it's the big, big questions like, "What am I doing with my life?"

I had that whole mental discussion last week with myself about work. Because I work for a non-for-profit organisation part-time and it was down to, "We've got to lower our standards". I just could not get my head around it because I thought, No! There is a person at the end of the

line that you're talking about. There is a life. A life! That you'd either improve or disadvantage. And it was a very difficult decision to go, ok how I am going to decide what to do with this, if I am going to lower my standards but I don't feel comfortable with it. And so that's a very big question and I haven't yet reached a resolution with it. But that, for example, is an inner peace question that I need to solve because I'm simply not at peace with that decision. So it varies, really. It's a big spectrum of things that you need to be at peace with.

And do you have any memories of a really peaceful experience?

Oh yes, lots of them. I guess my biggest memory is when we were at Clontarf Beach. I love Redcliffe, it's a healing place for me. It was absolutely all about healing. The women's refuge that I spent about 8 months in, it was there in Redcliffe. So, I used to go to Clontarf Beach to relax. My little man was two months old and just in the pram, I'm sitting looking at the beach. This is what I'm talking about when you talk about peace. I had no worries, although nothing in my life at that stage was working well. Nothing. But I didn't have that feeling that, I'm going to be in the streets tomorrow or, I'm going to be

in a bad place. That didn't even cross my mind. It was like, Yep, I've got a lot of work to do, to put my life back together, but it was a peaceful moment. There are lots of those moments. Most of them actually, are at the beach. I've got a beautiful relationship with water. It just brings good things, I think, inside of me.

Well, I think that's it, unless there's anything you'd like to add?

You guys are inspiring and I'm serious. When Liz told me about the change in the project and how it moved from commemorating war to a conversation about peace - and this is what I love about Australia, there are always people who care and are willing to go no, we're not going to do it this way. We're going to do a peace project! When Liz said that, "We decided not to do an ANZAC project but do a peace project" I thought oh, I love you. And it's even more than you guys, it's that the management were ok with this. And it's going to be even more beautiful when people will show up for that peace project instead of a war project. This is what really inspires me about Australians, really, and this is why I love Australia. Although I'm very far away from family and

sometimes homesickness gets into me, when
I see the beauty of planting good things
here I know it's worth it. So you guys are
inspiring to me.

*Well, thank you, but I think it's the
other way around.*

PART II

Do you think there's a relationship for you between your religion, your faith and your experience of peace?

Yes, big time. And when I say this, being peaceful with my religion was in itself a journey to get to. When I moved here to Australia I was disenfranchised from everything that I would call culturally or religiously acceptable. So I had to examine almost all my beliefs, especially religion-wise. Because we grow up in a culture and everything is set out for us, so the tracks are clear, you just go, you don't really think of why, what's the reason behind it. That didn't cross my mind when I was back home. And then when I moved here I had to really examine what is it that I'm believing in. Why is it congruent? Do I feel integrated as a whole with everything that I believe in? Or not? That was a long journey in inner peace to me.

I'm very happy that we didn't talk about religion before because this is one of the things that I don't feel that I'm boxed in. Although I am a Muslim and I practice my faith. I pray five times a day, I wake up at 4:30 to do my morning prayer and I am a full-on Muslim. But

still I don't see Islam as a 'box in' thing. Islam is simply something that the Creator sent, just like any other religion before it. That I do believe in, because religions are exactly the same. It's just a book, a manual into how to live your life in peace, harmony, where everyone is taken care of and protected and loved. This to me is a big catalogue. And when I see my other friends, they are atheists or Christians or Jewish or whatever background they come from, you find that common thread in all religions. And even with people who don't believe in our religion, they still have those core values, pretty much similar to those ones that Islam talks about. So to me, that opens up my eyes. Especially when you are raised in a culture where Islam is the dominant religion, people are boxed in. But it's exactly the opposite. Everything out there, and you'll find everyone talks exactly the same way, everything that God made or sent or let people talk about, pretty much talks about the same thing. So peace in Islam is a very big thing. Our

hello, 'As-Salaam-Alaikum', is actually, 'peace and blessings be upon you'. When we say goodbye we say, 'salaam', which is 'peace'.

So peace is a very big part of it, even the word Islam comes from the root where the word salaam comes from. So it's a very big thing in Islam. I had a little bit of a challenge at first, finding out why there were wars in the very early stages of Islam. How did that happen? And walking through that, by itself, was a whole journey. And I realised later that if something was done for some reason, at some stage, that was for people who lived at that stage a necessity, it doesn't mean that it has to be a necessity for me. Because their rules, their ways, whatever resources they had, whatever knowledge they had applies to them at that stage. It doesn't apply to me now. It doesn't have to happen now simply because now we have Facebook and other Internet-based platforms. You can express your thoughts and your opinions to everybody around the world without having to move a pen, not even a pen, let alone military forces. So, that to me changed the way I view peace in Islam, especially now, as a Muslim living in this century. How I look at it, how I practice it. Even when I read the Qur'an, the way it puts war. War's rarely

mentioned but when it is, you just go and look at the verses, and it goes like, well, you go to war *but* if you can make peace, it's better; and if you can forgive it's better. There's a whole list of things that, if you do any of them, it's better than war.

War is a last resort.

Exactly. War is a very, very, very last resort. Not only that, but to me again, religion and my Islam, are very much connected to my inner peace. So, it's all about how you can be in inner peace. Like, for example, there is a Hadith that I absolutely love, 'a'l ethem ma hak bel nafs', which means, 'A sin is a deed which you do not feel at peace with'. And I love this, because, for example, most of my Muslim friends are boxed in, so you must not drink, you must not have sex outside marriage, you must not steal, so they are very much boxed to me. Because things that I am not at peace with internally, for example, when I see an opportunity that I can do something for a greater good, and I don't take it, I go home feeling not at peace with that. So, according to prophet Mohammed, Peace be Upon Him, that's a sin. So and Islam asks us to find inner peace. I reckon if everybody can do it, we will get to a peaceful world.

But unfortunately, being a Muslim at this time...

It's challenging!

Yes. Do you find that you are actually experiencing discrimination or conflict? Or do you carry that conflict of the Middle East inside you? Do you feel you can't get away from that?

It's very challenging on both ends, believe it or not, to me. It's challenging with people who are not Muslims and look at me as, "Oh, that person who wants to kill us and do this to us. And *her* people do this, and *her* country does that. Where *she* comes from is a war zone and they're all violent, bloodthirsty people". So I feel that sometimes, and I sometimes get asked questions that I go, what??!! They're just people! They're just like you! Get over yourself! But I don't say it, I've never said it, so far. That part is difficult. The other part of being a Muslim with my beliefs is from the Muslim community itself. Or people who are still boxed in Islam. I had this conversation, I visited [name of country omitted] three months ago and we were talking about different things and the subject of sinning came into the topic and everybody was talking about, you know, the covering

and that stuff. And I was like, well if my legs show accidentally or someone saw my hair, I don't actually feel bad about it. But I do feel bad, with the example I mentioned before, when I go out and I see an opportunity that I could do something better, but I didn't. Because I was scared, because I was worried about what people would say. When my own fears and insecurities prevented me from doing something for the greater good. That to me, is a bigger sin. To me, that's really what I reflect on when I pray and I ask for forgiveness. Those kinds of sins come into my head. Not really the other ones, not at all.

So, what did they say?

Exactly. When I had that conversation, they said, 'No. Let's go back to the subject of covering up your body.' I was like, oh my god! There is a beautiful saying from a beautiful poet, I absolutely love, Mahmoud Darwish - it goes 'A'ana men honak, ana men hona. Wa lasto honak wa lasto hona', meaning, 'I belong here and I belong there, and I'm not here and I'm not there'. This is exactly how I felt. So it's hard in both way, the white culture that goes, you come from that place, you don't belong here and also, from the other culture. Because not many people are

willing to walk that path internally, that path of, 'Let's examine what I believe in, let's put it on the table and see why I do what I do'. Very few people are willing to do that. And I think this is why I get along with people who seemingly don't look like me at all, don't act like me at all. My mentor, my very best friend, was born and raised Catholic and now, she's pretty much like, "I'll worship God in the way I see as appropriate and you have no say in it!", She's 63 years old, I think. So when you look at us, she's blonde, beautiful blue eyes and I'm 1 with a head scarf, dark olive skin, and we don't look at all like each other. But when I sit with her, I think she was willing to walk that path and go, "Ok, what am I believing in? And, am I at perfect peace with that or not?". So, I get along and I feel a sense of belonging with people of that mentality.