

Nada Moghaizel Nasr: Writer, Educator

(Born in 1955, in Beirut; currently living in Beirut; recorded in her office. Language: educated/colloquial Arabic, with some French.)

I would like to start my life story by saying that I was brought up in a happy home, I was born into a family that I believe is exceptional in that my parents were two people who were living a great love story. I often felt that I was the fruit of it. I was their first-born and when she was pregnant with me my mother wished for a girl. I was welcomed as a girl, which is unusual here, most people prefer to have a boy. My parents had a great love for one another, and also a great 'national project', so that I felt that the country was also my family - Lebanon and its reform was among the projects of this couple. Because of the exceptional family atmosphere, I've made an effort since childhood to cultivate my memory. I felt that I had to remember everything, even small details. I always considered the chance to be born in this family as a debt, that I was given something that I did not deserve. I feel I was given a lot, and as much as I have been given I should give back.

By the way my mother also experienced this feeling, she was also brought up in a happy home and she, like me, was the fruit of her parent's love. My mother also felt she had a debt to pay back, as much as she was given she wanted to give back. This is one of the explanations of the course of her life, this huge project that she began when she was only seventeen years old, namely the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women in Lebanese law. As if she felt - it didn't stem from discrimination against her personally, on the contrary, as a woman she was given a lot, it was because she thought it was her duty to help "the less fortunate and the most in need" as she always said. In our family the idea was always there, that others should benefit from what we had received. We always felt in this house that one cannot live in a small enclosed cell, and that awareness of public interest is a duty. Currently I work in the educational field, not in law, but we all feel, that wherever we work in, we ought to give back



Picture Credit: Debby Saoud

something of what we've been given.

In this happy house we used to care for all the small details of everyday life. My parents used to care for small details, for instance in our house you would always find flowers, my mother always filled the house with flowers. Also my parents were happy that they had several children - we are five - whenever we came back home my mother used to say, "The house is lit by the presence of the children." When we were home it was like a feast. Our parents listened to us. They felt that our ideas were important, they used to take our opinion, they listened to us. I lived in a house where children were respected. I'm certain that our ability to think was brought about and built through this listening. We weren't considered as incomplete adults but as independent persons. When I was young, if my mother had a lecture, she'd read it to me and ask my opinion and take it into consideration. Among other things, my mother often read us poetry. Before I'd learned the language well, with all its vocabulary, she began reading me poetry. It was something I loved about our house, that it was a house where poetry was recited. It was important for me that our parents were happy as a couple, and were happy with their family and had a 'national project' too.

These are the important things about my childhood, and I believe that it's due to the way I was brought up that I studied education. I did university studies in Paris and have a PhD in education, yet I feel that my real training was before, at home. My first training was at home, and then I took off to acquire theory so as to be able to name the things that I had lived. Even in the books that I write - there is one in process now, and another published one called 'Images écrites' - it's as if I'm telling in an indirect way the story that I lived. I feel as if the child that was happy in that family, has continued to live inside me, and gives me the ability to understand my own children and other children, and helps me in my work which is

Nada Moghaizel Nasr

education. I feel I have a continuous relation with this child that is within me. This child teaches me things, it teaches me how children feel anxious, what scares them, what upsets them, what makes them happy, what helps them to learn and grow. All these basic things in my private life and my professional life, I learned indirectly from home. Also - and this is very important - we felt that we were loved unconditionally, and without limits; but at the same time - and this is important too - there were rules, rules that were clear and fixed. For instance, when we were in our mountain house, we were not allowed to go out between one and three o'clock because our neighbors might sleep in the afternoon and we shouldn't disturb them. We also had to be home by a certain time. There were rules in this house and I believe this gives children security for they feel that there is authority at home as well as love.

This house where we were brought up is no longer there because my parents passed away - I don't like to use the English term 'to lose one's parents', nor the French - they say 'perdre ses parents' - I prefer to use 'when my parents died'. Because I think you don't lose your parents. Of course parents die, this is life and we can't change it, at a certain time people pass away. Yet they don't go. I don't feel that I have lost my parents. They died but they are still present, and their presence is still strongly felt. They were 'references' and such strong ones that until now I still feel they direct me in my life. I feel like I'm holding my parents, inside me, and I feel them with all my senses at every minute. Whenever I have to decide something - and you know that life is all about choices, big and small - and according to me even small choices often carry with them basic ones - I feel that in all my life choices my parents are present. They help me, accompany me, and give me the strength to go on. It wasn't through personal strength that I was able to go on with my life after their death, it was they who gave me strength. There is a sentence that my mother often used to quote to us when we were young, "Even if we are suffering we remain elegant." I mean by elegance having pride. When my father and mother died I felt we had to practice the phrase, be elegant, stand on our feet, act like them and be worthy of them. I'm always conscious that we have to be worthy of being their children. This saying and others remain with us. There was another they used to say after the war broke out, and we were living in different places, that each one of us should be happy wherever he or she is, and that we had to be a bit more happy for the sake of others. This was very important because it allowed us to grow and move on. For instance for five years I had to live in

Paris, because I was studying there. It was difficult for me to distance myself from those to whom I was so attached. This approach is interesting, for it shows how a family can enjoy strong ties and closeness, and at the same time allow its members to grow, and become independent and take decisions. I believe this is something very important in Lebanon. Family ties are important for us in Lebanon - studies conducted after the war showed the importance of family ties in preserving people's mental health. Had this war taken place in a society where there aren't firm family ties there would have been more people suffering from psychological problems. So family ties need to be preserved. In my family we had strong family ties, but at the same time there was - I want to insist on the word - not 'individualism' but 'individuation'. Our house was one in which its members were allowed to grow independently. We weren't to be molded, we were potentials that had to blossom, and to blossom we needed support. So we were constantly supported, we became independent individuals who were also members of a very united family. I'm focusing on this, because as Lebanese it is important that we learn how to preserve our family ties, and at the same time allow persons to be independent.

I often think - and this is one of the themes of my life - of the question of filiation. What does it mean to be the child of such people, how does one continue with what one has gathered from them, and at the same time be oneself. I have thought a lot about this, and have concluded that one resembles one's parents not by imitating them, but by internalizing the values that they taught and the behavior they lived. They taught us a lot, their actions and the way they were, through their personality and through their dealings with us, and with others, and with the country - through these we learned. They weren't the sort of parents that cram you with instructions, do this, do that, you can't do this. They taught us through their way of life. There is a line of poetry that I like very much that goes as follows, "What we are shouts louder than what we say." They were poles of identification for us, and I internalized them to the point where I was able to transform them into a personal project through which the inherited qualities may be continued.

The Joseph and Laure Foundation was founded to continue this inheritance, but I feel that one can work on an inheritance through one's personal project as well as through foundations. The purpose behind this foundation is not commemorative, the aim is for Laure and Joseph Moghaizel's national project to remain alive. We want to preserve the values that they proclaimed and actively fought for for the past fifty years, values of human rights, and the best way to do this is to



continue working along the same lines. In this way they remain alive and give society nutrients it needs, and continue to enrich our society.

Another thing I recall was that my parents always talked about 'a'ilat al-tayibeen'. The family as they saw it wasn't just the small unit linked by blood relations - though of course their family was important to them and they gave it a lot - their family was larger, it included - and I consider them to be members of my family - all those people who shared, and believed in the same values as they did, the values of human rights. My parents often repeated the words 'a'ilat al-tayibeen, a'ilat huquq al-insan' ('the family of human rights'). I feel very deeply that all who believe in these values are members of my family. Many people who belonged to the same school of thought used to come to our house, eat with us, so I always felt that my family is big. The family of Joseph and Laure was a big one and I can't talk about myself without talking about belonging to this big family.

Talking about my family life, I'd like to say that my parents attended to the details of our lives - we always had flowers at home, and whenever we came back we used to find a new book my father had put on the table to encourage us to read. We often discussed the books we read, and talked about our projects, and the problems we faced. Our everyday life was filled with these things. Each Saturday we also used to go out and have dinner together, it was something sacred, my parents never accepted any dinner invitation on Saturday evening, it was kept specially for us. And every Thursday night my mother and father used to go out and have dinner together. My mother always referred to my father as 'the guest of honor'. Both of them cared about the details of their relationship, and I grew up to believe that a relationship is like a plant, for it to grow one constantly has to care for it and water it. Relationships are built, and they are built through daily follow-up, caring for details, caring for the relationship as if it was a person. One has to care for this person-relationship so as to make it grow and mature. The home I grew up in was made up of all these things, and even though this house is no longer present in reality, it is present within me. That house that was full of paintings, flowers, books, joy, love, discussions, accompanies me. Beauty is eternal. A flower dies but its beauty lingers on, the effect of beauty in us doesn't end. This does not mean that our house was pain free. This house knew pain, but I learned through living there that one can transform pain into something positive. When I talk about this happy house, it doesn't mean that we didn't experience pain - on the contrary - but we learned to accept pain and make something out of it.

Another thing I should mention is my constant feeling that I am parent and child at the same time. This I acquired from my closeness to my parents. I am a parent and at the same time I am a child, and I like this articulation between these two statuses. I feel that I can be myself through this articulation, this is me, myself. To be a parent is to be responsible, to give and to share what you have and what you know. To be a child is

always to grow, a child is some one who grows, who always learns and who is free. So I continually feel responsible, and I have to protect, share, give, orient, understand; and at the same time I feel that I continually have to learn, I'm always in this process of learning. I feel that I can learn from everything, as if I'm always taking private lessons. My every day life is like a series of private lessons. When there are problems or obstacles I say to myself that the lesson has begun. I have a capacity to learn, I know that I have much to learn, I'm eager to learn. I also feel very free because somewhere I'm a child, I can be free, I can be fresh while I look at things because I'm always in this process of becoming. I believe that my development is not complete nor fixed, I'm always in this process of growing. I'm always learning, growing, and at some level I'm free. Maybe this is why I chose education as my profession. What I do is teach teachers. I think that to work in the field of education one has to be both teacher and student; if you haven't kept within you the student and child you once were, you won't be able to understand the student or the child. You always have to be in this articulation if you want to accompany a child in his project of growing and learning. You have to keep this relationship between these two statuses of parent and child, of adult and child. This was the fundamental reason why I chose this profession, also because I want to give other children what I was given. I feel that through the field of education I have the means and tools to name the things I was given, and in turn to pass them on. This is why I chose this profession.

I have three children and this is a very big project in my life. Through my children I make use of the child I was, but - this is important - I don't want to repeat my experience through them. They are different people, and just as my parents loved me the way I was, and allowed me to grow and cultivate my capabilities, and didn't mold me into what they wanted, I try to do to that with my children. One has to love a child, be present for him, and support him all the way in order for him to have enough courage to embark on a project of his own. This project might be different in form but not in content. There is an image I love, it's the image of a plant, supported by a stick, but then bit by bit it grows, and gathers enough strength to hold itself erect and be independent. So I feel that as much as you support a child, encourage and are present for him, so much he will have the ability to be independent in the future. There's another picture I like - through pictures one can talk about oneself - this image I saw on a poster of an international organization. It shows the world with finger prints all over it. The house I was brought up in diffused this idea, that through one's life - please, I'm not bragging, I'm saying this without pretentiousness - one has to leave a certain imprint on the place where one has lived. One can't live without leaving a stamp. This idea was always present in our house, one had to leave an imprint, though what kind of imprint and in what field could be different.

I can't talk about my life story without mentioning my feeling of responsibility. We were made to feel responsible for the country we were born in. There's a phrase that my father often repeated, "Our country is a collective and continuous project."

I like this idea that one's country is a project in which everyone participates. According to him citizenship is participating in this continuous project. One should have a project of one's own but one should also participate in this public project, and feel responsible for it, and be a partner in building it. The idea of partnership was always present while I was growing up. My mother, at the age of seventeen, when she was still at her first year of university, started a project to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women in Lebanese law, and she continued with this project throughout her life. Nothing stopped her, she never gave up, she had a lot of patience and determination. Among the things that I learned is that one has to be very patient when embarking on projects, also one must have a methodology. To be able to succeed in one's private or public projects, one has to have a methodology, as well as determination, hope, patience, and the ability to cooperate with others. Whenever I talk about myself I have to talk about this house because this is what made me what I am. As I told you earlier I teach at university and write books, educational books. My latest book, entitled 'Images écrites', portrays educational images about childhood and education, the articulation between the status of parent and child that we talked about before shows up. Through my profession, work, through writing, through organizations and projects I engage in, I feel I'm transforming and translating all that I've learned. (pause)

If I'm asked to tell my life story maybe what comes first to my mind is beauty and happiness. I'll give you a small detail. I remember that at Christmas time each year my mother used to choose a specific theme, and we all used to participate. I remember also that we ourselves used to make the decorations we hung on the tree. We used to tell our parents what we wanted as Christmas presents, but my mother used to buy us what we asked for, and other things as well. According to her the element of surprise was a gift in itself. This is one of the small details that my parents cared for. All these nice things are now within me.

Myriam: Is there anything you'd like to add?

Nada: There is a statement I have read by Christian Bobin which says that most people when they talk about their parents are usually talking about the past, but he when talking about his parents is talking about the future. This statement meant a lot to me. When I talk about my parents I'm not talking of the past. I don't like nostalgia. Things that have really taken place are never lost, that's why, in my opinion, one never loses one's parents, they continue to exist, in different ways, on the personal and national levels.

Would you like to know what I studied at university? I did my 'license' in Lebanon, and then left for Paris to do my graduate studies in education. I returned to Lebanon and worked in a research center, and then I taught for several years. I'm currently teaching at the Université Saint Joseph and I'm teaching people who will become teachers in future, and I enjoy it very much. I'm also responsible for the continuing education program for teachers of elementary classes. I like

working with people who have experience in the educational domain, and who work on the ground. I organize an educational day for them each month. I also love writing, through writing I feel that I'm taking pictures and developing them. It's my feeling that the more you experience rich things in life the more you enrich your capacities of thinking and knowing. You start seeing things more clearly, you gain insight, you acquire the ability to observe things and feel them. This is a source of happiness for me. It's a gift from life, but also it was created by my parents because they discussed things with me, and showed me things, so as to cultivate my thinking faculties. The poetry my mother read to me when young has refined my structures of perception, it strengthened my ability to understand things. I love poetry, and I believe that through it one can understand a lot of things in life.

Myriam: What about your own family?

Nada: I have a daughter who is sixteen and a half, and two boys of thirteen and a half. My house is full of paintings and books - I owned paintings before I had a house of my own. With my first salary I bought a painting by Awwad and paid for it in installments. In my house I try to carry out things that I learned from my parents. We share a lot in my house, but each member has his own place. Sometimes I make a contract with my children, I believe this facilitates dealing with them. When one knows what one's rights and obligations are, it facilitates one's dealings with others. We can't totally eliminate arguments and conflicts of interest, so I try to solve such problems in a non-violent manner, through having a law where one's rights and duties are spelled out. Conflicts are bound to take place, but the method used to solve conflicts is very important. I feel that my children are gifts from life, and I always tell them so. Children are very much affected by the way their

parents look at them - this has been proved by several studies. One's capacities grow better when one has a positive image of one's self. I try to apply this in my family, I don't want to imitate my parents, I just try to pass on to my children the most important things that I learned at home. (pause)

If I'm to talk more about my story, I'd like to say something, in all



modesty, I feel one is the author of his life. Of course life is full of hindrances and it's true that we are not always free to be the authors of our life. To be the author of my life I mean that - let me start like this: there's a saying of George Khodr's that "war is dictation." I hate dictation. I refuse to allow anyone to dictate the course of my life, nor do I allow circumstances or problems to affect its course. This doesn't mean that I refuse to accept problems, on the contrary. But I don't like circumstances to rule my life, so I try to transform this problem into something positive. To be positive, I believe you have to be creative. Here I'd like to quote a neurologist who says, "Humans are not beings of perception, but beings of representation." Perceiving things is one part, and how you represent the givens is another. What are you going to do with these givens? We have this problem, this pain, this illness - what are we going to do about it? It's something we can't overcome - pain, death - I don't want to sound - I'm not saying that I am stronger than circumstances, but I like this way of dealing with things. There are things in life you can't change, so you have to accept them.

Even if something is painful I try to find the lesson behind it. I feel that my life is my responsibility and I have to make it a happy one. I have to care for it and make it a happy life even if there is pain in it. However there are things that one can change. I lived in a house where there was a lot of optimism and enthusiasm. Both my parents had many projects to accomplish for the sake of the country, and they succeeded in achieving most of them. Laure Moghaizel managed to change twelve different laws in the course of her life, and before she died she did her best to have the Lebanese government sign the International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women. She was a courageous, strong and optimistic woman, not to mention that she was determined, patient and systematic. My father also contributed to bringing about a democratic culture in Lebanon, he was the founder of the Parliamentary Human Rights Committee, and was its president, and he was with Laure the founder of the Lebanese Human Rights Committee. He fought hard to include a clause in the Lebanese Constitution which would commit Lebanon to respecting human rights, and international conventions relating to human rights. Both my parents had dreams, they struggled and managed to achieve a lot, they made change.

Myriam: How has living in Lebanon been?

Nada: I feel responsible for Lebanon, I'm not sitting and waiting to see what Lebanon will give me. I grew up in a place where Lebanon was a project we felt responsible for. I used to feel that Lebanon is one of the children of the family, as if we were responsible for him. If he is sick it is our duty to help him recover, he can't do it on his own. We all felt responsible for Lebanon. Lebanon is not an abstraction. Lebanon is a project or, as my father said, a 'collective construction'. I feel that Lebanon is a project, and each one of us in his own field must give it something. Lebanon is our responsibility, and depending on how much we give it, to that extent it will match our aspirations. The more we invest in it, the more it will

resemble our dreams. Lebanon is not something separate from us, we make it the way it is. I grew up with this idea and it is very clear to me that we make the country what it is, all of us, every day. I'll give you a very simple example: by stopping or not stopping when the traffic sign is red we are creating Lebanon. If we participate in the elections we are creating Lebanon. If we engage ourselves in a civil association that works in a certain field, we are creating Lebanon. When one takes one's profession seriously, and tries to accomplish it in an outstanding manner, one is building Lebanon. If one's personal relationships are ethical and carry with them the values of human rights, if one listens to and respects others; all this helps create Lebanon. I believe that Lebanon as country of human rights, the Lebanon that I aspire to, the project that my parents sacrificed fifty years of their lives for, is a collective project, and is created every day in all fields. It all depends how much we care for the public interest, which at the end of the day is also private interest because it affects one's private life. Take for example the question of the environment. It is considered to be a matter of public interest, yet in fact each one of us is affected by the environment in his everyday life, we are falling sick, coughing, going to hospital, because of pollution. So according to me the public interest is strongly linked to each one of us. All of us have to take into account the public interest because it is affecting his or her daily life.

When I finished my studies I was given a very tempting offer to teach in a French university, but I preferred to come back. I felt responsible for Lebanon, I was born here and I'm responsible for it. If we Lebanese don't work here, who is going to? If we don't take the initiative and initiate projects, how are these projects going to take place? I don't believe in "Papa Noel", if we just wait for things to get better nothing will change. Time alone won't bring change, we can sit, wait, and complain, but things won't change. I believe that as much as we invest our energy, talents, and knowledge, so much this child - I mean country - will improve. This slip of the tongue is nice - 'child'/'country' (*balad/walad*) (laughs). I believe change will eventually occur, we must be patient and hope. Living somewhere other than Lebanon would have meant nothing to me my personal life takes meaning in a certain place and flows into something that is public. This is something I inherited. I can't imagine a private life that is isolated from collective life. I want my personal life to be happy but at the same time flowing into something that is bigger than me. I take pleasure in my work and in the organizations that I am member of. Pleasure is important in life, but it has to flow into something that is bigger than us. For me, the project can't be purely personal, it has to become public for it to have full meaning. This feeling of responsibility and debt that accompanied both my parents still accompanies us at home. That's why I can't live anywhere else, I'm not needed there, Lebanon is my place, our child, if we I don't take care of it, who will? We can't leave it and take care of other people's children, for who is going to make sure that our child is growing?

Recorded and translated by Myriam Sfeir