

Daniel Pearl FOUNDATION

Remarks made at the American Red Cross luncheon presenting the 2008 Humanitarian Award to Noam Yifrach and Younis Al-Khatib

Washington DC, October 26, 2008
----- Judea Pearl -----

Thank you Mr. Bennett, Secretary Rice, distinguished guests,

I am humbled and honored by the opportunity to speak at this important event of the American Red Cross, an organization that has pioneered border-less Humanity much before it became a standard of necessity in our global society.

And I am doubly honored to direct my remarks at two champions of humanity, Noam Yifrach and Younis Al-Khatib, who are recognized today for demonstrating that courage and commitment are truly border-less and can yield magical results even in the most volatile regions of the world.

By honoring me as your guest speaker, you have honored my son Daniel, and by honoring Danny you have honored hundreds of young men and women who roam the world with laptops and cameras, so that you and I could see the world through a sharper lens, from a deeper level of understanding, and so that millions of people around the world will see themselves, not as strangers, but as partners to the blazing orbit of this planet.

These young men and women are not normally in the medical profession, and the services they provide is not normally classified as "humanitarian". Yet they are as essential to the mission of the red cross as the Medics and Doctors in your volunteer force, for they spread understanding, tolerance, empathy and humanity before grievance turns into anger, and before anger erupts into violence, injury, ambulances and hospitals.

In other words they are the "preventive medicine" department of the great army of humanitarian aid that the red-cross has come to represent.

Danny was one of those troopers.

He lived a life that knew no geographical boundaries, with a spirit that knew no shred of prejudice. Through words and music, he communicated joy, humor, friendship and understanding in many parts of the world.

He was a bridge builder who befriended and gave voice to millions of voiceless Muslims in the Balkans, Middle East and South Asia.

A story teller who traveled the dusty roads of the Middle East with his laptop and violin, and unveiled to readers in the West the human faces behind the news.

He wrote about neighborly Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo, imaginative carpet weavers in Tehran, singing pearl divers in Baharain, Yemenites and Ethiopians quibbling on who owns the true Queen of Sheba, creative money changers in Pakistan and angry gem miners on the slopes of Mount Killemanjaro.

Six and a half years ago, in a desolate dungeon in Karachi, Pakistan, in the midst of the great madness, he was looking straight in the eyes of evil, and proclaimed his identity.

"My name is Daniel Pearl," he said before his captor's video camera, "I am a Jewish American journalist from Encino, California."...

"My father is Jewish, my mother is Jewish, I am Jewish."
"Back in the town of Bnai Brak (Israel) there is a street named after my great grandfather, Chaim Pearl, who was one of the founders of the town.

These were his last words.

And as he stood there, demanding sanity in the face of madness, his words assumed a universal dimension, and have come to symbolize not only the right of every individual to assert his faith, heritage and identity. but also the amazing capacity of the human spirit to weave together the dignity of being different within the sanctity of being ONE.

His murderers schemed to sow fear and division among us but, remarkably, with all their technical sophistication, they made a critical miscalculation and the outcome turned against them.

How?

The respect that Daniel earned on both sides of the East/West divides, the principles by which he lived, the goodness of his smile, and the sound of his last words became iconic personal reminders to millions of principled people around this planet that the current tide of violence and hatred is not an expression of an ordinary conflict between tribes, countries or religions but threatens to erode the very fabric of civilized society.

Consequently, what emerged from Danny's tragedy and vividly displayed on the screens of the world's consciousness was an urgent call for people of all faiths to recognize the dangers threatening us, and to lift our common humanity above the differences that set us apart.

It was this urgent call that compelled my family and I to establish the Daniel Pearl Foundation and to take upon ourselves the task of channeling all the energy and goodwill that the tragedy had evoked into one and only one aim: fighting the hatred that took Danny's life.

Of course we do not have the resources to move armies or conquer territories, but we have the goodwill of millions of principled people around the world, Christians, Jews and Muslims, Pakistanis, Europeans and Americans, Israelis and Palestinians, Journalists and musicians, who are determined to form what I call "a Coalition Of The Decent" and work together to contain the rising Tsunami of anger and hatred that have swept our planet.

Yet as we looked around us, we quickly discovered a strange phenomenon. We found dozens of celebrities and philanthropists fighting diseases and natural disasters all over the world. We found Bono, Bill Gates, and Madonna competing with each other on fighting AIDS and malaria in Africa. These are noble causes, undeniably. But we could not find a celebrity dedicated specifically to fighting the culture of hate that has been rising steadily in the past two decades and now threatens to heat up our planet much before global warming does.

What can we do about it?

In an open letter to the people of Pakistan, published in Karachi in July 2002, I wrote: "The loss of Danny will forever tear my heart, but I cannot think of a greater consolation than seeing your children [in Pakistan] pointing at Danny's picture one day and saying: 'This is the kind of person I want to be. Like him, I want to be truthful, and friendly, open-minded and, above all, respectful of others.'"

I was in a rather imaginative mood when I wrote this letter, and I did not really envision it would materialize in my lifetime.

I was surprised therefore last week, when I received a message with the following photos.

-----photos from Faisalabad, Pakistan, 1. High school Lecture on "Who was Daniel Pearl", 2. Inauguration of the World Tolerance Organization, 3. Celebration of the Daniel Pearl World Music Days.

As you probably know, the Daniel Pearl World Music Days is celebrated worldwide each year to commemorate Daniel's birthday of October 10. This year it has embraced 1,150 concerts, in 59 countries, all united in a call for tolerance and humanity.

We registered concerts in Pakistan, as you can see in this photo, Montenegro, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, New York and of course, Washington DC. The last registration came from Kabul, Afghanistan.

What does it all represent?

It represents a tremendous undercurrent of courage and decency that is awaiting for a leader, a banner and an action to claim back this planet and restore it to an orbit of sanity.

It represents a world that is thirsty for an icon of peace, and this photo here is one such icon -- there aren't many faces around at which both a Muslim and a Westerner can point and say: Here goes a man of peace.

Compelled by the power of this icon, we started the Daniel Pearl Dialogue for Muslim-Jewish Understanding, a conversational road-show in which I and my partner, Professor Akbar Ahmed, travel from city to city and discuss Jewish-Muslim relationships before mixed audiences, in a town-hall setting.

It was initiated

out of our joint concern for the deteriorating relationships between the two communities, and out of an unshaken belief that, these relationships could be improved.

by engaging in a frank, respectful and rational dialogue, based on our common Abrahamic tradition.

We see our mission in this dialogue

as that of carving a path of legitimacy for on-going grass-root conversations aiming, in the best case, at achieving understanding and collaboration and, at the very least, acknowledgment of, and familiarity with each other narrative.

Neither of us is an official representative of his community, I am not an ordained Rabbi and my friend Akbar is not an appointed Imam. Still, we are very much in tune with the sentiments of our respective communities, and we feel qualified therefore to communicate those sentiments, including grievances and sensitivities, faithfully and frankly.

Two rules guide our discussions:

1. No topic is a taboo
2. Respect at all time.

And these I believe are the reasons that audience flock to our humble show -- there aren't many occasions for people to see their sentiments echoed and listened to with respect. TV discussions quickly deteriorate into shouting matches and conventional interfaith meetings never touch on the hot issue -- participants are reluctant to spoil the cozy atmosphere.

And because we touch on the hot issues, theological, social, historical and political, we have a chance to understand the reasons that communities are angry at each others.

And, given that this meeting is about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it would be criminally dishonest if I told you that there is no anger around. Lots of anger!

Muslims are angry at Jews for supporting a state which they perceive to be an outpost of European imperialism.

And Jews are angry at Muslims for upholding this perception, namely, for failing to see that Jews are no less indigenous to the Biblical landscape than their Palestinian neighbors.

This clash is historical, not theological, which is why we are optimistic; historical clashes can be reconciled through education and communication by placing the two narratives side by side.

And this became our motto -- two narratives side by side.

In this spirit, I would like to say a few words to Dr. Al-Khatib, in the name of my friends in Israel, who grew up with me in the pre-1948 years and still remember the days that we lived together side by side.

You are my brother Younis, not because we are both children of Abraham but because we played in the same sand box. I played there 2000 years ago, and you played there since, I came back in 1948 after having some rough time in other neighborhoods, and we are bound to play together in the very near future -- it could be a fun sand box.

In my home town, Bnai Braq, children learned to say "peace" before they could say "give me".

My friends and I went to schools where Arabs were considered future neighbors, despite the hostilities. I remember to this very day one of my teachers roaring in anger: "Don't you ever let me catch you saying it about an Arab -- today they are our enemies, tomorrow our neighbors."

We grew up with folk songs in which the frequency of the word "peace" exceeded that of the words "I love you" -- I don't think you can find many such cultures today.

Why am I telling you all this?, because I want to confess our weaknesses to you and to your friends in Palestine: Yes, we are afflicted with a secret addiction called "yearning for peace".

And I implore you and your friends:

take advantage of this weakness, please, exploit it.

I will end on a hopeful note, that next time we meet, we will see our two peoples playing in that old sand box again, enjoying peace and freedom in two democratic states living side by side, equally viable, equally secure, equally legitimate and, in what says it all: equally indigenous.

Thank you.