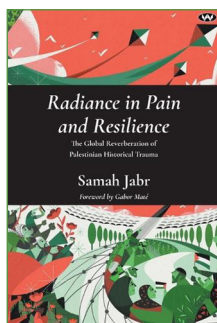




We all become witnesses:

An alternative way of responding to personal and collective despair



A review of *Radiance in Pain and Resilience: The global reverberation of Palestinian historical trauma* by Samah Jabr

Reviewed by David Denborough

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Abstract

David Denborough reviews Samah Jabr's (2025) book *Radiance in pain and resilience: The global reverberation of Palestinian historical trauma*. Wakefield Press. 304pp. ISBN 9781923042926.

Key words: *Palestine; book; review; narrative therapy; narrative practice*

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Author pronouns: All pronouns welcome

"In a world gone mad, we need books."

So says editor Julia Beaven as she introduces Dr Samah Jabr at the global launch of her new book, *Radiance in pain and resilience: The global reverberation of Palestinian historical trauma*. I sense that everyone in this room at the University of South Australia can relate to Julia's words.

This book has been published by Wakefield Press, a small independent publisher based here in Tarntanya Adelaide. By some measures, we are a world away from Jerusalem, where Dr Samah usually lives and works. But one of the main messages of this book is about the reverberation of Palestinian stories, the significance of bearing witness to them and, significantly, what this can make possible. As Dr Samah described during the launch, "We can generate very important lessons from Palestine".

There were many moving moments tonight. One being when Dr Samah explained why she has written the pieces that have been compiled into this collection. She spoke of how her work as a Palestinian psychiatrist means that she is witness to unrelenting stories of injustice. Witnessing, she says, has a significant meaning both in liberation psychology and within Islam. Bearing witness can be an act of responsibility, of justice-seeking and of healing. It is both secular obligation and sacred duty. Writing about her work, sharing Palestinian testimonies of daily injustices, means that Dr Samah's readers become witnesses by proxy:

Writing helps me to organise my feelings and my thoughts about all that I receive from people. I also feel a professional ethical responsibility which matches with my Islamic ethical responsibility. When I share testimonies, this is a way for me to share these responsibilities – to pass this to others. It enables others to become witnesses.

And so it is that all of us in this room, and all who read this book, become witnesses, and the stories of Palestine reverberate and spark new meanings and actions.

Crucially, Dr Samah invites us to be witnesses in particular ways:

Palestinians need the solidarity of others who recognize us as active subjects and fighters for freedom, not as bleeding victims. (Jabr, 2025, p. 99)

Related to this, during the launch, Jon Jureidini asked Dr Samah to convey to us the significance of the concept of *Sumud*, which is the term Palestinians use to express their steadfastness and resistance:

Palestinians have used the term *Sumud* since the time of their defiance of the British mandate, and it expresses both a state of mind and an orientation to action. Everyone in Palestine understands *Sumud*, but finds it difficult to convey to others. Usually Palestinians hold a symbol of *Sumud* as an old olive tree that is deeply rooted in the land. It is not an inborn trait or the consequence of a single life event, but a system of skills and habits that are learnt and can be developed. It forms the basis of a lifestyle of endurance. We have a responsibility to try to research *Sumud*¹ and to support it.

I am particularly interested in Dr Samah's vision for forms of collective therapeutic practice that support *Sumud*:

Practitioners can focus on *Sumud* (steadfastness), solidarity, redress, resistance, accountability, narratives, storytelling, and community healing, contributing to addressing collective trauma beyond clinical definitions. Such efforts aim to rebuild social fabric, validate experiences, and promote resilience. (Jabr, 2025, p. 71)

As *Sumud* involves "collective action, strong community ties, solidarity" (Jabr, 2025, p. 239), Dr Samah convincingly argues that work to alleviate mental health struggles requires collective approaches:

In the end, addressing collective trauma requires comprehensive approaches that go beyond clinical models. They need to embrace cultural, historical and communal healing practices – while acknowledging the systemic injustices of perpetuating suffering. We have to empower the Palestinian community to address mental health as a form of resistance against the occupation on our minds. (Jabr, 2025, p. 71)

As an example of a collective response, Dr Samah and her colleagues Zaynab Hinnawi and Elizabeth Berger have recently published a paper called "Healing through the skies" (Jabr, Hinnawi, & Berger, 2024), which describes a therapeutic group activity for Palestinian children based on creating and flying kites. As I read this paper, I kept thinking of colleagues from the Remedial Education Center and School of

Salaam Children of the Olive Tree in Jabalia in the north of Gaza, which no longer exist due to devastating bombing by the IDF since 7 October 2023. Back in 2012 and 2015 when a team from Dulwich Centre Foundation visited this team, we learnt a lot from them about the significance of kites in Gaza. When we shared with them the Kite of Life² they came up with their own creative version:

We have three new inventions for the Kite of Life that we also want to share with you! We decided that the frills or ribbons on the sides of the kite can represent “the things in life that lift us up”. The frame of the kite can represent “what

keeps our life in balance”. And here in Gaza, we sometimes place small messages on the string of the kite. The wind then carries these messages up the string, as if they are climbing into the air. We decided that we will include on our kites a message to the next generation. We hope you like these Palestinian inventions!

... We are writing to you from Gaza, Palestine. We hope that you enjoy the freedom that we are seeking. We hope for a better life for you and for us. (Treatment and Rehabilitation Center for Victims of Torture & Dulwich Centre Foundation, 2014, p. 47)



Members of the team at Salam Peace School, Jabaliya, Gaza, with their Kite of Life drawings.

One of the elements of Dr Samah's writings I find most powerful is her insistence that Palestinian mental health workers have a great deal to offer practitioners in different parts of the world:

Supporting sumud is not only necessary for decolonizing Palestine and liberating its people from oppression, but it also provides an opportunity for Palestinian decolonial mental health to influence mainstream mental health practices. (Jabr, 2025, p. 240)

Palestinian practitioners in the West Bank and Gaza have been influencing narrative practice over the last two decades. Many of their stories of practice are included in *Responding to trauma that is not past: Strengthening stories of survival and resistance* (Treatment and Rehabilitation Center for Victims of Torture & Dulwich Centre Foundation, 2014).

What's more, practitioners from the Palestine Trauma Centre in Gaza, even in the midst of current devastation, are finding ways to honour and elevate children's voices

and agency. The questions they have gathered from Gaza's children are now being circulated widely and used in campaigns (Palestine Trauma Centre, 2024).

The part of Dr Samah's book launch that I found most moving was when she was responding to a member of the audience who is regularly in contact with individuals in Gaza via Instagram, and is struggling with feeling as if their actions of support are not enough. Dr Samah's thoughtful, skilled, caring and strategic response meant a great deal to all who were present:

Many of us who are not in Gaza see the huge suffering and feel that we can't do enough. And maybe, when we feel our responses are not sufficient, then we get the feeling of emotional burnout. We might feel that nothing we can do is significant. We become resigned and we no longer do anything. This can happen because intentional trauma has the objective of making people feel helpless and it affects people inside Palestine and outside Palestine. I communicate a lot with people in solidarity, and sometimes I see

people overwhelm themselves in their efforts to do something for Palestine. I say, do not deplete yourself and think strategically about what you can do to support. I also say that messages of support are significant. When people look at the Sydney Harbour Bridge [protest march] and see a huge number of people rallying in solidarity, this is very important. This acknowledges Palestinians and their pain, and this has a therapeutic effect that can mitigate the effects of trauma. One of the intended effects of genocide and trauma is to give Palestinians a very dark prospect of the world. It changes the way you see the world, so sending messages of support is significant. When we think of the apathy and neglect of official regimes in the world towards Palestinians, when we think of how the world has allowed all this harm to happen to the people of Gaza for the last two years, we might lose faith in human goodness. The rallies and messages of support and the kind individual communications with some people from outside Gaza and Palestine give Palestinians a message of hope that maintains our common human fabric. I want you to know that this matters a lot to Palestinians. It matters at the psychological level. And now we need to have a separate

conversation about how to make it matter at the political level, because it's political change that needs to occur. But that is a discussion that you should have here. It's for you to organise and strategize and develop effective ways to influence your government.

When I think back to the atmosphere at the book launch and the diversity of people present – Muslim, Jewish, Christian, Hindu, atheist – it seems fitting to close with these words from the book:

Let's rescue the remains of our humanity from the rubble of Gaza. (Jabr, 2025, p. 28)

Notes

- ¹ These hopes of researching Sumud remind me of the work of Dr Rita Giacaman (2014, 2018) and her studies of Palestinians' "capacity to endure and resist" (Giacaman, 2014, p. 39).
- ² The Kite of Life was developed in collaboration with the Tamil community in Toronto (see Denborough, 2010).

Dr Samah Jabr was brought to Australia by the Shifa Project.

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