



Edward Said

1935 - 2003

A Letter to a Friend

Rasha Salti wrote the following letter in the wake of Edward Said's New York City memorial service. Said, the seminal American scholar on culture and the Arab world and a tireless advocate for the Palestinian cause, passed away on 22 September, 2003 after a long battle with cancer.

Perhaps if I shared my day with you, it would feel less burdensome. Forgive me for unloading the burden onto you...

The first of what we all presume will be a long series of memorial services celebrating the life and mourning the loss of Edward Said was concluded today, at Riverside Church, at the mouth of Harlem in Manhattan. A little fewer than two thousand people gathered in the imposing edifice; the ceremony was solemn, simple and humble. It was an undecided autumnal Monday. The sun rose and shone in the morning, but around eleven, grey plump wet clouds shed rain, and throughout the day, it seemed as if the last of summer's sunshine bickered with the first of fall's overcast rain showers. In my mental rendering to you of the memorial service, I decided to cast their bickering as a response of solidarity with the conflicting flux of

emotions that we experienced during the service. We basked in the beckoning of his generosity, his wit and humour, and we wept at the reckoning of his loss.

Nearly two thousand of us huddled in solemn calm, hearts heavy, eyes welled up in silent tears, strangers and friends, students and colleagues, from all walks of life, colours, denominations and corners of the world. Riverside Church is a most appropriate venue for bidding our farewells to Edward Said. An imposing structure, a church bare of the arrogance of dogma, rich with a generous heart and noble history, the locale for peace and justice rallies in New York City, for Americans, New Yorkers and citizens of the world. When Fidel Castro was outcast from accommodations in the city while attending the general assembly of the United Nations, he found a home at Riverside Church. The civil rights movement, the anti-Vietnam movement, the anti-apartheid movement found a home in Riverside Church, and most recently the anti-globalisation movement, and the anti-war movements found a home in Riverside Church. Our farewells to Edward were housed this morning at Riverside Church, lodging themselves alongside the many tears and much applause that the church had opened its doors and provided shelter to. If Orientalism had reoriented the near 2,000 of us lodged in the church, Riverside Church brought a momentary placeness to our “out-of-placeness”.

Although the event had been planned in the duress of haste, it spoke to all that Edward would have liked. Wadie, his son, delivered a deeply stirring eulogy. Words, celebratory, graceful, thankful, read aloud to our audience, intimating of the intimate longing of a son to his father. Najla, his daughter, read a poem, his favourite, by Cavafy, “Waiting for the Barbarians”. Look it up, it’s compelling. She spoke the Alexandrian’s verse, his wisdom, breathing

sound, sentiment, colour, shape and motion, into his words, like a glass blower or a magician. The stanzas rang in the echo of the high sky inside Riverside Church, and lingered in mid-flight, dancing around us aloft. The Barbarians were at the gates, we were breathless, smitten, we were besieged; the Barbarians were at the gates.

And suddenly, Najla’s voice flattened, the stanzas dancing in the air evaporated, as if by magic, their echo disappeared, and a chilling silence fell on the room. “Now what is going to happen to us without the Barbarians? Those people were a kind of solution.”

Daniel Barenboim, Edward’s close friend and collaborator, bid his farewells and our own with an enchanting, heart-wrenching rendering of Mozart, Brahms and Bach. I will never be able to describe Barenboim’s delivery, neither would have Mozart, Brahms or Bach imagined their compositions rendered in eulogizing the passing away of a friend by a friend. They were charged with all that mourning engulfs: love, admiration, longing, lament, reminiscence, regret, warmth, cold, horror... Barenboim’s rendition of Bach’s “Prelude in E-Flat” was shrouded in the sorrowful love and regretful tenderness that compose the embrace between two friends who know, without speaking it, they may be embracing for the last time.

Often, news of death is at first deeply bewildering, disorienting, drowned in disbelief. In those initial instances, one begins to apprehend the significance of the loss by cataloguing the discreet acts that constituted the quotidian and subtract from each one the presence of the lost loved one. That is why it is so difficult to come to terms with the loss of Edward Said. The most articulate, incisive and compelling Anglophone voice in the English-speaking world that rescued Arabs, Palestinians and Muslims from total marginalisation, demonisation and subjugation will not



Edward and his sister Rosemary in traditional Palestinian dress, Jerusalem, 1941. Source: *Out of Place*.

speaking again. When we streamed into the reception area, it became clear, from the long hugs and the furtive exchanges that bound us momentarily to one another, that the idea of New York City and of the United States without his voice, his stamina and his whirlwind was horrifying to us all. We murmured variations of that realisation to one another, almost worried that its utterance louder and clearer would grant it more power, more reality.

No one can come near a measure of him; no one has his eloquence, his tirelessness, his fire and his erudition. On his deathbed he instructed his children to continue the struggle, and continue the struggle they pledged, as we all will. On his deathbed, he despaired over the fate of Palestine; he despaired because he could no longer

speaking and write. Najla said he cried angry tears watching news of Gaza and the West Bank; his voice had become barely audible, but tears flushed his face, anger tortured his eyes. The concluding statement of Edward's eulogy for Eqbal Ahmad, at the memorial service held at Amherst in 1998, asserted that the truest, most poignant test for public intellectuals and political activists in the United States was defined in their relationship to the question of Palestine, which Eqbal upheld without fear and at great cost. Rare, very rare, have been those public intellectuals, academics and activists who have taken to task standing up to par with enemies of Palestine in America. Ibrahim Abu Lughod, Edward Said and Eqbal Ahmad were three stellar figures, tireless soldiers, fearless defenders of the struggle for Palestine. Edward was the last of the three to remain standing.

Now he has joined them and left us. They were unflinching in their commitment from the moment they set foot on the continent. At a time when no one considered the question of Palestine defensible, they trekked the continent; no speaking engagement was too small, no venue was too demure, no article or publication was to be neglected, unanswered. On the day he died, a hearing was held in Congress for the establishment of a special committee that would monitor curricular and extracurricular activities on campuses in the US pertaining to the study of the Middle East. The committee is to be headed by Daniel Pipes, the rabidly Zionist instigator of "Campus Watch", the world-wide-web manifestation of the spirit of the Patriot Act in the domain of academia. The committee is to be entrusted with the task of ensuring that all representations of the Middle East befit the Zionist paradigm, under the aegis of Daniel Pipes' understanding of fair, and unbiased. Should they fail to do so, public funds (from Title 6) would be withheld. The committee's monitoring mandate includes

the hiring of “spy” stooges on campuses to report on professors and conferences, etc. On the day that Edward Said died, the heart of a three-year-old girl in Gaza stopped beating from the trauma of the sound of shells. She died in her infancy, of fear so awesome her heart stopped beating. Had he been seated with us, had he not left us with our grief, Edward would have delivered the information himself, and urged us to continue the struggle, and we would have drowned his speech in applause.

And continue the struggle we will. His passion for life rivalled the passion he committed to the struggle for Palestine, his tireless fight with leukaemia paled his tireless fight with enemies of Palestine, of Arabs, of Muslims. And enemies he had many - innumerable were his enemies. Enemies of Palestine, enemies of Arabs, enemies of his scholarship, enemies of the wretched of the earth. His enemies had their cowardly, vile, last jab drafting and disseminating his obituary, as did The New York Times, The Associated Press, The Daily Telegraph, to name a few. Israeli chat rooms expressed regret that “cancer got to him before the IDF did” (<http://www.littlegreenfootballs.com/weblog/?entry=8297>), and rumours circulating around Columbia University report that some students applauded and cheered in the open on campus when they heard news of his demise.

I left the reception and the church after a while. I grabbed a cab on Broadway, at the gate of Columbia University. I gave my cab driver directions; he sighed and let out a soft “inshallah” under his breath... So I introduced myself. I would say that there is not a single standard conversation between I and cab drivers that hail from the Arab world, but there is a standard for conversations between recent immigrants enclosed in a vehicle, one in the passenger seat and the other in the driving seat. I prepared to set sail

on the latter. It was safer.

The man was from Egypt, from as-Sa’eed. He was unhappy with his life in New York City, he hated watching what America was doing to the Arab world from America. He was upset with the cruelty of imperialism, but mostly with the total moral decay that America brought to the world - our Muslim and Arab world. He had many a grief with LBC, and was pleased with my black cloak, covering my body head to toe. There was a lot of the Islamist conspiracy theories in his ramblings, which I took in, distracted with my own upheavals. Would he have known about Said? I did not even want to bring him up.

When I unloaded myself from his cab, I stopped at the deli on the corner of my street. Salah, a young Yemeni immigrant, who worked the 12-hour dayshift in the 24-hour operational deli, a face dear to my New Yorker quotidian, greeted me with his usual cheer. He noted that I looked drawn, and I said to him I just returned from the funeral of a dear Palestinian friend. His eyes grew wider and he asked, “That man Said, the “shayeb”, the one with white hair?” I nodded in the affirmative. He said that he was deeply saddened with his death, that he and his housemates had heard the news with shock and grief. “We all lost a great man”, he said to me, in the solace of solidarity. “We did”, I said.