



Transcript

November 9th, 2009

Award Acceptance Speech

By Dr. Izzeldin Abuelaish

These remarks were delivered at the 63rd Annual Conference, November 9, 2009

Wendy Chamberlin: It is my honor to introduce one of the Middle East Institute's most distinguished Board of Governors, who will in turn introduce the recipient of tonight's award. Mr. Abbas Farouq Zuaiter is Chief Operating Officer and member of the investment and management committees at Soros Fund Management in New York. In this capacity at SFM, Eddie (as we know him) is responsible for overseeing all aspects of investment for the Quantum Group of Funds, with a net equity capital currently exceeding \$25 billion. But what really impresses us at the Middle East Institute is Eddie's commitment and energy on behalf of the Palestinian people. Not only does he sit on several boards, including the Middle East Institute, but he works with the Institute of Middle East Understanding and the Arab Fund for Arts and Culture, and he works with commitment and compassion for the Palestinian people. Please join me in welcoming Eddie Zuaiter.

Abbas Farouq Zuaiter: Wendy, thank you for that brief introduction. Good evening, everyone. I am honored to be here with you tonight and grateful for the opportunity to present Dr Izzeldin Abuelaish, on behalf of the Middle East Institute, with an award for his extraordinary contributions to peace and reconciliation between Palestinians and Israelis.

Let me start by first making some apologies (I am in Washington and it is time for anyone from New York to come down here and apologize). Yes, I do work for a hedge fund. Unlike most people here in Washington I am a rather timid person who tries to avoid any form of public speaking. Over the course of the past twenty years I have been asked to present or give speeches in much more familiar crowds, and for people I know much better than Dr. Abuelaish. Accordingly, when Wendy initially presented me with the opportunity, my natural instinct was to politely decline. I was also, by the way, asked to present because someone else could not make it. However after learning a little bit more about Dr. Abuelaish's life and travels, I knew I could not resist this honor – and it is my honor. You see, Dr. Abuelaish and I share some things in common and some things that were very different. Both the differences and those things in common resonated to me to the core.

What is in common? We are both sons of Palestinian parents that remember living freely and not under any occupying force. We are both also married to Palestinian women with a passion and a fire in their bellies. We both have the privilege and joy of being fathers to Palestinian children. Most importantly, Dr. Abuelaish and I – and everyone here – share a humanity that binds us.

As far as the differences, I have lived a rather carefree life without occupation. Dr. Abuelaish struggled each and every day under occupation. I go about in my career trying to make money while he spends his life saving

lives and trying to bring people together. I mourn the loss of his daughters and niece as a human tragedy beyond any comprehension. He managed to forgive and see the beauty and hope in peaceful coexistence.

Dr. Izzeldin Abuelaish is an obstetrician who has practiced in both Israel and Palestinian territories, where for years he has used medicine to bridge the gap between Israelis and Palestinians. Trained in Cairo, London and at Harvard University, where he got his master's in health policy, Dr. Abuelaish has conducted joint research projects with Israeli physicians and worked to bring injured and sick Palestinians to Israel for treatment. In January 2009, three of his daughters and a niece were killed in their home during the Israeli war on Gaza. Bessan was twenty; Mayar was fifteen; Aya was fourteen; and his niece, Nur, was seventeen years old. Despite this personal tragedy, Dr. Abuelaish remains committed to spreading the message of forgiveness, hope and non-violence between Palestinians and Israelis. An international foundation was formed earlier this year, inspired by Dr. Abuelaish's vision and commitment to peace. It is headquartered in Toronto, where he now resides, and Gaza. The foundation will develop programs promoting education, health and leadership for women, young and old, throughout Gaza and the Middle East.

Tonight the Middle East Institute is deeply honored to present Dr. Izzeldin Abuelaish with this award for his extraordinary contributions to peace and reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians.

Dr. Izzeldin Abuelaish: Thank you all. I am honored, privileged and moved to be with you here, which gives me hope, and would like my parents, my wife, my daughters to come for a moment from their grave to be with me in this happy moment; and my Palestinian people in general, and the Gazans in particular, that they are not alone in this world. Some people are thinking of them and that is what we want.

For me the 16th of January, 2009, is the day when my three precious daughters and niece were killed by Israeli shells. It is hard to describe the dreadful scene and events of that day. The body parts of those beautiful girls – each of them was a special world – spread over the ceiling and were drowning in a pool of blood. I do not want anyone in this world to witness or see what I have seen.

But we are all human and we all make mistakes and commit sins from time to time. As a believer with deep faith as a Muslim, I fully believe that what I have lost – what was taken from me – will never come back. I need to go forward and be motivated by the spirit of those I lost and do them justice. I lost three precious daughters but I am blessed with five other children and the future. I fully believe that life is like riding a bicycle: to keep balanced we must keep moving. I assure you I am keeping moving. Nothing is impossible in life. The only thing that is impossible for me, that I have learned from life – what I have planned in my life I succeeded to achieve, but what is impossible is to return my daughters back. I felt much better and determined as a believer that this tragedy was somehow for good, and good is and will be made of it to help humanity. This tragedy came to disclose the secret of the craziness in January against innocent civilians in Gaza.

Then there is the choice, the crossroads: the path of light or the path of darkness. I choose the first. This path, the path of light, in the long run is most efficient and the right choice than to live with hatred or be consumed with revenge, with all the medical consequences. No one knows them better than myself. Also I know that darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can drive out darkness, and love can drive out hatred.

In a world torn by violence and pain, by three things this world can endure: justice, truth and honesty. Leaders cannot be leaders if they are not challenging and risk-takers. Today the world is in need more than any time ago for leaders who have the moral courage to act positively and make a positive difference in human life. We must not give up but be determined and work hard. We need to discover the humanness inside all of us and adopt it as our pathway. We have to defend loudly the humanity that we all belong to and in this way we defend ourselves. Willingness and talking is not enough. It is a matter of action. As Martin Luther King said, our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter. In the end we will remember not the words of our enemies but the silence of our friends. Concerning action, we must not underestimate the size of action we are doing.

This is the story. A man was walking along the shore. The falling tide revealed hundreds of starfish stranded on the sand. Up ahead he saw a young girl picking up starfish one by one and throwing them into the sea. The man overtook the child and asked her what she was doing. The girl answered, "They will die if I don't get them back into water." "But there are so many," said the man. "How can what you are doing make any difference?" The girl threw another starfish into the sea and said, "It made a difference, and to that starfish still there is hope."

As a physician, I learned I will never give up hope for a patient as long as he is alive, whatever his situation is. We are not allowed to give up hope but we must be creative in our treatment and change course. We need to change the course of treatment. We need to search for the causes of our failure and why we are not happy, satisfied and secure in this world. The cause is so clear and it is in our hearts and souls. It is not outside. God will never change what is in the people until they change what is in their hearts and souls.

What do we need to understand and respect each other, and that the dignity of all is equal and live in collaboration and partnership? We need to smash and destroy the mental and physical barriers within each of us and between us. Let us build a new generation who believes that advancing human civilization is a joint project and that the most holy things in the universe are humankind and freedom. Instead of building walls of separation, let us build a bridge of understanding, respect and love, and restore the trust we need to activate our big open minds, hearts, eyes and arms. At that moment we will have a bright future for all of us. Thank you so much.

Wendy Chamberlin: Thank you very much. I think we are all very moved by the optimism in the words from our honoree tonight. Thank you for coming this evening. We hope we will see you all tomorrow in this room, where we have a fantastic conference prepared for us. The opening keynote speech will be delivered by Undersecretary of State Bill Burns. Again, thank you. Linger and enjoy each other's company but we thank you, from the Middle East Institute, for coming this evening.

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Dr. Izzeldin Abuelaish is a Palestinian obstetrician who lost three of his daughters and a niece during Israeli military operations in Gaza last January. A longtime peace activist who has spoken out against violence, Dr. Abuelaish advocates Israelis and Palestinians working together to steer their leaders toward reconciliation.