

# Healing from Modern Superstitions

By **Munir Fasheh** (healed teacher and educator)



## Re-viewing education

Re-viewing education means to view again, not only what is visible about it but also, more importantly, what is invisible; to dig deep into foundations and the underlying logic. This is what I have been doing since 1971, which convinced me that modern education is not about learning but about winning and control (control of minds, perceptions, actions, and relationships). Official education (especially math, which I studied and taught for many years) has been crucial in this control. As Palestinians, we have been living for many decades under occupation of the land, but we seem to be totally unaware of another occupation: that of the mind. Whereas the first occupation is done via **military tanks**, the second takes place via **think tanks**. Control and occupation of the second kind happen via words whose meanings do not stem from life but from licensed institutions and professionals; they also happen by using numbers to measure the worth of people through comparing them on a vertical line (grading, which is degrading). Words that embody inequality are crucial in domination; especially inequality in intelligence. This onslaught on human dignity and intelligence is accepted today as something normal. The disease is very deep, permeating all levels. Ranking universities is a disgrace to the concept of a university. The main logic taught in schools is the two-valued logic (true-false) and is part of math curricula in most if not all countries. What is kept invisible is the fact that this logic has no application in life except in relation to control and the world of machines. It is translated, for example, in general exams at the end of the twelve-year school cycle by giving every student a certificate that labels her/him a “success” or a



My realisation of my mother's math expertise healed me from the claim that math requires a higher intelligence than that needed to make a dress, write a poem, farm a field, raise a child, sail a boat, play a drum, or create a happy home.

“failure.” I don't know of any Ministry of Education that gives a certificate stating that a person is a poet, a storyteller, a drummer, or a gardener.

Official education is not about learning but about control and winning. This has to stop; *bas!* enough. We cannot continue in a drugged stupor, believing that people's worthiness can be measured by numbers claiming that they reflect something real – other than the readiness to follow instructions. Almost all aspects of life (as a result of modern knowledge) have been corrupted or poisoned: food, drink, soil, air, sea, entertainment, and relationships – not because of ignorance but as a result of planning. Until I was in my early twenties, I used to eat four raw eggs every day; science was not yet advanced enough to corrupt eggs. Now I don't dare eat one!

This article distinguishes between two kinds of words: those whose purpose is to control, distract, and deform; and those that are rich in meaning and rooted in life, community, and culture, and in harmony with living wisely. Whereas the first need superstitions, the second need to reclaim words that have been ignored or belittled by modern ideology.

## Shattering myths

At the peak of my career as a math teacher/educator (mid-1970s), I realised for the first time that my illiterate mother was all her life an “illiterate mathematician” (as Richard Noss, Institute of Education, University of London described her after a talk I gave). My realisation of my mother's math was an “intellectual earthquake” that shattered the myths I had acquired in schools and universities. Her story appeared first in my doctoral dissertation, then in an article published in the *Harvard Educational Review*.<sup>i</sup> Much of what I have written, spoken about, and done since then has been inspired by that realisation. In 1977, I was head supervisor of math education in West Bank schools, and teaching math at Birzeit and Bethlehem universities, and I was recognised as a distinguished math teacher and educator. Since 1976, when I first realised that my illiterate mother was practicing math in a way that was impossible for me to understand and do, her world saved me from modern

superstitions and taught me humility, plurality of knowledge, and equality in intelligence, as well as the fact that the best learning happens without teaching, that knowledge is action, and that official education leads to tearing apart a person's inner world and a community's social fabric.

The purpose of my math was to produce feelings of superiority and inferiority rather than equality, justice, usefulness, and living in harmony with nature – as was the purpose of math in earlier times. My realisation of my mother's math healed me from the claim that math requires a higher intelligence than that needed to make a dress, write a poem, farm a field,



raise a child, sail a boat, play a drum, or create a happy home. Cutting a rectangular piece of cloth into pieces and forming a new whole that fits the body of the woman who brought that cloth (which my mother did daily) was beyond my ability to comprehend. Whereas I studied and taught geometry that consisted of points, straight lines, triangles, circles, parabolas, etc., my mother – during a 50-year period – made thousands of dresses that fit numerous women, each with her own geometry! She never needed the two-valued logic or geometric set; she only needed a measuring tape. Whereas my math is dogmatically precise, hers was flexibly precise, and whereas my knowledge claims to be universal, my mother's knowledge formed a universe – a harmonious one rooted in life and community.

Until the 1970s, I believed that my job was to transmit my knowledge to

students and bring them to my level. However, the times I felt I was best as a teacher were when I did not have a subject matter that I was required to teach. This happened many times in my life (which led me to refuse to teach starting with the first Intifada) in various settings since 1971: math and science clubs in schools; Math in the Other Direction (a course I introduced at Birzeit University in 1979 for first-year science students); Tamer Institute; the Arab Education Forum; working with women in Shufat Refugee Camp and with young men and women in Dheisheh Refugee Camp, and currently with various groups. When people ask, "What did you teach young men and women in Dheisheh?" I say, "Nothing; that's why they learned a lot, in freedom, personally and communally."

Just think: with the exception of only a few, every Arab child (regardless of skin colour, gender, religion, or social and economic background) by the age of three or four speaks Arabic fluently – without textbooks, pedagogy, or evaluation. There is hardly a subject more complex than Arabic, yet children learn it at an early age. All they need is a rich, lively, interactive environment. This fact shatters three myths: the myth of inequality, the myth that learning needs teaching, and the myth that children need to move from the simple to the complex and from one grade to another. As Palestinians, we don't have political-social-economic-legal equality; however we can live and practice, here and now, equality in intelligence. What is significant about this equality is that we don't demand it; we just practice it. No one can stop us; the only obstacle is if we believe in inequality. Imagine what would happen if we started treating children in accordance with the faith that they are equal in intelligence and able to learn without teaching! How wonderful, liberating, energising, and creative that would be! It could be our gift to children

around the world who suffer from the myth of inequality, which is used as a basis for racism<sup>ii</sup> and subduing people.

### Healing from modern superstitions

A fundamental challenge that we face in the world today is how to free ourselves from modern myths and superstitions such as the ones mentioned above. The myth that links technological advancement with human progress deforms us. The progress of Western civilisation has been at the level of tools, not life. Hardly any aspect in life has improved in essence. Schools plant seeds of inequality and powerlessness in children's minds. A basic task of official education, world organisations, and experts is to make the past look obsolete, backward, and out of date. What I mean by equality of intelligence is that it is a non-commensurable quality of humans. It is probably hard for most people to accept what I am saying simply because we have been drugged to perceive modern myths as progress and true. Sitting on our behinds for 12 years and looking at meaningless words (on boards, papers, and screens), with no action and no context, and calling that learning, has caused much harm. Myths existed in other civilisations, but the modern one is the first to measure intelligence, one's worthiness, and a country's development using numbers – and to claim that such measures reflect reality.

### The flush toilet as an embodiment of modernity

Western civilisation is the first to refer to itself as modern. That's why experts who want to be promoted go out of their way to prove that the past is out of date. No doubt, Western civilisation has excelled in inventing tools; however, most tools lead to laziness and unwise living, and have contributed to threats and crises. If we compare what we have gained and lost from sciences, our losses are much greater. I will choose

Every Arab child by the age of three or four speaks Arabic fluently – without textbooks, pedagogy, or evaluation. There is hardly a subject more complex than Arabic, yet children learn it at an early age. All they need is a rich, lively, interactive environment.

the flush toilet to illustrate.

No doubt, the flush toilet was a great scientific invention but devoid of wisdom. It flushes away precious and scarce water, and precious excrement (which should go back to the soil); and pollutes the environment. We lose all that in order for the toilet to look clean! It is absurd, and in a place like Palestine, criminal. The flush toilet is not in harmony with the cycle of life and the spirit of regeneration. For those who ask about alternatives, I say there are many, but they are kept out of awareness because companies cannot make money from them. I first experienced it for ten days in a friend's home in Mexico in 2001 (where I didn't use water, where there was no smell, and where things that were taken from the soil go back to it). It is called a "dry latrine." Laziness and obsession with looks make us admire the flush toilet but blind us to its disastrous consequences. This is similar to what modern education does: it flushes away useful, meaningful, rooted knowledge and sustainable lifestyles, and it flushes away wisdom as a guide to thought and action.



## Healing from modern myths via rooted words

Words that were flushed away by “knowledge flush-toilets” include *mujaawarah* مجاورة, *yuhsen* يحسن, and *muthanna* مثنى. (Stories as a medium of learning and social weaving are also flushed away; however, they deserve an entire article devoted to them.) The three words are basic in healing. We don’t need verbal empires to deal with academic empires. A thousand years ago, Al-Naffari wrote, “The wider the vision, the fewer the words needed to express it.” The vision embedded here can be expressed as “equality in intelligence.”

### Mujaawarah

*Mujaawarah* refers to any group of people who decide, in freedom, to meet regularly in their quest to understand and act on an issue in their lives, with no internal or external authority. A basic aspect in *mujaawarah* is personal and communal freedom to learn and act. This was true about great centres of learning throughout history: the library of Alexandria, Gundeshapur, Cordoba, and House of Wisdom. *Mujaawarah* cannot be a model; each one grows in accordance with its inner dynamics and interaction with the surroundings. I would like to choose “neighbourhood committees” that sprang up spontaneously during the first Intifada as a manifestation of *mujaawarah*. I want to focus on how Israel reacted. Whereas it did not mind that conferences were held to condemn the closure of schools and universities and to demand their re-opening, it could not tolerate neighbourhood committees at all. It took me a while to figure out why communal farming or neighbourhood learning is more dangerous than international conferences. The threat is in the medium. Whereas licensed individuals and organisations are the medium in conferences, the medium in neighbourhood committees consisted

of people who thought, learned, and acted in freedom, personally and communally, and who were attentive to their surroundings and to what they could do with what they have. That led me to publish an article in *al-Quds* newspaper with the title “Freedom of Thought and Expression OR Freeing Thought and Expression?” The deeper freedom is the one that frees our thinking and expression from dominant discourse, meanings, and perceptions.

### Yuhsen

Imam Ali’s statement, “the worth of a person is what s/he *yuhsen*” قيمة كل امرئ ما يحسنه with the various meanings of *yuhsen* in Arabic (what the person does well, useful, beautiful, giving, and respectful) is what I suggest as a basis for a person’s worth. I first read the statement in 1998, when I established the Arab Education Forum within the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Harvard University. I read it in *Aljahiz’* book “*al-bayan wattabyeen*” البيان والتبيين (which was written 1,200 years ago). I don’t remember any statement that had as profound an impact on me. According to it, a person’s worth is not judged by professional committees and measures that claim to be objective and universal, but by the five meanings embedded in the word *yuhsen*. The five meanings embody pluralism, humility, and thinking within context; they reflect interconnectedness in life.

### Muthanna

*Muthanna* forms a good part of the grammatical structure and inner logic of Arabic (it has no synonym in any European language). It demonstrates the richness that exists in every culture and, at the same time, shows the limitation of cultures. There is no culture that can encompass the totality of experience or have universal claims about life.

I first realised the logic and beauty of *muthanna* when I was invited to participate in a UNESCO conference (May 2007) on intercultural dialogue. The concept paper had this in it, “a very old philosophical debate [is] the relationship between the One and the Many.” When I read it, I thought, “I don’t remember that I ever experienced being one or many; I always feel that I am made of *muthannas*.” *Muthanna* refers to a relation between two persons that becomes very important in the lives of both, and yet has a life of its own. It is neither legal nor intellectual nor economic nor social; it develops freely between the two. It is neither a couple nor dual – although the latter is usually used to refer to it. *Muthanna* does not perceive the other as non-I or as a person that is a copy of I, or a higher synthesis of both. Each person remains who s/he is but a relation

Sitting on our behinds for 12 years and looking at meaningless words (on boards, papers, and screens), with no action and no context, and calling that learning, has caused much harm. Myths existed in other civilisations, but the modern one is the first to measure intelligence, one’s worthiness, and a country’s development using numbers – and to claim that such measures reflect reality.



develops that becomes important to both. In this sense, it embodies a logic that is different from that of both Aristotle and Hegel. The “other” is a “you” rather than a non-I or a copy of I or a higher synthesis with I. It is also different from the logic of Descartes, who said “I think, therefore I am.” In the logic of *muthanna*, “YOU are, therefore I am” – my existence depends on my relation with you. That’s why I believe that without *muthanna*, it is difficult to develop a healthy pluralistic attitude in living. This explains why a person like Samuel Huntington oscillates between conflict and integration; the limitation in his mind is due to the lack of *muthanna* in his language.

\* \* \*

In short, *mujaawarahs* are an alternative to controlling institutions; *yuhseen* alternative to degrading evaluation; and *muthanna* alternative to “the other.” The three words embody equality of intelligence, learning without teaching, the belief that a person’s worth is incommensurable with that of others, the personal and communal responsibility to learn, and being in harmony with the spirit of regeneration. They are crucial in liberating people from modern illusions.

Although I am writing this article for *This Week in Palestine*, I hope it continues to be a main concern “this year in Palestine” (and beyond) until every child in Palestine is free from the onslaught of the most dangerous inequality.

In today’s world, most of us need to live two lives (at least for a while): one in the dominant world and the other in harmony with well-being and with one’s passion in life. What I said above may sound unrealistic or idealistic. It is not possible in a short article to elaborate on any claim I made, but I am ready to meet with any group to further discuss any idea.

We need courage to think of simple solutions (meaning available to all). Ending the tyranny of a single universal medium/path for learning is crucial to human survival. We need to reclaim part of the educational budget and use it in diverse mediums.

When a body gets sick, the healthy part rushes to start healing it. Without the healthy part, physicians and medicines cannot do it. Similarly, in order for societies and cultures to heal, we need to build on what is healthy in them. The three words mentioned above form part of what is healthy in Arab culture. Reclaiming them in our daily living reveals the beauty in Arab culture and invites others to reveal the beauty in theirs.

*Dr. Munir Fasheh was born in Jerusalem in 1941 and was expelled with his family in the 1948 Nakba. He has spent the first half of his life in educational illusions and the second half of his life struggling to free himself from such illusions, mainly through sources of strength such as his community and the Palestinian experience and culture – especially Arabic words that are rich in meanings and wisdom.*

<sup>i</sup> See, for example, my article, “Community Education Is to Reclaim and Transform What Has Been Made Invisible,” in the *Harvard Educational Review*, February 1990. See also my article, “How to Eradicate Illiteracy without Eradicating Illiterates?” (presented at International Literacy Day at UNESCO, September 2002).

<sup>ii</sup> At the peak of the civil rights movement in the United States (1960s), Arthur Jensen of Berkeley University and J. P. Rushton of the University of Western Ontario, Canada, published a study (60 pages and more than 170 references) that asserted that black people are intellectually inferior! It was published in the *Harvard Educational Review* in 1969. This is a good example of collaboration of top scholars and academic institutions, using various references and “scientific” methods ... all to show that black people are genetically intellectually inferior!