



PERSONALITY OF THE MONTH



Munir Fasheh

By Ahmad Damen



Munir Fasheh stands out as someone who takes the best of our Palestinian educational heritage and continuously adapts it to our current reality. He has touched and influenced my life and the lives of many others. Unlike most of his peers, Munir Fasheh doesn't block out and ridicule the "change" and struggles of the new generation; he embraces and accepts them. His words to me are always about living life with *hope* rather than with *expectations*.

The son of a Jerusalem family, the young Munir was able to experience Palestinian life fully in his city for seven years before the horrible exodus of *Al-Nakba*. He was able to absorb the essence of the wisdom developed by the famous Palestinian educator Khalil Sakakini and passed on to his student Khalil Abu Rayya, who was Munir's school principal. His first main influence, however, was his mother; a brilliant tailor who exercised her own know-how to create something useful with numbers. Her knowledge was acquired by practice outside school classrooms and Western forms of education.

It was the 1967 *Al Naksa* that was a turning point for Munir and many Palestinians at the time. Before that he was subject to the hollow hierarchies of the academic world and totally engulfed in formal teaching at Birzeit College (which later became Birzeit University). The impact of *Al-Naksa* made him realise that math teachers "were able to solve problems that are meaningless, but they have no clue what to do with real problems in life (...) Using numbers to measure intelligence and the worth of a person (called evaluation) corrupts people and communities in a deep but invisible way."

He finally realised that his illiterate mother's math as a tailor, which he could neither understand nor do, was in fact

more useful and real than anything he had learnt in college. Munir describes this revelation as an "intellectual earthquake."

Despite being a Harvard PhD graduate, Munir changed his whole view on "expertise" and specialisation, and started viewing them as something that conflicts with the nature of knowledge. Prefixes such as Dr. and Eng. were all designed to rank humans in groups that have nothing to do with their intelligence or value. Acting on his new belief system, he encouraged students to form math and science clubs and published a magazine on the teaching and learning of math.

During the first Palestinian Intifada (late 1980s) he left academia and established Tamer Institute for Community Education, which revolved around protecting and providing productive "learning environments." He then went on to establish the Arab Education Forum and other initiatives that aim to spread his ideas on a pan-Arab scale. Between 1997 and 2007, Munir visited 29 countries to discuss how learning could be done in harmony with various local contexts and cultures.

He is currently trying to establish a "Home of Wisdom" college (based on the name of the first university established 1,100 years ago in Baghdad), where the learning concept of *mujawara* can be applied in action. He stresses that there is no dream or ideal school; this concept belongs to the consumption pattern of living where schools, students, and knowledge are treated as commodities. Education should instead mirror life, and each student must choose the path that is closest to her/his interest.