



Crossing Borders and Boundaries in Quarantine

By Maissa Khatib

I am at my home in El Paso, Texas while under a “shelter-in-place” order, writing this piece of deep reflection about feelings and emotions during this pandemic. My main purpose here is to tell my story as an immigrant living on the border during these dizzying times with the intention of focusing on what has been working for me hoping that sharing my experience of embracing and coping will light a little candle in the midst of this darkness and uncertainty about life.

We cannot ignore the fact that COVID-19 is one of the deadly respiratory viral diseases but is essential to reflect on all the changes that this virus has brought to our lives. An expression that has been circulating on social media caught my attention. “We’re not going back to normal as normal was not working.” In this paper, this expression will serve as the frame around my thoughts, perspectives and reflections on being quarantined in El Paso, a border city also known as the borderlands. This border region is centered on two large cities: Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, Mexico and El Paso, Texas, U.S. There are different types of borders and boundaries: some are visible and natural while others are invisible and created. In both cases, across all borders and

boundaries, there are projections of us and others, based on racial, economic, linguistic, and cultural differences.

In this piece, I will reflect on my own feelings and emotions and my ways of coping, caring, and healing through this pandemic and the changes that have invaded my life and struck me like lightning. Change has always overwhelmed me, and I always tried to resist it, but I have become aware of how sometimes change is needed to clear the way for the “new” to take place.

I was born and raised in Lebanon. My father is a Palestinian refugee and my mother is Lebanese. I inherited my father’s refugee status since the Lebanese law for naturalization is patrilineal. I grew up learning how to navigate the daily discrimination and racism against Palestinians in Lebanon. Growing up as a Palestinian refugee, I became aware of the inhumane and brutal policies that forbid people with a refugee status like me to live a normal life like my Lebanese friends and classmates and deprive us from freedom and human rights. I was not able to attend public schools or state hospitals or pursue a career that requires licensure such as a physician, a lawyer or an engineer. Palestinians born in Lebanon cannot own a property or a business, cannot have a governmental job, cannot join the army or even vote. Living in Lebanon heavily impacted me. I became a woman who was insecure, scared, and anxious about being stateless. I was the “other”, unaccepted and systematically forced to leave. While living in Lebanon, I had to cross visible and invisible borders daily. My life in Lebanon made me experience the lack of belonging to a place, a national identity, and a community. The experience impacted me emotionally, but also affected my ability to know myself. It

disabled me from focusing on my true self and my passions. I acted out of fear and a desperate need to belong and exist. I did not know what I wanted to study or do in my life. The only thing that was clear was the urgency to cross a different border, the urgency to leave.

In 1995, I moved from Lebanon to El Paso, Texas as a wife. While I was establishing my life in a new place trying to adapt to all the changes, raising my two children and working on my education, my three-year old daughter was diagnosed with brain cancer. I had to move to Houston where my daughter received her treatment at MD Anderson hospital. My daughter's physical, emotional, and learning needs; my need to reconnect with my husband and fourteen-month old son; and my need to resume my higher education while being away from my support system in Lebanon were all difficult and necessary parts of my life that required lots of attention, time, and energy.

I was twenty-two years old when I came to the United States. During the span of a quarter century in El Paso, Texas, I raised my children, pursued my doctoral degree, got a job that aligns with my passion, lost my daughter and separated from my husband. A life journey full of events: the happy and sad ones. I have been living here for longer than I lived in Lebanon, but throughout the years in El Paso, I was occupied with my children's needs, my role as a wife, and my dream of attaining a graduate degree and becoming an academic. Such a busy life did not leave me any spare time to pause and reflect. Therefore, COVID-19 has a positive impact on me. It enabled me to reflect on my life recalling past events, examining the present and visioning the future.

My busy life prevented me from assessing my emotions and reflecting on things in my life. I never delved deeply with my inner self. I feared it and resisted it so strongly. I do not know why. I did not want to revisit and awaken painful experiences. Now I have lots of time to sit, meditate and reflect.

Sometime ago I read *Siddhartha: An Indian Tale* by Hermann Hesse. I enjoyed learning about Siddhartha's spiritual search and fulfillment emphasizing self-assertive individuality. My reflective writing here echoes Siddhartha's search: this time in quarantine is urging me to examine my own life, to think of all the borders that I have crossed and still need to cross, to connect with my inner self. Looking back at experiences in my life has brought me to a state of realization and deep understanding that "everything that exists is good—death as well as life, sin as well as holiness, wisdom as well as folly. Everything is necessary, everything needs only my agreement, my assent, my loving understanding; then all is well with me and nothing can harm me" (Hesse, 2017, p.116). During this quarantine time, I have followed in Siddhartha's steps: I fast, wait, and think.

I have crossed several borders, the physical, linguistic and cultural in my life and have been in El Paso for many years, but I have noticed that I have never thought deeply about this city: how I feel towards it and its impact on my life. During the years here in El Paso, people's curiosity about my identity did not resonate well with me. It made me feel like a stranger who does not belong, as I always felt in Lebanon.

Once, my cardiologist told me: "you are exotic." At that moment, I felt like my humanity was stripped away. When some of my professors in class turned to me as an

“expert” on Middle Eastern political issues, I felt alienated and burdened with a heavy load of responsibility to provide credible information and fair representation of my culture and history. People’s attention when I spoke Arabic with my children in public places replenished that feeling of being an outsider who does not belong.

This period of stay-in-shelter gave me the opportunity to revisit all those experiences and think deeply from within, examining where I am now and how I genuinely feel about El Paso and its people observing my current relationships with colleagues, friends, and neighbors during these challenging times. This difficult time of social-distance and lock-down has shown how people around me are caring, nurturing, and loving. Away from the noise, distractions, and the daily packed schedule, I am able now to realize that El Paso has made me feel welcomed and valued. I am able now to confidently say that El Paso has a welcoming culture and openness to diversity and inclusion, which have made me feel that I do belong and that this is home.

Life keeps moving, dragging and changing people along with it. But does this mean that change is easily accepted and embraced? In my case, some of my roles in life resisted the change and became in constant disagreement and dissatisfaction with reality. Currently, motherhood has taken an accelerated change for me. Suddenly, I woke up and found two adults who talked to me as my close and dear friends, not as my children. They became independent, no longer needing me as much as before. Another sudden change happened, the hardest and most painful to carry, is the fact that I no longer have my daughter. She had a “mysterious” lung disease that was diagnosed differently at each hospital we visited locally and nationally. Now, as I learn

about the developments of the COVID-19 pandemic and hear the stories of patients fighting for their lives some of the puzzling parts of my daughter's unbearable journey with the lung disease have unfolded for me. In all of this, my role as mother has rapidly turned to a new phase. I have to figure out how to maintain my connection with my son in a way that shields him from my grieving and suffering and still provides him love, encouragement, and support.

My relationship with others who are close to me also has been under the microscope lately. My relationship with my husband has been aching for years. I will talk about my perspective on our marriage acknowledging the fact that he is not given the opportunity here to include his own perspective; I cannot deny that I am responsible, too, for this aching. This time of isolation and physical distancing has enabled me to look back and examine my role as a wife to see if there is any possibility to rescue the relationship even after losing my daughter. This stillness of time has silenced the distractions and fogginess, creating clarity for me. I realized that my dedication to my family, how I always prioritized the needs of my children and my husband, and how I upheld his image in his family and the local Arab community, required lots of compromises from my end. My forgiving attitude made my husband comfortable to put me on the bottom of the list, ignoring all my requests to spend quality time, my desires to create trust through honesty, clarity and sharing, and my desperate need for his companionship.

I have also been examining my role as a daughter and sister. I've noticed that our daily life, our responsibilities and obligations have widened the distance between me,

my mother and my siblings. We have been maintaining our connection across borders just during birthdays and major holidays. Our connectedness has been dormant and needs to be awakened.

Reflecting on various experiences, I learned something new about myself. Whatever happened, I always blamed myself and showered myself with negative comments. I always thought that I was sensitive, vulnerable, and lacked experience. Forgiving and forgetting were always my tools, no matter how serious or impactful the issue was. This pandemic has forced me to reach deep inside and learn more about myself. I have realized that forgiving and forgetting are not necessarily the best solution to all problems. It became clear to me that some relationships are repairable while others are not. It is important to sort out which relationships are true and important in one's life. Through this close look and examination of my relationships, the past and the present ones, I am comfortable to say that it is essential to stop wasting time keeping dysfunctional, deceptive, meaningless and parasitic relationships in our lives.

The lock-down in El Paso has given the courage to let my pain arise and be able to face it. The current quarantine has given me the space, the silence to grieve my daughter's loss freely away from social norms, expectations, and judgment. I have been able to cross boundaries that confined my emotions and feelings of loss and deep sadness.

In this country, we are expected to control our emotions and isolate them from the public. We always apologize when we cannot prevent a tear from surfacing up in our eyes or when our voice shakes. Being at home and having a flexible virtual work

schedule have been a relief as I am allowing grief to manifest as it wants and at any time. On some days, I feel like staying in my pajamas all day, not brushing my hair, or even speaking with anybody. On other days, I feel like screaming and crying and disconnecting from everything. I don't have to perform according to the social norms and work environment policies and others' expectations and judgments. Grieving freely has opened up the space to take care of myself and find ways to cope and heal.

While hunkering in fear, I have gotten more time to reflect, examine, revisit the past, assess the present and readjust my plans for the future. My story of quarantining across borders has opened a can of worms and has helped me to reflect deeply, to face my old fears and sorrows, clearing the way to change my hamster-wheel daily life and cross various borders and boundaries in my life fearlessly. Through this process, I have realized that change requires urgency, focus, and courage – I am ready for it.



Work Cited

Hesse, Hermann. (2017). *Siddhartha: An Indian Tale*. Indi Book Distributors: Mumbai, India.