BECAUSE ONE CONNECTION CAN CHANGE *Everything*

Written by Roba Khder

I feel grateful to all that I am, and all that I've been through. I am grateful for my soul, which feels with a depth that sometimes overwhelms me. I keep reminding myself that this is what makes us humans. To feel deeply is a holy gift which ignites us to work and move in the direction of goodness. To feel deeply is the resource and the essence of a human being and the essence of peace. To feel deeply is to be a part of a whole, is to truly and sincerely share with the world a language that transcends any place or time or identity. I'm thankful for the chance to exist in this magnificent universe, so that I may solidify even a small contribution to make another human being feel beauty, hope, or connection.

This kind of empathy is what allows us to relate to "the other," no matter who they are or where they are from. Think about a time you read a good book and said "I do feel seen by the writer! They described exactly what I've experienced." Right there, this is a connection with someone you may not have met before. Realizing that all humans, regardless of their status, ethnicity, color, religion, or nationality, share the same emotions is such a powerful tool to be a better communicator and influencer! What if I told you that by having a good connection with your fellow humans, you can literally be a hero and save lives, and prevent casualties during hostile times?

As an Egyptian Fulbright scholar who has lived in Pennsylvania, United States for a year, I could tangibly see the fruits of the real connections I made during my time there, and the positive impact it had on me in times of crisis.



After returning back home to Egypt from the U.S., I woke up one morning to hear the devastating news of a war breaking out in the neighboring Gaza Strip. My heart was aching for all the innocent lives abruptly taken. Two months passed and still no word from my Fulbright colleague in Gaza. Then, finally—one brief signal. Her message was short, and urgent: I need to get out.

There was no manual for this. I wasn't a diplomat or an aid worker. Just someone who couldn't look away. I began reaching out, pulling on every thread I could find—former classmates, distant contacts, anyone who might know something about borders, policies, etc. I learned she would need an invitation, legal backing, money—more than I had, but not more than we could gather.

People responded, friends joined in, alumni I hadn't spoken to in years sent donations, advice, and names. I formed a team to manage the campaign, update the page, and handle the funds. I ran between Cairo offices, stood for hours at crowded doors trying to get her name on the borders list. Her relatives came with me, and we pushed through the chaos together.

In the background, I was coordinating everything— an immigration lawyer in the U.S., professors willing to write letters, and institutions willing to listen. I wrote appeal after appeal, even guessing the CEO's email address at a prominent international education nonprofit until I reached him. He replied, and helped. Eventually, we secured her a safe pathway. My host institution in the U.S. agreed to host her thanks to the good relationship I had with them. We also arranged housing and healthcare for when she arrived. Looking back, I realize this wasn't just about one person helping another, it was rather a whole network coming alive with purpose, and thanks to the trust I'd built during my time in the U.S.

Leadership, I've learned, isn't about standing alone. It's about friendship, good connection, asking for help, listening, clear communication, coordinating, and trusting people to step in with their strengths. In times of crisis, it's not the loudest voice that makes the difference—it's the one that brings others together.

I, then, started working remotely with the British International School of Gaza (BISG) as a high school teacher of English & Social Studies. I was humbled by the students' strength and resilience. Studying for international exams under airstrikes? That's not just strength—that's grace.

But I also noticed something. When I mentioned living in the U.S., the students were curious. Some asked thoughtful questions about American people and culture. Others asked why the West allows Gaza's destruction. Their questions were fair. I knew then I needed to help them *connect* with people from the West. Real people. I wanted them to see that curiosity can lead to understanding, and understanding can lead to peace. Additionally, I realized that building a mindset of peace within them is part of the collective healing process they all should be aided through. I strongly believed in what Victor Frankl, the psychologist and a holocaust survivor, explained: those who can thrive in their life and do great things after tragedy are the ones who have the ability to find meaning behind hardships. My students needed meaning and connection.

That's when the idea of peace leadership truly took root in my work.

Peace leaders aren't born with all the answers—they just carry a vision bigger than their fear. My peace leader role model is President Mohamed Anwar El Sadat. His 1977's bold and controversial speech in the Israeli Knesset wasn't just about diplomacy or treaties. It was a moment of deep vulnerability and truth. A leader of an Arab nation, standing before former enemies, saying "No more war. No more bloodshed."

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What stood out in that speech wasn't only the political weight, but the human language. Sadat spoke not as a distant head of state, but as a father, a neighbor, and a man who had witnessed too much loss. He said, "I have come to you with an open heart... so that we might establish a durable peace together." That kind of honest, empathetic, and painfully brave leadership is what we are trying to nurture in our students now.

My now good friend Candace McCoy, the immigration lawyer who worked with me on my colleague's rescue mission, connected me with some friends from Culturing Peace and Euphrates Institute, who both work in the field of peacebuilding. From the very beginning, they were excited to collaborate and support our students in connecting more deeply with the world and with themselves. They have generously offered their time and energy to run weekly and monthly conversation sessions, serving as informal peace education. In these gatherings, we practice peace—not just by talking about it, but by living it. We explore what it means to find peace within ourselves, how to express that peace in our relationships, and how to lead with it. We dive into culture, self-expression, and even let the students take the lead sometimes, guiding sessions around the theme of peace leadership.

Like Sadat, we try to help our students speak with courage about their pain, their dreams, and their desire for connection—even when it is not easy. Peace leadership, I've learned, is not about being the strongest voice in the room—it's about having the heart to listen, and the humility to step into unknown spaces with hope.

I could especially see real results when the students joined one global call which amplified Palestinian voices—with participants from all over the world—and they spoke confidently and preached like peace leaders! Honestly, isn't that something? Students who were wondering about the thoughts of "the other" now have the skills to connect, communicate effectively, and influence others! To me, this would always be a reminder for why peace education matters so deeply. It's not just about teaching history or theory; it's about transformation. When students begin to see people they once saw as "the other" as human, as storytellers, as compassionate listeners, as peers, something shifts. From a curious question and a moment of listening to speaking up, holding space, and building bridges. That's the magic.

Peace education is not a curriculum, nor does it hand out answers. It creates space for hard questions and brave constructive conversations. It nurtures empathy in a world that often encourages indifference. Watching students step into that space—messy, honest, courageous—gives me hope. Not a vague, idealistic hope, but a grounded, practical one. Because if they can do it in a classroom or on a global call, they can do it anywhere.

If you've read this far and felt something stir in you, maybe it's time to explore what peace leadership might look like in your life.



Roba Khder

Whether you are an educator, a parent, a student, or just a human who cares and wants to help in manifesting peace, know that it takes a village, but a village always needs someone to lay the cornerstone. You don't necessarily need to know exactly where the stone should go—you just need the intense and deep realization of how crucial this one stone is and the courage to begin to build and put together the rest of the stones, even if you have to place that first stone in the middle of nowhere and even if no one else has joined you yet!

Because one stone matters. One connection can change everything.