

Realities and implications of being Palestinian-American

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Even though I have an American passport and I am a natural-born citizen, I was never comfortable saying "I am an American" until I studied abroad in London last semester. I convinced myself that I am not an American.

After considering this issue deeply, I realized that this feeling stems from the political implications and realities of being a Palestinian, rather than shame or discomfort in being an American. I will attempt to explain.

In Palestine my Palestinian passport reflects my identity, while my American passport makes my life easier. According to Israeli law, my American passport grants me more rights.

To get to Palestine, Palestinians must travel to Jordan and cross the Jordan River on a bus to get to Jericho. As an American, I can use the airport and fly directly into Tel-Aviv. Palestinians must spend five hours taking extensive back roads to get to Jerusalem, which is about 20 minutes away from Ramallah. I reach Jerusalem in 15 minutes because I am given the advantages of international travelers. I can take direct routes, without being tortured and humiliated at checkpoints.

According to a new Israeli law, Palestinians born in Jerusalem must change the birthplace on their Palestinian passports

to read "Ramallah," "Jenin," "Nablus," or anything else, as long as it is not "Jerusalem." My American passport states that my birthplace is "Jerusalem." Yet, my Palestinian passport falsely states that I was born in "Ramallah." When I renewed my Palestinian passport in 2005 the computer automatically changed my birthplace from "Jerusa-

lem" to "Ramallah."

My cousins were born in Detroit, have never lived in Palestine and do not have Palestinian passports. With American passports, they are allowed to visit Jerusalem and to travel freely throughout the country.

My brother and my sister and I were born in Jerusalem and have grown up in Palestine and possess Palestinian passports. We are forbidden to enter Jerusalem or any other city without written permission from the Israeli government—a permit that, as of a few years ago, is impossible to get.

According to Israeli law, my American passport gives me the freedom of movement. It awards me basic human rights. It awards me respect. But this respect is fragile—it is conditional.

My American passport has a stamp on it with my Palestinian identification number to distinguish me from other Americans.

When an Israeli official becomes suspicious of my identity and notices the stamp, my Palestinian identity will be discovered. I will be blacklisted. I could be jailed. I could be exiled. I will be punished

severely for daring to take advantage of the rights of "true" Americans.

My grandfather, Nabeel, was born in Detroit in June 1934 to Palestinian parents. He became the first natural-born American in his family. But he is not an American.

When Nabeel was one he moved back to Palestine with his mother. When he was 15, Nabeel was sent to Detroit to live with his uncles and cousins. He attended American public schools and grew up in the streets of Detroit. But he is not an American. When he was 18 he was drafted. He served in the American army. But he is not an American. When he was 26 he returned to Palestine. He met my grandmother—a native of Jerusalem. They married and had four Palestinian-American children. But they are not

Americans.

I was born in 1988 and received an American passport from the American consulate courtesy of my mother and my grandfather—two natural-born citizens. I moved to Maryland in 2001 but was quickly reminded by my classmates that I am not an American. I was singled out by my accent, my ability to speak another language, my dark and curly Arab hair, my Arab eyes and my "Arabic perspective."

"Where are you REALLY from?" they would ask. I have always wanted to respond with "Where are YOU really from?" and wondered if any would be able to tell me. Their attempt to alienate me and cast me as an outsider was stimulated by my natural tendency to alienate myself. I knew that I was different. They knew it too. Consequently, I was surprised when people in London were convinced based on my accent and my passport that I am an American.

"But I am a Palestinian," I would say. "I am not really an American." Confused, they would say "But you have an American passport. The only 'true' Americans are the Native Americans." "You are an American," I was told over and over again. I got goose bumps. I shivered. I was touched that they think I am equal. I was comforted that they think that being a Palestinian should not strip me of this equality. I look forward to returning to London and hearing someone say "You are an American," and, for a night, pretending that they are right.

In Palestine my Palestinian passport reflects my identity, while my American passport makes my life easier.

Today's Lesson: Do you have a blind spot?



with
Paula
Wilder

"Watch your blind spot!" I say to my daughter who is learning to drive in my car. I try to remain calm. I always end up yelling.

Sometimes I regret yelling. Other times I regret that I remained silent. One of the times I should have yelled out about another kind of blind spot that happened in a class discussion about English literary devices.

A former Guilford professor was having some home improvements made and told us that the painters were using metaphors when they talked with each other.

The professor said, "They are just painters. They don't know what metaphors are." Is that true? Do people who paint for a living not understand the uses of the English language?

I clean houses for a living, so does that mean I don't know how to define figures of speech? It seems to me that this professor, like many of us, had a blind spot. This professor's pertained to the working class. I should have yelled out in class, "Watch your blind spot!" But I didn't; I sat in class and didn't say a word, and no one else did either. Even though I sat in silence, this comment made me realize that although we don't call America Plato's Utopian world, somehow this pyra-

mid of power and superiority has filtered into our thoughts, conversations, and dogmatic statements.

The professor's comment signifies a problem that exists within our college, community, and world. This is a problem that elevates people in "white-collar" jobs above the "blue-collar" workers. It seems that some people think that if you are in the working class then you aren't educated, can't find anything better to do, have somehow settled, and don't know how to define figures of speech.

Recently I was introduced to a man who does miscellaneous jobs in people's homes. I was told later that he had a Ph.D. He teaches a couple of classes at a local college. He likes fixing things, so he does both jobs on a part-time basis. I would guess that he knows what a metaphor is. A friend of mine graduated from Guilford with honors. She worked in her field of study for a while, but realized she missed the physically active jobs she worked before graduating. She decided to return to a physical labor job. She uses the skills obtained from her degree in her spare time and just for fun.

She definitely knows how to identify all kinds of figures of speech. Is someone "better" because he or she doesn't work in a service-oriented job?

I see the interest in people's faces when they find out that I co-own a business. But once they realize it is a

cleaning business and that we do all the work rather than manage, the look changes from interest to something along the lines of "that's nice."

I actually take great pleasure in the scenario, because it has been duplicated so many times: the eyes light up with interest, then with the revelation of the type of business, the eyes go into a vacant stare, the conversation ends, or there is an immediate change of subject.

Look around our college community and realize what would happen if no one emptied the garbage, cleaned the bathrooms, vacuumed and mopped the floors, weeded the flowerbeds, cooked, washed dishes. Expand that to our city, our state, and our world. If you get down to the bottom line, all of these places could do without people who knew how to define metaphors – but who's to say they can't?

If clean-up, maintenance, and food preparation didn't happen then many people would be sick, everything would be in disarray, dirty and falling apart and you might have to paint your own house.

When I graduate in May, I am not closing down my business. I came to Guilford to expand my knowledge, grow, and learn. I will use this to do what I love – writing and speaking – in my spare time, for now. And until the stereotypes and labels fade, it doesn't matter whether or not I'm defined as a blue-collar or white-collar worker.

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