

**Postcards from Lebanon:
Expressive Writing and Telling
By People in Crisis**

**Introduced by
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Postcards from Lebanon

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Introduction

The Lebanese financial crisis and resulting hyperinflation has caused significant loss of incomes for households, creating widespread scarcity of food, shelter, and other basic needs. When combined with the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the situation has had catastrophic effects across the country, particularly among the most vulnerable groups. Increased tension between local communities and the large, mainly Syrian, refugee population has led to widespread mutual distrust, harassment, and discrimination. Lockdowns have provided additional cover for domestic and sexual abuse and trafficking while the online provision of education has faced barriers including lack of digital access and a cementing of gender roles in quarantined households whereby girls are called upon to take up domestic work and leave behind their studies.

The work presented in the following pages are translations from the Arabic of writing and storytelling which arose in response to a series of recent Expressive Writing and Telling initiatives conducted in Lebanon as part of an Arts and Humanities Research Council - Global Challenges-funded research project, *Expressive Life Writing and Telling During Crisis: Addressing Urgent Needs in the Akkar Governorate, Lebanon*.

Expressive Writing and Telling (EWT) is a form of storytelling that draws on imagination and creativity to express emotion and thereby support well-being and the building of resilience. In previous research projects conducted in various regions of Iraq and Lebanon, Campbell and Jensen have demonstrated that specially adapted versions of EWT, developed in collaboration with partners who have local knowledge and expertise in the delivery of humanitarian aid and intervention, can measurably increase the well-being of individuals in conflict and post-conflict regions, and aid in the development of social cohesion for vulnerable communities.

The aim of our most recent project in Akkar was to create a more flexible and adaptable curriculum and delivery for EWT during the current multi-faceted crisis. The project sought to forge a framework of support to help both local Lebanese and refugee communities create individual life plans that focus on the future, to enhance coping mechanisms, to build individual resilience, and support community cohesion. Details of the exercises and writing and telling prompts used in this and other EWT projects, as well as supporting research and information on the EWT methodology can be found here: <https://expressivewritingforall.com/en/>

The full handbook is available here [The Expressive Life-Writing Handbook - Open Research Online](#)

The reflections that follow have been gleaned from the work of participants who have engaged with a series of writing and/or storytelling prompts that form the EWT curriculum. They are short, fragmentary, reflective, imaginative, and often deeply moving. Some have been produced in workshop settings, prior to lockdown, others in one-to-one settings or on phone messaging apps, and still others arose as part of an adjunct pilot project undertaken by volunteers from another local Lebanese non-profit organisation: SHiFT Social Innovation Hub, based in Tripoli. SHiFT established that there was an urgent need for well-being support and opportunities for future planning for the adolescents in their care. To this end they piloted a newly devised EWT curriculum adapted during the current research project and aimed at adolescent participants. In every case, the participants granted permission for their words to be published in anonymised form for academic and research purposes, as here. We have grouped these pieces under headings to reflect their wide-ranging content and concerns: “Expressive Writing: Remembered places, Shared stories”; “Expressive Telling: Difficult Subjects”; “Writing about Families; Writing about Ourselves”; “Writing about Experiences in Covid 19”; “Thoughts and reactions from younger participants”; “Expressive telling from the heart”

Campbell and Jensen are deeply grateful to the AHRC-GCRF for funding this initiative, to the amazing team at Akkar Network for Development for their generous engagement in co-research and their tireless endeavours to care for their clients, and to the volunteers at SHiFT for trialling the curriculum to support adolescents who are facing an uncertain and often worrying future. But most of all we wish to thank the participants themselves: the brave women and young people in Lebanon who engage in these exercises and who have given permission to showcase their writing and telling in the hope that their work may have positive impact.

Siobhan Campbell and Meg Jensen 2022

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Expressive Writing: Remembered Places, Shared Stories



1.

I love Lebanon, nowhere smells the same as Lebanon.

Though our Civil war ended 1990, it's not had closure, no one talks about why it ended, so did it really end, or is it waiting there to happen again? Could it become itself again, how would we know it if we saw that? We are always just on the brink. Or maybe we are already in it and do not know.

We are brought up in a small proud country. We have a mentality that we use to be hardy and able.

The old saying goes: You never throw a stone in the well that you drink from. We look after the small people, the small surroundings, the places and the people.

But without self-reflection, we will not grow.

Narrative is a gentle way in, an expression of a thinking about things, an expression of feeling differently about things. This is what my writing is doing, it is an active thinking way of writing and thinking at the same time.

2.

When I am sad or alone, I remember the stories we were told.

I think this story is mixed in with my own story.

When the elder sultan called in the governor of the city, he wanted to take away his possessions. He said the governor had stolen, he had cheated on the taxes from the fruit and the crops. But the truth was the crops and the fruit had been damaged by a rainstorm and battered by wind.

It was true that the previous year's harvest had indeed been plentiful, and this year the earth had produced barely enough for the people to stay alive. But the governor was not a thief. He had in fact done all that he could.

He knew to save some seed and use it to make more seed.

But the elder sultan did not know the ways of the people and though

the governor produced his account books, written on paper,

The sultan tore these up.

Where is the seed you have stolen? he said.

But there was none to be found as it was in the ground.

I will take away all your possessions the sultan said, and he did.

So, the governor was left without anything and with no one who could help him as they could not be seen with him.

That year the sultans' family had to move because they had no food.

They moved far away and became destitute.

But the next year the seeds came forth again with the new crop and new bread was made and the people ate and toasted the name of the governor.

This is how I have learned to cope with the different years and the lean years and to hope for the better years to come sometime in the future

3

This is the place I remember

Hear the cedar trees in the lightness of the wind calling

Step down to the ancient wood where the voices of the past are calling

What truths are they telling us if we could hear them now

Here is a flower I offer to the river where it runs quickly

Here is the little stream that feeds the riverbank

Walk through the green wood thinking of water

And hear the voices of the past telling us to be wary

4

'Beirut is no more'

Torrent and storm

The cranes are falling

The buildings are stuttering and coming apart

Where there were windows, now they are gaping open with holes

Where there were families, now there are none

They have all left this place to find shelter elsewhere

Where they are gone, I cannot tell

Expressive Telling: Difficult Subjects



1

Here I thought I will find solace, here I thought I will meet my brothers.

But my brothers have beaten me and there is no solace.

The solace has evaded me and there is no brotherhood.

Here I think I see the futures, but the futures do not include my children.

My children have run to other places, other futures, and they have left me behind.

2

When my child died, I felt it was my fault

We had come from war but found another conflict

We did not know who the enemy was here

Maybe the enemy was ourselves

When my child died, I wanted clothes to bury him in

I wanted a suit from my home to bury him in

Something he would wear into the after life

Something he might meet me again in

I could not find the clothes to bury my child

Then the social workers helped me

Then I saw that kindness still is existing

Then I heard the kind words of the social workers

Then I did have the clothes, they were blue and white but that is not important

They were what I wanted for my child

My poor dead child

3

Today I want to tell you my story through my experience of an expressive writing exercise, entitled 'Writing about the family'. I wrote about me and my family. I started five years after my marriage. I lived happily with my husband and my two children – a girl and a boy. My husband had changed, and he had started to treat me harshly.

It was because of his mother, who had suddenly begun to hate me. The problems began to increase every day until my daughter was a year and a half old. I was upset and went to my family home and stayed there for three months. At that time my mother-in-law found a second wife for my husband. She said to him, I will give you money to get married and I will raise your children.

When I heard the news that he was married I didn't panic, and I decided to be strong and stay with my children because I can't be away from them. After three months I returned to my husband's house and I was pregnant with my third child, and I lived with my husband's parents through the bittersweet time, until he married his third wife after four years of his second marriage.

There were many problems, and every day his aggression was increasing. He hit me and fought with me about everything. And I lost my voice. If I was upset, I would go to my family home for several days and then come back - this was my situation.

After a while my mother-in-law and his other wives hated us. He had taken a fourth wife. But this time my parents weren't pleased. My husband and I quarrelled, and my children were split up. My mother-in-law hated me and made him divorce me and took my children from me. My Lord will avenge them and bring me and my children back together again. This is my hope.

Writing about Families; Writing about Ourselves



1

An 'unsent' letter

Dear mother,

How much I miss you, in your presence and in your absence, because of your tenderness, because you did not leave me on that day of all days, and because Paradise exists under the feet of mothers. I wrote this letter to you, the greatest mother in this world, because when you left, you left a huge vacuum in my life.

And because you are the strength that I derive in order to live; you are the most important person in my life because I love you so much and because you are the greatest person who struggled and worked and tired and challenged against every difficulty in order to provide me with everything I ask for, and you never missed anything.

And I thank you so much for putting me through my studies, and for helping me to study and learn and gain a degree. I tell you how proud I am of you because you are my mother, and you are so dear to my heart. You are the light that guides me and keeps me on the right path. I love you so much.

When I am asked to write about myself, the first thing that comes to my mind is to write about everything that has happened to me, my problems and the things that have caused me sadness – or about everything in my life that causes me to be happy and feel relaxed. I'm not comfortable with writing when I don't feel confident in myself and when I feel very sad and sorry for myself.

What inspires me and encourages me to write stories about my life is knowing that it will increase my awareness and help me to be confident in myself and able to face the difficulties I've encountered in my life.

2

I always feel sad. 13 years ago I intended to leave my husband... but I got sick. My family took me to the doctor and I found out I was pregnant. After that I was bound to this long marriage because I could never leave my son because he is my entire life, my light, my only hope in this life. And I wish every girl were told this when they get married.

I want to read this letter to my son. My dear son, I wish I had money to build you a house and I hope you are one of the most successful in your studies. And I wish you happiness for your life, my O..., and I wish you longevity, my love.

I was encouraged to participate in this group so I did, and I overcame the pain that was inside me and I was encouraged to do Expressive Writing. I expressed things that happened to me that I had not previously expressed. I thank all the staff for this project.

Writing about Experiences in Covid 19



1

I have my baby, but formula milk is very hard to find. My brother brought some back from Jordan. He had to lie at the airport. My friend had to get pregnant again so she could keep feeding the baby she has already, she cannot stop breast feeding as there is no baby milk. There was one place with some baby milk, but they could not give it out as they had no paper to record it on, they had not got the stamp (Translator: think this is the official stamp, with date etc) they needed to give. It could be difficult if they had not stamped the papers.

I cannot be in touch with my family in Sarmada سوريا as there is not internet, and phones now do not work, a pylon is down. I did write them but now there is no paper to write on, we used all the bits. When I see a shop with foods, I see what they have, if I can afford it. Subsidies have been stopped on beans, rice, the foods we most need are too expensive. One day 100 Lebanese pounds a bag, next day 500 more!

What makes me happy is when I can say "Electricity is back!" but fear of what the cartels and corrupt politicians can do to us, that the country will fail more, makes me sad, worried, concerned, and afraid.

The hoarding of vaccines, the hoarding of the aid packages, selling them on the black market or managing the supply only when it suits them for major profits. Or vaccines smuggled to Syria, and we know they need it, but we need it too here. I cannot get simple things of the past like heartburn tablets but worse, if you are diabetic, there's no hope. But still you try, we carry on, despite the lack of everything.

2

Queuing for diesel as otherwise my husband will not be able to drive to work shifts work at night – I do three hours, then my sister does three hours. We get up to queue at 4am. We will share this petrol between families.

We queue for over a kilometre. It is hot here. People around us are getting annoyed by this. Local officials seem to be able to get in front of the queue.

3

I am afraid at the petrol station. I have to go on my own. I am so tired. There are men who are smoking near the fumes. Yesterday, a man was shot after a fight. The bullet pinged back and my colleague A..... could have been injured or killed.

Civil war ended 1990 – but it's not had closure, no one talks about why it ended, so did it really end? Right now, it feels the same as it did then, fear everywhere. More guns. This is what we can do in telling stories of our experiences, being self-critical, self-reflective. We are brought up - small country, proud, this is the saying –

You never throw a stone in the well that you drink from

This is why it is hard to share these thoughts now -

But without self-criticism we will not grow -

Narrative is a gentle way in, expression of what we need to say.

4

I am aide at R.... hospital. I thought our hospital would be okay as it is not funded by the government but we are not okay. The executive cannot access their own funds because of the banking crisis. There is no air conditioning now, the wards are too hot. The lights are off, everywhere is dark. We are working in the dark. They have to keep the generator for the operations and some acute wards. I am doing more than ever with helping nursing staff members. I think I could now be a nurse, train as a nurse, if ever things get normal.

But do not come in with infected wound or blood as our hospital does not have antibiotic for you. Find somewhere else. Only the patients having operations get the antibiotic. Medicines are running out. They come in over the border, some are Soviet, we don't know if they work.

5

We have not had much variety in our food since before the COVID. Even bread is costing too much now. We bake a Za'atar – we can make this on very little. Things like meat and green vegetables cannot be seen.

The banks use our money as they want to. We will never see it again.

6

Everything is shutting down. We have to do everything in the two hours that we have electric power. The children are crying. They cannot see inside. One of my family had COVID. Our neighbours will not speak to us now.

My mother has cancer but there is no treatment. We cannot go to buy the treatment as there is none. She will die but not of COVID, but because of COVID and the corruption.

Thoughts and Reactions from Younger Participants



1. "Following my participation in this curriculum I learnt that my life matters, and some people are interested in listening to my story and together we could use to support other people" 17-year-old Lebanese female.
2. "Having someone listen to what I am saying just for the sake of listening meant the world to me. I never knew I could matter to someone" 14-year-old Lebanese male.
3. "This activity taught me how to look at things from different perspectives, it allowed me to highlight on my biggest fear, identify different elements, dissect the problem and act accordingly" 16-year-old Syrian female.
4. "For some reason I thought I can bury my fears and get over my worries without knowing that this will have repercussions on other members of my family. Participating in the Expressive Writing taught me how to identify the real challenge, address it in an efficient manner and find ways to overcome negative feelings" Syrian male, 12 years old.

Expressive telling from the heart



1 'Everything is changed'

I am 23 years of age. I am from Syria. I am here in Lebanon with my family due to the war. I live with my husband and three small children in a small room in North Lebanon. I will not say where.

We fled our village near Homs 5 years ago. We had just been married. Our house had been flattened already. I had to find work, whatever I could do, because my husband could not work, was not allowed to work. I worked in the fields near my home village, it was hard work. My back was hurting. I had to take one of the children with me. The children played together in the shade in the corner of the field.

When we came here to Lebanon, I thought it would be better. The government and the aid workers do their best. But my life and the children's lives have changed. My husband has changed. He used to be the leader. Now he too has to queue for the water and medicines. He has hit me, which he did not do in Syria. He shouts. I am blamed for things that cannot be my fault.

How will we ever go back? Even if the war ends, there is nothing there for us now. And there is nothing here for us. Can we feed our children here better than in Syria? We have to get the aid that comes two days in the week. We go with everyone else, and we get the grain and the flour. My children are only hungry in the evenings, so they drink some water and go to bed.

Nothing will be the same. Everything is changed.

2. 'Education is what can change the things that we see'

From the case worker: A... is a 50-year-old grandmother looking after her three grandchildren. Her own son, the father of these children, returned to Syria seven months ago to join in with his family to try and rebuild their house but they were bombed again and now she has not heard from him. He asked her to mind the children until he came for them. They live in a hut. There is no heating. They burn what they can get in the forest for warmth. We gave them blankets and sleeping bags. A...tries to do work some days as a cleaner. This is her story:

I am alone. I divorced long ago. My daughter died, the mother of these children. How I am living, how I have nothing. They have to help me secure food and medicine. Their mother has a death certificate. This means we have the papers to get the aid. My son went to Syria to try for a return there. He may not have got past the border. He could have been arrested. People disappear. My brother has not been heard of. My nephew, and two of the cousins – so many lost. No one knows where they are. Will they ever be seen again? Our country is better than this. It could be better again. But it's not safe yet. If it were safe, that would be different. I will stay until I feel it is safe. But if my son comes, I will have to go back with him and the children. I want them to go to school here but if I am at work or going to get the medicines, they have to stay here, they cannot go out. I want them to be educated. Education is what can change the things that we see, the things that we want to be different.