

# *Seasons of Life: Ex-detainees reclaiming their lives*

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This paper describes therapeutic/psychosocial support work with Palestinian ex-prisoners. This work draws upon imagery from nature's seasons and elements to create conversations based on a 'seasons of life' metaphor. This metaphor enables ex-detainees to trace their journey through the stages of detention, incarceration, and release into society. This approach offers opportunities for ex-detainees to offer double-storied testimonies of their prison experiences and to draw upon the skills and knowledges they used to endure incarceration in order to move forward with their lives.

Keywords: prisoners, ex-prisoners, torture, trauma, rites of passage, migration of identity, narrative therapy.

## INTRODUCTION

When we hear the word 'seasons', its echo holds us. It reminds of many things: some things are renewed, some things change. Every year, the seasons come and go in circles. This happens for all people around the world, although we pass through the seasons at different times. For all of us, the seasons of life come to break routines, and to deliver a new child of hope. Around here, the seasons of life are also associated with devotion for life and with survival. This is perhaps especially true for people who have been imprisoned.

When I hear words from ex-prisoners, I am reminded of the struggles they have faced. Just hearing the word 'prison' can bring forth painful memories for some:

- 'I don't like remembering prison times.'
- 'I felt scared in the cell, where I spent the worst and most difficult moments of my life.'
- 'I didn't realise how much I'd miss my friends who I left in prison.'
- 'Sometimes, now, life's clock feels like it is always running, and if I stop, then I will lose time.'

In my work with ex-prisoners, I attempt to honour their struggles during detention. At the same time, I try always to remember the words of one ex-detainee who described to me that experiencing detention, just like experiencing being far away from your native land for a period of time, means you become 'tempered like steel'. There may be aspects of life within prison which they are proud about and memories which they hold strongly in the bottom of their hearts. In the conversations we share after they have been released, I seek to assist them to open their eyes to new meanings and to the new circumstances, the new world they are now within. The metaphor of the seasons of life helps me to do so.

Palestinians live under occupation. Currently there are over 9,700 prisoners in Israeli detention facilities, where they are subjected to various forms of physical and psychological pressure. In the midst of this they are separated from family members, often isolated in solitary confinement with no access to information about the outside world. After all they go through during detention, when prisoners are released, there are terrible struggles. So much

has changed in terms of how they relate to themselves and to others. They must begin to adapt to a new environment, reconnect with old friends and family who have limited understanding of what they have been through, and leave friends in the prison behind.

## rites of passage / seasons of life

In all of our lives, we move through different rites of passage; for instance from being a child to an adult. As we live life on one stage, we face particular changes and challenges and we develop our own expertise. All that we learn on one stage of life affects who we are and how we relate to those we know. When the time comes to separate from one way of living and to move to another, these are moments of enormous challenge. Everything that is familiar and comfortable on the first stage is no longer. We are forced to face changes and new struggle. Life doesn't always provide us with choices. Sometimes we are placed in situations beyond our control and it is then that we must find ways to live and to protect our sense of self from being demolished.

When we move from one stage of life to another, it can make all the difference if we use the expertise we developed on the first stage in order to face the difficult situations of the next. All that we learnt in autumn can assist us to deal with winter. All that we learnt during winter can help us throughout spring. And all that we learnt in spring can provide comfort during summer, and so on. Only when there is this sense of continuity can we look forward to life. And as the seasons cycle, we can then remember what we have passed through, how we have changed, and how we have remained the same.

While meeting with ex-prisoners, the metaphor of the seasons of life provides a way of providing continuity for those who have been through great hardship. It provides a chance for them to speak about the different stages or seasons that they have passed through and how what they learnt in one season can assist them in another. Significantly, this provides for conversations of pride, not shame. We speak about the tough experiences and their profound struggles and also about their achievements and what they learned about life through time in prison. Importantly, we talk about

the abilities and skills they developed in dealing with life in prison and how such approaches are able to assist them in their lives now. Often the person has not been conscious or aware of these abilities until our conversations. By finding ways to have these conversations we can build a sense of continuity between how they dealt with life in prison and how they might live their lives now. More significantly, by having conversations of pride about prison experiences, we can also contribute to re-building a sense of self that has often suffered terribly.

## FOUR 'SEASONS' OF PRISON EXPERIENCE

Since ex-detainees' experience can be seen as consisting of four stages, we can relate these stages to the four seasons:

1. Detention stage (autumn)
2. Cell and investigation stage / isolation stage (winter)
3. Prison stage (spring)
4. After release (summer).

Before I start these conversations, I remind myself of the following Palestinian sayings:

- Every day, we say goodbye to the sunset, and every morning, we say hello to the sunrise.
- In spite of the presence of darkness in every night, the sky always hosts the stars and the moon which lighten the road.
- When the sun enters into challenge with the rain and it wins, this is when the rainbow appears between the clouds in the sky.
- At the end of every season, we await the beginning of the new season with pleasure.
- We can live today only because we lived yesterday. We live today so that we will have the ability to live tomorrow.

These sayings assist me to evoke the power of nature and the seasons in my conversations. I then proceed to speak with ex-prisoners using the metaphors of the seasons to guide us.

## STAGE 1: DETENTION STAGE – AUTUMN

The detention stage is the time when the person is separated from their familiar lives, their friends, their families, and relations. One of the most recognisable features of autumn is in leaves changing colours and falling. Even though autumn might bring with it the loss of summer, and concerns about what is ahead, it also paints a beautiful image in the changing colours of the leaves, and in the fallen leaves carpeting the ground. The image of different coloured leaves guides the questions I ask about the different times during detention: green fallen leaves represent the arrest itself, orange fallen leaves represent the subsequent detention and further interrogation, and yellow fallen leaves represent paying attention to the exceptions or unique outcomes during this detention time.

### GREEN FALLEN LEAVES: THE ARREST

I choose the image of green fallen leaves to talk about the time of the arrest itself, as it's the green leaves that are closest to the life they have already known: attached to the tree, surrounded by what is familiar and supportive before they embark on their journey of change. Green leaves are still holding the tree, still connected to the strength of resistance as they face the winds:

- What happened when you were arrested?<sup>1</sup>
- What time did it happen?
- Where did it happen?
- What did the soldiers do during the arrest?
- How did you face this? What did you do?
- Tell me more about these abilities in facing difficult times?
- Does this relate to other skills you have?

### ORANGE FALLEN LEAVES: THE DETENTION

Orange leaves are under increasing stress. They are more likely to be affected by the buffeting of winds. Their position is unstable. How long will they be able to hang on? When will they fall? What will happen then? Ex-detainees have told me that this image of uncertainty is very reminiscent of their time after arrest, during detention when there is the presence of fear and instability:

- After you were arrested, where did the soldiers take you?

- Can you describe this place more?
- How did they take you there?
- Tell me more about your reactions to this place?
- Did you experience torture there? Are you able to tell me about this?
- What were the main challenges you faced during this time?
- What were you thinking? What were you feeling?
- What new things were you exposed to during this stage?
- How did you respond to these?
- Does this relate in some ways to the skills you spoke about which you drew on during the arrest?
- How is it that you are able to deal with such difficult challenges in this way?

### **YELLOW FALLEN LEAVES: EXCEPTIONS AND UNIQUE OUTCOMES**

Why yellow leaves for exceptions? Surely, yellow leaves are the ones that have fallen to the ground? Yes, but this doesn't need to mean weakness; instead, it could mean a new vantage point, a break from being buffeted by winds high up in the tree, and time to prepare for the new challenges of being in a new environment ...

- From the first moment of arrest to the times you were in the investigation centre, were there any moments in which you felt stronger than others?
- Were there any thoughts you had that assisted you during these times?
- What does it mean to you that there were these moments, these thoughts?
- What were the sources of power for these exceptions? Where or who did they come from?
- Did you use these exceptions as a source of strength? Or do these exceptions give you a power to face new challenges in the future?
- Does it make a difference to think about these exceptions?

### **STAGE 2: THE CELL AND INVESTIGATION / ISOLATION STAGE – WINTER**

After the initial detention and questioning, detainees are moved to another facility, or another part of the facility. Often, they will be placed in isolation. If not, they will be put in an overcrowded cell. Neither are appealing options: often cells are small, smelly, and unhygienic. In this stage, detainees routinely experience frustration, tension and anxiety, and restlessness caused by their living conditions.

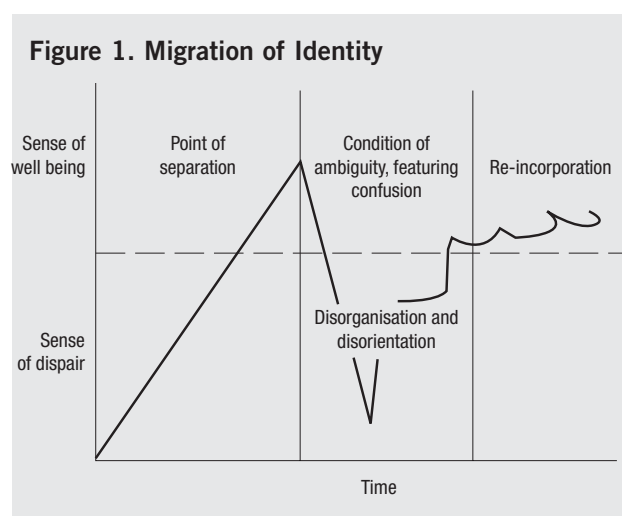
They will then also usually be exposed to several kinds of physical or psychological torture. While I do not wish to distress readers, I think it is important to list just some of the things that detainees can be exposed to. This is important not just in naming what occurs and setting a context for this work, but in preparing other workers for the realities of doing this kind of work:

- Solitary confinement
- Confinement in a very cold cell
- Confinement in a crowded cell
- The sound of shooting from other cells, or other parts of the prison
- Unexpected inspections at night
- Deprivation of food and water for long times
- Being forced to eat bad and unhealthy food
- Deprivation of sleep for long periods
- Deprivation of use of the toilet
- Deprivation of daily self-care and cleaning, such as not being allowed to clean your dish, or brush your teeth
- Deprivation of any stimulus, such as sound or vision
- Deprivation of knowing time and place (Where am I? What is the time?)
- Exposure to bright light for long periods
- Exposure to darkness for long periods
- Sight deprivation by blindfolding, or covering of the head in a smelly bag
- Deprivation of family visits
- Deliberate deprivation of medical treatment
- Exposure to insults about one's family, religion, habits, or political or national identity
- Being degraded, such as by being urinated or defecated on, or being forced to be naked.

In light of these experiences, it is important that during conversations with ex-detainees we do not re-traumatise them by only asking about their experiences of torture and trauma. To this end, it is important to 'doubly-listen' for the story of not just what the person was subjected to, but how they responded: for example, how they resisted, made sense of their experience, or survived (Denborough, 2006). These conversations can also involve 'scaffolding' conversations, to provide some sense of movement from what has been known and familiar, to what might be possible to know in the detainees' lives, and in their sense of themselves (see White, 2007).

## A MIGRATION OF IDENTITY

This 'seasons of life' approach is based upon the concept of 'the migration of identity' (White, 1995). When any person undergoes a significant 'migration' this involves a 'rite of passage'. And within any rite of passage there are three phases: life before the point of separation; the 'liminal' stage, characterised by a condition of ambiguity, confusion, and disorientation; and the reincorporation stage (Turner, 1969). When charted visually, these three stages on the horizontal axis can be plotted against degrees of a sense of despair or a sense of wellbeing on the vertical axis, as shown in Figure 1.



This chart can be used to trace the literal separation from life-as-familiar during the arrest and detention, through confinement and interrogation, to release. However, because it also incorporates

people's sense of self during disruptive times, it is very helpful for people who have experienced trauma. This chart shows that it is not as easy as just 'going back to one's old life' after challenging events. I find this chart especially useful when people are in danger of feeling that they're going backwards, or if they have been diagnosed as 'in relapse' of some kind ... the migration of identity map literally charts the difficult terrain that people face, and shows why it might make sense that they would pause in some places, and even double back at other times. Even when people might 'fall down' while walking up a mountain, this doesn't mean they're back to the very beginning of where they started from, or that the heights they reached are suddenly discounted. At all times, the migration of identity shows that the overall journey is forwards and upwards; it's a chart that does not allow people to experience a sense of failure, which is critical within post-trauma work.

During conversations about the migration of identity, we focus on the small details of actions the person took in order to adapt and endure their life circumstances while in prison. Even if they were living in a very small and unhealthy place which consists only of a blanket that is tough and worn, and has the toilet in the same cell room; even if it is a dark room, with a bad smell, and wet and mouldy walls, the person will be doing many things to survive, to resist despair and hopelessness, and to prevent themselves from succumbing to death. We explore the small details of these actions of self-preservation and discuss their meaning. Here is an example of one prisoner's actions of survival during the investigation period.

### The Insect Story – Namousah

*Ahmad is forty-nine years old. He was in prison in Israel and in Jordan. He first experienced detention when he was thirteen years old. The next time he was imprisoned he was twenty and he experienced solitary confinement for nine months and thirteen days continuously. This was the investigation period. During these nine months,*

*he was under the pressure of investigation.*

*When he was in the cell there was no light, nothing to use. He didn't know what time it was. It was a very unhealthy room with insects. There is a particular sort of insect that Palestinian people call Namousah which makes a 'zzzzz' sound. During solitary confinement, Ahmad would hear this sound but he couldn't see where the insect was because the cell was so dark and the insect was also a dark colour. Ahmad would just listen to Namousah's voice going 'zzzzzzzz'.*

*All the time, Ahmad was thinking, 'how can I catch this insect?' During the investigations, when he was being interrogated, Ahmad would focus his mind on Namousah. He focused on the insect rather than on the investigation. When he would get back to his cell, he would talk with Namousah: 'Where are you? What do you need from me? Why do you do this to me? Can we be friends?'*

*Ahmad is a writer but he didn't have any papers or pens when he was in prison. Throughout his time in this cell he would memorise the words that he needed to express the story of his relationship with this insect. At the end of his time in prison, he still wasn't able to catch Namousah, but he put it in his mind that he would capture it the next time he was detained. When he was released Ahmad then wrote a story, a novel. Its title is Namousah. He's going to bring this story in to show me one day.*

*For Ahmad, Namousah was his key survival method while in solitary confinement.*

## **WINDS, STORMS, RAIN, AND RAINBOWS**

In my part of the world, winter is often characterised by winds and storms, rain, and rainbows. I draw on each of these three elements in my questions in this stage.

### **WINDS AND STORMS**

Winds and storms are metaphors for the investigations themselves. During these times, the prisoner may be exposed to torture, and as a result be in a near-constant state of panic, anxiety, and fear. As well as the questions from the investigators, the detainees themselves have many questions crowding their thoughts: Why am I here? What do they want from me? What will happen to me? When will I be released from here? Shall I talk or not? If I speak, will I always feel shame?

Added to these questions are many doubts that are generated by the interrogators. Particularly damaging are the ways in which interrogators start to make the detainees doubt themselves and become suspicious of their friends, family members and relatives. Investigators often use a technique where one appears to care about the detainee and empathises with them, while the other appears tough, obviously knows a lot of details about the detainee's life and family, and shows a disregard for the detainee's welfare. When this technique is used over time, and combined with various forms of interrogation, it can add a second experience of confusion to the detainee's experience: 'How bad will the "bad one" get? Why isn't the "good one" doing more to help me? If I talk, will they keep the promises they have made or not?' And so on. These questions are heightened, as the detainee does not know what to expect during the interrogation.

However, over time, detainees begin to understand what the investigators are doing, and how this 'game' is played. Detainees also develop skills in discerning the moods of the investigators, inviting the investigators to relate to them as real people, and how to gauge when a situation is 'real', and when it is more of a 'game'. These skills that detainees develop are exceptions to the dominant experience of helplessness. In this way, in spite of the storms and thunder, lightning can also occur, which can lighten the road for a moment. And, over time, as the storms lighten, the way becomes more discernable, and it's more possible to choose a path. In winter here, sometimes, once a storm passes, then the earth is covered by snow.



We describe this as a 'fine white dress'. Not only is the snow a welcome respite from the wind and storms, but it also invites playfulness and fun that would have been unthinkable only moments before.

Questions I use during the 'winds and storm' section include:

- During the investigation, can you tell me about moments you might have been scared and anxious?
- How did you face these feelings?
- What motivated you to respond in this way?
- Can you tell me more about this? What was the source of power for these motivations?

## THE RAIN

The rain represents time that the detainee spends in confinement, whether this is in the suffocating isolation of solitary confinement, or in a rank, overcrowded cell. Solitary confinement is usually in a small cell, just one metre by one metre – not even long enough to lie down in. These cells are dark and smell bad, and detainees have no exposure to sun or fresh air, save for a very small window. Not only can detainees not lie down properly, but there is no bed, or even a sheet.

Sharing a cell brings different struggles. Apart from the filth and overcrowding, sharing a cell can expose detainees to other fears and doubts. Spies, which we call 'birds' in Palestine, are placed in cells to collect information from and about prisoners. Even if a 'bird' is not in a cell, the very possibility encourages prisoners to mistrust each other, and can limit the times that prisoners reach out to each other.

Even in the face of all this, detainees find ways to adapt to these circumstances. Particularly when there are other prisoners nearby, detainees report that they begin to feel a sense of safety. Sometimes, even those in isolation have contact with other prisoners during dishwashing and personal cleaning times. Some have reported that they never knew they would enjoy washing the dishes or brushing their teeth so much. Detainees describe ways in which they offer each other psychological support. When it is possible to make contributions to others to deal with life in the cells, they say that this provides a kind of satisfaction.

So, while rain might bring hardship, it can also carry favours. And there are ways to shield oneself from the cold and wet, like with clothing and

umbrellas. My task is to thicken stories about this: what did detainees do to weather the rain? What did they do to adapt and to contribute to others?

- Were you placed in solitary confinement? If so, can you tell me what conditions were like in the cell?
- How did you deal with being in these conditions?
- Did anyone or anything help you to feel more safe?
- Did you give any support or help to anyone else during this time, no matter how small?
- If so, did this in any small way bring some satisfaction?

## THE RAINBOW

The rainbow represents how the detainee spent their time in the cell. I am particularly interested in conversations about this that build a strong psychological identity. The ways detainees find to manage time when in the cells can be linked to their hopes, intentions, values, and commitments in life. By doing so, it is possible to re-author identities in ways that bring psychological strength.

**Green:** *Personal qualities (I chose green for personal qualities, as green reminds me of life and survival, which relates to the survival of detainees during their time in prison).*

**Blue:** *Intentions (blue reminds me of the sky, which is high and lofty, like many of our intentions!).*

**Dark blue:** *Commitments (commitments are related to intentions, just as the light blue of day is related to the dark blue sky of night).*

**Yellow:** *Values (yellow is sometimes used to denote jealousy, and our values are one of the things that I feel it is okay to guard jealously!).*

**Orange:** *Hope and dreams (orange always appears when the sun rises and sets, which reminds me of the hopefulness of the beginning of the day, and the dreams that sunsets can evoke).*

**Red:** Principles (red can signify danger, or 'stop'; similarly, we should stop and respect people's closely-held principles).

**Violet:** Skills (violet reminds me of the colours of new flowers; nature's skills in creating beauty and new life reminds me of the skills people have in creating new directions for their lives).

To assist with this, I use the image of the rainbow, which fits within this stage of the winter storms. Rainbows contain beautiful colours of life, and provide people with a chance to take a deep breath and reflect on their lives. This is especially so when the earth below is covered with snow.

In these 'rainbow conversations', I explore in detail what the person did during their time in the cell, how they managed this time, and how their actions (no matter how small) are linked to each of the colours of the rainbow. In doing so, we discover that new understandings of identity can come from acknowledging the 'old things' he or she did in the past.

Questions to draw out the colours of the rainbow include:

- When you were alone in the cell, how did you spend this time?
- What did you do? Can you tell me this in detail?
- Why did you choose these particular things? Does this relate in some way to expertise you developed in the past?
- Where did you learn these skills/values/intentions/commitments?
- When you were taking these small actions at the time, did you have a name for this? What did you call it?
- What name do you prefer to call these acts now?
- What is it like to think about these actions now? What does it say about you that you were able to do this when you were in detention?

## PATIENCE AND TOLERANCE

The following story illustrates one woman's 'rainbow'. Amal was imprisoned for three years:

*I was imprisoned for 3½ years from when I was twenty-two years old. My son was only eleven months old at the time and I spent 73 days in isolation. The first two weeks of investigation and pressure was a time of sorrow and grief. After that I sat in a cell and started to manage my time in many ways. I started to talk to other prisoners who were in neighbouring cells. We talked through the doors. I was the only woman in the prison at that time and I would manage my time in the cell by praying and by constantly walking between the walls of the cell. Sometimes I would get a bit calm, but it didn't mean that I had given up.*

*Eventually I worked out ways to tell the time. Every day they brought the breakfast meal at 7am, lunch at 11am and then dinner at 4pm. These times were used every day except Saturday. On Saturday the breakfast meal came at 8am. These rituals of meal times helped me to know the times of the day. I then arranged my prayer times according to the meal times. I am a Muslim and so I am used to knowing the times for prayers throughout the day. I am so used to orientating my life to the times we need to pray as Muslims, that with just a few cues I can know the prayer times without needing to look at a clock. This made a big difference to me.*

*Then, one day, I used my knowledge of the meal times and joined this with my knowledge of the prayer times to draw a clock on the wall and start using this to be able to tell the time. Also, the cell walls were very rough and this meant that when I washed my clothes, I could put my clothes up on the wall over the roughness. They would stay up on the wall and this would help them to dry. I also took toilet tissue and put it in the water and then stuck it on the walls. I used this tissue paper to write words like 'the prison is for heroes' or to write my name, or the date of my arrest, or the village where I came from. I also used*



*the toothpaste and wrote on the door of the cell. As every day passed I would make a mark: 52, 53, 54, 55. These were all ways of dealing with life in the isolation cell. These are ways of finding a routine, finding ordinary things in your life that bring feeling of comfort and safety. Even during the investigation stage I felt some safety because of this. But it took its toll too.*

*One day the investigator said, 'I will bring to you your son's picture to put on your cell wall so that you can spend your time looking at it'. And I responded, 'You know, anyone who sits and lives in these cells, their heart becomes tough, more tough than a stone'.*

*There were also things I would tell myself during these times that made a difference. I would say 'I cannot change this situation so I must just cope'. I feel there was an eternal power that pushed me to this thinking. Before prison, I liked joking and I was also patient. I also liked to challenge myself. I used all these ways of being in prison. My intention was to satisfy my God by praying and by standing up to the challenge I was facing. I felt that I must pass this examination before God, and this would help me. This is about eternal patience and being able to tolerate the pressure around me. My dreams revolved around passing these tests and not failing.*

*What name would I call this? What name would I give to what got me through this time? Patience and tolerance. I deal with life with this philosophy. All the time in isolation I said to myself, 'I'm imprisoned in this room. Its door is closed and the key is not with me, so I can't do anything. All I can do is adapt and wait for someone who is holding the key to open the door. This is about facing facts. This is about patience and tolerance.'*

*My principles come from religious commitment, moral commitment to be proud of myself, and familial commitments to be there for my family. My name, Amal, actually means 'hope' in Arabic. This is the name my family gave to me. At times when the door was locked, other prisoners would call out to me, 'Who are you?' And I would reply, 'I am Amal. My name means hope'. When I heard the voices of the others I felt comforted. They gave me strength. And my name made them feel stronger.*

### **STAGE 3: PRISON STAGE – SPRING**

Spring represents the stage when the detainee is taken from isolation and interrogation to a general prison, with other detainees. When detainees are moved, this can be a new time of anxiety. However, it is also a time of increased safety and familiarity: detainees will now be one of a number of other prisoners, they will see people they know, and they will make new connections. They have the opportunity to be more active and engage in daily activities. Importantly, they will have the chance to laugh together, resist together, cry together, go to sleep together, wake up together, and support each other.

Being in a larger group also means that detainees hear the stories of other prisoners' arrests and interrogation. These may be painful. In fact, they may be more painful than your own story. This brings a sense of empathy and concern, and individuals start to support those whose stories were more difficult than their own. This process brings mutual support. There is a Palestinian proverb about this: 'When someone listens to another person's problem, it makes their own problem easier'. In responding to other people's pain, our own pain is soothed. We make contributions to each other's lives through sharing stories and trying to help each other. This skill of give-and-take helps us in difficult situations to face our lives. This way of thinking is like taking a long breath. It's a way of creating hope.

During this prison time, detainees may be brought before a judge, and may be moved between different prisons. While this is disruptive, it also brings chances for more social interaction and connection. And, not only do detainees make friends, they often engage in political acts together while in jail – for example, going on hunger strikes to draw attention to issues of rights and dignity. In these ways, the ‘spring’ stage of prison can be reminiscent of spring in the outside world: a spring of flowers and going on journeys; a spring of new beginnings.

## FLOWERS

Once moved to a bigger prison, the other prisoners are like the different flowers in a garden or field. They are different colours, have different names, but they all have similarities. We can ask questions about these friendships and connections:

- What did moving in with other prisoners mean to you?
- What were some differences between the solitary cell and prison?
- How did this make a change to your life? Can you tell me more about this?
- Did being with others help you? How?
- Are there some stories about this that would help me understand this?
- Did you offer help to others?

## JOURNEYS

The passing of winter and the warming of spring makes some journeys possible that could not be made before. In questions about metaphorical ‘journeys’, we can ask about the interests and activities the detainee engaged in with others in the larger prison, such as visit times, group work, and activities (cooking, praying, singing, playing, joking, fasting, and so on). We can also ask about crafts and favourite pastimes in general:

- What was your favourite time when you were in prison with others?
- What did you like to do?
- What was your role in this? What were the things you did with others?
- How did you think about yourself during these times?

## Silent singing

Salma described the following story of her favourite time in prison:

*There was a particular time when we were in the common area. We would be allowed into this common area for three hours each day and me and my woman friends would sit around a circular table. We'd eat some biscuits and then we'd sing together. I forget myself when I start singing. I would forget myself when we were singing together. Whenever we started singing, however, the guards would come and make us quieten down. They would forbid us from singing. So, one day, when we started to sing and they told us to be quiet, we then started to sing without speaking, just using body language and silent movements. This was silent singing and it made us laugh!*

*We kept singing without voices for half an hour. We were singing traditional Palestinian songs, songs from wedding parties. We did all of this even though we were forbidden from doing it. Then we cast the biscuits into the air, and on our clothes. We were acting as if we had crazy movements. All seven of us were doing this at the same time. One would start doing some sort of crazy movement and then others would repeat it.*

Listening for these sorts of stories of prison life is significant. When I listen to the women who tell these stories, it brings joy. Even though they are in prison, they find ways to find joy among each other. Even among the storms and hardships, they find ways to care for each other. This is a part of the metaphor of the seasons of life: even in hardship we find gifts. When we are double-listening, there are many meanings to be found in the experience of imprisonment.

## STAGE 4: AFTER RELEASE STAGE – SUMMER AND THE SUN OF FREEDOM

Summer is the stage when the detainee is released from prison and returns to their relations, life, house, and other connections that they were separated from at the time of arrest. At this stage, I like to use the language of 'ex-detainee' and 'ex-prisoner', to help support the idea that the time of prison is behind them.

However, in returning to 'society', a major struggle for ex-detainees is that they have lived in quite different 'societies': the society before their arrest, the society of those arresting them, the prison society, and society after their release. Having been removed from one society, and then having to adapt to another greatly different one is hard enough. To have to do this over and over is part of the psychological trauma that detainees are exposed to: at each stage, what was known and safe is taken away. Connections are broken. New relationships must be formed. And, while returning to one's family and friends outside is something detainees look forward to, they are also aware that they will be leaving behind some very significant friends – who they may not be able to see for a long time. So, even at the time of release, hidden in the wings of freedom is also some pain.

In our culture, when ex-detainees re-enter their communities, there are a lot of ceremonies, food, and gatherings. This acknowledges not only their freedom, but also what they have stood up for – for themselves, their families, and other Palestinians. In this way, freedom is like the sun of a new day.

After the release and the ceremonies are over, the ex-detainee faces the world again – but of course, it is a different world, as they themselves are different. The challenges during this time can in some ways be the hardest. Trauma's common after-effects might be present – fear, flashbacks, physical injuries, and so on. Other unexpected struggles might also appear. For example, after release, some ex-detainees think that many doors will open for them after all that they have been through. However, they then find that they are just one person in a busy world. Alternately, routine tasks can at times seem too difficult or overwhelming – apparently for no reason at all. Not only might friends and family ask what is wrong with them, but ex-detainees themselves might think, 'Why am I acting like this? This is not me. I've never done this before', and so on.

All of these struggles and challenges in the ex-detainee's life need expertise in order to be dealt with. And this expertise comes from the past. To reconnect with a sense of competence, confidence, and ability, I have conversations with ex-detainees about the skills and knowledges they employed during their incarceration, and how these might be relevant to the challenges they are facing after release. When this is possible, these discoveries are like the honey that comes from the insect that may also sting you. Similarly, while summer might be very hot and even cause headaches during the day, summer nights invite us to look up at the moon and stars – so there is light of one kind or another all day long.

## THE SUN

The sun, here, is representative of future plans. These can include the ex-detainee's hopes and dreams, intentions, and planned achievements for the future and the skills they will draw on to realise these. When detainees are in jail, their thoughts are often about the future and their hopes for release. So, when the knock on the prison door means freedom, they walk up stairs of the future towards the sun of freedom. I once saw a video of detainees talking with each other about what they would do when released, and this included a wide range of dreams: getting married and having children, continuing education, looking for work, or engaging in projects for human rights and social justice. Even in the most extreme circumstances, dreams and hopes for the future are not extinguished. In light of this, I try to use the dreams that ex-detainees held while in prison as a starting point for their own path towards their sun of freedom.

One day, I visited an ex-detainee who wrote a sentence on a wall-hanging for his family when he was in prison: 'Your and my freedom is my last dream'. I asked him, 'Does this sentence mean that after your release that you have now realised all of your dreams?' In reply, he smiled and said, 'That was my dream when I was in prison. But now that I am released, I have a lot of other dreams, and I will work to achieve them. However, even if I reach them, I will continue dreaming and planning for my future. I will not stop dreaming now'.

Finally, in this part of the Seasons of Life I am also on the lookout for things that the ex-detainee misses or laments. For whenever someone is missing something, he or she is already looking forward to finding it.

Here are some questions about the summer sun of hopes and dreams:

- While you were imprisoned, what were you hoping for, what were you dreaming for?
- Where did these dreams come from?
- Who else was involved in the creation of these dreams?
- How did you hold onto these dreams throughout that time?
- Are those dreams from the past still significant to you?
- What are you hoping for now, what are you dreaming for?
- Where did these hopes and dreams come from?
- Who else was involved in the creation of these dreams?
- How are you managing to hold onto these hopes at this time? What helps to keep these hopes alive?

### To study and be ourselves

Mohamad described his dreams in this way:

*Since I have been released from prison, I have had a dream to have a job. This dream of wanting to work is very strong. I also have an ambition to continue my university studies and one day to graduate. This, I believe, will help to have a job. In order to work towards these dreams, the first thing that I must do is to care about my son, then continue my education, then get a driver's licence, then get a job, then buy a car, and then build a home. This is a series of dreams that add upon each other.*

*To achieve these dreams I must be patient and depend on myself. I am at university now. In one year I will graduate. My son is in school and I care about him. I took a computer course and I asked an institution to build for me a home. These are steps I am taking.*

*Throughout this entire process of trying to achieve my dreams, I always remember my father. Even though he was a poor man with an unstable income, he always helped me and all my brothers and sisters to continue our education. Always he invited us to care about our studying and to be ourselves. Now I carry on his dreams.*

## THE MOON

Given its links with romance, the moon in Palestinian culture is suggestive of happiness and comfort. The moon can also be emblematic for love, soul, emotions, and the senses. And always, the moon has many memories. What is more, as it begins its cycle as a thin sliver and then builds to a crescent, and then to a full moon, this process can symbolise the gradual thickening of a story over time.

Drawing on this imagery and associations, I relate the moon to conversations about the best or favourite times inside and outside prison, and moments of happiness in the ex-detainees' new lives. In a context of so much suffering, talking about happiness may at first seem strange, but, to me, it is crucial. These conversations are about reconnecting with one's old life, and with times of safety. They are particularly about reconnecting with old memories, for when you find missing memories, sometimes they can offer a kind and supportive hand:

- If you look back through your 'life album', through all the memories of your life, can you tell me some of the most happy and favourite memories?
- Can you tell me more about this memory?
- What's the thing in this memory that makes you happy?
- Why do you think these are your favourite memories?
- What does it mean to you when you talk about these memories?
- Who do you think are the most important people with whom to share these memories?
- Are there other ways in which you can keep these memories alive?

## STARS

Stars represent the social relations of the ex-detainee. Just as stars lighten the night darkness, family members, children, partners, neighbours, workmates, and so on, interrupt loneliness and help ex-detainees to adapt 'back' to life outside prison. However, it can be complex to bring together the relationships from inside the prison with those outside. At the time of the detainee's release, she or he promises their friends in prison that they will not forget them, and that they will keep in touch with them. After release, the ex-detainee takes this responsibility of faith on their shoulders and in some ways this means they are not alone. Those within prison remain with them in some way.

And then, when the ex-detainee meets their old friends outside prison, sometimes she or he feels isolated even when sitting with them. Many times ex-detainees feel like strangers from the society. They feel they cannot cope with the outside world or with the ways in which they themselves have changed.

At these times, we return to the past. We explore in conversations how the ex-detainee was able to make relations and friendships with those in prison, even though they had not met before. We explore what skills this involved. And then we discuss how these skills can be used to re-introduce themselves to their old friends and relations. From this viewpoint of revisiting the past, ex-detainees can start to cope with the 'new-old' relations and perhaps can also begin to make new relations in the outside world. These skills of social relations will be significant because ex-detainees have to adapt to so many changes – changes that have occurred to themselves, changes in their society that have taken place since they were imprisoned, and changes in the lives of those they knew and loved.

I try to ask questions that invite the ex-detainee to reconnect with their relations by remembering the ways they made and maintain friendships inside prison:

- Do you have any friends who are still in prison?
- Can you tell me about them?
- How did you make these friendships?
- Are there ways you continue to honour these friendships?
- Do you remember them, stay in touch with them?

- Did you have any friendships or significant relationships before you entered prison?
- Can you tell me more about these friendships?
- How did you make these friendships? What skills did this involve?
- Have any changes happened to these friendships? If so, what are these changes?
- Would any of the ways in which you made friends within prisons, or the ways in which you remember and honour these friendships, be relevant in making or re-making friendships outside prison?

In hearing Maryam tell this story, I was interested to know about the history of friendships in her life, in the hope that this might assist Maryam to build further friendships now that she is released.

### Friendship in Maryam's life

The following story is from a woman prisoner, Maryam:

*I have two friends in the prison who I left behind when I was released. One woman in particular, Laila, was very significant to me. She is so accessible, friendly, and lives life with a simplicity that I can learn a lot from. I learnt a lot from her about security and also social things when I was in prison. In addition, when I see her, I like her face because she always has a proud and dignified expression. I respected her from the first time that I saw her.*

*I knew Laila when she was tortured by another female prisoner. She asked the administration people to move her to where I lived and, after a lot of struggles, the administration allowed this and she came to stay where I was staying. I felt so comfortable with her. Sometimes I actually felt so strongly towards her that I didn't want her to be with anyone else.*

*Laila taught me the real meaning of friendship and I taught her how to be more careful in how she dealt with others. She learnt from me when she*



*can help people and when she cannot help people, so she became more careful in dealing with people so that no-one can hurt her.*

*Before I left the prison we exchanged head scarves and promised to always remember each other. Until now our relationship continues. She phones me from the prison and sends me messages to reassure me about her friendship. And sometimes I receive messages or news from others who relate stories to me about Laila. She cares about me even now when I am released. I experience her as sitting beside me, supporting me, helping me, even if she is in prison.*

*Laila really taught me the meaning of friendship. I feel she is a part of my soul. She always tells me that when she is released from prison she will send a card for me, to call me from my home so that I can go and see her because she is wishing so much to see me and I'm wishing so much to see her.*

When Maryam first came to see me, she was full of sorrow. She was struggling to adapt to release. One of the hardest things was that her young son had rejected her. He had been less than one year old when she went into prison and by the time she was released he was four. Maryam had very many difficult emotions. She was anxious and nervous and crying all the time. Since going through the Seasons of Life conversations, things have become a whole lot better now than then.

At first Maryam had the idea that she had the friend (Laila) in prison but no real friendships outside. But after talking about the history of friendships, and particularly after talking about the significance of Salwa, her neighbour, Maryam decided that she wanted to try to make new friendships. After about three months, she renewed contact with Salwa. She asked her why they no longer visited each other and this renewed a connection. This is an example of honouring friendships and relationships formed within prison and using this as a starting point to talk about the

significance of friendship and histories of friendship. These conversations can assist people to adjust to life outside prison and to reconnect with older friendships, or get more in touch with the skills they have used to make friends in the past.

*Before I was in the prison I couldn't find a real friend, except for my sisters; they were like friends. When I was in twelfth grade, the closest I came to having a friend was my neighbour, Salwa. She was with me in school. We walked to school together and then we went to university together. Salwa would always tell me everything about her life, but for some reason I could not share back because I didn't feel she was a real friend.*

*Sometimes I am not quite sure what to think of this relationship with Salwa. Perhaps she was more like a workmate because we were in the same class at school and also at university. After the final semester of university, I got married and lived in a different village so our friendship just gradually faded away. From then on we'd only see each other if we accidentally met each other in the road. And then we would just say hullo.*

*Looking back on this friendship, I think Salwa probably felt that I was her best friend because I listened to her and had empathy for her.*

## THE SEASONS OF LIFE GRAPH

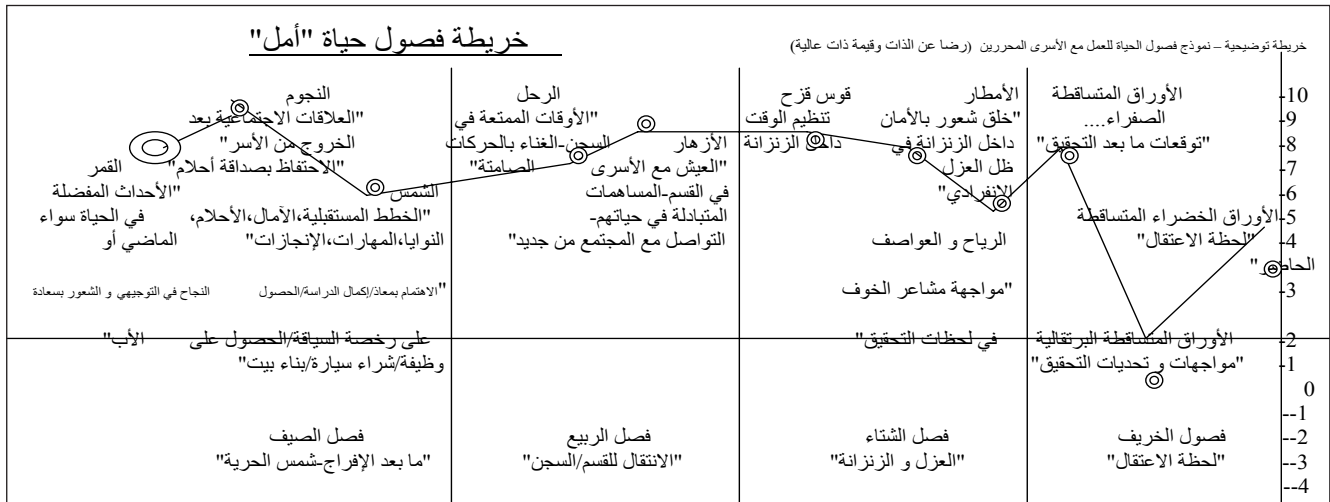
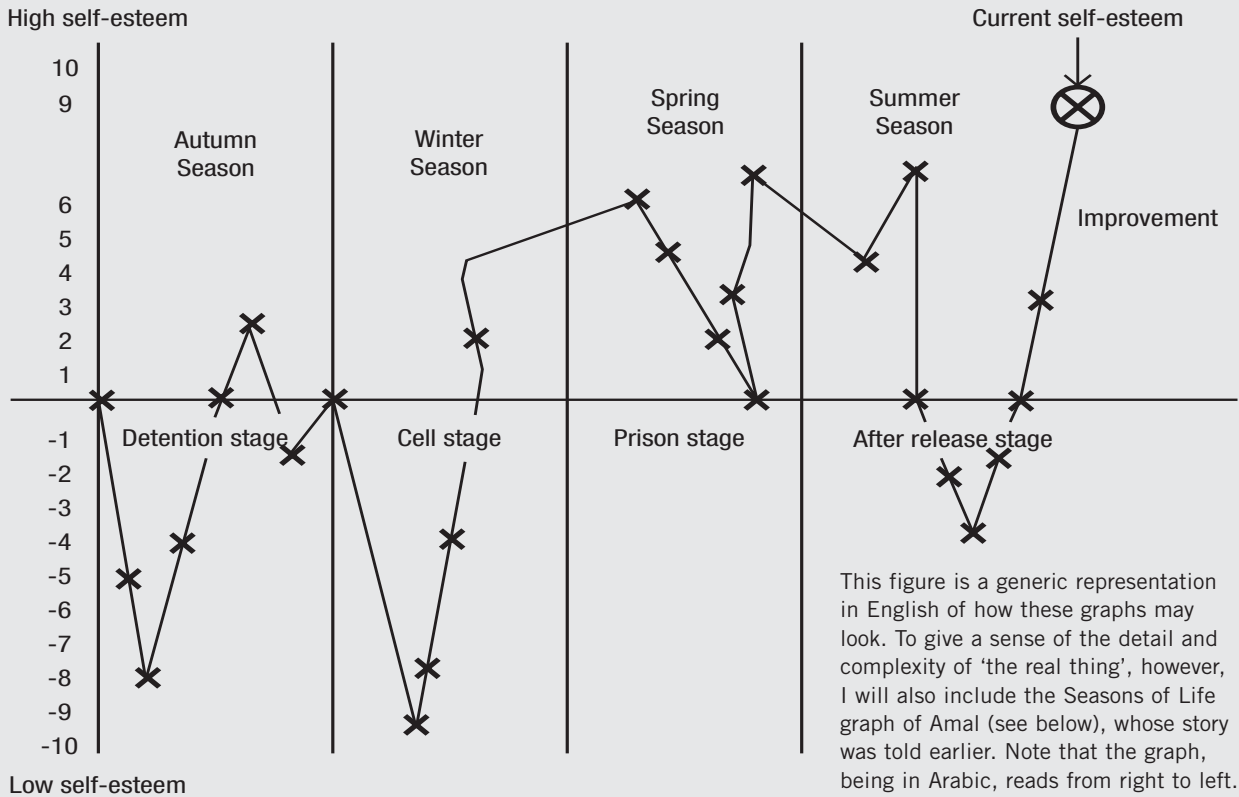
I have found it helpful to visually represent ex-detainee's journeys through the 'Seasons of Life'. One way of doing so is by using a chart which follows the basic form of the 'migration of identity' chart shown earlier. This chart can be used during therapeutic conversations to illustrate where someone has come from and where they are going, as well as acting as a visual record of the conversations themselves. My experience is that doing this charting makes dealing with life's struggles and difficulties easier.

One option I have used is to review a person's experiences and place dots on the chart to show their different senses of despair and wellbeing over time. At the end of each session, or each part of the Seasons of Life exercise, I ask the participant to rate the degree of their esteem/respect or satisfaction with their life at that time (according to a scale between -10 to 10+). When we place this onto a chart, it might initially look like a random scattering of stars in a night sky. However,

towards the end of our conversations, I then invite the person to link these dots, to connect them, moving from one side of the page to the other (see Figure 2). When they do this, I have found that the visual sense of progress over time can be powerfully significant.

It is as if their past achievements push them further forwards. It's as if aspects of their past endurance provide them with a way to deal with current struggles and difficulties.

Figure 2. Seasons of Life



## REFLECTIONS ON THE SEASONS OF LIFE

In meeting with ex-detainees, I see my role and responsibility is to change the tear into a beautiful smile, a smile that can rise over painful memories. This paper has described how using the metaphor of the Seasons of Life enables double-storied conversations about people's prison experiences. These conversations assist people to recognise the skills and knowledge they have developed in one season or stage of their life, and put these to work in addressing current hardships. This metaphor also harnesses the power and beauty of nature's cycles in ways that make it possible to speak about difficulties without re-traumatising the person concerned.

I would like to finish with a quote from the Soviet writer Nikolai Ostrovky (1904-1936). His descriptions in his book entitled *How the steel was tempered* (1932) seem very relevant to the stories that I have told here. While he uses masculine language, his words ring true for women as much as for men:

The most valuable thing to man is his life. Life belongs to him only once and should be spent this way: when he recalls his past, he will not regret having wasted any time or feel ashamed of having accomplished nothing. Thus he can say on his deathbed: I have devoted my whole life and every bit of my energy to the most magnificent cause of humanity – the struggle for the liberation of mankind.

### **The Treatment and Rehabilitation Center for Victims of Torture**

*The Treatment and Rehabilitation Center for Victims of Torture (TRC) is a non-government, non-profit organisation that provides psychosocial services to Palestinian survivors of torture and organised violence. TRC works to reduce the traumatic and devastating physical and psychological consequences of*

*torture and organised violence and reduce retaliatory behaviour by offering victims and their families comprehensive medical, physical, psychiatric, and psychosocial care completely free-of-charge, in a safe and comfortable atmosphere. TRC also works to prevent and respond to torture and violence through training, research, and advocacy.*

*Our four goals are:*

- 1. To alleviate the suffering of torture survivors and their families, and to facilitate the process of their reintegration into the community and into normal life.*
- 2. To promote a community culture that rejects all forms of torture; to reduce retaliatory feelings and behaviour, acceptance of violence, and impunity; and to promote mental health and social welfare in the Palestinian community.*
- 3. To raise awareness among victims so that they never become a source of violence to themselves, their families, or their communities.*
- 4. To train university students and health professionals in mental health and human rights in order to enable them to recognise symptoms of trauma, and to train law enforcement officials to increase awareness and respect for issues related to mental health and human rights.*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to acknowledge all Palestinian prisoners and my wish for their freedom. The idea of using the metaphor of 'Seasons of Life' was sparked by the use of natural metaphors in the 'Tree of Life: An approach to working with vulnerable children' which was co-developed by Ncazelo Ncube & David Denborough (See Ncube 2007; Denborough 2008).

## NOTES

1. Please note that detainees routinely have their eyes covered when arrested, so they face the arrest without sight.

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# 10<sup>TH</sup> INTERNATIONAL NARRATIVE THERAPY AND COMMUNITY WORK CONFERENCE

**Brazil** July 2011

Start making plans now... the 10th International Narrative Therapy and Community Work Conference is to be held in Salvador, Brazil from 13-15th July 2011.

Salvador is a fascinating place (see <http://www.bahia-online.net/>) and in July 2011 it will host a gathering of narrative therapists and community workers from around the globe. Many Brazilian practitioners are engaging with narrative ideas in unique ways and we are so looking forward to this event.

Stay tuned to [www.dulwichcentre.com.au](http://www.dulwichcentre.com.au) for more information.  
We hope to see you there!



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