

Telling the Truth

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Telling the truth can be a complicated business. This was one of the first lessons I learned at a very tender age. Still unable to grasp the importance of the school timetable in my first week, I rolled up for class 20 minutes late having been diverted by a rather splendid game of marbles. Four black jack chews and a sherbet dip were at stake. By the time I walked in the teacher was so fraught that lying seemed to be the best option. Five minutes later I was before the headmistress because my colourful story about helping a blind man find his way home after his old, crippled guide dog had dropped dead outside the playground gates was - surprisingly - not believed.

At the end of the day when my mother came to collect me she was hauled in to the head's office where I was forced to recount my rather elaborate story before being made to apologise to the grown-ups and promise always to tell the truth. Just as we were about to leave she reminded my mother that the school day actually finished at 3.30pm and noted that she had arrived five minutes after the bell. My mother was really annoyed; angry with me for telling lies and irritated by the head's observation on the importance of time-keeping.

On seeing me the next day the headmistress asked me what my mother had to say about the previous day's events. "Oh," I responded brimming with determination to only tell the truth, "she thinks you are an interfering, old busybody."

That evening when the school bell sounded both my mum and I were back in the head's office. To my utter amazement my mother lied and when we got home that night I was punished for telling the truth! I was four years old and I realised there and then that telling the truth can sometimes be painful.

Why am I recounting this childhood story for you? I am in Egypt now, following the Free Gaza Movement of 1400 peace activists who gathered in Cairo from more than 40 different countries. Their week-long efforts to get to Gaza to give humanitarian aid and messages of goodwill and solidarity to the Palestinians have been thwarted with the utmost vigour and enthusiasm by the Egyptian Government.

This prompted me to write a series of articles exposing the shameful behaviour of the Egyptian Government. I described the Cairo Government as "Obama's rent boy" in the Middle East clearly influenced by the \$2 billion of aid it receives from the USA. Thanks to some heroic camerawork from British film-maker Warren Biggs and American journalist Jehan Hafiz, I was able to back up my words about the violence of the Mukhabarat - the secret police - with some shocking images.

Telling the truth in Cairo, as I have now discovered, can be a rather precarious thing to do and certainly does not endear you to people in power or authority. I have been told that I will never be allowed to enter Egypt again although, as usual, the implied threats are never put down, officially, in writing. I would be devastated if this ban is indeed official because despite the flotsam and jetsam in power, I have a deep respect for ordinary Egyptian people and their country.

Threats are something local journalists have experienced over many years, and there are those who have ended up in Cairo's darkest dungeons for telling the truth, so I salute my fellow scribes for their heroic determination to make sure the facts surface.

Sadly, not all journalists subscribe to that ethos and they opt for something worse than telling the truth - silence. I will not name and shame those journalists in this article; they know who they are and they are working in positions of great influence where their words and pictures could easily tell the world about what is really happening on the ground in Cairo. What I would say to them is that if they are too afraid to tell the truth, or even cover the most basic stories in an open way, then they are in the wrong profession and doing a great disservice to journalism.

Ours is a noble profession and hundreds of our colleagues have paid the ultimate price for trying to get the truth out in Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan; in fact, in war and conflict zones across the globe as well as within the most sinister of police states.

But those who chose to ignore the arrival in Cairo of 1400 peace activists from around the world, and the efforts they have made to get to Gaza, cannot call themselves journalists. They have become an extension of a government apparatus which uses fear and intimidation to stop the truth getting out.

At the end of the day the truth is there. The Cairo government might attack it, ignorant individuals may choose to ridicule it, but it will not go away and the truth will out.

To all those Egyptian journalists who continue to defend the truth, I salute you; and to those miserable individuals who remained silent or twisted the facts, there is a chance to redeem yourselves - over the next 72 hours the Viva Palestina convoy will enter Egypt. Please report exactly how the members of the convoy are treated and how the Egyptian Government receives them.

Telling the truth might be an act of courage but it is also a powerful entity, which can open doors, shame governments and mobilise people to fight for what is right and what is just.

Everyone is entitled to their opinions but - to paraphrase the late C.P. Scott, editor of the Guardian newspaper from 1872 until 1929 - the truth is sacred.

***Yvonne Ridley** is a British journalist, one of the founders of Viva Palestina, as well as a member of the RESPECT Party, and presenter for Rattansi & Ridley and the Agenda shows on Press TV. She is making a documentary with Indy film-maker Warren Biggs about the Gaza Freedom March for First Witness Productions - www.1stwitness.com*

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