

‘The Antidote to Hate Is Success’: An Interview With Izzeldin Abuelaish

Joanie Eppinga

Izzeldin Abuelaish, often referred to as “the Gaza doctor,” grew up in a refugee camp in the Gaza Strip. He overcame poverty and many other obstacles, and was accepted to medical school in Cairo. He became an internationally recognized expert on issues of fertility and worked in an Israeli hospital. Dr. Abuelaish married and had eight children. Shortly after his wife died from leukemia, he was with seven of his eight children in their home in Gaza on January 16, 2009 when their home was hit by a mortar during Israeli shelling. Three of Dr. Abuelaish’s daughters and his niece were killed instantly, and another daughter was profoundly wounded. Despite his great pain, he held to the belief that hate is not an appropriate response to war. Today Dr. Abuelaish, who has been nominated for the Pulitzer Peace Prize, has started a foundation called Daughters for Life (www.daughtersforlife.com), which works to educate young women from the Middle East in an attempt to promote peace. In addition, he has written a book entitled I Shall Not Hate: A Gaza Doctor’s Journey on the Road to Peace and Human Dignity (Random House Canada, 2010), in which he recounts his life story and his philosophy. Journal editor Joanie Eppinga spoke with Dr. Abuelaish at the Gonzaga University Institute for Hate Studies’ Conference on Hate Studies in Spokane, Washington, on April 7, 2011.

EPPINGA: What gives you hope?

ABUELAISH: What gives me hope? My life. As long as I’m living, I have hope. I was asked at a conference in Poland, “What is life?” I answered, “Life is hope.” As long as I am breathing, there is hope. As long as I am moving, there is hope. Meeting with people gives hope. Engagement. What we see on a daily basis gives hope. Every day, where I go, it strengthens my belief in the presence of hope. So I fully believe in the presence of hope, and we must not give up; we only lose hope once we are dead. As a medical doctor, we can’t lose hope; as long as the patient is still alive, though maybe in a critical situation, but still alive. We teach patients: Today there is no treatment, but the hope of tomorrow is to find a treatment. The students who come to the university to study—why? They have hope to succeed. The patient who goes to the medical doctor for the hope of recovery—it’s life. It’s *life*. We bring our children for the hope to change, to do something against hate. This conference, which has been held here in the hope to do something against hate. Hope is in every action of our life.

EPPINGA: Have you always had this attitude?

ABUELAISH: Of course. Always we must have this, and always I have it. It encourages me. It energizes me. Because, you know, with hope, you succeed. And success begets success.

EPPINGA: Yes. But many people who have experienced such a crippling blow as you have would be broken by it.

ABUELAISH: But we are lucky that we are human beings. And this is the difference between human beings and animals and other creatures in this world: that we have choices. We have choices in life between this and that—to carry this with the pain, with the suffering, or to be collapsed and destroyed. So it helped me, my life experience, my profession as a medical doctor, and most important, my faith. And that's what I say to everyone: To have faith. Whatever is your faith—to have that faith, it helps.

EPPINGA: What would you say to people who *don't* have that faith, who weren't raised with it or don't feel it?

ABUELAISH: Those people who don't have faith, what are they called, atheists—they believe in *something*. There is something there. There is belief in certain values. What can be done to spread those values? Kindness, dignity, humanity, responsibility—all of those good values. That's religion, in an indirect way. Religion is kindness. Religion is a relationship between the people and God. But the relationship between people and other people is affected by their kindness, how they deal with each other. That's religion. Religion is a way of dealing with each other. The one who believes, to be religious, he's a good person to others, he deals with respect and kindness to others. So that's the faith.

EPPINGA: You wrote in your book that we need to inoculate children against hatred.

ABUELASIH: In medicine, it's important to prevent, not to treat. Prevention is more important. If we succeed to prevent, it is cost-effective, cost-efficient, and important; and that's why immunization against certain communicable diseases is effective to save a lot of our resources. So prevention, I stress it; it's vital, and we want to inoculate our children before the microbe and the toxin invade their bodies with this hate and violence.

EPPINGA: That's clear on a physical level, but how do we do that on an emotional level, on a mental level?

ABUELAISH: Education. Educate the people about what religion is. What do we want from life? What's our mission in life?

EPPINGA: To be good to each other.

ABUELAISH: How can we be good to each other? It's important for the researchers, like the ones at this conference, to study hate. What are the determinants of hate?

EPPINGA: Fear is a big piece.

ABUELAISH: What are the causes of fear?

EPPINGA: Insecurity.

ABUELAISH: Why are we feeling insecure?

EPPINGA: We fear we won't have enough.

ABUELAISH: Ask five times backwards. *Why* fear? *Why* insecurity? Lack or shortage of resources. Ask again. *Why* is there a lack of resources?

EPPINGA: Because we don't share.

ABUELAISH: Lack of sharing. So now the solution starts here. How can we allocate and distribute resources equally? When we don't, there is injustice. So that is the issue. That's the diagnostic tree. It starts here. So hate is a consequence of something before. It's a symptom.

EPPINGA: Do you think it's your understanding of that process that gives you compassion?

ABUELAISH: Of course. If you have a child, God bless them, one day your son is coming to you from the school, complaining, suffering, he did something wrong, he has a problem with the teacher, or he had a test and didn't do well. You must find out the reason. Maybe the night before he didn't sleep well. He has problems, he has, he has, he has . . . many things. Don't take his failure as the end result. There is something wrong [that] happened to him, because this child who is usually successful, doing a great job—just *this* time he didn't do well. So we must ask ourselves: "Why? What made him. . .?" And that's important—no one was born with hate. So that's why we want to focus as early as possible on the children to immunize them before they are spoiled and start to be poisoned with hate. Our life is shaped by the environment in which we live. Environmental factors and lifestyle have a major impact in shaping our life and our behaviors. So if you want to deal with and change the behavior, look for the environment and the lifestyle.

EPPINGA: So would you say the main way we can affect our children and steer them toward love is through our own behavior?

ABUELAISH: We as parents must lead by example. We must practice with others, to show them. How can my child be tolerant if I am intolerant with his mother, with him, with the neighbors? I must practice it on a daily basis, to show the love, to show the caring, the sharing with others, connection with others. What is justice, in simple terms? Justice is to like for others what I like for myself. To put myself in the shoes of others.

EPPINGA: That's easy to understand conceptually. Do you always *feel* it?

ABUELAISH: Yes, of course. I feel it, and I practice it. It's important not *just* to feel. Feeling is good, to be moved. But if this feeling is not accompanied by action and by practice, what is the value of that?

EPPINGA: Did you not have a moment during your crisis of wanting vengeance?

ABUELAISH: I don't allow this feeling, or this way of thinking, to come to my mind, because it has no place. I can say to you, those ideas are frustrated and they will never approach me. They would say, "Oh, it's not going to work there." They'll find someone else to work and invest in. For me, they are not there. I have a shield against that. I built that shield.

EPPINGA: How did you build that shield?

ABUELAISH: I built that shield through being rational; through thinking, using my mind. I know what I want in my life. Also, my life experience gave me a lot to learn to build that shield. Many factors, they came together, that this shield [exists], that hate could find no way. It will be killed in front of that shield.

EPPINGA: Do you have a specific spiritual discipline that you practice?

ABUELAISH: I am a Muslim; I have the faith. I am close to God; I believe everything from God is for good, and God knows, and we don't know. So that is what I practice. As long as I am close to God, God is close to me. I pray. My weakest point is I am an emotional person. I feel the feelings of others. To see a child suffering . . . my tears are so close.

EPPINGA: You see that as a weakness?

ABUELAISH: No, it is a strength! It's the strength of not accepting it. *Why* is

the child suffering? I feel angry about it. What can I do to direct my energy in a positive way to change the situation? And that's what is needed from all of us, to feel the anger, to feel the outrage, to feel upset, to speak louder, to tell others—that is what is needed, not to feel emotionally and to be so sad—and to do nothing.

EPPINGA: So we teach our children through education, we teach our children through the way we live—is there anything else?

ABUELAISH: To connect to each other. To explain to them and to take them to see what we call “the other.” To explain to them that others are *not* different from you—they are similar. We are complementing, we are not competing.

EPPINGA: You seem to feel that women have a special role in building the future.

ABUELAISH: Of course. In my life personally, I am in debt to my mother, to my wife, to my daughters. As you know, behind every successful man, there is a woman! We belong to others, all of us. Mothers feed us love, care, sacrifice, sharing. Who is the most sacrificing person on earth? The mother. To give the heart, to give the time. She is sacrificing the time. In her deep sleep, when she is in bad need, she is the one to wake up to take care of the child, to breastfeed. When the child is sick, she is the one who gives the medication, keeps track of the times; the mother is the one who prepares the food, and she is the last to eat. These are the values we want. To give the mother the role to be equal, so that what she gets is equal to what she gives. She gives a lot, beyond limits. Can we expand that, not just to take from her, but also, what can we give her? When you give to the women, it will be reflected on us, will have a positive impact on us. So mothers, and women, are key—the key players in any change. Any country's development is not measured by GDP; it is measured by women's role, not just women's status. Even here in the States you are still struggling for your rights, but what's your role here in the States as a woman? It's not equal to the man. Your role is far, far beyond. We don't want to have *equal*. We want each person to practice his or her role according to his or her potential. We are not competing; we are complementing each other. We want the good for all. It's important to understand that it's woman's role, not just woman's status and woman's rights; and woman's rights, it's not coming in a fragmented way, a divided way. Every now and then we get this right here, another right there. . . Once we are born we have rights! The same rights! It's not coming in phases. Rights are rights. But more important is the role. So how can we encourage the woman's role in decision making, in shaping our life?

The woman is the school. *The woman is the school.* If you equip this school with good means, what do you think the student will be? She will produce highly skilled, successful students. So that is what we want: to equip mothers and women with the means to be real players, decision makers, to have full potential, and to practice the right role in their life.

EPPINGA: Do you see women as being just as valuable as men in the intellectual realm?

ABUELAISH: Of course. In all aspects. What is the difference? They have proved by evidence-based practices and successes to be not less than anyone else in doing any job.

EPPINGA: If men and women are equal intellectually, and women have this strong nurturing role, what is the role of men?

ABUELAISH: To support their family and not be threatened by women—to support them and to be working. We want the good for our children. We have one goal to achieve. Let us work together to achieve that goal.

EPPINGA: Do you have anything to say about the way people talk about or to each other?

ABUELAISH: Political discourse can lead to hate. Once there is political discourse, there is misunderstanding, manipulation. Politics leads to hate. It leads to conflict, violence. . . because the interest here is completely different—it's political interest. The agenda of the politicians is mostly different from the agenda of the people on the ground. Who are the grassroots paying the price?—The people. The impact of violence, conflict, and war on people will be hate. Who are on the ground fighting?—The people. Who are killed?—The people. Who are suffering?—The people. Who are injected with this poison? The people themselves. How can we settle this? It's the role of the leaders. Their role is to be risk-takers, challenging, honest. Honesty is a very rare commodity among leaders. Their main goal is to do what serves the people and to avoid conflict, violence, and war.

EPPINGA: Do you think war is ever justified?

ABUELAISH: I don't. I don't like war. Especially with what is happening in this world, we must not justify war. We must avoid it and prevent it from the start. With any disease, if you start from the beginning and treat it, it is not going to be complicated. With diabetes, if you control it, the lifestyle and everything, not to reach the moment with gangrene and do amputation, so we must not reach that point, and it's the role of the politicians. War will

increase hate. We must do as much as we can to avoid, to prevent [it]. Fear, lack of resources will lead to war. Insecurity will lead to war. Many want to dominate and oppress others. This must be stopped.

EPPINGA: What is the main thing you want people to know?

ABUELAISH: Life is what we make it. Always has been, always will be.

EPPINGA: Do you say this even to the person who was born with nothing?

ABUELAISH: Of course. Our hands—what our hands bring to us, what our hands did for us. I want people to know that nothing is impossible; but it's important to take responsibility. Don't say, "I am far from the danger." We are connected as one. We must protect outside if we are to protect ourselves. We are living and riding in the same boat. Geographically today, I may be far away from the rest. Today it may be 2,000 kilometers, but tomorrow it may be 1,000; it's far; things are changing; look at what is happening in the Middle East. It is far, maybe, but it may be approaching other places. It will spread. So we must not think, "We are safe." My safety comes from your safety. My security is your security. We are linked, and we must start reaching out.

EPPINGA: Do you have anything else you'd like to say about hatred?

ABUELAISH: About hatred, I can say: I tell people to give themselves the time—four seconds!—before adopting it as an approach. Think of the consequences before you will regret and before it becomes irreversible. *The antidote to hate is success.* The one who you want to hate is not thinking of you at all, and you are wasted, you are consumed by this hate, which is a fire, a poison. So don't collapse. Don't give up. You have suffered, maybe, from the one you hated. Don't be another victim of hate. How many times do you want to be a victim? Say to yourself, "No! I will never. The one whom I thought I had to hate, I will challenge him, to tell him that I am stronger. I am standing steadfast. I will send him, on a daily basis, messages of success, that I am succeeding."