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The Oxford English dictionary defines the word *narrative* as, “a spoken or written account of connected events; a story.”ⁱ A narrative is the story of a person; it is not only the things that they do or the things that are done to them, but also their hopes, desires, and passions. It can be single events or a long chain of events that span years or even a lifetime. Narratives are not composed of solely the events in an objective format. Instead, the narrative creator has the ability to recall and assign meaning or more importance to particular events and memories over others, regardless of the event’s actual duration or chronology. At Belmont, I conducted sociological research involving narrative construction during the course of life changing events: while making a choice about reproduction, during a miscarriage, and during terminal cancer. My Lumos experience made me think even more about the idea of narrative creation and sharing.

Like most narratives, the things I emphasize here have deeper meaning beyond a simple recounting of events. The events I assign importance to tell a lot more about me, the creator, than they do about the actual events themselves. While reflecting on my experience and the part of my narrative I share here, I recognize that I am still very raw and unfinished yet open, honest, and passionate about my time in Bethlehem.

“*Have a good day, Ms. Virgin,*” the security officer at EL AL said with a sarcastic smile as I left with a TSA agent. She walked me through the airport back to the domestic luggage claim where the security officer claimed they would return my luggage to. I had only my cell phone and my passport in my hand. I remember crying softly, but I felt like it was not really me, like I was not in my body. I looked at the bustling of persons around me, trying to make it to their gates on time, and the lights on the store overhangs, and feeling like a ghost. I recognize now that I was in shock after what had just happened. I had been pulled out of line while boarding and shown into a small room. All of my belongings were taken from me, including my passport, cell phone, money, purse and laptop, and was strip-searched by two security agents. And then, I found out I was not getting to go back to Bethlehem. After two months of recovery from my broken jaw, after having my jaw wired shut and not eating solid food for four weeks, and after weeks of rehab to be able to reopen my mouth normally again. After talking to my friends and family about Bethlehem, the things I was doing with my organization, and plans for when I got back. After the heartbreak of waking up every day during those two months in my bed in Nashville instead of my bed in Bethlehem. After all of this, I was not going to go back to Bethlehem. The rug that was Bethlehem had already been ripped out from under me the night I broke my jaw, but this time, the rug was thrown on a fire. Walking through the JFK airport, I watched it curl in the fire, smoke tendrils drifting up into the night sky with the plane that took off for Israel without me on it.

As disappointing as it is to have my Lumos experience terminated against my wishes, time and thought has finally placed it in perspective. This event has become a defining moment in my narrative.

Based on this experience, I know a little bit more about what it feels like to be completely at another person's will, a person who had all of my identifying documents and personal belongings. As a white American, I had never experienced this before. Before then, I had experienced privilege in the way I travel abroad and in my own country. But that day, I was refused entry into a country because they knew that I was going to travel to the West Bank and work with Palestinians. They did not want me to do so. I believe the reasons for my refusal stem from fear and prejudice. Sadly, I did not get to continue my experience because of this. As I write this, there are people who are trying to come into my country, the U.S., who are stopped, detained, questioned, and refused entry for similar reasons that I was refused entry into Israel, for prejudice and fear. Many of these people, unlike me, do not have a place to call home. I am privileged to have been able to turn around, to come home, and figure out what I was going to do next. Those who are refused entry into the U.S. as immigrants right now do not have that same option. This country was possibly their one and only plan, their last hope. So as I reflect on this part of my experience, the unfortunate ending to my Lumos, I am reminded of those refugees and immigrants. I can now understand in a more physical sense the way detainment, suspicion, and refusal feels. However, I do not and will never know the reality and weight of the denial they experience. In this, I find the rumbling of a new passion, a new direction beginning to form for me, and something I want to work for.

There are many people in Bethlehem who are working on their narratives like I am. I was fortunate to listen to a few of them. Listening is powerful; it empowers the storyteller and it increases the amount of empathetic energy and knowledge circulating in our world. The stories I heard during my time in Bethlehem were important for me to hear, but they were not easy to hear. I can remember staying up with my host family until the late hours of the night, talking about the conflict, their childhoods, and the suffering of their friends and family members. I went to bed many nights with a heavy heart, unable to sleep with the weight of the things they had divulged to me. I cried myself to sleep some nights. Why do these things happen? Why does the world contain so much suffering? As a child, I had some issues; my parents went through a divorce, I was bullied, and had problems with body image. These are all pieces of my childhood narrative, but my issues were nothing but compared to the narratives of those I met in Bethlehem. During my childhood, I got to play, go to school, and live a life where I did not fear for my safety or the safety of my friends and family. The people I met in Bethlehem did not grow up the way I did. Their childhood narratives contain memories of pain; violence; death; and existing mostly in a state of the unknown for the future of their country, of their neighborhoods, their school, their families, and themselves. I could not see any logic in how immensely our narratives differed.

Conflict is not fair. It is not fair that there are children in Bethlehem who are currently constructing narratives similar to the ones I heard told by young

adults and adults, children who will grow up in this conflict and who will not share in my opportunities. It is not fair to have tear gas thrown at you as a child, to be shot at, to have your home used as a sniper tower, to be imprisoned as a child for something you did not do or, as a parent, to have a child taken from your home and imprisoned without being notified where they are or what they did. It is not fair to live behind a wall when you did nothing to put it there. It is not fair to be called a terrorist from the time you are born; when you are not your culture or the culture others imagine you to be. It is not fair to have your narrative written for you.

My time spent with Wi'am gives me hope despite the extent to which life in Bethlehem is often unfair. Wi'am's work for women, youth, and children is crucial. They are working to reclaim individual narratives and to change the narrative of the entire conflict, that is, to make the narrative of what it means to be "Palestinian" not one of shame or pity, but one of strength, love, openness, and hope. I am grateful that Wi'am and the people I met in Bethlehem allowed me to listen to their narratives.

Even though I only stayed in Bethlehem for two months, I made many great memories while I was there. It is difficult to decide which ones will go in my narrative.

I was invited to a Palestinian wedding. I remember standing next to women on the dance floor, all of us holding lit candles, while watching the bride walk by us.



I remember walking the kids to the market down the street to get ice cream in the hot midday sun.





I remember painting the garden with the kids. They helped me practice my colors in Arabic and I felt like I was the kid, not them.







I remember getting lost in the dark while hiking in *al Makrhoud*. I pointed my phone's flashlight on my feet as we stomped through the tall grass; my mind went wild at every shadow with images of snakes, scorpions, and spiders.





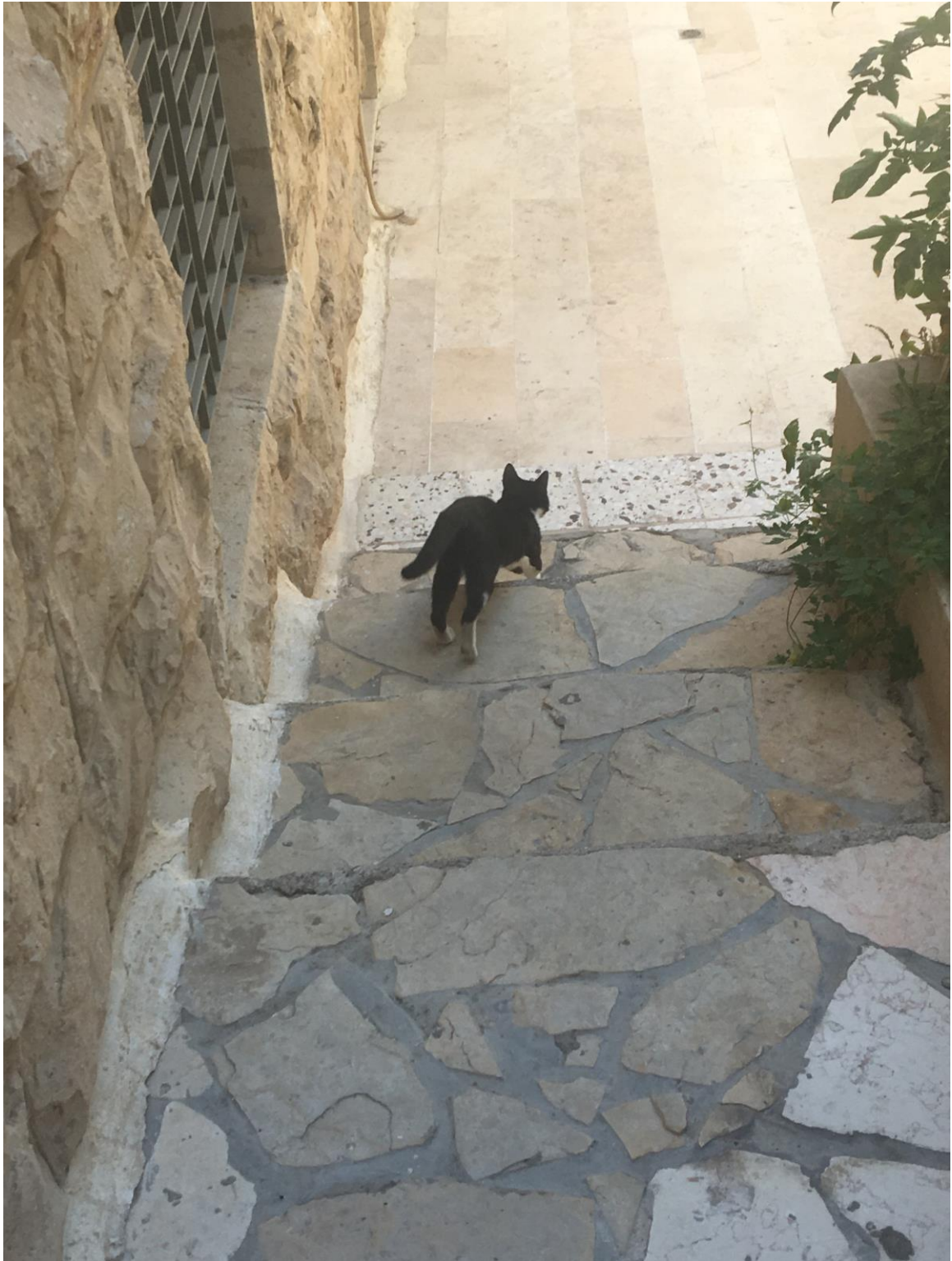
I remember visiting Hebron shortly after I arrived. I can still hear the loud whirring of the machines in the *kuffiyeh* factory and see the gates over the Old City market to catch trash and other objects thrown by settlers.

I remember the long *servic* ride to visit Ramallah. We passed a granite mine where olive trees stood next to it, and I can still see the way they were covered in the white rocky dust from the mine. I remember that I didn't know how long the ride would be and how I held my bladder while sitting between two strangers on that ride.



I remember sitting at a restaurant on a sloping hill near *al Makrhoud* in Beit Jala. I had a conversation about life, education, the occupation, and the meaning of all of these things with some fellow foreigners over lemon mint's.

I remember the first time I cleaned my apartment floor with a squeegee and a rag.





I remember the way the temperature would drop after the sun finally set, and the way the stone floor of my apartment and the courtyard outside it would chill accordingly.



I remember the entire walk to and from work. I try to hold on to the route in my mind, including the names of the shops and the size of the buildings, the cobblestone streets, and the smell of baking pita, *shrak*, and falafel.

There are other parts of my narrative in Bethlehem that are not as bright. For example, I remember tear gas; I know that when you are far away from it, you first feel it in your nasal passages, a burning sensation, before you can smell it. I remember the shock one feels course through their body at the explosion of a sound bomb before their mind has the chance to process what the bang was. I remember the nervous anticipation of being stopped by soldiers, of having guns pointed at me, and being told to “leave the area” while watching a group of them clash with young boys in *Aida* refugee camp. I remember the fear and shame of being taken into a room and strip-searched and of listening to a group of men in the next room rifle through my diary and hearing them count what sounds like my money. I remember the mix of anger, disgust, and fear that would crawl up my spine when men would say threatening sexual comments to me while I walked to work in Bethlehem. I remember the overwhelming shock and pain of coming back into consciousness with a rust-taste in my mouth and spitting out shards of my teeth after fainting and breaking my jaw.

I could write that I have finally figured out how these events, memories, and feelings fit together and what they all mean. I could write that my going to Bethlehem was fate falling into place and that I discovered myself through my work, that going to Bethlehem was a stepping-stone for the rest of my life’s

interests. I could write that I truly learned everything about this region and about the conflict in the way I have hoped for since 2014. But narratives are not that simple or cohesive, and mine, in particular, is decidedly neither of those things. Instead, I have not found any answers while constructing my narrative, only more questions. My time in Bethlehem did not solve anything for me but left me even more puzzled about social life, narrative work, the world, the concept of “fairness” or justice, and what is next for me, personally. I am still unpacking and sorting through these experiences, the good and the bad, the expected and the unexpected, the beautiful and the terrifying, and trying to uncover what I will do with them. I am still piecing together my narrative. I am grateful to the Lumos Foundation for funding me and for the opportunity to take on this challenge and to continue to be challenged by my time in Bethlehem. I am grateful that I was able to see more of the world and that these questions will become a part of my life’s narrative and will follow me wherever I go.



ⁱ “Narrative.” Def. 1. <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/narrative>, *Oxford Dictionaries*.
Web. 7 February 2017.