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## **Writing in order to make the world a better place**

My name is Motti Lerner. I'm a playwright and screenwriter. I live in Israel. And I had a wonderful collaboration for almost 15 years with Klaus Wagner, to whom I dedicate this conversation. I'm very grateful to Madeleine Lienhard who made this conversation possible.

As we all know, people are different from one another. They have different thoughts, different visions, different purposes. They all try different ways and different methods to live their life in their own ways. I think we must admit that this is a great advantage for our civilization. Just try to imagine a civilization in which people are similar to one another. It will be a very boring place to live in.

But the differences among people create conflicts between them. We cannot ignore these conflicts, and it's an illusion that we can repress them. On the contrary. We have to admit that they exist, and try and live with them. Not only that – we have to make the best from them, grow from them, and benefit from them as much as possible for our progress. How do we do it? More specifically – how do we use the art of writing for this purpose?

First of all, I'd like to comment that as writers we shouldn't have too many expectations. It's almost impossible to achieve significant changes in our complicated world by writing. But if we don't assume that we can make changes, we wouldn't write at all. Our illusion that we can change something in our world, gives us our strongest force.

So how can we contribute by our writing to living with conflicts in our civilization?

It seems to me that the key words are Creating Empathy. If we can create deeper empathy between people, they will be able to tolerate the conflicts between them. They will be able to understand one another better and deeper. They will find more sophisticated ways to solve the conflicts between them, and they will not be forced to hate one another and use violence and aggression as their immediate resource for action.

The big question is of course how do we create empathy between people?

I want to believe - although I'm not aware of any research that supports this belief – that if a reader of a book or a spectator in a play or a film is able to feel empathy for a character in a book or a play or a film, then he or she will be more capable of feeling empathy to people in the reality around him.

I would even dare to believe that the more you read books, see plays and films, then you'll develop and strengthen your skill of feeling empathy towards people around you. Again, this is merely a belief, but I think it makes some sense.

So the next question is of course – How do we enable our readers and our spectators to feel empathy to the characters we create? I'm pretty sure that many writers will give different answers to this question. My strong belief, and again, I don't have any research to support it, is that the deeper the character is, the deeper is our empathy for it. So now the next question is how do we create deeper characters? Again, there isn't only one answer for it – but I think that in order to create a deep character we need to create deep actions for it and deep relationships with the people around it. Deep relationship is something that our intuition can understand – it means deep dependence, deep needs, deep desires, deep competition, deep intimacy and of course deep hate and love. What is a deep action for a character? I think that a deep action is a crucial action that is a life changing action. For example, in the play "Death of a Salesman" by Arthur Miller – the action of Willie Loman is to save himself from a complete failure in his life. This is something very deep and it need all his mental resources.

Just to summarize the thoughts we had until now – in order to create more peaceful and tolerant civilization we need to enable the individuals to be capable of more empathy for one another. Therefore, we need to write books, plays and film that train the individual to have empathy for our characters, and for that we have to write deep characters with deep relationships.

In a side note I'd like to say the following: Of course, we are all aware of the Biblical commandment – "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" from the Book of Leviticus in the Old Testament. This is a wonderful commandment. I wish we can all follow it, but unfortunately, it's quite difficult to follow. Therefore, I suggest an easier commandment – Try to have empathy for the other, whoever the other is.

In order to be more concrete, I'd like to share an example. As you all know, the state of Israel is in a constant conflict with the Palestinian people for more than a hundred years. This is a bloody conflict that created repeated wars with endless human catastrophes on both sides. As an Israeli writer I always faced the question – what do I do in order to reduce the hatred on both sides. I wrote several plays that deal with this conflict, but I'd like to share with you some thoughts about one of them.

The play is titled "The Admission". It was written about 10 years ago, and was first produced in 2014. The background of the play is the occupation of a small Palestinian village called Tantura during the 1948 war between Israel and the Palestinians, a war that ended on one hand with the creation of the state of Israel, and on the other hand with "The Nakba" the catastrophe of the Palestinian people.

The play focuses on two families, One Jewish and one Palestinian. The Jewish father was a soldier who participated in the occupation of Tantura, and the Palestinian father is a survivor of a massacre committed by the Israeli soldiers during the occupation. I won't get into all the details of the plot, but I'd say that both families are confronting the events of the occupation. They try to live or repress their memories of it, and understand the consequences of the past events in the present.

I think that the big value of the play for the Israeli spectators was that finally, perhaps for the first time, they were faced with "The Other" on the stage. This other is a Palestinian survivor. Suddenly he is a live character, suddenly he is human, suddenly the Israelis can see his suffering, his dilemmas, his hopes, his anger and his frustrations. Suddenly, because he is a deep character, they can have empathy for him. If this has really happened, it's not less than a miracle, because if these Israeli spectators can have empathy for the character on the stage, they will more easily have empathy for real Palestinians who live around them.

Of course, this play didn't end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but I hope it contributed to a more empathic dialogue between Israelis and Palestinians.