

Dear Mr Gibran,

I write to you in response to your message to the Lebanese people from 1920.¹

I have many thoughts. Some in agreement, some in defiance.

Firstly, I must question your description of Lebanon as a “serene mountain sitting between the sea and the plains” (Gibran & Ayoub, 2013).

Serene?

I suppose there was a brief moment of serenity after I puked my guts out in my family home in Hadchit at age nine. One does not simply sample the native delicacies of Lebanon without the baptism by fire that is *maghes*.

Simply put, it resolves the constipation brought on by the 20 hour flight from Sydney and ensures you still look as trim as the citizens of Lebanon while having daily banquets at Babel or Em Sherif. It is a system - one that works.

Kahlil, I don't believe I shall ever genuinely use the word serene to describe my Lebanon. It was not serene when I nearly drowned in Batroun at age 24. I remember the day clearly, and I still have a scar on my knee to remind me. I hopped on a boat from Beirut with a group of friends. A neighboring country had been hit with an earthquake recently, which made the waves larger and the ride incredibly rocky.

I fell over on the boat. I cut my knee on the glass that shattered. I experienced seasickness for the first and only time in my life.

¹ Gibran, K. (2013) *Kahlil Gibran on Lebanon* Joey Ayoub, *Hummus For Thought*. Translated by J. Ayoub. Available at: <https://hummusforthought.com/2013/12/20/khalil-gibran-on-lebanon/> (Accessed: 12 November 2023).

Kahlil Gibran's message to the Lebanese people from c 1920.

So unpleasant and seemingly never-ending was the cruise, that I paid no mind to the fact my companions wanted to disembark via a small, pitiful raft heading towards a rocky wall - that's right, wall. No pier, just a bunch of rocks by a waterside club in Batroun.

I clambered onto that tiny lifeboat and let the captain lead the way. Within seconds, the giant waves that had been terrorising me all day began to crash over us until we capsized.

What drove me to avoid drowning? Sheer frustration with the situation. This poorly managed situation would never occur anywhere else in modern times. We had fallen so far from our marine-trading ancestors.

“Not like this,” I remember thinking, as I swam my heart out. I reached the rocks and saw that some people were already waiting. Judging by their all-white outfits, it was clear they worked at the club. They had a warm, concerned look in their eyes. I immediately trusted them and allowed them to help me climb up the rocks. Once I reached the top, more workers were waiting with fresh towels and sympathetic ears. I was touched. I was a complete stranger to them, and yet I felt so safe, like I was with family.

I tell that story with pride now. Things are not always what they seem in Lebanon. Compassion can be found behind a wall of rocks. A harrowing experience can reveal itself to be a story of the power of human spirit. It is that awareness that keeps me going back to visit the land you speak of. So, Kahlil, while I question your use of the word serene, I did meet your “children of Lebanon” (Gibran & Ayoub, 2013).

I just had to be willing to part with serenity.

In your message, you said “your Lebanon is an arena for men from the West and men from the East” (Gibran & Ayoub, 2013).

It can feel that way at times, Kahlil. I can see how some view this majestic land as their playground.

The realisation initially came to me in a superfluous manner. When I became of age, I began to experience the nightlife within Lebanon. I remember feeling incredibly disconnected when visiting the beach resorts and superclubs that seemed to be mimicking Las Vegas. It became increasingly clear that these were just places for tourists to play in. You could only enter these clubs if you had booked a table with your party - meaning that you attended and left each night without meeting anyone new. Without meeting anyone that might actually live there.

By comparison, the bars that were frequented by Lebanese people carry some of my fondest memories in the way of nightlife. I left behind the petroleum spirits at White to enjoy delicious cocktails made from locally-sourced ingredients and inspired by traditional dishes at Central Station boutique bar. Without the blaring music and the icy front that night clubs seem to give people, I was able to strike up conversations with locals and get to know the modern Lebanese. The vine-pressers. The people that I could've been, had my parents not left the country.

The Western and Eastern influences in Lebanon wreak havoc in other ways. I almost cringe when people call it the "Paris of the Middle East."

If it is a nod to Lebanon's previous colonisers, then it insinuates that the Lebanese have not been truly liberated. That we are, as you say, "cowards, always led backwards by the Europeans."

If it's to highlight Lebanon as the most cosmopolitan country in the Middle East, then it simply reminds me of the cost. The cities have crumbled at the hands of those with allegiance to other countries.

What was it that you said? That the "ancient tyrannical enemy still hides within their own soul?" (Gibran & Ayoub, 2013).

How true. Some consider themselves to be truly Lebanese, while allowing garbage to pile up in the streets and resources to become scarce. When that isn't enough, they destroy the entire city of Beirut and plead negligence. These people are not your children of Lebanon, Kahlil.

When you focus solely on that, it can feel disheartening. You begin to believe that Lebanon is truly lost to greed and power...until you retreat to the mountains.

I find it hilarious that the Lebanese-Arabic word for the village sounds exactly like the feminine word for lost.

I never feel *daeya* in Hadchit. I am not a foreigner there. My body was born in a Western hospital, but my soul was resting in the Qadisha valley, waiting for me to return.

I once heard a woman speak of how right and dignified she felt around the right man. I feel something akin to that everytime I visit the North of Lebanon. I'm as much a part of the ecosystem as the cedar trees. I walk through the streets with comfort, humbled by the knowledge that I was a generation away from living there.

The villages in the Bsharri district are delightfully frozen in time. A story of first-peoples and ancient empires lies behind every corner, but it is not limited to the North. The remnants of early occupiers are scattered across the country, from the Temples of Baalbek to the Byblos Citadel.

Like you Kahlil, I simply thank the mountains for reminding me that while the entire planet has history, Lebanon takes pleasure in reminding you of it. How right you were, when you said, “the songs of a maiden collecting herbs in the valleys of Lebanon will outlast all the uttering of the most exalted prattler among you.” (Gibran & Ayoub, 2013).

My Lebanon may not always be serene, but it will never lose its long-held spirit.

It seems, after all, that we might share the same Lebanon.

Sincerely,

Chadielle Fayad.

References:

Gibran, K. (2013) *Kahlil Gibran on Lebanon* Joey Ayoub, *Hummus For Thought*. Translated by J. Ayoub. Available at: <https://hummusforthought.com/2013/12/20/khalil-gibran-on-lebanon/> (Accessed: 12 November 2023).

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