

The Marka Experiment

The Darkness before Dawn

WORDS Charli Wyatt

Creating a community garden with the residents of a low-income neighborhood in Marka is turning out to be more difficult than Charli had initially anticipated. With Ramadan hot on her heels, a make-or-break meeting needs to be called.

Ramadan is one week away. The dirt has not been moved. The compost vendor won't answer our calls. But maybe it won't matter – the project could end tonight.

We're meeting with the families – men and children as well as the women gardeners – to talk about the work that needs to be done and find out if they really want to participate in the project. Maybe they'll say no. Or, what's scarier, maybe they'll say yes even if they aren't really interested because they think it's what we want to hear.

So why am I so calm? Is it because I brought my friend Fatimah, a smart and sensitive soul whom I trust to help me read between the lines? Did the simplicity of Philip's advice for tonight ("maintain the relationship") ease my fear of failure? Is it because I know I can always go home?

As we assemble in Um Abdullah's sitting room, I see new and unexpected faces – not just children, but also women from other households. Future gardeners, perhaps?

Nadia gives a brief introduction and then turns the floor over to the families for their response. People begin talking all at once. Israa, my translator, does her best to keep up. I listen, and watch, and wait – for what, I'm not sure.

For half an hour, the discussion centers on one thought expressed in different ways – *we want this garden, but the work is too much*. It occurs to me as I



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listen that they don't know their collective power. Each person sees 50 cubic meters of dirt and thinks, "This will take me months, and it will break me." I see a room full of people and think, "If we work together we can do this in a day."

I don't want to push them to do something they don't want to do, and I can't change their minds in one night or just with words. At least they're sharing their

feelings honestly – that's what matters. Now, how can we end the meeting gracefully, accepting the reality but maintaining the relationship?

"We're not doing this because we want money," Um Marwan assures me. "But it's too much. It will take us months to move all this dirt." I nod, listening.



But then she adds something unexpected. “We want results as fast as possible.”

And that’s my opening – the thing I’ve been waiting for.

Once again, the nature of the garden holds the key. No garden ever gave anybody speedy results beyond the instant gratification of doing good, honest work. Gardens are a study of faith and patience. From building to harvesting, a garden takes time. Months of it. Even then, nothing is for certain – nature may thwart you, and this is a real threat in our case. I break my silence to remind them of this.

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Like a wave, this statement rolls back to me, sweeping people up one by one. “We will try. We want to try!”

“As long as you want to try, I will help you,” I tell them, trying not to smile too much. Someone replies, “Our success is your success.” It strikes me as a uniquely Jordanian exchange.

At 3:00pm the next day we assemble at the garden beds. My spirits are high. I

can’t wait for them to see just how much they will accomplish in the three hours before sunset.

We set to work. Bucket by bucket, the mountain of dirt melts away. By the time the sun hits the hills, we’ve filled about a quarter of the bed space – far more than they had thought possible.

And yet I’m uncertain. The kids worked hard and we got a lot done, but the adults didn’t participate much. I had hoped for a more convincing sign of their commitment, especially since the calendar is beating us. Our ideal planting date has passed, and unless we work during Ramadan – an unlikely scenario – we can’t plant for another six weeks. Depending on the weather, it might be too late.

I flirt with the idea of coming every day, alone if necessary, until it’s finished. I could get it done in a week. But the families would see my impatience, and that could create shame and resentment – two things that are not useful for building and maintaining relationships.

Nadia and I arrange another meeting with the families to discuss the situation and what, if anything, to do next. This time, though, I’m nervous. If they look to me for direction, what will I say? I head to

Habitat for Humanity to talk it over with Philip.

“Sounds like you’ve got a lot to think about,” he says, after I explain the situation.

“I have thought about it!” I answer, frustrated. He’s my advisor, why isn’t he advising? “I’ve come to you because I still don’t know what to do.”

“I don’t feel comfortable telling you what to do. You’re the one out there alone, flapping in the wind.”

I pause, trying to decide what he means. I realize he’s not worried about the community – he’s worried about me. Like growing a garden, this work requires faith and patience. He knows that I weigh what we’ve achieved in Marka against working in a less ambiguous environment where I can feel more certain, where “progress” is steady and measurable and the results are tangible. He knows that sometimes I wonder if anything will come of this project, while he sees what’s already come of it – the things we’re learning and the relationships we’re building in the community and with our volunteers and supporters. He knows the difficulty of working in ambiguity and uncertainty, and he understands the danger of shame, resentment, and the false yes. He doesn’t want to push me. This is a decision I have to make for myself.

“I’m not giving up,” I tell him. “I lack experience, not courage. I’ll go tap dance in the streets if that’s what it takes.”

He smiles as if to say, “Then what’s the problem?” He tries not to smile too much.

Back again in Um Abdullah’s house, Nadia lays out the scenario for the families and asks them what they think. Ala’ translates their discussion for me. I listen.

“We want to do this,” they tell us, “but it’s not possible during Ramadan. We must wait until after Eid.”

After Eid, it is. **JO**