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# Danny's Story: Uniting Around Our Common Humanity

Judea Pearl

*University of California, Los Angeles*

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## Danny's Story: Uniting Around Our Common Humanity

### **Cover Page Footnote**

Dr. Judea Pearl, professor of computer science at UCLA, is the father of the Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl, who was executed by Islamic extremists in Pakistan in 2002. This talk was presented at Sacred Heart University on February 4, 2008, at a colloquium sponsored by the Center for Christian-Jewish Understanding as part of the undergraduate core curriculum focusing on "The Human Journey."

JUDEA PEARL

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*Danny's Story:  
Uniting Around Our Common Humanity*

Six years ago almost to the date, in a desolated area of Karachi, Pakistan, a young man got out of the car and said, “Where is the guy I’m supposed to interview? . . . Are you out of your mind? . . . I am a journalist.”

Well, he was a journalist. He was my son, Danny, a walking sunshine of truth, humor, music, and humanity. He was a journalist: one who gave readers in the West a picture of the human face behind the news; one who gave to millions of Muslims—voiceless Muslims in the Middle East and Southeast Asia—a voice. Danny was a storyteller who told the stories about ethnic Albanians trying to make friends with Serbians, about Ethiopians and Yemenites fighting over who owns the real Queen of Sheba, about carpet weavers in Tehran who are trying to weave the greatest carpet in the world. And as he stood there demanding sanity in the face of madness, in that dungeon in Karachi, Pakistan turned into a microcosm of our twenty-first century and came to amplify and personify the age-old struggle between civilization and barbarity.

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The struggle lasted for about a week. At the end of that week, in the same dungeon facing a television camera, the young man looked straight in the eyes of evil and proclaimed his identity. “My name is Daniel Pearl,” he said. “I am a Jewish-American journalist from Encino, California. My father is Jewish. My mother is Jewish. And I am Jewish.” Now, he did not say it under coercion, nor did he say it in defiance or gallantry. He said it in his usual matter of fact way, as if saying two plus two makes four, and I am Jewish. Danny was not so naïve as to ignore the venom that drew down his captor’s face each time he uttered the phrase, and still he repeated, “My father is Jewish. My mother is Jewish. I am Jewish.”

What did he mean by those eleven words? Danny was not religious in the conventional sense. Judaism for him was the language of his extended family and a source of strength, commitment, and historical identity. When he proclaimed, “I’m Jewish,” what Danny told his captors was, “I respect Islam precisely because I’m Jewish. And I expect you to respect me and my faith precisely because you are or you claim to be good Muslims.” In other words, I come from a place where one’s heritage is a source of one’s strength, and one’s strength is measured by one’s capacity to accommodate diversity, because it is only through diversity that we recognize our common humanity.

“I am Jewish” means I understand suffering because the suffering of my ancestors is etched on my consciousness. I understand justice because I was distilled in injustice. And I understand Muslim suffering, too, because I’ve seen your people in Kosovo, and I have worked with your carpet weavers in Tehran, and I swam with your pearl divers in Baharan. “I’m Jewish” means I’m reminding you of the challenge of understanding others. “I am Jewish” means I proclaim my right to be different, and I’m reminding you, as did my ancestors for three millennia, of the shining dignity of being different. “I am Jewish” means I am the litmus test of your faith and the final test of your strength. So, let’s come to our senses.

Danny's next sentence—the last one that he uttered freely—shed additional light of what he meant by those words. He said, “Back in the town of Bnai-Brak in Israel, there is a street named after my great grandfather, Chaim Pearl, who was one of the founders of the town.” And why is he telling this strange story about his great grandfather in Bnai-Brak? How come in the race—the crazy race for nanoseconds before his execution—does his mind stumble on that almost anecdotal story from our family archive? As you can imagine, I have asked myself this question millions of times in the past six years, and I will tell you my theory.

He chose that story because it conveys three different messages to three different audiences. The first message is to his family, the second to his captors, and the third message is to all of us here in the free world. To his family he says, “Behold, I am volunteering information that no one knows because I want to assure you that I am doing okay, and I am choosing my own words, and I am choosing my story, and I am undefeated.” And to his captors he says, “Look guys, I come from a place where a person is judged by the town that he builds, by the wealth that he builds, by the trees that he plants, and not by the war and destruction that he brings to the world. So come to your senses.” And to all of us in the free world, the message is clear: “Despite all the anti-American protests and criticisms that we hear from the world around us, we can be mighty proud of who we are because we are town builders in the world. Let us not forget some basic simple facts: there is a street named after my grandfather and we are the town builders in this world.” He was then silenced forever.

I wrote a poem about this struggle which I would like to share with you. It's called “The Lions' Den.”

*I walked the road to the lions' den  
South of midnight, planet earth, Karachi, Pakistan.  
Some call it “shed,” some: “nursery,”  
My father's holy book said: “den,”  
“the lions' den.”*

I touched the walls on which two eyes  
with a thousand dreams wrote songs  
and fiercest battles, ancient wars,  
for seven days, went on.

Never in the field of human conflict  
Has there been a clash so total  
so intense in charge and aim  
Between two cosmic forces  
so localized in space  
So opposed in vision  
so rooted in conviction  
Across so close a distance  
Before so many eyes.

Never stood a son of Abel  
so fiercely to the face of Cain  
A giver—to teeth of claim  
A Curious—to the blind of self.  
A listener—to the deafening shrieks of zeal.

Alone!

Never beamed a ray of light  
so deeply to the core of darkness  
Compassion, to brutality  
Principles, to whims  
Reason, to impulse  
Mankind, to Attila, the Hun

Never was this saga chanted  
in so powerful a rhyme:  
“My name is Daniel Pearl,”  
Softly spoken from the den,  
Softly, from Karachi, Pakistan

And when Daniel was lifted from the Den  
So the bible tells us  
No wound was found on him  
For he stood his ground.

This is the first time in my talk that I have alluded to God. So you might ask how do I cope with the terrible injustice that befell my son, Danny, without a faith in God? How do I reconcile the crying contradiction between our intuitive notions of good and evil and reward and punishment, divine supervision, a loving God, and the brutal murder of the most gentle person I've ever met?

Well, the truth is I don't. I'm a scientist and I find comfort in the scientific perception of life. I know that intuitive emotions such as reward and punishment and divine supervision are merely poetic visions of reality, and that history occasionally reminds us of their fallibility, and that there is nothing particularly significant about when and how these reminders crossed our path. So, as a random victim of those reminders, I simply put my mind on the opportunities that my private tragedy has imposed on me, rather than agonizing over a God that slept late on the morning of January 30, 2002. Oh, God, how negligent can the Almighty be?

I actually find support for this attitude in Genesis and the story of Abraham and Isaac called "The Binding of Isaac." It says God tested Abraham and said to him, "Abraham?" and he replied, "Here I am." And I have always felt uncomfortable with this perplexing and challenging story. I never understood how people could admire a father sacrificing his son for some God who plays games with his creatures to see how much they love him; a God who created those creatures in his own image, testing them with suffering and guilt. In other places, the Bible commands us not to sacrifice children to deities. But this story asks us to admire a person who did just that, and all on account of some hallucinating voice saying, "Abraham, take your son." However, I have recently begun to understand that story from a different angle. Who is God? God is our ideals and values and principles. And what does it mean to sacrifice your son

to God? It means to educate your children by certain principles and to certain ideas. So why is death involved here, and sacrifice? It is because living by principle is a dangerous enterprise in our world, and perhaps it has been like that throughout history. So, when Abraham says, "Here I am," what does that mean? It means I'm perfectly aware of those dangers, and still I am committed to educate my son by the principles of civilized society.

At the end of the story, an angel comes and says, "You did the right thing, Abraham. Isaac will live on." And God promises Abraham to multiply his descendants and make them a blessing to all nations, which means civilization survives. Humanity comes out victorious. Progress is a bloody journey. There are victims on both sides, especially those who push hard and those who find new pathways, but the caravan makes its way uphill. "And I will make you into a great nation and all other nations on earth will be blessed by you" means forget about personal redemption or reaping pleasure in paradise. Your reward lies in the progress of mankind.

This is my secular interpretation of the story of Abraham and Isaac. It's the only one that makes sense to me and the only one that is free of contradiction—justice, reward, and punishment, sure, but on a collective, not individual scale. And in the story of Danny, his trust in humanity, his unyielding honesty and love of life, talking to strangers, befriending the suspecting, living his principles and drawing others to them, he may perhaps have pushed too hard and at the wrong time, but the caravan goes on another inch uphill. Humanity will prevail, and all nations on earth will be blessed by you.

People ask me if I seek revenge. Yes, I do. I made this quite clear in an article which I published in Karachi a few months after the tragedy. Hatred killed my son, and that hatred I shall fight for the rest of my life. And I cannot find a greater consolation, I wrote, than one day seeing your children here in Pakistan point to Daniel's picture and say, "This is the kind of person I want to be. Like him, I want to be truthful and honest and friendly, and above all,

respectful of others.” This is my vision of revenge and this is what compelled us—my family and myself—to establish the Daniel Pearl Foundation and channel all our energy to only one aim: to harness all the goodwill that this tragedy has evoked to fighting the hatred that killed Daniel, my son.

At the Daniel Pearl Foundation, we don't have resources to move armies or conquer territories. But we do have the millions of people around the world that were shocked by Danny's tragedy and are willing to give us their time, talents, and energy to take a stand for tolerance and humanity. They are people from all religions and cultures—Christians, Jews, and Muslims; Pakistanis, Israelis, and Palestinians—working together to help contain the tsunami of hatred that has swept our land.

And permit me, my friends, to call your attention to a very strange phenomenon. You'll find dozens of celebrities and philanthropists are fighting diseases and natural disasters all over the world. Bill Gates is competing with Bono, and they're competing with Madonna, on fighting AIDS and malaria in Africa. These are noble causes, undeniably, but who is attempting to fight the culture of terror that threatens our way of life? Show me one celebrity that is devoted to fighting this tsunami which has been growing like an epidemic. And, believe me, that wave of hatred is going to explode much before global warming.

So, what is the Daniel Pearl Foundation doing about the tsunami of hatred? We have three programs in areas where Danny excelled and where we can marshal the energy of communities that resonate with our mission—journalism, music, and dialogue. In the area of journalism, we bring Muslims journalists on fellowships to work in the newsrooms of major U.S. newspapers—the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *Washington Post*—so that they can observe the dynamics of the free press. For every one journalist, we know we are reaching 100,000 or more readers when they return to their country of origin and convey the benefits of a free press society and a society, like ours, that feels secure enough to accommodate difference and listen to others. We also

have programs for high schools to encourage students to consider a career in journalism by engaging them in a collaborative project in writing school newspapers with students in Uzbekistan and Pakistan. And on the music side, we organize hundreds of free concerts every October around Danny's birthday. Last year, we held 540 concerts in 42 countries, all dedicated to the ideas of tolerance and humanity. It's an awareness-raising idea. It's using the universal power of music to bridge cultural divides. We have partners in Pakistan, Iran, and Yemen who are currently singing with us for the same cause. My personal wish is that Sacred Heart University will join in this global chorus for understanding and tolerance and take part in the Daniel Pearl Music Day in October of this year.

Our third area of programming is dialogue. My partner in this initiative is Muslim scholar, Ahmed Akbar, professor of Islamic Studies at American University in Washington, D.C. Dr. Akbar and I travel from city to city to model Jewish-Muslim dialogue for mixed audiences of Jews, Muslims, and Christians. I'm not a rabbi and my friend is not an imam. But we are highly attuned to the sentiments of our respective communities; we understand our grievances and we feel comfortable enough to represent those grievances in a public forum with mutual respect and the desire for understanding. We have only two rules of the dialogue. The first is that no issue is taboo, and the second is the requirement for respect of the other at all times. We discuss our grievances and we honestly examine our ignorance with respect to the other. There are grave misperceptions on both sides and neither Jews nor Muslims fully understand each other's history. Both sides have been negligent, and dialogue is the first step in understanding the other as they understand themselves.

In closing, I would like to add one more comment about the revenge that I have vowed to take against the hatred that took Danny's life. Danny's murderers made one serious miscalculation when they brought that camera into the Karachi dungeon and brought the face of American values to the world. By displaying the face of an American journalist who did not bow to conventional

wisdom, an American and a Jew who built bridges between East and West armed with a pen and a fiddle, not a rifle and a helmet, as Americans are often portrayed in Islamic media day after day, this was the opposite of the image of American and Jew that the murderers hoped to promote.

There is a rule of battle that says you must make your enemy weaker and your troops stronger. The battle against hatred is no exception. We must boost the morale here at home, especially among our young people. We consider American young adults like the students at Sacred Heart University to be semi-clones of Danny—talented, principled, friendly, and giving. Despite what you may hear in the media and certain halls of academia, you can be proud of your American heritage and the hopes that we radiate to the rest of the world. True, we have not always been perfect but we are still the world's largest exporters of hope, pluralism, human rights, and basic freedoms. You are Danny Pearl's kin. Like him, you will be traveling the world with a pen and a fiddle trying to make sense of what you see. Like him, you will make friends with strangers of all races, nationalities, and creeds, and you will enrich their lives with your humor, music, and insights. Like Danny, you will offer your humble contribution to the progress of humankind by insisting with all the stubbornness of your heritage: "I am American. I am Jewish. And I stand for sanity and decency and courage. So let's come to our senses."