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Q U D W A

**QUDWA 2017**

## Inspirational Stories

**Saturday October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2017**

**Dr. Naif Al Mutawa**, Creator of *The 99*, Kuwait

Moderated/Facilitated by **Sultan Al Qassemi**, Founder of Barjeel Art Foundation, UAE

Imagine Circleville, a world in which the only thing that matters is your ability to bounce or roll. Now imagine you are a half-circle in Circleville. You have no value in society. That is until a flood comes. The circles can no longer bounce or roll in the water, but you, the humble half-circle, can flip yourself over and become a boat and save them all. This illustrated story, entitled *To Bounce or Not to Bounce*, was Dr. Naif Al Mutawa's response when a Kuwaiti supermarket fired a drycleaner because of his religion.

"I used to write essays," Dr. Al Mutawa said. "One of my relatives told me: 'Great essay, but who are you writing for? You need to tell other people.' Some of the ideas I had are not acceptable to some people, so I had to learn how to tell stories so as not to offend. I realized I could not talk about religion, but I could talk about circles and half-circles."

The book was a finalist for the UNESCO prize for Literature in the Service of Tolerance and inspired two other illustrated books, one about Rainbowland, where half-circles with red bowties are not allowed to marry those with blue ones because they would create purple, the lowest colour on the rainbow; and another about Tieland, in which the circles wear ties that are too long for them but discriminate against those who cut their ties. Al Mutawa stopped writing after the third book because he refused the government censor's editing requests. Instead, he went to New York for graduate training in clinical psychology at Columbia University. There he worked at the Bellevue Hospital, where he worked in the Survivors of Political Torture unit. "The story I heard over and over was of people who grew up idolizing leaders only to end up being tortured by them," he said.

The storytelling skills he developed would have relevance in Al Mutawa's future endeavours. He has taught at the Kuwait University Faculty of Medicine for 13 years and works at The Soor Center for Professional Therapy and Assessment in Kuwait. "For me, when I teach I do not have anything to write down on the board except for drawings," he said. "If you have something new, use it. You





need new tools to get students and patients laughing and engaged. You are not there just to push information. I also use stories when I meet patients. I try to use stories to change their lives.”

The next story Al Mutawa would tell would change his life. He was talking with a relative during a 2006 taxi ride to Harrods (“A pilgrimage for all Gulf Arabs in London”) when the inspiration for *The 99* arrived in the form of Pokémon. “There was a fatwa against Pokémon at the time,” Al Mutawa said. “I thought: “My God, what is happening to my religion?’ And I realized my next idea had to be as successful as Pokémon.”

*The 99* is a comic book series featuring superheroes from around the world. The backstory is that when the Mongols throw all the Islamic texts into the river, the knowledge was preserved as prayer beads. Years later, when Grenada fell, the prayer beads were separated and ended up in different places around the world, eventually giving birth to 99 superheroes. “Like prophets, all superheroes are based on messages from above,” Al Mutawa said. “Peter Parker gets his from a spider rather than the angel Gabriel; Superman is sent away in a basket by his parents like Moses.”

The series inspired a mini theme park in Kuwait and a TV show that was shown around the world, including China, where the Communist government officially opposes religion. It also received a lot of attention, some good (Barack Obama gave it a shout-out in the press), and some bad (there were two fatwas against the book, and Daesh threatened Al Mutawa and his mother).

“It won many prizes, but what makes me unhappy is the number of viewers who told us this was against religion,” he said. “When I receive an award I am happy because I know when I get praise in one place I will get in trouble somewhere else.”

Because of a lawsuit against him, Al Mutawa did not write at all for three years. But last year, after the lawsuit was dismissed, his latest book was published in Saudi Arabia. It is about Circleville again, but this time they are not discriminating against half-circles but using triangles to go to war. Fortunately, they figure out that triangles can also be used for culture (to make pyramids) and for security (as the roofs on a house).

“Comics and illustrations are a different language.”, Al Mutawa said.

**Takeaway:** Teachers are no longer needed to provide information, so they need to use all resources at their disposal to engage students.





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التعليم من  
أجل المستقبل  
**TEACHING  
FOR TOMORROW**

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ASK

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تقدم  
ADVANCE