

# 'Spring will come, but it is the grieving process that will dictate when,' says Lebanese artist Zena El-Khalil

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Whirling on site at Beit Beirut (Zena el Khalil)

Naima Morelli

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"Just like the seasons of the Earth, there is a time and place for everything," says Lebanese artist Zena El-Khalil. "Winter has the tendency to create the most amount of discomfort for us. The trepidation of the unknown can bring about anxiety and frustration. However, this phase is absolutely necessary for us to appreciate what comes next."

Like her fellow citizens, international artist, author, sacred activist and yoga instructor El-Khalil has been affected deeply by the explosion in Beirut on 4 August. However, through her art and yoga, she has developed a spiritual framework that brings hope and strength.

"With regards to the explosion, I am deep into the winter," she explained. "I am observing and digesting the changes happening as well as supporting and holding space for those in need. I am also sitting with the experience with the intention that when the time is right, I will know what to do."

At the time of the blast last month, El-Khalil was sitting on her couch in her apartment. "It was a beautiful afternoon and I was filled with gratitude to be back in the sanctuary of my home, after being stuck abroad for five months due to the pandemic. Just behind me, warm Mediterranean light streamed through and lit up my indoor plants. Suddenly my building began to shake."

Her initial thought was "Earthquake!" even though it was unfolding in short and violent waves. "Then it stopped. And then came the sound. And then the explosion. The roar of a thousand dragons cracked open my skull. Autopilot took over. An Arabic mantra went off on replay in my head: *In the name of God, The Merciful, The Compassionate.*"

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The artist is no stranger to bombs, having lived through the 2006 Israeli invasion of Lebanon. But she says that this blast was different. "It ripped through every atom of my existence, in both slow motion and full speed ahead. As I leapt towards my door, I realised that an invisible push had aided my jump. A blast pressure unlike anything I had ever experienced."

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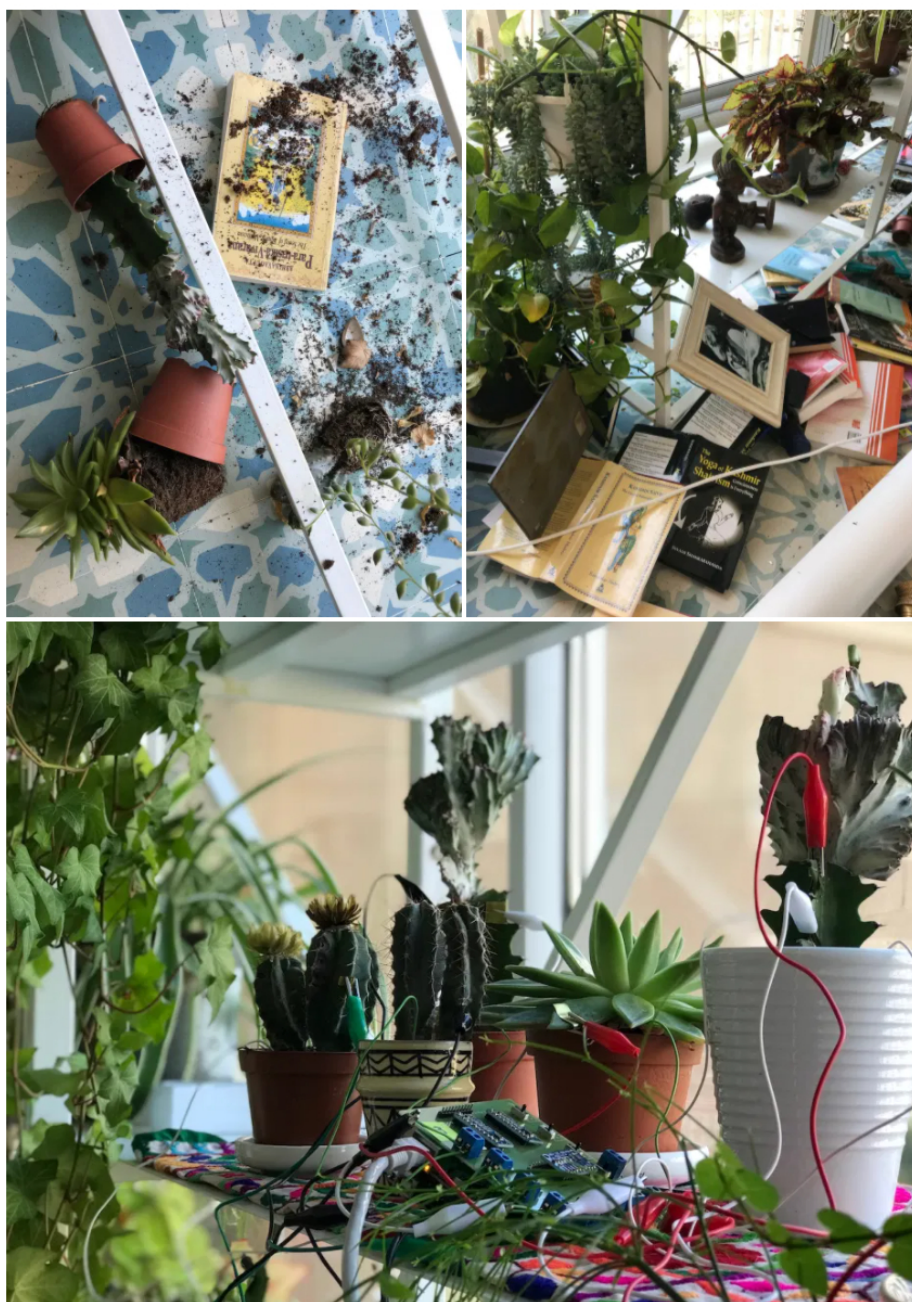
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She recalls rushing out of her apartment, then having to run back in to get her shoes: "My hands trembled, but I was calm. The mantra was doing its thing. Scanning my apartment, I realised that the only reason I was still alive was because my bookshelf heavy with books and plants had held the window panes from crashing over my head. My books had saved my life. I ran down and out to the street, praying that my 15-storey building would not collapse on top of me. All this happened in 5, 10, 20 seconds... I don't know. Time stood still."



On the street, she found an eerie quietness, until a woman pointed to the sky and began screaming. "Then I saw a huge plume of pink smoke. A bomb? An attack? An explosion."

In the uncertainty of an attack or further explosions, she tried frantically to call her loved ones. "I sat down on a cement stump and the son of the caretaker of our building brought me a glass of water. This blessed 10-year-old boy, Omar with the bright blue eyes, grew into a man right there and then. My eyes locked with his and overwhelming gratitude filled my heart. An experience of *expansion* began to arise. It told me to go back up, grab my passport, laptop and portable battery chargers and go check on my parents."

On the trek to her parents through Ain El-Mreisseh, she saw incredible destruction. "I dodged falling glass and saw bits and pieces of buildings and gypsum board ceilings fall. I kept my pace steady and walked in the middle of the already narrow road in order to avoid the debris. I could hear sirens wailing but other than a few sporadic cars flying by with severely injured people, Beirut had stood still. It looked like the apocalypse that I had seen in so many Hollywood movies. If I found Will Smith or Schwarzenegger suddenly walking by my side, I would not have been surprised."

In the aftermath of this traumatic event, she is taking her time and allowing herself to experience the full spectrum of emotions as they arise. "I am learning to be with what is. I have been in this state before and in no rush to get out."

She points out that it is normal to want to heal as quickly as possible, but the danger in doing so is



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that it can create a sort of spiritual bypassing, robbing ourselves of the precious lessons in vulnerability, authenticity and compassion that come with pain. Or it could interrupt the delicate and important process of grieving.

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This aspect of compassionate re-elaboration of catastrophes, as well as grieving and healing are very present in Zena El-Khalil's work. She emphasises how – since she moved back to Beirut in 1994, after the civil war — the city has continued to produce cycles of death and rebirth within her.

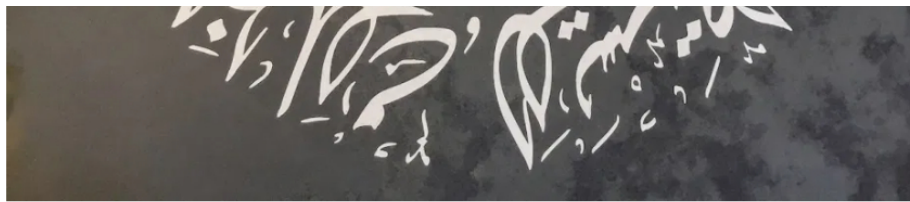
"I used to believe that with each death, I lost a part of my heart. But that was the past and since deepening my spiritual journey, I have come to learn that pain can be the greatest teacher for compassion, self-transformation and an accelerator for the elevation of human consciousness. Spring will come, but it is the grieving process that will dictate when."

While she is aware that it's currently impossible to experience life without violence, she believes that we can learn not to identify with it, not to participate. In short, there is no quick fix to living a life beyond fear. "It takes hard work and discipline to unravel your mind. To live in a world free from fear, injustice, inequality and brutality, we have first to go through the internal revolution; the journey inwards towards self-realisation. To set the world free, you have to be free from within."

Indeed, the concept of healing that we find prevalent in Zena's work is actually a healing of the falsely perceived notion of the self as being separate from source. "Healing means knowing that we are not separate from the universe and the discipline of transforming our paradigm of the world into a lens that humanity has yet to use as a norm. We are the universe and it's only the intricacies of the mind that keeps us believing that we are our thoughts. Thoughts come and go, but there is a constant to be discovered, an entirely different reality that exists behind the framework of mental constructs. And that constant is love."

The artist found evidence of love as a paradigm on the streets of Beirut. Post explosion, she has seen innumerable acts of kindness. "People have donated money when they had little to spend on themselves. They have opened the doors of their homes to total strangers. They are cooking and cleaning for neighbours. They are demanding change within our government."





The way that everyone has come together to help and support each other is nothing short of phenomenal, she adds. "But it's also not surprising as the very definition of the Lebanese people is one of resilience and love. If there's anything I have learned from my spiritual studies it is that in order for the new to come through, the old must be thrown out. Destruction clears the way for a rebirth."

She believes that the rebirth that happened on 4 August 2020 will have the power to take the people of Lebanon to a higher state of consciousness and help them rebuild the country they dream of. "Despite the pain, they still believe that the Lebanon they desire so much is within reach. Something is waking up. Since October last year [when huge public protests started], the people have not backed down. We are learning from our mistakes and moving further to dispel the darkness that has gripped our land for so long. And the driving force is love."

Through her life, as well as through her spiritual and artistic practice, she has come to see that the only constant is change. "Whatever comes, will go; whatever is born, will die. We will continue to gain and lose. A radical acceptance of this impermanence can allow us to embrace fully and appreciate the blossoming that will come this spring."

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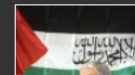
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