

## “Our Work is Love”

By Steven W. Thrasher

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*This talk is dedicated to the parents of my friend Mohanad, to the 143 journalists killed in Palestine—and to all of the brave Northwestern students here today.*

Good afternoon, Liberated Zone of Northwestern University!

I would like to begin by sharing some words from two comrades. The first are from Ahmad, a Twitter mutual, who writes to you from Sa’Na, Yemen, and asked me to tell you, “To the amazing people of America! Know that you are not alone. Hundreds of millions, if not billions, of people stand by your side. Our prayers, hopes, and aspirations are all intertwined with your hands. You are the frontline defenders of humanity, not just in Gaza! You are the barrier that prevents the terrifying flood of blood from sweeping away the innocent everywhere. Gaza is just the beginning... Push the rock uphill... Swim against the current... If necessary, be the current itself! Be the rock... Be the mountain... But beware of retreat and surrender! The wall that protects children and the innocent in Gaza and the world will collapse after that. You are the heroes our children should look up to. Respect from Yemen. From a young Yemeni man who lost his father due to his opposition to the Zionist regime. I am Ahmed, the son of Hassan Zaid, who was assassinated in 2020.”

The second are the words of Martin Luther King Jr., who is our comrade, even though he was killed long ago—because our work connects like-hearted souls across space, and across time, and even across the threshold of death itself. On April 4, 1967—one year to the day before he was assassinated—Dr. King gave a speech called “Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break the Silence” at the Riverside Church in Manhattan, just a few blocks from where your peers at Columbia began the first Gaza Solidarity Camp. In it, he said, “A true revolution of values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth. With righteous indignation, it will look across the seas and see individual capitalists of the West investing huge sums of money in Asia, Africa, and South America, only to take the profits out with no concern for the social betterment of the countries, and say, ‘This is not just.’”

You, my friends, have not just *said* that “This is not just.” *You* have put your bodies on the line, occupied this space, and demanded that Northwestern “Disclose!” and “Divest!” from investing money in war—because you “will not stop, you will not rest” until the University meets not your request, but your *demands*! *You* have turned Deering Lawn into a Gaza Solidarity Camp and a Liberated Zone, which is fitting because this lawn is dedicated to the memory of Allison Krause, Jeffrey Miller, Sandra Scheuer, William Knox Schroede, Phillip Lafayette Gibbs and

James Earl Ray—the six students killed at Kent State and Jackson State universities by the National Guard in 1970.

As Beth Massey, who was arrested protesting at Columbia in 1968, told us right here last night, the murder of those six students “doesn't mean you have to cower” when thinking of them. Rather, “That means make it bigger and bigger and bigger!”

Let their sacrifice *radicalize* you, to do just that: to let *you* get bigger—bigger in your *hearts*, bigger in your *courage*, bigger in your *numbers*, and bigger in your commitment liberation.

In the same 1967 speech King delivered just a year before his death, he warned of “the giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism.” King was not popular in white or Black America at the time, and he would remain in the public wilderness the last year of his life. Because he turned his sights on combating not just racism domestically—which was hard enough—but on critiquing capitalism and militarism.

King also was thinking globally. And as Malcolm X, King’s brother-by-other-means, once observed, “The first thing the American power structure doesn't want is any negroes to start thinking internationally.”

King went up against the American empire.

And so have you. *You* have gone up against the American empire.

It might feel scary at times. Because, in essence, a colonial war of occupation is playing out on this lawn. The empire has not just struck back at our efforts; it has hit extremely close to your homes. And when the university became an imperial battle site, the administration wanted to side with the warmongers instead of with *you*, the peacemakers.

But we said no. Just a short 52 hours ago, this lawn was empty, when a couple dozen of you students showed up with tents. A number of faculty, including Marshall Alithia, Josh Hon, Andy Holter and I locked arms with you to keep the cops out. We got roughed up a little bit, but we were successful. No matter how hard they pushed and shoved and tried to break our solidarity, we didn’t let go of each other—and they couldn’t break our bond between each other.

Police officers do *violence* work on behalf of a ruling class that does not want you thinking internationally.

But *ours*, our work has a higher calling. And so, the Northwestern police could *not* break us because we held onto to another, our cause is just, our mission is righteous, and our work is love.

*Our work is love.*

Not in a Taylor Swift “Love Story” way. Not in a Tinder way. Not even in a “I really heart your Insta story” kind of way.

Our work is love—the radical love of Martin Luther King. A love that is going to dismantle “the giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism”—in Gaza, in Palestine, in America, and right here at Northwestern University!

A love that has made *you* risk your comfort, and your scholastic security, and your future job prospects, and your physical safety because of *your* love for millions of Palestinians, most of whom you have never and never will meet. And yet, you are willing to do the work to stop one more cent of your money being sent by this university, to the state of Israel—so that it can use weapons made right here in the United States of America, to destroy every university in Gaza, to make millions homeless, to kill a staggering 143 journalists, to turn tens of thousands of children into orphans, to make the moms and dads of 15,000 children into *theklas* (that’s Arabic for a parent whose child dies), to murder one hundred university professors and 8,000 university students such as you, and to commit genocide.

We are saying to this university, we will not be a part of *that*. Our cause is righteous.

*Our work is love.*

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Over the last week, and as we have built this beautiful space over the last two days, horrific news has been reported about a mass grave found at Nasser hospital in Khan Younis with hundreds of bodies in it. Some were children.

Many were in their scrubs, with their hands behind their back—killed either execution style or, horrifically, buried alive.

When I say our work is love, I am talking about the kind of love that doctors, nurses, phlebotomists, pharmacists and ambulance drivers in Gaza have given not just to their patients they refused to abandon, but to us. Because in their sacrifice, and in their refusal to let go of the humanity of their patients and themselves no matter how many Israeli tanks shot at their hospital with American made shells—they are loving us by liberating us. They are showing us *how* to get *bigger and bigger and bigger* in our hearts and in our willingness to make loving sacrifices.

These healthcare workers include medical students, the same age as many of you, who have had their education taken away from them, and yet have stepped up to do the work of seasoned doctors.

One of them is Ezz Lulu. He was a fifth-year medical student, doing a residency in Al-Shifa hospital, when the war came to him; along with his classmates, he was thrust into being a “real doctor” very quickly. When Al-Shifa was under attack, he wrote: “We work 24 hours per day with very little time of sleep. We are doing the work that is supposed to be for the professional and experienced doctors. Still, we proved that we can do it! Our names were named in the doctors honors list. Despite of the heart breaking and terrifying sights that we witness, we are glad that we are doing our best to make people feel they’re not alone with their freshly opened wounds.”

As he narrowly avoided shells, he vowed he would not leave Al-Shifa.

Then, he went silent for weeks. With this weird parasocial anxiety many of us have developed, as we get intimate accounts of genocide beamed into our phones every day, I felt deeply worried about him.

I thought I would be ebullient when he finally posted almost a month later—and I was, until I used Google to translate what he’d posted in Arabic: “I bring to you the news of the martyrdom of my father, my eldest brother, his wife, their daughter, my sister, two of my maternal uncles, their wives and their children. May you receive martyrdom, my beloved ones. I will see you in heaven, my soul. We belong to Allah and to Him we shall return.”

“I bring to you the news of the martyrdom” of my family. I wasn’t sure what to feel about finding out someone was alive who was suffering a fate worse than death.

Ezz has gone on to work in *more* hospitals. When one is destroyed, he goes to *another*. (And like all healthcare workers in Gaza, he does this work without pay.) But if you ever doubt the power of what you are doing here, in relation to what a peer of yours is doing in Gaza, just listen to his words. In a message he posted on social media, Ezz said this week “From a university student in still northern Gaza who lost his family, his home and his university, to the brave students protesting against the genocide, I stand with you in solidarity. Your voices are powerful, and your fight for justice is crucial. Don’t give up! The world needs your courage. And dedication to raise awareness and demand change! I see your strength. Keep fighting for what’s right! Don’t forget your voices are making a difference.”

Our work is love.

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I teach in the Medill School of journalism and I work in the Institute of Sexual and Gender Minority Health and Wellbeing—and one of the people I look up to most in the world is trans journalist Lewis Wallace, who sacrificed a great deal out of love for his fellow humans. In his book *The View From Somewhere*, he lays out how there are two major schools of journalism—*extractive* journalism, where journalists take something from people (in a model similar to colonialism), and *relational* journalism, where journalists are in relationship with the communities and people they are writing about.

I teach my students relational journalism. But one of the many lessons Palestinian journalists have taught me—at great sacrifice—is that journalism can be an act of love. They have elevated beyond belief what relational journalism can, and should, be.

As you may know, 143 Palestinian journalists have been killed so far in the genocide. The last two, Ibrahim Al-Gharbawi and Ayman Gherbawi, were killed just yesterday. The journalists who are surviving and still reporting are not just doing so in the face of imminent death at any time while vowing to keep reporting until their last breath; they are doing so while practicing journalism as a form of love. They are treating journalism as a public good and as a shared responsibility—one which is not about who “scoops” whom, but one in which they all work together to bring the world the news as a story of their people collectively.

In December, on a day when Khan Younis was under attack and “only”—I am using scare quotes—about 80 journalists had been killed, Journalist Ahmed El-Madhoun posted a video, depicting a group of men and women sharing laughs and a simple meal, writing “Today, we got our lunch late, but together. A group of brave journalists decided to stay in Khan Yunis and cover what's happening here despite the intense shelling. All of us, hand in hand.”

*All of us, hand in hand.*

Madhoun and his colleagues, such as Hossan Shabat (who is 21 and should be a junior in college like many of you) are changing the game of journalism. Neither of them are “objective.” But this is one of the many gifts Palestinian journalists, at great personal sacrifice, are giving to the world: they are giving us a chance to view the role of the journalist in fundamentally different ways, including to see how *interdependence* might be a better way to approach our craft than the myth of *independence*. If the purpose of journalists is to get “news people can use” to the public to make a better world, that is a *shared* responsibility, and a goal we can work towards *together* without competing against each other. Madhoun, Shabbat and their colleagues report, with great heart and intellect and integrity, on the genocide around them. But they also feed the people around them. They feed one another. They tend to the tears of the crying children. They jump in

as medics for the wounded. They sweep the floors of hospitals and dig through the rubble. They seem to understand that if you want to be a journalist, you need access to clean water, food, shelter—and a freedom from violence.

They are not *objective*. But why is the U.S. press corps *objective* as they prepare, this very evening, to yuk it up with Genocide Joe Biden at the White House Correspondents' Dinner—*after* he killed 143 of our colleagues? Why is *not* caring about the mass murder of tens of thousands and the famine of millions “objective?” At last year’s White House Correspondents Dinner, Genocide Joe gave an impassioned speech about a single Wall Street Journal reporter, Evan Gershkovich, who was detained in Russia and who is, unfortunately, still detained there—and Britany Griner, who had just been released from Russia. If Biden could devote much of his 2023 speech to Gershkovich and Griner, but fails to talk about the 143 journalists his bombs have killed tonight, and the press corps just eats their rubber chicken and says nothing about murdering our colleagues—why is that “objective”?

To the Medill students and journalists within ear shot, I say to you: *our* work is not about objectivity. Our work is not about “scooping” one another. Our work is about you putting your brilliant minds to work, and opening your compassionate hearts, and linking your arms together understanding all of our fates are interconnected.

Our work is love.

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Many university administrators and politicians have tried to slander our cause as violent or antisemitic.

Nothing could be further from the truth. And we need to be loud in saying this.

I look around this encampment and I see a multi-racial, multi-ethnic, multi-faith coalition of people united against colonialism, imperialism, and Zionism.

But I don’t see anti-semitism.

When I was at Columbia’s Gaza Solidarity Encampment last week, I saw Muslim students in prayer being surrounded by Jewish students, so they could pray for peace. And I saw Jewish students having Shabat.

But nothing could have prepared me for what I saw when I came home to Northwestern. Nothing could have prepared me for the pride I would feel last night, when I heard one of my former

students, Maddie, explaining the Passover meal to hundreds of you. And in the front row were your Muslim classmates and friends, praying with you for a free Palestine and a freedom for all oppressed peoples.

Over these nights of Pesach, I've been deeply moved as I saw Jewish members of our community sharing your faith with an open heart—explaining the Passover plate, talking about the meaning of the foods, sharing your prayers and matzoh. As you have literally invited us to break bread with one another, my eyes have grown teary as I looked out and heard “Da-ay-yanu, da-day-danu-da-day-dayn-dayana dayanu.” You brought together hundreds of Wildcats, singing together as lights in the darkness—as Jews, as Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Hindus, as people of Native American faiths and of no religious affiliation at all.

*Our work is love.* This here is a radical pedagogy, and what a university ought to be. You are not being taught by professors or titans of industry. You are unlearning the lies of the world. You are rejecting the lie that being Jewish and being Zionist are the same thing—especially considering most Zionists in the United States are fundamentalist Christians. You are rejecting the lie that our Muslim and Jewish students do not love one another.

You are united against what bell hooks called “white supremacist capitalist, imperialist patriarchy.” All of you are doing your parts! Whether it's the people in the art tent helping people express a beautiful vision of the world, Ethan and Isabel documenting what's happening for history, Abu teaching me how to roll my keffiyeh, the kitchen feeding us or the negotiating committee working to make Northwester “Disclose! Divest,” you are each doing your part to make the world a better place.

What you are doing, every moment of every day, is making history—and not in a cheap way. A lot of things get labeled as history. But as the writer Hussein Omar says, “History is what hurts.” You may take, or may have already taken, some bruises to be here today. But what we are building will outlast all of us, and they will know that we did our part for peace.

Because our work is love.

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My late sister, Sharron Thrasher, PhD, was a therapist. And there was a story she would use when counseling people about grief. Sharron would tell them, when you are in deep mourning—especially after the death of a loved one—grief looks like a dark, cold, scary lake. And the person in grief knows they have to get to the other side of the body of water to get to a better place. But often, the person doesn't *want* to get into the lake *because* it looks dark, and cold, and scary, and getting into will mean wading into its unknown depth. They are afraid the

lake will pull them under and consume them. And so, they try to walk around the lake. And they walk. And walk. And walk. But it turns out, it's not a lake at all, it's a river. And the more they try to avoid the river, they wind up in bushes and bramble, and they get lost trying to get where they want to go.

Eventually, they will *have* to get into the lake to swim across of—or, they will stay lost, far from their intended path, and stuck with their grief, forever. Because the only way through it, is through it: swimming through grief is the way out.

My friends, we have reason to feel great grief. But we also have reason to feel hope, because—as Mariame Kaba puts it—hope is a disciple. Hope is what you do to bring a better world into being.

And look around you! You did not avoid the “lake” and wind up in the river. You got into the lake, and are swimming in its depths. As your Israeli friends mourned on October 7, you mounted with them. As mothers in Gaza mourn, you have mourned. As your Palestinian friends have mourned, you have mourned with them. You could have lost yourself in the delights of the “extreme materialism” Martin Luther King warned about. You could have said nothing, and focused only on your careers.

*But you got in the water.* You are not careening down a path you don't really want to be on. You are swimming through the waters of grief together. You are building solidarity with one another, and learning how to build *physically*, and learning how to build *power*, and learning how to build *relationships*—not using each other for “networking” but real relationships—and you are learning to bring a whole, damn new world into being.

And the building blocks of that world are love. Tent by tent, brick by brick, *our work in love*. The love you share with your peers in Palestine, and the love you share for each other when you protect one another.

And when they falsely accuse of us anti-semitism, we will say:

*Our work is love.*

And when they ask us to be objective in the face of genocide, we will say:

*Our work is love.*

And when the war machine comes for us, we will say:



*Our work is love.*

And when they try to tell us not to care about the fate of our brothers, our sisters, of our trans and non-binary fellow humans with whom you share this beautiful planet, we will say:

*Our work is love.*

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Right now at New York University, students have taken over Gould Plaza for a second time, turning it into NYU's Liberation Zone. They tore down a wall to do it—after the administration called in the NYPD and arrested about a dozen faculty and over 100 students. The NYU Bobcats are as wily as our Wildcats.

I am proud of this because NYU is my alma mater, three times over. When I graduated with my doctorate from NYU in 2019, I was asked to give the graduation speech to my fellow PhD students. And in the time between when I was asked and the speech happened, the university maligned the clubs Students for Justice and Palestine and Jewish Voices for Peace. They viciously targeted my fellow students who, like you, were doing the work of love.

And so in my speech, I said that I was so proud of SJP and JVP for standing up against the apartheid state of Israel, and I was proud of them showing us as *students* what those of us graduating with PhDs would soon need to do as *professors*: to stand up on our campuses against the most marginalized, and to stand against Islamophobia, antisemitism, racism, homophobia and transphobia.

I paid a pretty high price for saying this. I was doxxed. I was threatened. I lost publishing opportunities. Most painfully, I lost some people very close to me—including two members of my dissertation committee.

But more importantly, I gained the world. (And as I always tell anyone who is wavering about speaking out, if you speak out on Palestine, you will be blessed by the most amazing people around the globe.) In the middle of when I left NYU with a broken heart, and did not know if *this* university was going to fire me before I began, I got a message from a man in Gaza. His name was Mohanad Shubair, and he wanted me to know that my speech meant a lot to him, that it was being discussed in Palestine, and that the people of Gaza appreciated what I'd said when I had the mic.

I still get choked up thinking about it. Mohanad has been my friend and pen pal for five years now. I was relieved knowing at the beginning of the genocide that he had married his

Palestinian-Canadian wife, Bella, and they were living safely in Toronto. But I was horrified that much of Mohanad's family is still in Gaza—and that both his father and his mother were killed by Israeli snipers, his cousins have been bombed, and his siblings and their families there have also either been killed with bombs, or are facing death by starvation. US-backed-Israel has murdered his parents, made him an adult orphan, and destroyed much of his home.

And yet, he is not deterred. You've let me have the mic for this afternoon, but I am so proud hearing the songs, the prayers, and the poems you deliver up here. And so, before I hand the mic back to you, I asked Mohanad if he had anything he'd like me to share with you, and he did, so I will close out with his words, which echo my own feelings. He writes, "Thank you and please don't stop. Our children need you more than ever because the whole world is letting them die. Do not be intimidated. Do not back down. Do not go home. Your message is that of love and peace and it will prevail over the ghouls running this world. We see each and every one of you and we appreciate and love you."

*Free Palestine!*