



## PEACE

## Bridges to Freedom

### one woman's journey from Iranian prison to peace

Tegra Fisk

Last September, Sarah Shourd was freed from prison in Tehran, Iran, after 15 harrowing months. Her fiancée Shane Bauer and friend Josh Fattal, both in their late 20's, are still there. With widespread international support for their freedom and innocence in the face of Iran's charges of espionage, Sarah was finally released. Desmond Tutu, Barack Obama, Ban Ki-Moon, and Noam Chomsky have all praised the three hikers' "cultural peace work". I spoke to Sarah about her experiences which have honed her desire to "work the rest of my life for peace in the Middle East."

Sarah began with a heartfelt account of the best year of her life among the culturally diverse artists, writers, and humanitarian workers in Damascus, Syria. She had been there for a year with Shane, he - involved in photojournalism, she - teaching Iraqi refugees.



Sarah Shourd in Sana'a, Yemen

Sarah recounts one of her favorite memories where while walking home late one night, she was nervous to find she was being followed. Calling out the Arabic phrase for help, "Oh People!" ten neighbors immediately ran out to assist her. She doesn't think such a caring response would take place in her native Oakland in California.

Her stories are poignant with the irony of

her and her friends' imprisonment in light of their strong desire to promote cultural exchange. "Everywhere we go, in all our work, we try to bring the best of our culture to other places and gather the best of theirs to bring home," she says. Sarah expresses a passionate wish that experiences such as hers do not inspire more fear between countries, but inspire us to "make the walls between our countries breathe and be porous".

She remembers her guards being surprised by her anguish at being away from her mother. They thought that "Most Americans don't care about their mothers so deeply."

"Our false assumptions and lack of information," says Sarah, "are perpetuated by sanctions and distrust by both governments. Since the US and Iran cut off ties 31 years ago, there has been a widening gulf of misunderstanding between Iranian and American people. We must chip away at ignorance by

being open to the rich cultures of the Middle East, seeking out information and promoting cultural exchange."

This peace activist envisions a future of promoting more understanding between people of the US and the Middle East through organizing cultural collaborations involving artists, filmmakers, musicians and writers. She has also vowed to use her prison experience as a springboard for spending the rest of her life influencing change in her country's policy towards the Middle East.

Sarah recalls the moving experience when a prison guard brought her a rose from the garden saying, "Sarah, I know someday you will be free." Presently, her full time work is with the campaign to free Shane and Josh, but Sarah says she can hardly wait to know Iran and the Middle East not as a prisoner, but an ambassador of peace.

#### MORE INFORMATION:

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## Theater of War

### Ancient Greek plays help modern-day combat veterans express their feelings

by Ruth Robertson

BROOKLYN, NY - It's a tough challenge to help troops and veterans feel more comfortable opening up about their private thoughts. Traditionally our service members have been trained to bottle up their feelings and instead stay focused on the tasks at hand. Today, we know that everyone needs a time out to address emotional needs, especially when experiences carry psychic wounds with them.

Some of history's bravest heroes suffered mentally from battle, and today's service members and relatives are no different. Overcoming stigmas about psychological injuries can be an uphill fight that seems endless, but now a new project is helping. The Theater of War project is making headway across the US.

"This is about theater as a vehicle

for something much bigger than a performance," explains Bryan Doerries, the project's director. "When veterans see their own lives reflected

**"Sophocles, a general himself, understood firsthand the mental, emotional, and physical toll of war."**

in ancient stories, they open up and talk about things they might not have shared with anyone. Maintaining one's humanity in the face of war is something people have been struggling with for thousands of years."

Today, after more than 100 readings for about 20,000 service members, Theater of War seems firmly established as a good idea.

Since autumn 2009, Theater of War has presented readings of Sophocles' *Ajax* and *Philoctetes* to military communities across the United States. These timeless plays depict the psychological wounds inflicted

upon warriors in ancient times. The two ancient stories are almost like textbook descriptions of wounded soldiers today, and show their struggle under the weight of both psychological and physical injuries. Read with emotion by actors and actresses, they have much that is important and relevant to say to military audiences.

The plays serve as inspiration for a panel discussion which immediately follows the readings. Each panel includes an active duty soldier who has experienced at least one deployment to Iraq or Afghanistan, a veteran who has experienced at least one deployment, a spouse or other family member, and a mental health professional or a member of the military chaplaincy. After the panel a town hall style discussion takes place.

Often, active-duty personnel worry about the stigma of post-



A panel discussion during Theater of War

traumatic stress disorder. Some do not even seek help after their military career is over. But in the audience participation segment of Theater of War, internal thoughts find their way into open discussion. Both active service members and veterans find they can begin to speak out loud about internal trauma. Many say they have been moved to tears by the performances.

Service members' families too are benefiting from the open discussion that Theater of War fosters. Some say they feel they have been on battlefields at home, dealing

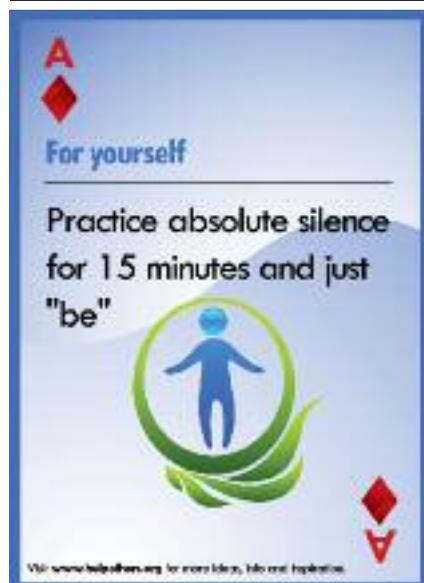
with the stresses their loved ones experienced far away. The plays have touched about 20,000 service members in more than hundred locations since the performances started less than two years ago.

This spring, Theater of War will broaden its audience even further as it makes its way onto university campuses including Columbia University, University of Pennsylvania, and Emory College.

#### MORE INFORMATION:

www.philoctetesproject.org  
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## ACTION CARD



## What They Say About Peace:

*The way of peace is the way of love. Love is the greatest power on earth.*

~Peace Pilgrim

*Stop thinking this is all there is... Realize that for every ongoing war and religious outrage and environmental devastation and bogus Iraqi attack plan, there are a thousand counter-balancing acts of staggering generosity and humanity and beauty happening all over the world, right now, on a breathtaking scale... Re-*

*sist the temptation to drown in fatalism, to shake your head and sigh and just throw in the karmic towel... Realize that this is the perfect moment to change the energy of the world, to step right up and crank your personal volume. Remember magic. And finally, believe you are part of a groundswell, a resistance, a seemingly small but actually very, very large impending karmic overhaul, a great shift, the beginning of something important and potent and unstoppable.*

~Mark Morford, San Francisco Chronicle