

A Palestinian friend and peacemaker

John Dear | Sep. 25, 2007 On the Road to Peace

In 1990, I spent a memorable day in Santa Cruz with Zoughbi Zoughbi, a long-time Palestinian teacher of nonviolence from Bethlehem. Some nine years later I met up with him in Bethlehem, and this summer we both spoke at a London peace conference.

Zoughbi was born in 1963, the second youngest of eight children, entering the world just a two-minute walk from Bethlehem's Church of the Nativity. His Palestinian Christian family is rooted deeply in Bethlehem soil. He traces his lineage way back, nearly 600 years. Married with four children, he founded Wi'am in 1995, a Palestinian Conflict Resolution Center.

Zoughbi says that in Palestine, "we are all hostages of fear. We are not dealing with 'post-traumatic stress disorder.' The stress is ongoing, with layer upon layer of pain, violence and trauma. The kids suffer from bed-wetting, flashbacks and rebelliousness. We help them play and create, and cope with the trauma of war. And in this, a patriarchal society, we try to help women gain equal footing."

The weight on the people bears down hard. Seventy-six percent of Palestinians live on less than \$2 a day. The Israeli government siphons off 84 percent of their water. Some 10,000 Palestinians languish in Israeli jails -- all in all, a long and steady worsening since the advent of the peace process in 1993.

"There are," he told the London peace conference, "now more than 450 checkpoints. There is a wall around the West Bank, and Bethlehem has become a ghetto. There is no economic vitality or freedom of movement. The Palestinian people are being crucified every day."

"Crucifixion," "ghetto," "apartheid" -- these are the words he vigorously applies. "It is nothing less than apartheid. Walls surround our towns, isolating people from each other," he says.

The results are chilling. People are confined to their homes and Bantustans. Local economies are withering and employment is skyrocketing. And frustrations among the people get played out in anger and violence, neighbor against neighbor.

They are on the brink of civil war.

The lesson of history is that never does violence spontaneously arise. It is often the foul fruit of a long continuum. Such is true in Palestine as anywhere else. "We are," he says, "the victims of the victims of the Holocaust."

The ashes of the Holocaust. Out of guilt, Israel was formed, a guilt that overwhelmed justice and turned a benighted eye as hundreds of thousands of Palestinians were uprooted to make room. It's a bitter irony hard to take.

"But there's no point," he says, "dwelling on victimhood. Palestine must be formed now from collective responsibility. Restorative justice -- justice that redresses rather than avenges -- is the only way to break the cycle of violence." Restorative justice -- putting matters right -- will disarm the extremists, he says. Otherwise they will seize on all manner of pretexts to kill indiscriminately and regard themselves as martyrs.

Over lunch in Derbyshire, Zoughbi told me. "Every day we are living the Stations of the Cross. We needn't depart for Jerusalem to be reminded of the Passion. It comes to us." Still, his hope remains. For where there is crucifixion, he says, there is the promise of resurrection. He believes in "the politics and economics of resurrection," where land is restored and the enemy reconciled.

The story of South Africa particularly instills hope. "We hope that it will happen here." In particular, that the occupation will end, the walls be torn down, freedoms be restored, prisoners be released, and the Palestinian economy -- and democracy -- be allowed to flourish. "May justice and peace be our future," he prays.

Meantime he and his center put in the hard work. "We are doing nonviolent conflict resolution every day. For here any misunderstanding can lead to big fights." He confines his work for the time being at the local level, between neighbors and families and clans. But expansive is his vision. "I hope someday we can resolve conflicts nonviolently at a national level."

And in a sense they already are. "We model nonviolence," he says, "by actively participating in the struggle to change the system. Our struggle does not perpetuate the status quo. For us, nonviolence is about challenging the system, working to change the system."

Making an impact, though, on the national level requires more work to come. It will, he says, require the struggle to take three paths. First, the Palestinians must approach the shaking off of the occupation nonviolently. Second the occupation, resisted nonviolently, must sour finally in the minds of Israelis. Third, the responsibility for harmony must fall to the international community.

As for the last, "if you are neutral in a time of injustice, then you are on the side of the oppressor," Zoughbi quotes Archbishop Tutu -- a quote he directs toward the rest of us. The time, he says, is overdue for the world to pressure Israel back to its senses.

Especially overdue for the United States. "The U.S. bears a great responsibility for what is going on here. Your

churches and peace-and-justice groups can help enormously by raising awareness, by speaking out, by changing your foreign policy, and by demanding a true peace process."

And most practical of all, by cutting off funding. The U.S. has showered largess upon Israel to the tune of \$140 billion since 1967. Zoughbi wants the aid linked to Israel's attaining a decent human rights record. "Israel," he said, "must be held accountable."

I've long thought that we must neither be anti-Semitic nor supportive of suicide bombings. Rather all should pursue the Jewish vision of Shalom, peace and human rights for all humanity -- including Palestine and its children.

"I'm not urging people to be pro-Palestinian," Zoughbi confided. "Be pro-justice. Be pro-human rights. And if you come to the Holy Land to see the old stones, come as well to see the Living Stones. Meet the Palestinian people. As we say in Bethlehem, you'll discover that now, there's enough room in the inn."

John Dear's new book, "Transfiguration," is available from www.amazon.com [1], and the DVD he is featured in, "The Narrow Path," is available from www.sandamianofoundation.org [2]. Next week, he will be speaking in Cedar Rapids and Clinton, Iowa, and Joliet, Illinois. For info, see: www.johndear.org [3].

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