

Second Threshing Session at FMC on Palestine/Israel, 12/18/2014

Minga's introduction: The idea for a minute arose during summertime military events in Gaza and Israel; two minutes were written and edited by P&SC and others. The present process is a Meeting-wide threshing on what we are led to say and do; P&SC wants a result that reflects unity in the Meeting. The first threshing session was on 12/7. We are not addressing the minutes directly, but rather speaking from our hearts about the issues. The intention is to open with worship sharing, followed by worshipful discussion later. The goal is to see if there is some movement in the group toward some definite minute and/or other action.

Minga briefly summarized the high points of what was said in the 12/7 session: A number of Friends said that our most potentially effective role is to address a US audience. What is the unique role that Quakers can play? We are not here to take sides, despite sometimes seeming to do so. We should use our prophetic voice: what is the power of love in this situation? We have faith that there is an answer and a way forward. We feel everyone needs to be actively and deeply listened to, and we are here to answer to that of God in everyone in this situation. We feel (variably) quite ignorant, but we're eager to learn. We have great compassion for the Palestinians and for the Israelis.

In worship sharing:

We need to respond because of our testimonies. The actions of our government – which are supportive of violence. We are able to respond, because of our coherence and unity as a group standing for peace on the basis of deep, spiritual convictions.

One of the threads from last time was: What do we as Quakers bring that is unique? My answer is: we bring a brotherhood and sisterhood of humanity; we deal with that of God in everyone involved. Our commitment to peace and reconciliation makes this a compelling thing for us. Beyond these generalities, I get stuck; all the proposed solutions are just so much structure, without speaking to the core of our concerns. We can do significant good if we can get our arms, our hearts, and our minds around it.

Around 1985, Apartheid was horrendously active in South Africa. Three of us arranged a film series on South Africa at the Meeting; having South Africans present made a huge difference to our understanding. In a meeting at the end of the series, the question was what to do. The three of us decided to go to South Africa to stand in solidarity with Black South Africans. We did so. While we were absent, two racially charged events (the Charles Stuart case, in which police reacted unthinkingly racist, was one) occurred. Our reaction was to realize that racism was just as active here as in South Africa. This gave rise to the formation of the Friends for Racial Justice committee. A small group can get a lot done.

I am also wrestling with the complexity of the conflict, which is really an Arab-Israeli issue, not just a Palestinian-Israeli issue. All the countries in the area are involved. We may have to leave behind rhetoric and act, either individually or together. Can we participate in some boycotts of companies active in the occupied territories?

I learned of an Arab-Jewish peace community/organization in Palestine. A man who works with them says that the Israel people want peace, but the government doesn't; the Palestinian government wants peace, but the people don't. Nothing will happen until that situation changes. There are many small groups, Arab and Israeli, which are working for peace. That seems to be really the only possibility for us: working for small peace groups, especially those with memberships that include both Arabs and Israelis.

I have observations about two specific aspects of the situation: there is a deep history in the region, which is both a blessing and a curse to finding of common solutions. How do we handle that deep history? Second: we Quakers are very small, and our Meeting is even smaller; that may be a strength. I would hope that we can find in our small numbers some ways of identifying our power; we can't do what larger groups can do. Another observation, about coalitions: at first, I assented to the opinion that we should not align with coalitions; however, I would like to investigate the possibility of finding common cause with others.

As deeply mired in deep history as this situation is (my own family was moved out of their homes in the area, and was anti-Zionist), there are sometimes surprising and rapid changes in similar situations: Northern Ireland, South Africa, the Berlin Wall. The people in the Middle East know they are all closely related (that doesn't keep them from hating one another, of course); that knowledge could be important to the prospects of peace. Both sides may decide they will lose everything unless they cooperate with one another. What is needed is political courage – at the most basic level, assassination is always a possibility. Anything we do has to appeal to our leaders and those leaders of the countries in the area; that's fundamental. But it is terribly complicated; I feel helpless about it, and have felt that way for fifty years. The question is one of heart and transformation, not structural details.

How do we address the people in the US who are most passionately involved in the conflict: Jews and Arabs. "Terrorism" is a trigger word; how do we understand that and other loaded words ("antizionism" is another). (The reaction of Cubans to establishment of relations yesterday was like an arrow of love; I come with that spirit here to this conversation.) I was in Palestine in 2012, and I really identified with a Christian woman who worked with a small peace organization. What I got from her story is that the scriptures are about liberation and compassion. That's the Jewish story, the Christian story, and it's big enough for all people; we can stand on that story – our truth can be in that story of liberation. I don't know about anything else, but this can work.

I keep coming back to what it is that Quakers can bring to the peace effort. I feel that it is our commitment to Peace and our commitment to community and our faith that things can always be worked out. There's a feeling of urgency here now; I wonder why it's suddenly so urgent. How can we translate what is important about us into some kind of action that would be meaningful, especially in a short time frame? I don't know whether having a minute (a symbolic gesture) would be good, or a more concrete commitment to the process of peacemaking; perhaps this will take fifty years; becoming engaged in the long term would seem to be what is important. It is about defining what our beliefs are and how we feel that we could contribute to a solution – how the Quaker way of approaching things could be effective in the long term.

Northern Ireland: if you listened before the Good Friday agreement to the IRA and others, you would not have believed that they would ever get together. I knew a Catholic priest who was

instrumental in converting violence way into a peaceful way. In our present context, the fact that Hamas sounds very violent and intransigent, doesn't mean that it will be impossible to get an agreement. The basic Quaker principle is that we are committed to non-violence, but this is violent from every direction (including from our government); a simple statement that there is a non-violent approach that would work would be a big gift to the situation. In 2009, we reacted to bombing in Gaza by giving money to a mental health program for children impacted by the violence. Now there is terror for children on both sides. That could be an entry point to effective and immediate action. Reacting to the damage that violence has done: interrupt the message and put forward a message of nonviolence.

Of the many upsetting, horrible things that were slipped into the budget that just went through Congress was some 100's of millions of dollars for weapons to Israel. That is really upsetting to me; that's some of my money. It seems that opposing such military aid could be a prime area of focus for Americans; Quakers have their effective lobby, FCNL (Friends Committee for National Legislation), that could really be helpful there.

I turn inward in this situation; can we learn compassion? My husband has spent much time in Israel, meeting with peace groups to increase his understanding. There is a consensus in those groups that the present government of Israel doesn't want peace. He has been asked not to bring pressure before the coming elections; that will just strengthen the conservatives' chances. We should therefore wait until after the March elections before we do anything.

Discussion in the Spirit of Worship:

What is coming up for me really strongly is our own government's complicity in the violence in the world. We need to work on our own government; if we could get somewhere with that, we could make a significant contribution to peace in the world.

The thing that rises up for me is the number of groups in the US who are very polarized on these issues. To the extent we have opportunities to talk with those folks, this seems more practicable and effective than other options. Could we invite people in for conversations where we can share our views, without it appearing that we are taking sides?

Twenty or so years ago, we had some groups who spoke here about the Mideast conflict. I don't think we give up our identity when we try to learn from others. I do think that if we have anything that is unique, it will emerge; we don't have to force the issue – it will be felt by others. Having other people know that we care what happens to everyone in the Middle East would be a good thing. What happens there affects us, and what we do here affects them. Being small, we can be resilient (but not necessarily rapid in our responses).

I have been involved in these issues for less than a year. What happened during the summer totally radicalized me. I would like to be able to engage both sides, but it is pretty hard not to take sides, because of the power differential between Israel and the Palestinians. Not to be biased in this case is to be unfair. Since there are no unbiased books or articles about the situation, you have to read everything, from all sides. Maybe a first step would be to have programs that would invite people from both sides and many perspectives. That might help bring forth from us what we should do. One thing that we can do is to help with nonviolent

protests in Palestine; nonviolence is the only way, because you certainly can't compete with the power of the other side to inflict violence.

I'm a little afraid to say this, but could we challenge ourselves by listening to things that are difficult? There are types of people we don't draw here. And there are areas of conversation that we might not want to hear, like Republicanism. That would be a test case for us. How would we respond to folks who came in and presented a pro-Israeli stance? Our listening and our heart skills might be exercised a little.

As I think about peace and justice, the word that comes to me is *empathy*. Peace comes by feeling what the other people are feeling. Listening to how things feel (fear) on each side could be very valuable. It's difficult to get beyond the fear you are experiencing. Developing empathy could be key.

In a nonviolence exercise at Brandeis, a role play of people affected directly by the conflict, it was impossible for one young Jewish man to take the role of a young Palestinian fighter. Do we know the story of our own reconciliation here at Meeting on these issues? Compassionate Listening was important in that process. That process came out of the Palestine conflict. I don't know how Compassionate Listening would lead to the next step toward peace in Palestine.

There's something very powerful in hearing one another's stories. We may not be able to see how that sharing can lead to the next step, but the potential is great.

Less controversial, but effective target: our government's export of violent solutions to conflicts. And we can identify groups and share with them our love and support (like bringing Palestinian and Israeli youth together).

I like the direction of the last comment; here's where I see a positive step to take. Others: supporting small groups working for peace, for friendship; boycotting products from the West Bank; interrupting messages of violence; addressing the harm to people (especially children); stopping the export of weapons from the US; supporting nonviolent protests in Palestine; learning about reconciliation at FMC and bringing that outward; working with FCNL on these issues.

An exchange on taking sides:

Boycotting takes a side, and is not consistent with my way of being Quaker.

But what about slavery? How does the principle of not taking sides apply? Or maybe Apartheid?

But this situation may be different -- no clear right side or wrong side.

It seems we do take sides: we're against governments who use violence to bolster their political ends.

There may be a clear right side, but you're not taking sides in the sense that you listen to both sides.

Talking with a friend who is very much pro-Israeli. He blamed Palestinians for building schools right next to military targets. But what about the compassion involved in loss of family, trauma. It's easy to make the other side the "enemy"; how do we get to the gut reaction that we are all together in the human family?

We seem to dance around full descriptions of what happened last summer, accepting the propaganda and mild allusions. Why can't we face full descriptions of what happened – the facts?

I can't condone the massacre of this summer, but I can't condone sending rockets, blowing up buses, and so forth, either. There is no truth that goes along with a story of the violence; none of it is right. The truth is that nonviolence and compassion is what must exist there. We must listen to all the pain on both sides. We must learn to see all of those involved as human.

Summary & Next Steps: start with compassion; action in this country, especially on selling weapons and military aid; find examples (including ourselves) who model peacemaking; (note resource of Ramallah School); there are many of us with passionate feelings about these issues – could we have an opportunity here to learn Compassionate Listening – learn about the long history of pain and retribution?

Alternatives of what we could do now: (1) nothing; (2) another threshing session; (3) take something to Business Meeting; (4) form a small working group to work on the ideas we've come up with, and the minute(s). What's the mechanism we want to use?

How about having Leah Green (formerly of Compassionate Listening) come specifically to help us listen to one another about these issues?

The core value we have identified: killing is not a solution to the problem.

We have accomplished something – we could now compose a minute of exercise telling ourselves and those who aren't here tonight where we are.

Not knowing the context is a big problem; can we get groups to come and teach us?

Could a small group report to Business Meeting and maybe get them to participate in the discussion? Could the Clerks Team come up with a minute of exercise to be presented to Business Meeting? What about presenting a draft of this minute of exercise to this group (in other words, another session) before Business Meeting?

Twenty-five years ago, there was an exercise here that let people reflect on their feelings and background about Palestine/Israel. Could we do such a thing in Business Meeting?

What is P&SC to do: perhaps they could have an open meeting on this topic. Perhaps they can think about creating a small working group. Of course, they should go wherever they are truly led.

We decided to ask the Clerks Team to come up with a minute of exercise, based on the notes from the two threshing sessions. They should present the minute to a third session, with the aim of crafting a message/program for Business Meeting the following week. Our next threshing meeting will be **Sunday, 1/4, at 7:00 pm.**

Notes by David L Myers