

Opening Space for Peace

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Note – The Open Space described here took place in a Villa in Rome which seemed to be the closest neutral turf. It was sponsored by the Italian Foreign Ministry and the Education for Life foundation. I have written this as my story, for after all it is the only one I can tell. The details of the discussion remain with the participants as they requested.

Fifty Palestinians and Israelis gathered in Rome to talk about themselves, their future, and the possibilities of peace. They met in Open Space.

Two days before the opening of the gathering, yet another “incident” took place. I do not know the details, and they really don’t matter, but in a moment the possibility of the convergence in Rome hung on a thread. The Israeli government moved on Ramallah, and only by very quick actions were the delegates from that city moved to Jerusalem a day early so that they could make the trip. Once in Rome, all 50 came to the Centro Dionsyia – a marvelous 500 year old villa which overlooks the Basilica of St. Peters. We thought to meet in a large pavilion located in the gardens, but upon arrival the rains came too. Not just a little rain but sheets and torrents, dark clouds, high winds, thunder, lightening.

The dripping participants moved inside the villa for the opening ceremonies, but the time was late, and they were tired, some having been on their feet for 24 hours. So the opening remarks by the Italian minister for the Middle East were put to the side, as were the greetings from the conference organizers. We began with some powerful comments by Nada, a Serbian who has been working ceaselessly in that troubled part of the world. How to deal with your anger, pain and despair -- all spoken from the heart and from experience. We ate and went to bed.

The next morning 50 Palestinians and Israelis sat in a circle under the pavilion. I opened the space asking each person to look around the circle and notice the people. It was quite a group. Not just your standard peacenics – but people from the right and the left politically and religiously.

I began by saying that I had come because I cared for my friends in Palestine and Israel, and also for myself and my children. And although the people in that circle may feel themselves isolated and alone in their own private Hell with their own agonizing story, that story was also the story of our world. Like it or not they were in the hot crucible of the future of humankind. The future of all of us is being created in that strange place known as the Holy Land, even as it has been for millennia. So I cared, but I was also on the edge of despair or beyond. I could not think of any way out. The issues were so deep and intractable that movement appeared denied. Space was closed. But still I came, and still I cared – as I presumed was true for each of them as well.

When the present is closed, and the future confused, sometimes the past can be helpful, and I recalled a time 10 years ago when I happened to be in South Africa as Mandela was released from prison. We did an Open space then in Capetown, and people sat in a circle fearing a future that appeared all too dark and bloody. Over the several years following Mandela's release, as I came and went, my friends in the US and Europe would ask me what I thought about the possibilities. To their surprise and mine too, I said I thought that South Africa would make it. Not without problems for sure, but they would make it. When asked why, I responded that there were two things I know about every South African. They all loved their land with something approaching mystic intensity. And secondly, they all loved to sing. I felt that people who loved their land and loved to sing would find the way, as they seem to be doing. I knew that each person sitting in that circle in Rome also loved their land. They too loved to sing. Maybe we would find a way. But that way would not be easy, having many dark and fearful places. But we could not avoid the dark, or we would never see the light. We had to go deep. Each one of us must make that journey by ourselves, but it always helps to have a friend. So I invited them to find a friend, best of all a new friend, and don't forget to sing. And so we started.

The open circle quickly filled with people posing issues. In 20 minutes flat, the work for the next two days was on the wall. It was not a pretty picture, and hard work in abundance lay ahead, but we were under way. All day long, in the usual way of Open Space, the conversation continued. Sessions convened and dispersed. The details of those conversations are known only to the participants, but sitting in that space, I felt an incredible flow of passion and desire, hope and exasperation, fear and no small amount of trembling. It was all coming out. But as we came to the end of the day, there was a peace which

did not exclude conflict, but somehow transcended it. We gathered in the circle for Evening news. An olive tree had given me a branch for our talking stick. And we shared. Fifty Palestinians and Israelis sitting in a circle, passing an olive branch each to the other.

The next morning broke clear. Not a cloud in the sky. The warm Italian Sun gave energy to the place, and we began again. New issues were posted, conversations commenced, but there was an edge. It seemed that on this day we would go into those dark and frightful places that had perhaps been visited before, but now it would go deeply. To set the tone, one of our number noted that there had been yet more killing in that land they called home. As the morning progressed, the clouds came, and by noon the Sun was completely hidden. A cool breeze brought a chill. Over the afternoon, it became darker and colder in stark contrast to the heat and intensity of the conversations. By late afternoon, I found myself sitting on a bank of steps in front of the villa between two large groups in heated debate. I could hear some of the words, but didn't need to listen in order to catch the tones of anger, despair, fear, frustration – all came rolling towards me like a heavy surf – acid discontent and pain. It was deep and it went deeper.

Shortly after 5 pm, I rang the Temple Bells signaling Evening News. Nobody was listening, and the waves of pain and fear rolled on. There was nothing to do, but simply be there with it all. After all, this was why we came together.

Sometime later – I do not know exactly when – the conversation ceased only to be replaced with an awesome silence. For practical reasons, it was not possible to return to the pavilion for Evening News, instead we gathered in a garden, sitting formally in white lawn chairs. The circle was no bigger or smaller than previously – but the distance between us all was huge. It appeared almost as the Theater of the Absurd, surreal and menacing. Dark clouds, chilled air, white chairs, green grass, somber people. I passed the talking stick – an olive branch – wondering whether it would simply wilt in the atmosphere. Most people just passed it along without saying a word. Many of those who spoke noted the difference between that moment and the evening before. Some voiced a feeling that all of us had. Yesterday had been but an illusion, a phantasm, a terrible ironic dream which would haunt us even as it disappeared. Evening News was over, and the group scattered, some walking alone – others with a friend or two. It was very quiet.

That night, after a meal I would hardly touch, I went to my room, which was located just to one side of our pavilion where once again we would meet in the morning. The pavilion was lighted all through the night illuminating a silent circle of 50 chairs. And over the top of the pavilion, I could see the dome of St. Peter's bathed in floodlights standing silently as it had for centuries. If I slept that night, I can't remember. I do not know what the others felt as they wrestled with the night, but I knew waves of fear and anger, fear and desperation. What had started as a glimmer of hope just two days before now seemed but a haunting, ironic nightmare.

And yet through it all I knew that the hope had been real, the space had been open, we had seen some light. But all of that had been followed by a forbidding darkness which threatened, or perhaps had succeeded – in quenching the light. It became clear that the end to our story was a matter of our choosing. We could see only light quenched by darkness and choose to live in that darkness. Or we could see that it was only because we had known the light and hope that we had been able to go deeply into the darkness. And so we could carry both the light and the darkness and continue the journey with a friend(s) – remembering to sing. Our choice. Some words from Rumi, the Suffi poet came to my mind. "There is a field, beyond right thinking and wrong thinking. I will meet you there."

The night ended and the dawn broke, and once again we were sitting in a circle. Fifty Palestinians and Israelis, on our final day together. I opened the circle with a few words. Exactly what they were, I can't remember – but something like... We have known some hope and light together. We have entered into the darkness. This is a day of choosing. I propose that we take the next hour to be with our selves and/or talk with our friends. In one hour, I will ring the bells. Those who wish to return to our circle, please do so. Those who find that they cannot come back – for whatever reason, know that their choice is honored and respected. Then I said the words of Rumi one more time. "There is a field beyond right thinking and wrong thinking. I will meet you there." And I left.

Over the hour, I walked the grounds, past the olive trees, down the many paths, pausing to gaze at the looming Basilica of St Peters. Strangely silent. Strangely comforting. Others were around, but I spoke to no one, and no one spoke to me. As the hour ended, I passed an olive tree. It gave me a fresh branch. I started ringing the bell and slowly returned to the circle of 50 chairs, not having a clue as to what might happen next.

I was surprised to see all the chairs full. My words were few – something like – We have known the light and walked in the darkness. And where are you my friends? Where are you going, and what are you going to do? I passed the fresh olive branch to my right.

For the next several hours, people spoke, one at a time...with respect. As the hours past, people came and went as they needed, but they always returned. There were tears and laughter. New projects were announced, and old ones revisited. Commitments were made to continue, and the roughness of the journey ahead acknowledged.

On this last day we had been joined by a special guest, the head of the Islamic community in Rome. And after all had spoken, I invited him to speak. He was introduced by David Rosen, a leading Orthodox Rabbi from Jerusalem. As I remember his words were something like, "The Koran teaches us that to kill one person is to kill us all. And to save one person is to save the world. We must take whatever steps we can." When he finished, there was absolute silence, and I asked the group to stand, and one more time look into the eyes of each of their fellows. It was a long look. And then I asked that they turn in place so that each person faced outwards to all points of the compass. I wished them well on their journey, and asked that they remember, when they felt lonely and discouraged, that there was much love and respect behind them, at least at this moment. The circle broke. We had lunch.

The afternoon was an incredible flow of informal discussions, moments of reflection, relaxation. Diner came, musicians from Palestine and Israel performed, people danced. And in the morning busses and taxis departed. I returned from Rome last night, and this morning I read that more have been killed. The struggle goes on, but I do not think it is hopeless. At the very least we all have a choice.