

Meeting the Women of Palestine

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Invisible and oppressed—that's our stereotype image of the Arab woman. But here I am, leading a retreat in the West Bank for forty Palestinian women who seem every bit as powerful as any of my Western sisters. Most are Muslim, a few are Christian, while the four of us who have come from the US are Jewish.

Jewish-Arab relationships have long been poisoned by mutual hatred, so it's understandable that many American Jews make little effort to connect with Arabs when they visit Israel. And yet, in both Israel and Palestine, Arabs have unfailingly welcomed us with overwhelming courtesy, warmth, and hospitality.

Since 2005, I've been leading workshops in Israel that unite Jewish, Arab, Druze, and Bedouin women in a spirit of peace

and healing. Rich and meaningful as they are, I've always been disturbed by the glaring absence of women from the West Bank or Gaza. To enter Israel, they need permits, and these can be difficult if not impossible to come by.

The West Bank is a tiny area, less than 1/70th the size of California, and substantial portions of it are governed by Israel. Moreover, in an effort to deter terrorist attacks, Israel has since 2002 been building a huge concrete wall around the entire area. Now nearing completion, the wall is over 400 miles long—more than four times the length of the former Berlin wall—and twice as high. It's not hard to see why many Palestinians view the West Bank as a large prison camp.

Yet even though most of them will never be able to attend my workshops in Israel, there have

been a few notable exceptions. One of them is Nimala Kharoufeh, a young resident of the West Bank who, due to a unique set of circumstances, is able to exit and enter Palestine at will. After falling passionately in love with Circlework, American donors made it possible for her to attend the week-long Circlework Leadership Training in upstate New York.

One day, near the end of our time together, Nimala sat down across from me, her gentle face quiet and thoughtful.

"I'm sad," she said, "because my sisters in the West Bank have no opportunity to experience what I experienced this week."

I too felt saddened by this knowledge. And so I promised that if Nimala would organize a retreat in her community, I would come and lead it.

Nimala's enthusiasm was infectious. "I want this so much," she said. "The women are so hungry for this. And it will be the first healing retreat for Palestinian women in the West Bank."

"You mean the first ever?" I asked.

Nimala nodded. "Yes, the first ever. There have been many peace workshops and dialogue circles and discussion groups, but nothing that provides healing, nurturing, and empowerment for women. And they need it so badly."

Perhaps, but would they come? We weren't sure. Arab women are typically expected to serve their families and put their own needs on the back burner. To claim even a single evening away from their children, husbands, and in-laws can be a challenge. How then would they justify the extravagance of an entire weekend dedicated to their personal well-being?

Our doubts turned out to be unfounded. Within short order, we had more applicants than we



could handle, and after planning for twenty women, we finally had to close the doors at 40.

The day of the workshop dawned, and after the short drive from Jerusalem, we arrived at Talitha Kumi, the retreat center near Bethlehem where we'd be spending the weekend. As the women greeted me, the first thing that struck me was the range of their attire. Rania, with her tight jeans, short, spiky black hair and multiple piercings, would surely look at home in any hip New York café. Aisha, on the other hand, arrived shrouded from head to toe in black, with just a small slit through which her dark eyes surveyed the world.

As we enter our meeting space, I briefly wonder how forty women will manage to squeeze into a room that seems barely big enough for twenty. And why are those women covering up the tiny window between our room and the corridor? It takes me a moment to understand: Once that window is covered, Aisha will finally be able to unveil her face, safe in the knowledge that no casual passer-by will catch a glimpse of her naked face.

At first, some of my Western friends feel scared of her. As one of them tells me, "When I saw that black shroud walk in the door, my gut just clenched with terror."

But Aisha shows us just how

distorted our preconceived views of Arab women really are. To our surprise, we soon come to know and respect her as a strong, intelligent, highly educated, and deeply compassionate woman. Nobody forces her to dress as she does; it's her own choice. Deeply religious, she prays five times a day, spreading her little prayer rug in a corner of our coffee room. And yet, there is nothing fanatic or rigid about her. Tolerant and open-minded, she informs us that she's a Reiki practitioner. And at the end of the weekend, she thanks us with a radiant smile for having connected her with such a wonderful and diverse group of women.

But all this is yet to come; our circle has only just begun. To break the ice, I ask each woman to explain the meaning of her name. Names hold power, I explain. And as they share the beauty of their names—Fragrant Flower, Worthy of Love, Lovely as a Date Palm—they begin to light up with smiles.

From moment to moment, I have no idea how they will react to what I say or do; everything is an experiment. Cranking up the volume on my little iPod system, I am thrilled to discover that they love to dance. From the oldest grandmother to the youngest girl, they all go wild with joy. Only the most religious stand by, and even they are smiling. Old and young

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shake their hips with abandon, with nary a trace of inhibition or embarrassment. In some ways, I think to myself, they are less oppressed than we, who struggle so hard to accept and love our female bodies.

Later that night, I decide to go out on a limb with an exercise that will invite them to touch and hold each other. Apart from the fact that most of them have just met for the first time, I have no idea how they feel about physical touch. Are they ready to open to such a deep level of intimacy?

It appears they are. I'm surprised at how quickly the talking and giggling subsides and how quiet the room grows. They've paired up now, sitting on the floor. One is leaning back against her partner, who in turn is leaning against the wall. It's a scene I will never forget: The faces illuminated by candle light, head scarves removed to reveal dark hair. Eyes closed, faces soft and peaceful, as if each had discovered a well of pure sweetness within herself.

Speaking softly, I invite them to imagine that the woman they're holding is their beloved daughter. "Offer her the love that you would want all women in the world to feel," I say.

"And you, who are being held, give yourself permission to relax completely, and to fully receive this woman's caring and concern."

Tears glisten on long dark eyelashes as elderly grandmothers hold young women and vice versa. I feel like we're on a magic carpet, sailing beyond time and space into a realm of exquisite tenderness.

In retrospect, I realize just how far I was pushing the envelope that night and am thankful that at the time, I had no idea. Palestinian women are warm and expressive, so I assumed they were accustomed to physical expressions of affection. Yet the next day, they tell me that they rarely hug or touch, and this has been a radically new and profoundly healing experience for them. "When I go home I'm going to hug and hold my

daughter," a beautiful woman called Majida announces with a big smile.

I also learn that they rarely express grief or pain. "We're supposed to be strong," they explain. "We're not supposed to show our feelings."

Yet by the end of our retreat, many are showing their feelings, and feeling better for it. Nuur is a shy young woman who's been suffering from chest pain for weeks. "Your heart is fine," her doctor has assured her. But

in truth, Nuur's heart is not fine at all. Rather, it's bursting with unshed tears for her father, whose recent death has dealt Nuur's mother and her five children a devastating blow. After sobbing for the first time since her father's death, Nuur looks up, wipes her eyes, and exclaims with relief, "Finally! I can breathe again!"

I tell the women that as I see it, the empowerment of women is an essential key to peace, not only in the Middle East but around the world. Women

have tremendous power, and are increasingly ready to embrace their role as leaders and change-makers. They nod in agreement, and as the circle draws to a close, a young physician says, "For me, the most important thing that happened this weekend is that we realized our worth, and became proud of being women."

Hearing this, I feel happy. Some day, I hope, every woman, whether she's from Afghanistan or Iran, Nigeria or the Congo, will know her worth and feel

proud of who she is.

It's not easy to leave these amazing women who have shared their stories with so much courage and honesty. Majida holds my hand. "Please," she says, "Come back. We need this."

"I would love to," I respond, adding, as they have taught me, "Inshallah—God willing."

Jalaja Bonheim will be doing a Circlework retreat for women on November 18-20. Please see page 14.

Here Come the OWSers!— Occupy Wall Street

BY JAMES HOWARD KUNSTLER on October 3, 2011 8:24 AM

All last week across the media landscape, in pod, blog, flat-screen, and crunkly old newsprint columns, fatuous professional observers complained that the Occupy Wall Street marchers "have no clear agenda" or "can't articulate their positions." What impertinent horseshit. I saw a statement on one OWSer's sign that said it all:

*\$70,000 College Debt
\$12,000 Medical Bills
I'm 22
Where's My Bailout?*

What part of that is unclear to interlocutors of what we called "the establishment" back in the day? That would be the day of the Vietnam War and the Aquarian Upsurge. One difference being that in 1968 we at least had some solidarity in the older generation coming from figures of gravity like Senators Robert Kennedy (bumped off), Eugene McCarthy, J. William Fullbright, George McGovern, Rev Martin Luther King (bumped off), and even one US Attorney General, Ramsey Clark. Today, the entire "establishment" is a clueless, hopeless blob of self-interested, craven opportunism. Even the arty fringe - the people who

pretend to be an avant-garde - are nothing but narcissistic self-branding operations masquerading as culture leaders.

The worst offender this past week was the prating empty vessel Nicholas Kristoff at *The New York Times* who affected to offer the OWSers his own tidy agenda of nit-picky, arcane tax reforms (e.g. "Close the 'carried interest' and 'founders' stock' loopholes") and limp-dick banking regulations (e.g. "[move] ahead with Basel III capital requirements"). David Plotz and his Gen X sidekicks at the Slate Political Podcast were equally mystified. I have some heartier suggestions: bring the full weight of the RICO act and the federal anti-fraud statutes down on Lloyd Blankfein, Jamie Dimon, Brian Moynihan, Angelo Moziolo, and a host of other impudent schmekels still at large in their world of Escalade limos and Gulfstream vistas. Or, if that's just too difficult, how about a handy lamppost and about 40 feet of stout nylon cord?

It is cosmically ironic, of course, that the same generation of Boomer-hippies that ran in the streets and marched through the maze of service roads around the Pentagon has

become a new "establishment" more obtuse, feckless, greedy and mendacious than the one they battled with over 40 years ago. I guess they just don't see that their time has come to get right with reality - or get shoved aside and trampled. The essence of the OWSer's argument is pretty simple: they've got a raw deal; somebody dealt them a bad hand; someone ran their society into a ditch and not a goddammed one of the older generation will set in motion the machinery to correct the situation, or even acknowledge it.

At the apex of this new establishment is the Baby Boomer's moral trophy president: Barack Obama, whose election made the Boomers feel good about themselves - while they preceded to loot the national treasury's accumulated capital, and then reach forward a few generations to rob their legacy, too. I haven't heard Nicholas Kristoff (or any of his colleagues at *The New York Times*) complain about Mr. Obama's stupendous inattention to the crimes of Wall Street, or to the dereliction of his proconsuls in the SEC and the Department of Justice. I'd at least send somebody to hold a mirror under Eric Holder's nostrils to see if he is

actually alive.

For my money, the OWSers have plenty to yell about. Apart from the crimes and turpitudes of their elders, the younger generation hasn't even been prepared for the massive change in reality that these times are heaving them into. If it was me out there, I'd conclude that I'd better make up the future on my own, with no help from my parents' generation. In fact, that future is rushing toward all of us so cold, hard, and fresh even in this autumn season that it might splatter the banking establishment - and the global economy - like a bug on a windshield. The OWSers have a front row seat down there in lower Manhattan. The financial gangrene (thank you Zero Hedge) is not just seeping anymore, it's blowing through the arteries of the money underworld like fracking fluid. The damage can't be contained. Let the Arabs have spring. The OWSers of America own the fall. Rock on OWSers and don't let the "pigs" (as we used to call them) get you down.

James Howard Kunstler will be leading a workshop December 2-4. Please see page 15.