

# **Building a Culture of Peace and Nonviolence in a Context of Oppression**

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Sisters and brothers, I share with you my personal witness to peacemaking in my native land of Palestine, where to be actively engaged in the building of a culture of peace and nonviolence is to do so in a context of severe oppression, military occupation, and continual displacement.

I have struggled most of my adult life with issues of liberation and theology. Deep reflection on my life experience has served as my main source of inspiration. This experience has taken me to five continents, where, over the years, I have been enormously enriched by lively exchange with activists and theologians also engaged in the struggle for liberation. Throughout this journey, I have been aware that my experience was always rooted in and filtered through my identity as a Palestinian Christian Quaker woman.

My outward identity was at all times coupled with the inward knowledge that I am a child of God. This self-understanding has provided me with the necessary sustenance and steadfastness for all of my life's struggles. What a fundamental realization it is—a major re-alignment of sorts—to finally honor that of God inside me, while simultaneously honoring the Light that shines in every other person in the world. I have been sustained by a deeply embedded sense of equality and empowered with that equality in spite of the oppression and structures of domination I face daily that scream at me otherwise.

When entering this new landscape, this new way of being in the world, one is immediately washed with a sense of both humble privilege and precious responsibility. Recognizing the divine in myself has led me to recognize it in all other peoples and creation. And, my Friends, this recognition is nothing short of radical. It has left me with no alternative but to become immersed in the struggle for human rights and justice, for all and without exception. It has left me with no alternative but to explore nonviolent means of bringing forth social and political change in my community, and to being open to the truth in other faiths and nationalities.

For more than forty years, I have been walking that edge where the spiritual meets the political. For me, the two have always been integrated. My spirituality is rooted in the human dignity and human rights of all people, and the sacredness of Mother Earth. I feel compelled to take action to work for a world in which human freedom and dignity may flourish. Spirituality can bring life and vibrancy and imagination to my struggle, but the mixture of religion and politics has, at times, been known to fuel the most extreme and violent acts and lead to systems of horrible repression.

We should be rightly suspicious when religion is exclusive, nationalistic, chauvinistic and against the emancipation of women. I do not want to believe in a religion that has a set of standards or dogma to determine who are the worthy people and who are not. Religion for me is to re-link, that is to bind one to the other.

Political work is hard. Without a spiritual base to renew my energies and my sense of hope, and without a community to share them with, I may suffer from frustration and despair. There are many risks to this work. But involvement in any action has a price. I must constantly ask myself, am I ready to pay that price?

Even traveling is an act of faith. My children and extended family often ask me, "Why, mother, why do you travel so much when there is so much risk involved?" Some think it is courageous. Maybe. But courage is simply the determination to rise to the occasion wherever you happen to find yourself. Of course, this is not easy to carry out all the time in a fragile and mortal body. And yet, I feel obliged to bear witness to what is happening in my land, to expose the principalities and powers, to bring them out into the light, and thereby undercut their power of falsehood.

Courage is not only about doing what I do. Courage is steeped in my daily struggle to

remain open to love, to the beauty of the world, to stand ready to tell my people's story despite all the obstacles, hardships, Walls and checkpoints. Their perseverance has taught me much. On a daily basis, the Palestinian people are placed in a position where they must choose, and, with few exceptions, they choose to affirm life in the midst of death and destruction. I hail from the West Bank city of Ramallah, which is only an hour from Gaza, yet I, like all West Bankers, am not allowed out to visit there. My connection during the recent war on Gaza was through local and regional television stations that broadcasted constant and up-to-date pictures of Gaza. It looked as if it had been hit by a devastating earthquake. There was a global uprising in many cities to condemn the attacks. Many Jews and people of all faiths and nationalities around the world, in the United Kingdom and some in the United States, joined hands to speak publicly against these war crimes.

The day the attacks stopped, the people in Gaza began to clean the rubble from their homes and pitch tents to protect their families. They even placed large tents over the rubble of school buildings so that the children might continue their studies. They have deep faith; faith in the Creator's mercy and compassion. The young people held two performances on the ruins of the cultural center that was, for some illogical reason, targeted and bombed. They performed a play that described their reality under siege, the onslaught they endured and how they creatively sought alternatives for survival. They ended their program with Rap music that they composed themselves!

Another story took place just days before I left to travel to the United States. I went to visit my aunt of ninety-three years in the nursing home section of St. Joseph's Hospital in Jerusalem. I know very well how sad she is that none of her family members from Ramallah can visit her, for they are unable to obtain permits from the Israeli military to travel to Jerusalem. She is suffering from many ailments, yet she continues to affirm beauty and life in the world. She makes the loveliest cards with dried flowers from the Holy Land. She asks other nuns not to throw away flowers in the hospital and dries those that are suitable. Although she cannot leave the retirement home, her creativity and appreciation for beauty and art has reached many places, far and wide. She energized me with her faith and love.

After visiting her, I went down the hill to catch the bus to return to Ramallah. It was Land Day for Palestinians. The Israeli army was extra cautious to search the passengers and bus. Two young people were taken aside. The soldiers asked the driver to go on but the passengers refused to leave until they organized for one of them to stay behind to get the

information to their families. Another person volunteered to take the things of the detainee and the volunteer to their families. The compassionate care they offered again is an example of building for a culture of life.

By then it was 5:00 p.m. I was tired and sleepy. My blood pressure was high. I dozed in the bus. Then the young man next to me said “Yamma,” which is mother in Arabic, “Yamma, wake up, we are here at the last stop.” He very kindly volunteered to call a taxi and to accompany me home. These stories are representative of the humanity and beauty of character I experience on a daily basis.

We are always told that nonviolence and dialogue are key to solving our problems. I agree and have committed my life to it. However, it is absolutely necessary that we understand how violence and systems of domination function. Structural violence is often silent. It does not easily show. Television captures the direct violence in my part of the world, which is often the violence of the powerless and the hopeless, and then it is usually qualified as terrorism. One distinct weakness of the concept of violence in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the basic assumption of symmetry, which views contending parties in conflict as being equal. This is absolutely false. After all, the conflict is there because of the imbalance of power between the two parties.

The goal of those who use violence, whether it be freelance or state supported, is to fill our mental and emotional space with rage, fear, powerlessness and despair, and to cut us off from the sources of life and hope. I have chosen to take an active part in the liberation struggle of my people. I have chosen to resist oppression and to do so nonviolently, for to resist is to be human.

The religious teachings of the faiths in my part of the world—Christianity, Judaism and Islam—undergird the belief that human beings have rights, that we are all created in the image of God, and that our value comes from this likeness. God’s nature is to be loving, free, and just. God’s purpose is to liberate human life from inhuman conditions. These inhuman conditions exist because humans with free will have chosen behavior that disrupts the intended harmony that could provide justice, peace and freedom for all.

Directed by my faith, I became involved in the struggle for justice on all fronts. I cannot be selective. I cannot reconcile myself to structures of domination and oppression, covered

over with words of peace and reconciliation. Such hypocrisy is problematic for me because too often words of peace have been hollow. That is, they have been preached without regard to any genuine change in the oppressive situation created by the powerful.

Too often in our discourse around peace and reconciliation, the victimized are called upon to forgive and reconcile in a way that perpetuates, rather than rectifies, the root causes of injustice, alienation and division. This is certainly true in my particular context, where the word “peace” has become an empty word for Palestinians. We find ourselves in a similar predicament with regards to reconciliation. While reconciliation suggests a genuine change in relations, reconciliation has, unfortunately, also been given a different meaning in the Middle East. That is, namely a collapse into the acceptance of the status quo because of the belief that nothing else can be done to effect real change.

As many of you know, these are very hard times in my home country, Palestine, especially after the Gaza crisis in January 2009. We have been working for a long time to end occupation, oppression and destruction, without any significant political gains. Fear and loss surround us, and many forces are at work to make us feel isolated, marginalized, and disempowered. At best the work ahead seems overwhelming. Surely, death and loss rearrange our priorities, and teach us how much we need each other.

Many activists mistrust religion and spirituality, sometimes for good reason. But all us find ourselves engaged in work for peace and justice because something is sacred to us, so sacred that it means more than convenience or comfort. It might be God, or the Spirit, or the sacredness of life or belief in freedom. Whatever it is, it can nurture us. Above all, the story of hope and protest that I share with you, revealed through our efforts to overcome structural and direct violence, is a witness to the conviction that the arena of divine justice does indeed appear in human history, certainly in the example of many in Israel and Palestine, but also elsewhere in those who know how to challenge and resist oppressive powers without dehumanizing the human being hidden behind “the enemy.”

These small communities of hope often change directions and patterns of thought; they may affect political decisions and economic transactions. The growing networks of non-governmental organizations that cooperate across the globe are an encouraging sign. They are critical to providing alternative views to the mainstream media and promoting the active pursuit of a pro-peace agenda. Our challenge is to garner the support of great majorities of

people who see themselves as responsible human beings in a world created for mutual justice, care and compassion. We must network widely. Our mobilization efforts must be broad-based, and as diverse and inclusive as imaginable.

Without a doubt, the way of transformation calls us to stand face to face with the forces of death and evil, both within us and around us. It challenges us to resist the temptation to simply rearrange furniture, whether that rearrangement is in the structures of our psyche or those of our planet, or the institutions to which we belong. It is a journey about life and about the passage from death to life.

I walk alongside many others in my journey of struggle and carry with me hope to move from oppressive and destructive power, to liberating, life-enhancing power. We should cease to be interested, as women and as Palestinians, to simply transfer power from men to women or from the Israelis to the Palestinians—or from any group to another, for that matter—for power is not a cake that is cut up and diminished the more it is shared. Power, when shared, is a relationship that enriches everyone. The great rift is not between various human beings and communities. For we all belong together. Rather, the great rift is between care and carelessness, justice and injustice, mercy and mercilessness, compassion and indifference. What divides is not difference but sin, oppression, and injustice. Difference does not destroy creation; rather, it is our sin of allowing oppression and injustice to be perpetrated that destroys. To create a culture of life, we need more than psychology, spirituality and community. We need economics, sustainable agriculture, and a politics of liberation capable of healing our world and restoring the earth to life.

My Friends, I sense that whenever I am in the United States speaking to audiences like yours, many are aware of the efforts of Israeli peace groups; however, they remain largely unaware of Palestinian peacemaking efforts. Others may be caught up in the larger, global culture of anti-Arabism and assume that Arabs are violent by nature. Certainly, there is very little fair reporting and critical discussion in the mainstream media, academia, and religious circles on this topic. Most have probably heard very little about the long-standing and rapidly growing nonviolent resistance movement in Palestine.

To begin with, I will mention the concept of sumoud. Sumoud might be best translated as steadfastness. It plays an incredibly important part in Palestinian culture and self-identity. This is especially true given present day, as well as historical, challenges to the self-

determination of the Palestinian people. To have sumoud is to have great pride in and remain steadfast to one's land and, more generally, to one's homeland and the struggle for freedom. For example, given the current grave circumstances, just waking up every morning with the determination to carry on with one's daily routine and to hold fast to one's humanity in spite of the challenges and dangers in movement—walking through military checkpoints to get to work; driving your children past army tanks to get to school; taking your herd out to graze despite physical and verbal abuse of Israeli settlers—is to have sumoud.

On an almost daily basis in villages and cities nonviolent demonstrations are taking place to resist the so-called “security wall” whose path is confiscating lands, splitting villages and destroying economic and social structures. Hundreds of men and women, old and young, have bravely sat in front of bulldozers and placed themselves between machinery and the construction site. Many of them have nothing to lose, for if the wall succeeds along the current path, they will be without access to the land passed down to them by their ancestors. The villagers of Yanun and Qawawees, who were forcibly expelled from their villages by settlers but who have returned to live in their homes despite settler harassment, are likewise demonstrating what we Palestinians call sumoud, demonstrating their determination to live on their land and be treated as human beings with equal rights.

I myself and countless others have dedicated most of our lives for many of the past sixty years to sharing the truth—offering our narrative, which so often is forgotten or neglected—and to networking by forming alliances between the various struggles around the globe with like-minded individuals and organizations. For ultimately, I have learned that the struggle for justice is one struggle, and that an action to subvert violence and strengthen human rights in one place is an action on behalf of people everywhere.

Nonviolent resistance has also meant noncompliance with the military occupation in Palestine. At the individual level, resistance has led to my longstanding commitment to use locally grown and locally produced products. It means boycotting Israeli goods whenever possible, most especially those products produced in illegal Israeli colonies or settlements. Similarly, I have always been supportive of morally responsible investment or selective divestment. I cannot participate even indirectly in supporting and enabling unjust policies and the violation of basic human rights. Boycotts, divestment, and sanctions are nonviolent means for individuals, churches, academic institutions, cities and corporations to highlight the need for adherence to international law and the rapid achievement of a just peace.

Nonviolence in the Palestinian struggle is certainly not new. However, there is a growing movement of not only nonviolent resistance, but also nonviolent direct action. In addition to actions, national organizing conferences to further develop and articulate Palestinian nonviolent strategies bring together hundreds of community leaders with Israelis from the peace camp, as well as internationals who risk their lives alongside us. Entire villages are asking to be trained in nonviolent methods. Children are being trained in the methods and theories of Gandhi and Dr. King. The Friends Center in Ramallah has conducted drama workshops for young adults on nonviolent communication and peacemaking. This new trend builds upon tactics used in the first Intifada, such as tax resistance, boycotts, sit-ins and strikes, with a new generation.

I have seen, my friends, that nonviolence is threatening to the powers that be because nonviolence reconceptualizes power and passes power to the ordinary person to effect meaningful change. Nonviolence exposes and then challenges the structures of domination, and not just the overt symptoms. It then, in turn, requires the oppressor to examine how they, too, are victims of the very violence they impart. For in the end, the violence of occupation is killing—morally, physically and spiritually—both peoples.

Friends, I cannot emphasize enough that in my humble experience I have found that the peculiar strength of nonviolence comes from the dual nature of its approach: the offering of respect and concern on the one hand while meeting injustice with noncooperation and with defiance on the other. These seemingly contradictory impulses—to rage against while simultaneously refusing to destroy—combine to create a force worthy of nothing less than a revolution. By this I mean not just a reshuffling of death dealing powers but a genuine restructuring of the society in which we live.

We have agreed to work for peace. Much stands in the way. The issues are clear and the dangers are very obvious. Peace is for everyone, not just for the powerful, but we cannot have peace if we continue to recite our litanies of past wrongs and past fears. We must deal with the present. We must look to the future of our children and all humanity. We must build with new materials that will not produce future wars. It is up to us to remove the causes of war, but still so often we do not seem to realize this. All of us are indifferent, to some extent, as we go about our daily lives, thinking that we are not important enough to have an impact or that we are too busy with other things. Yet working for peace is the

obligation of us all. Peace consists of dealing creatively with the inevitable internal, interpersonal, inter-group and international conflict that is part of human life.

I have learned that all struggles for justice are one struggle, and that an action taken to subvert violence and strengthen human rights in one place is an action on behalf of people everywhere. I now understand that our global responsibilities and relationships have a local face, and no matter where we live we can work for human rights and a culture of nonviolence. The kinships we form as we do serve as the prototype of a new community that knows no national, racial, gender or sexual boundaries.

We must not give up, for to give up is to give in to the forces of evil. We must continue to fan the embers of light no matter how small they are, because these embers of light give hope to those in the forefront of the struggle and will keep the work for justice and peace in the Middle East alive.