

The Spirit of the West Bank

Omar Bandar; 12/27/07

It must be some form of shock, maybe even a symptom of slight posttraumatic stress. Why else would a smiling co-worker's innocent question, "How was your trip?" provoke such an emotional convulsion? A blank canvas simultaneously sprayed by a dozen different colors of paint - too many thoughts at once, too many answers to this polite formality traditionally asked when a co-worker returns from "vacation." The irony is, similar to a discarded "How you doin'?" between strangers, the enquirer usually doesn't even genuinely care what the response is. Why then, is the answer so difficult? Why can't I just say "fine, thanks" and move on? What is a polite, concise, casual, response that captures all that I have seen and done during these past two weeks? How can one, with honesty, summarize into a sentence the horror, the beauty, the fear, the warmth, the love, the hate, and the pain, that is felt and evoked when one visits Israel and Palestine? How...?

I was one of fifteen fortunate Cantabrigians that were able to be part of a weeklong People-to-People delegation to the West Bank. Although the purpose of the delegation was to make connections between people and organizations in Bethlehem and people and organizations in Cambridge I must say that for me, an Arab-American of Palestinian decent whose father was forced from Palestine in 1948, the trip's purpose was eclipsed by my own personal experiences within the West Bank and my additional weeklong tour of Israel. For me, the personal experience paralyzed the people-to-people community mission; in Bethlehem I met distant relatives; in Haifa I saw buildings that were confiscated from my grandfather; I stood on the ground where my father's home once stood. How can one concentrate on making connections between school groups when one is reminded of past injustices and is treated in a way that makes them feel as though their personal safety, their rights, their life, their humanity, is worthless in the eyes of the occupying Israeli military and in the eyes of many of the residents of the State itself? How could I concentrate on making community connections when I felt so vulnerable, hurt, and prejudiced against? – Upon entering Israel I was interrogated by four different airport security personnel for over an hour and a half. The reason for the interrogation was never made clear to me but I am sure that my Muslim name, "Omar," was a factor in my detainment. Similarly, when traveling with the delegation by bus, so to lessen the likelihood of a problem at a checkpoint one of the organizers of our delegation asked that I sit in the back of the bus so that the Israeli soldiers could not see me and (implied) my Arab features. Upon meeting many distant Arab relatives in Israel, nearly all of them suggested that I legally (and immediately) change my name to a less Arab, and certainly less Muslim, sounding one. When I met the wife of a Jewish Israeli family friend she, very casually, said to me in a way that I am sure, or hope, was meant to be flattering, "you're so handsome, you don't even look Arab." The impact of these sort of experiences was that in the forefront of my mind - as I walked down the street, as I rode through a checkpoint, as I spoke, as I took a breath - I couldn't help but ponder: if I am so strongly effected and distracted by the treatment that I received, how have the life experiences of the residents of the West Bank, and of the Arabs within Israel, effected their well-being and ability to function in any semblance of what we in the U.S. presume to be "normality"?

For two weeks I heard first hand accounts about the suffering caused by the “Wall of Separation”; for two weeks I heard first hand accounts about “military accidents” resulting in the deaths of Palestinians and Palestinian children; about home demolitions; refugee experiences; arbitrary arrests and extended detainments; carcinogenic Israeli toxic dumps within the West Bank; check point humiliations; economic strangulation and unemployment; Israeli denials of travel permits needed for one to farm one’s own land; students attaining higher education degrees although they are likely to never be able to become employed in their fields of study due to Israeli restrictions. For two weeks I heard about, and saw, what I believe to be one of the greatest social injustices of our time.

Earlier in this writing I asked how could I focus on the task of establishing people-to-people relationships when after merely a taste of the “Arab experience” in the West Bank and Israel I was so distracted that I couldn’t focus on anything other than personal harm, safety, and vulnerability. However, a better question than this, and one that has a much greater impact on the Israel/Palestine situation, is how can the residents of the West Bank focus on relationships, their lives, their families, their futures, on peace and optimism, when on a daily basis they are subject to humiliations, hardships, and prejudices several times greater than what I experienced? Although I do not know the answer to this question, there is a silver lining...*they do*.

The residents of the West Bank *do* focus on their relationships and they *do* have optimism for the, albeit distant, future. In spite of the hardships, humiliations, vulnerability, insecurity, despair, and seemingly hopeless situation in the West Bank, the Palestinians that our delegation met with are eager to connect with their Cantabrigian counterparts. They are eager to develop new relationships even though they have felt the pain of losing loved ones. Despite the fact that I find it difficult to focus on establishing people-to-people connections between Bethlehemites and Cantabrigians because of my personal experience within the West Bank and Israel, I find hope for the initiative in the most unlikely place...from the Palestinians themselves. They have shown me that I have underestimated human endurance, resilience, optimism, and, put simply, that I have underestimated the human spirit.

Not only has being part of this delegation to Bethlehem stoked my sense of optimism, increased my respect for the endurance and emotional strength of human beings, but also, being part of this delegation has motivated me to want to further the people-to-people mission of the initiative not just to support the people of the West Bank, but also, so that other Cantabrigians can learn, as I have, about the power of the human spirit.

So, now, after much thought and reflection, I know that when my co-worker asks, “How was your trip?” I can answer them with a simple word - “inspiring.”