



You are not

BUILDING BRIDGES FOR PEACE

THREE TEENAGE GIRLS are sitting, knees nearly touching, their ancient enmity for now foresworn, trying to make a little peace of the heart. Amal, an eighteen-year-old West Bank fundamentalist with streaked blonde hair and the face of a Modigliani madonna, informs her Israeli counterpart that Muhammad was the last Prophet and the *Koran* the final Book.

“God gave us all the land. He orders us into *Jihad* —not just war, but holy war.”

Rachel, a fair-skinned, heavyset Israeli girl in blue jeans, flushes deeply. “By Jewish law, all Israel is for the Jews. By Muslim law, it’s all for the Arabs. The only way possible to fulfill these laws is by killing millions of people!”

Fatima, a dark, curly-haired Palestinian born in Israel, is caught in between. “I feel lost. I’m half-half. I can imagine the little child who saw her daddy shot by soldiers in Jenin and the Israeli kid whose mommy was blown up on a bus. My father was killed. Everyone I know has lost their cousins. I’m sick of these mean leaders who only want their place in history. Stop hurting each other, that’s all I can think of.”

The three are part of a group of some thirty girls flown from an eternal war zone to a borrowed lakeside estate deep in the heart of rural New Jersey. Under the auspices of an organization called Building Bridges for Peace, they will live together for two weeks, sleeping in one big room on air mattresses, their relationships a

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PHOTO MONTAGE BY TOM JOYCE

my Enemy

microcosm of internecine strife and a litmus test for any hope of resolving it.

“I feel like I live in the middle of a stupid world,” Rachel tells Amal and Fatima. “All that’s important to me is you, and you. We’re destined to live together in the same place at the end of the day. If I don’t know you, it’s easy to hate you. If I look in your eyes, I can’t.”

Amal shrugs elaborately. “When we’re here, who knows, maybe we’re friends. When we return, you are my enemy again. My heart is filled with hatred for Jews.” She says it bluntly, coolly, planting her flag. But I detect a wistfulness, the barest hope that her burden—of poisonous rancor, of history’s dolorous weight—might somehow be lifted from her shoulders.

ENCOUNTERING THE OTHER

A child of the second *intifada*, Amal has never met Jews who don’t wear fatigues and combat boots. “She’s one of the generation that ‘did not know Joseph,’” says Melodye Feldman, the preternaturally calm American social psychologist who founded Building Bridges. Melodye grew up as one of only three Jews in her Florida grade-school. She remembers one of her friends groping the top of her head to feel for horns; remembers being jumped, kicked, thrown into puddles, coming home to her parents and sobbing, “If they knew me, they would like me.” ➔

It could be the motto of her program. She has been bringing together Israeli and Palestinian teenagers for the past ten years with no other agenda than to place them in a seedbed of compassion, give them water and sunlight, and hope they grow. Melodye, who had been an Orthodox Jew and staunch anti-Palestinian until visiting East Jerusalem in 1989, was inspired to act after seeing firsthand the mounting despair among the youth of both sides. Meeting sometimes in secret with Palestinian counterparts, she proposed a program whose only goal was to shatter the stereotypes of The Enemy. “I didn’t know what I was doing,” she admits freely. “I just wanted to do something to give young people some hope.” She designed a camp-style retreat for young women that would use every tool of empathy she could think up, cadge, or improvise. What resulted is a sort of living lab for peace-making, its protocols developed through trial and error.

The next morning, one Palestinian girl confided how soldiers had come to her home, beat her family, and upon discovering they were mistaken, left with no apology or offer of medical care. Using a technique known as “compassionate listening,” Melodye asked a Jewish girl to repeat the story in the first person, then describe the emotions it had made her feel—terror, anger, revenge, sadness. The Palestinian girl burst into tears. “My enemy heard me!” The Israeli girl wept with her.

A few of the kids have been to other programs—“youth diplomatic corps,” one put it a little sarcastically—the kind where issues are debated and coexistence extolled. But Melodye doesn’t want them to coexist; she wants them to care about each other. She’s insistent on keeping it personal. Fine, she tells them, keep your hate, if you must, but now just touch her hand, her face, look in her eyes, speak your heart. These are kids who have yet to pick up weapons, but their minds are already locked and loaded, ready to go off half-cocked.

Melodye will try anything to get them to drop their canned historical laments and encounter each other as people. They make life-masks out of plaster, molding the wet goop over each other’s faces, tracing the unknown contours. She gets them to form a soft machine by connecting to each other with motions and sounds, or sit in a circle singing nonsense songs, patting their own legs and those of their neighbors in a blur of rhythm. The singing, the touching, the laughter help them, when they sit in small circles and the hard ugly things are dragged into the light, to see each other without the suffocation of blanket judgments.

I chat with a Palestinian girl wearing a T-shirt with a cartoon gun shooting a little flag that says “Bang,” knowing

that when she returns home, the bullets will be real. “I had all these boys who wanted to marry me,” she tells me. “One said if I didn’t, he would bomb himself.” I’m shocked, but she just giggles: Strapping on a suicide jacket if they can’t win a heart is a common boast-cum-threat of lovesick West Bank suitors. Her fiancé is with the Palestinian intelligence service; his job is to ferret out the *ameel*—the collaborators—find them, report them, maybe hurt them. She doesn’t want to reveal much more, but kids on both sides talk of violence with stunning casualness. For her, the *intifada* is always and everywhere; for the Israelis, it’s the army, each of them a citizen-soldier, wondering about the next bus bomb, worrying they’ll be sent across the green line into the occupied territories.

GETTING OUTSIDE THE BOX

“An enemy,” wrote psychologist Karen Horney, “is an economical way to form an identity.” Economical, but surely not cheap, with its costs amortized in collective tragedy. The Israelis are raised hearing about the horrors of the Holocaust and their state’s David-and-Goliath victories over Arab foes bent on their annihilation. Palestinians grow up hearing about the *Nakba*, the Catastrophe of 1948, when according to dueling versions of history, they fled or were driven from their hereditary lands as Arab armies marched righteously into battle against the Zionist Jews creating a nation in their midst. In the wake of utter defeat, living as refugees for generations, a stateless people in their own diaspora, they have taken guerilla commandos and suicide bombers for heroic role models.

Therapists have taken a keen interest in the conflict as a case study in how war and hatred take root in the human psyche and how they might be extirpated. Each side of the conflict, says Israeli psychiatrist Yitzhak Mendelsohn, sees itself as a victim of history struggling to survive in a hostile world, with the other side as the ultimate threat to its existence. Individual biography is woven into a collective narrative of woundedness—what he calls a “dependence on negative memory. People get hooked into a potent resentment that primes them for revenge and escalation. Hate becomes a way to create the illusion of power.” The task of reconciliation, he believes, is to break down the “symbolic scars that bind people to the group” and offer “some larger sense of ‘we’ to replace the victim identity.”

Melodye’s diagnosis as a social psychologist is even more far-ranging: “Nations are stuck in a developmental

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phase approximating an adolescent identity crisis,” she says, “refusing to compromise, seeing everything in black and white.”

These kids who could soon be gazing down gun barrels at each other are just teenage girls with half-articulated thoughts and inchoate longings: One minute they’re mouthing the slogans of the intifada or proclaiming the tenets of Zionism; the next they’re tooling around doing figure eights on the pink Schwinn they found in the garage or teaching each other American country-swing steps.

“First they need to define the box they’ve placed themselves in,” Melodye says, “then they can step outside it.” In an early session, they’re asked to list, in order, their most defining characteristics. A Jewish girl says, “Family, friends, music, Jewish religion”; another says, “Being from the city, being a high school student, clothes, travel, family.” Other Jewish kids put “human being” first, or the environment, or love of animals. But for most of the Palestinians, the list is more circumscribed: Arab, Palestinian, Muslim, colonized, refugee. It is the template of oppression, of a people defying erasure by carving a face in stone.

What are the root causes of war, of the millennia of hatred and strife? Those who study conflict look at everything from politics and economics, history and religion, child-rearing methods and marriage customs. But some point to a key human (and for that matter, primate) emotion

that, in individuals and nations alike, seems to drive the cycles of violence: humiliation. “People would often rather die than live with such a sense of shame,” writes one. “Even considerations of self-interest become irrelevant.”

Shame is a wound to the very sense of self. Palestinians speak of the daily humiliations of border crossings (“We’re herded into a chute like cattle,” one girl tells me bitterly), of grinding poverty and strutting occupying soldiers. One girl tells me how her father died in an ambulance held up for four hours at an Israeli checkpoint outside Jenin even as his heart gave out. He was forty-seven.

Humiliation is not just the province of the Arabs. “For Jews in general and Israelis in particular,” says a writer in the progressive Jewish magazine *Tikkun*, “there is a lasting form of shame associated with having been vulnerable and victimized during the Holocaust . . . a determination ‘never again’ to be subject to such humiliation as to be helpless prey to a ruthless predator.”

A RAY OF HOPE

[One] day, paper bags labeled with the toughest hot-button issues are put in the center of the room, and each girl is asked to write down a phrase that best expresses her feelings about it. The responses are scrawled in magic marker on big white pieces of paper and posted on the walls. ➔

Under "Zionism," an Israeli has written, "idealists who fought to come back to their country," and a Palestinian, "an evil organization that wants to kill all the Arabs in the world."

Under "Palestine," a Palestinian has written, "a dream that will come true, my homeland forever, my soul," and an Israeli has scrawled, "hostile territory, a danger for my existence."

Under "suicide bomber," the Israelis write "a killer" and "a dead murderer"; and the Palestinians, "a blessed person," "a winner in the next world," and, chillingly, "What I hope to be."

The kids shuffle from poster to poster, subdued, disbelieving. Now it's all been shoved out into the open, every threat and calumny; their faces are ashen at this secret ballot of fear. I can hear everyone's heart thud in the silence; it's suddenly a roomful of hunted rabbits.

"I see these words and I feel scared and angry and want to leave," says one Israeli girl.

Tears tremble on eyelashes, overspilling rims of reddening eyes as they attempt to smile through the pain, as if to spare others, or cling to their sinking hopes. A passed Kleenex box quickly empties.

"It hurts so much that each of us has deep hatred for the other. It's like you've been sleeping in the same room with a person who wants to get rid of you." My notes don't say whether this was spoken by a Palestinian or an Israeli; it doesn't matter.

As the tears dry, they're more curt, defended; they put on their game faces. "I feel proud to be Arab, proud to write these words about jihad and *shaheed*," says Amal defiantly. They trot out their litanies of grievance, their sullen prejudices. But they also seem to recognize something momentous is occurring. For once in their young lives, the truth has been laid bare, a force to be reckoned with—unpredictable, frightening, liberating. "These words on paper are our biggest fears," says Fatima. "They're what we're hiding behind our laughing faces, being dishonest one to the other. I want to learn about them from you."

Time is growing short. Soon they will be going home. Now it's in earnest, their heads bent toward each other, the talk urgent, intimate. Suddenly they're on fire to say everything and anything.

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"We haven't finished the job we started," Amal tells me. The signs still leer menacingly from the wall: Settler: "someone in my family I love"; "someone who deserves to be killed." Israel: "place I love"; "place I hate." But the enmity has flickered on and off like a worn-out light-

bulb filament. Curtains have parted, letting in shafts of natural light. What they say they want in their circle today is so ingenuous: "I hope to have a best friend here, to visit each other when we get back, to meet each other's family." When a Palestinian says, "I only hate soldiers who kill my neighbors," one militant Israeli, a middle-class kid in a horse-camp T-shirt, allows, "If someone was doing this to me, I might hate them, too." One girl tells me incredulously, "I wanted them to know I have pain, too, but that's exactly what they're telling me!"

"Soon she's returning to the intifada," says Melodye. "They all are." But one of the militant Palestinian kids, the one who had talked about blowing herself up, has approached her quietly, surreptitiously, about training as staff. "She's recognized that what she's been taught in books, what the media has portrayed, what both sides want them to believe about the other, it's all false. She told me, 'You can't make borders to keep people's hearts from meeting.' She says she wants to be a force for change."

They all will be, in their own way. These children belong to families, and families to clans, and clans to villages, and villages to nations. Have these two weeks implanted an antiviral of compassion that will spread slowly through their own societies? There's no telling how far the tentative words of peace they have spoken to each other here will reverberate. In the desert air, voices carry . . .



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