



Compassionate listening is
healing—
to the listeners and to those who
tell their stories. Can it be that

just listen **Leah Green**

It's 1991 The first Intifadah is raging. A group of Americans walks quietly through the twisted alleys of al-Fawwar refugee camp near Hebron. We can hear Israeli soldiers moving through the other side of the camp. We turn a corner and come upon a middle-aged Palestinian woman picking through rubble. Our host explains to her that we have come to listen to the people of Israel and Palestine—to see the situation firsthand and listen to their stories.

As our host translates, we learn that until recently, the pile of rubble was her home. She cries with rage as she tells us that her youngest son was shot and killed by the Israeli army and her oldest son has just been sentenced to life in prison by a military court. After the sentence was handed down, her home was bulldozed. She and her two daughters are left with only the makeshift shed that housed their animals. The woman begins to wail: "Why do Americans hate us? What have we done to you? We've lost everything! We are just struggling to survive. ..." We stand in shock as she continues to give voice to her anger and her grief.

Then, quite unexpectedly, she takes out a handkerchief, wipes her eyes, and invites us inside her shed for tea. We sit with her on her dirt floor, drinking watered down, sweet tea, and begin to listen to one another. This was the participants first awareness that many Palestinians believed the United States was waging war on them.

The Compassionate Listening Project, founded in 1996, evolved from these early citizen delegations

photographs by Beverly Boos

Nardin and Baraa' Asleh, sister and brother of Asel Asleh, 17-year-old slain Palestinian Israeli who was active with Seeds of Peace. Arrabeh village, Galilee.

"A day will come and we'll meet again. We'll live the rest of our earthly lives missing him and thinking about him, but let's think of it as if he's gone on a trip, a peaceful and heavenly one."

—Nardin Asleh



organized by MidEast Citizen Diplomacy. The project is a reconciliation effort based on the ideas of Gene Knudsen Hoffman, a Quaker peacemaker who began encouraging the peace community to practice compassionate listening 20 years ago. Hoffman's thinking, in turn, was influenced by Thich Nhat Hanh, a Buddhist monk who challenges peacemakers to stay available to all sides of a conflict. Participants in the Compassionate Listening Project are trained to listen respectfully to all sides of the conflict. Our goal is to build the international constituency for Mideast peace while offering a practical tool for conflict resolution on the ground.

In the last decade, hundreds of American participants have listened to thousands of Israelis and Palestinians with the intention of discovering the human being behind the stereotype. No one has declined a listening session with us. We've sat with people in homes, offices, streets, refugee camps, the Israeli prime minister's office, the Palestinian president's office, and on military bases. We've listened to settlers, sheikhs, mayors, rabbis, students, Bedouin, peace activists, and terrorists. We've learned that it is easy to listen to people with whom we agree. It's when we listen to those with whom we disagree, those we hold as our "enemies," that listening becomes a challenge.

The fundamental premise of compassionate listening is that every party to a conflict is suffering, that every act of violence comes from an unhealed wound. And that our job as peacemakers is to hear the grievances of

Marwa Adel al-Sharif, age 10, was wounded when a bullet from a nearby Israeli military camp tore through the walls of her house, ricocheted, and lodged in her brain. Her home faces the Israeli military encampment at the Beig Haggai settlement.



Na'ama Didovsky, age seven, mourns the death of her mother, Rina, murdered by Palestinians in a roadside shooting. Na'ama lives with her father and five brothers and sisters in the West Bank settlement, Beit Haggai.

can love save the world?



Muhammad, age 14, Hebron. Testimony taken by Hashem Abu Maria, Children's Defense International.

"The Israeli soldiers took us to a settlement and people wearing civilian clothes came and started to beat us. ... Then the soldiers started to beat us with their rifles, metal ropes, and sticks all over our bodies. ... They told me to turn over and lie on my belly, my eyes were covered and my hands cuffed, then the soldier put his rifle muzzle inside my butt and pushed it strongly. He repeated that many times. It was so painful ..."

Above right: Charles Lenchner, a Jewish Israeli citizen, was arrested during a nonviolent action against the Israeli takeover of the Orient House, East Jerusalem.

"In a few days the colors will fade, along with all the other pains, scratches, and bruises on my body. I will not forget."



all parties and find ways to tell each side about the humanity and the suffering of the other. We learn to listen with our "spiritual ear," to discern and acknowledge the partial truth in everyone—particularly those with whom we disagree. We learn to put aside our own positions and help the speakers tell their story. We learn to stretch our capacity to be present to another's pain.

When we sit with Israelis and Palestinians and hear their stories, regardless of where they fall on the political spectrum, it becomes possible to affirm their humanity at the deepest level. I have even found compassion for extremists on both sides of the conflict. It does not mean I condone their actions, but when I hear their life circumstances, I can, at times, imagine myself making the same choices.

Sitting in a settlement in the West Bank, I can feel the grief of an Israeli settler. The daughter of a Holocaust survivor, her mother literally carried her across armed European borders in the dark of night to the "promised land" of her Jewish ancestors. This woman wants nothing more than to live on the land of the prophets—land that is sacred to her and happens to lie in the disputed West Bank. A future peace agreement with the Palestinians will likely prevent her from staying in her beloved Judean hills. Her love for the land is so clear—so heartbreaking.



Sitting in a Gaza camp, I can imagine the rage of a Palestinian refugee—a member of Hamas—who saw his father and other relatives killed in front of him when he was a young boy. He was arrested many times and tortured. I can feel the grief he carries from being arrested on the eve of the birth of his first child, the son he didn't hold for his first five years of life. I think of times that I've had thoughts of revenge for incidents trivial in comparison. I remember the times I've fallen short of forgiveness.

Compassionate listening can be deeply healing for those listening as well as for those who are heard. What we're doing is creating an environment conducive to peace-building through deep, empathic listening. It is no simple thing. We work to see through any masks of fear or hostility to the sacredness of each individual. At times, we listeners must dig deep within ourselves to move beyond our own judgments and opinions.

Although we are not always "successful" in our own eyes, Israelis and Palestinians on all sides feel and appreciate our intention, which seems to be the most important factor. When we listen with the intention of building empathy and understanding, we also quickly build trust, and possibilities emerge. We have been able to bring opposing sides together in one room to listen to each other because our intentions are trusted.

Irene Siegel, a Jewish American, sleeps in the home of a Palestinian family in Beit Jala as part of a human-shield campaign to deter Israeli shelling of Palestinian homes.

"Magdaline, my Palestinian hostess, looked at me sideways and said softly, "Are you Jewish?" And I nodded. She threw her arms around me and said, "You know, I love you, Irene. I love you like a sister." And I cried. And so did she. And then she talked to me until two in the morning about everything—her fears, her pain, her experiences—everything she had held inside for so long, surrounded as she is by a community who are all suffering the same pains."

Here I am—this is me in my nakedness,
with my wounds, my secret grief,
my despair, my betrayal, my pain,
which I can't express, my terror, my
abandonment. Oh, listen to me for a day,
an hour, a moment, lest I expire in my
terrible wilderness, my lonely silence. Oh
God, is there no one to listen?

—Seneca

can love save the world?

"I would not wish for anyone in the world to feel what I am feeling now, or see the terrible images that I saw. There are no words to describe it - it is worse than hell. My sister, Yocheved, of blessed memory, was the angel of my family, so pretty and kind - I miss her so much!"

Miriam Shushan, age 15, survived the Sbarro restaurant suicide bombing. She mourns the loss of her 10-year old sister Yocheved in the

Below: "Fortunately, in my daily routine I actually don't feel the conflict—yet. Maybe I've had luck 'til now or it's just my fate. I have a lot of angry feelings and tough questions to the Palestinians. ... Unfortunately, I think that only a big event like a regional war will stop the conflict."

Tal Deri, Israeli reservist and father-to-be. Tel Aviv.



People want to take risks for peace, and will take risks,

Our experience has demonstrated that people want to take risks for peace, and will take risks, if given an opportunity to really be heard.

Compassionate listening with Israelis and Palestinians this past decade has been a gift for those involved. We've witnessed the courage of the human spirit in times both hopeful and dark. We've been privileged to hear so many stories filled with beauty, wisdom, and tears. After years of listening, it has become so clear to me: all are suffering, all are wounded, all want to live with security, justice and peace. All are worthy of our compassion.

The question remains, how do we break the cycles of violence? Perhaps listening is one of the keys. I'm now holding the vision of a new, global listening movement. This is my hope. This my prayer.

Leah Green is the director of MidEast Citizen Diplomacy. The photographs, by Beverly Duperly Boos, are part of an upcoming photographic exhibition and campaign to introduce compassionate listening worldwide. For information on Compassionate Listening delegations, workshops, Guidebook, and video, please visit www.mideastdiplomacy.org or call 360-297-2280.



can love save the world?



Palestinian family in front of their demolished home, Yatta.

Below: Atta Jabber, Palestinian farmer, with son Rajeh. The Israeli military has demolished Atta's family home two times. They recently moved into their twice-rebuilt home.

if given an opportunity to really be heard



"Many people in the West believe that religion is a key cause of this conflict. However, here in the Middle East where Islam and Judaism are 'totalizing' religions, nationality and religion are deeply anchored in the individual identity. People with clear identity have been shown to be less threatened by the intimate meeting with those different than they are. This is exactly opposed to the current paradigm of 'diluted identity.'"

—Rabbi Dov Maimon, with son Nissim Hai, Jerusalem. Dov directs interfaith programs for the Israeli organization Yesodot.

