

IT GETS HARD TALKING ABOUT PALESTINE

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I'm here because I participated in the contingent of mental health workers touring ten days in the West Bank and Israel early this Spring, as arranged under sponsorship by the *USA-Palestine Mental Health Network* and the *UK-Palestine Mental Health Network*. We met many articulate, brilliant, dedicated, and highly accomplished mental health professionals and social service providers who are determining and innovating ways to maximize wellness and reduce suffering in the context of what they may call "constant multiple stress disorders" and other emotional problems and behavioral pathologies, in the context of the political, economic, and legal constraints of military law and occupation of their traditional lands, in most cases involving repeated and often imminent displacement and refugee status within their homeland. It was a terrifically well-organized experience and I strongly recommend it to anyone who wants a deeper, clearer, and more connected understanding of life under occupation in Palestine, without spending a great amount of time or money.

Yesterday, walking on the sidewalk near this hotel, I found myself composing this following harangue, and I wrote fragments of it down on a scrap of paper at street corners so I would not forget it.

It's a matter of us versus them.

We know how this works, we know how to do it.

I know and you know what your people have done to my people,
what your people have thought, have felt,
and I feel that I know

all the automatic, reflexive, demeaning micro-offenses
going on since the beginning of all this –
before the beginning even of all this you and I,
we all have known, whatever you call it.

I know who my people are, like it or not.

I know by birth who my people are.

I know this through my socialization,
I know by my education,
and I feel I know between the lines.
I don't need to think about it.
And I know by location, where I live and who's around me, who we are.
I belong because these are the people who understand me –
or whether they understand *me* well or not,
we all understand something about your people,
some of the same specific big things about your people.
I ignore this at my peril.
Or represent it at my peril.
Challenge it at my peril.
Or act on it at my peril,
or avoid acting on it at my peril.
And at the peril of those I know
how to love, . . .
And you know it's your people's fault,
not my people's fault.

I am neither Jewish nor Muslim. I was raised Episcopalian, I don't have a horse I this race. I'm not an expert, I'm just learning, still learning, struggling to understand it more.

I spoke in my daughter's high school class on the Holocaust, and I spoke in our town's peace and justice speaker series, about some of my experiences in and learning about Palestine and Israel, on and before and after the study tour this spring. I tried not to blame anyone as deliberately choosing to endanger, harm, oppress, or overpower others.

Afterward I had no idea whether I sounded like a maniac, a tiresome soap box orator, a naïve fool, or a pathetic, untrustworthy worry wart.

Are you dissociating yet?

Categories accumulate as words and phrases to describe the situation, words with vague, ambiguous, and shifting meanings, meanings that shift particularly depending on tone and context with which they are apprehended. The same commonly used words also will certainly convey different ideas to different people.

- self-determination,
- peace process,

- road map,
- colonization,
- apartheid,
- security,
- freedom,
- occupation,
- permit,
- disengagement,
- dialogue,
- blockade,
- Green Line,
- intifada,
- the Nakba,
- right to return,
- equality,
- legitimacy,
- settlement,
- terrorist,
- detainee,
- clash,
- massacre,
- genocide,
- necessary,
- political,
- de-humanization,
- anti-Semitism,
- racism,
- Zionism,
- Arab,
- Jew,
- and Palestinian.

These and other terms may be used in an effort to convey sensibly a meaningful idea, but any of these words and phrases may immediately acquire radical force and toxicity, so that they may often appear suddenly, predictably, as if a weapon, spiking the sympathetic nervous system into fight or flight, blocking thought, intensifying stress and anger and fear, in anyone emotionally invested in issues relating to the safety and rights of Jews, of Muslims, of Palestinians, of Israelis, of Arabs.