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The Body as a Bridge to Peace

Joel Ziff

A Stress-Management Seminar at Al Q'uds University

It's a short distance from my sister's home in the Jewish Quarter of the Old City in Jerusalem to the hilltop campus of Al Q'uds University in Palestinian Abu Dis, perhaps a 15-minute drive by car. However, these two places are worlds apart, separated by the high concrete barriers that Israel has constructed, a barrier that Israelis mostly see as protection against suicide bombers and terrorists, and that Palestinians mostly see as yet another effort to take away their land and their rights to move freely.

I was invited to Al Q'uds to teach a seminar on stress management to health and human services professionals and students, an invitation that was a follow-up to a conference on conflict resolution and expressive arts therapy that was sponsored by Lesley University's program in Israel.

To complicate matters, the day I was scheduled to lead this program, was July 14, 2006, shortly after the beginning of fighting between Hizbollah and Israel. As I prepared to make the short journey from East to West Jerusalem, katyushas were falling on Israel and Israeli air attacks had begun against targets in Lebanon.

It was recommended to me that I not drive my own car into East Jerusalem. Instead, I drove from West Jerusalem to the Ambassador Hotel, on the border between East and West Jerusalem. There I was met by Dr. Eyad Hallaq, director of the Palestinian Center for Traumatic Stress Studies, who drove me in his car to Abu Dis. Eyad, a resident of East Jerusalem whose family has lived there for generations, drove a car with the yellow license plate that identified him as an Israeli, enabling him to travel without permits between the two Jerusalems—Israeli and Palestinian.

The participants came from all over the West Bank—from East Jerusalem, from Bethlehem, from Ramallah, from Jenin, and from Nablus. They were medical and human service professionals and students working with adults, with children and with families, and with people suffering from mental and physical symptoms and disorders. One of the participants, a faculty member at Al Q'uds University was a graduate of the Lesley program, and had taken a course with me twenty years ago. They were very welcoming and hospitable, proud of the campus that had been built; they were committed and caring professionals, open and eager to receive what I offered.

My approach to stress management is body-centered: strengthening people's capacity to monitor, moment-to-moment, kinesthetic awareness. As we learn to recognize the physical sensations that occur when we experience a stress reaction, we can then learn to interrupt that pattern and calm ourselves, thereby reducing the impact of everyday stress in our lives.

At the beginning of the day, I asked, as I usually do, for the participants to introduce themselves by describing the types of stress they experienced, the events of daily life that cause and exacerbate stress. Usually, when I teach stress management, I work with people who encounter challenges of financial and time pressures, problems with family or at work, health issues, and other difficult challenges. On this day, I listened to different problems: descriptions of the tensions associated with hours spent waiting at checkpoints to travel to work or to visit family, of scenes on television or reports on the radio of ongoing violence and bloodshed, of children who were in Israeli prisons, of insufficient medical supplies and other resources needed for the care of their patients and clients, of experiences of humiliation and intimidation.

As I listened to the descriptions of their stresses, I realized that although I had traveled only a short distance in my journey from West to East Jerusalem, I had journeyed a great distance between two radically different cultures with very different perspectives. Usually, I stood in West Jerusalem, looking off into the distance seeing the concrete barrier that cuts through the hills of Jerusalem looking East toward the Judean desert. Today, I stood on the other side of that barrier, looking toward the old city with the golden dome of the mosque. Called a 'fence' by Israelis, it is a 'wall' to the Palestinians: a protective shield against terrorism to the Israelis, part of an ongoing effort to humiliate and intimidate the Palestinians. This barrier was not only a physical presence dividing East and West, Palestinian and Israeli, Arab and Jew, but a symbol of an even more problematic divide, two cultures experiencing the same events with radically different understandings of their significance and meaning.

I experienced this divide most powerfully as many of the participants described their experiences of the long waits at Israeli security checkpoints: hours spent waiting to get to their work, to their studies, to their families, hours they described as characterized by acts of humiliation and intimidation by Israeli soldiers, hours they viewed as deliberate efforts to break their spirit.

As they talked, I thought of the generally accepted Israeli view that these checkpoints are a vital and necessary protection against potential terrorists and suicide bombers. At a more personal level, I thought of my nephew, an Israeli soldier, assigned to one of those checkpoints. I recalled our recent conversations about his efforts to be sensitive to the needs of innocent people who were trying simply to get to work or to see a doctor, and about his efforts to educate the soldiers under his command to have

empathy and respect for those whom they had to screen, while also having to maintain vigilance, responding to situations such as a 16-year old youth with grenades in his backpack.

I also asked participants to let me know something about how they coped with stress, about what they did for self-care. They talked about listening to music, hiking or spending time in nature, watching television, talking with friends, shopping, eating, praying, exercising, recommitting themselves to their dreams and goals. As I listened to the stories of their efforts to cope with stress, the divide I had been experiencing began to dissolve. I was reminded again of what we shared. And I reminded myself that my goal was not to debate politics but to help those who were care-givers do better with their own self-care. In that way, although I could not have much impact on the forces of world events, perhaps I could support the efforts of those who gave support and care to others. I was glad to have this opportunity to do something, albeit limited, to make a positive contribution and to create dialogue.

The participants in this seminar were very hospitable and welcoming, glad to have me there, but they were also somewhat skeptical as to whether this approach could be of any use to them. I spoke briefly about the underlying biological processes of stress, explaining that part of the stress reaction involved a shutting down of cerebral cortex processing, limiting a person's responses to primitive fright, flight, fight or freeze mechanisms, and clarifying how, as one calmed physically, the capacity for higher order thinking and problem solving could be enhanced.

I asked for a volunteer. I asked him to recall a situation that caused him to feel stress that he experienced in his body. Although he did not want to share the details, he reported that he was able to feel the physical tension in his body when he thought about this stressful situation. I then asked him to experiment with opening his field of kinesthetic awareness to include the sensation of his breath, the sensation of his feet on the ground, and the weight of his bones. He had difficulty in following these instructions. After some experimentation, he came to realize that he did not want to stop feeling angry. He felt justified in his anger and he felt that relaxing would take away his anger, a sign of submission and acceptance that seemed wrong.

Although I had not succeeded in my original goal, the demonstration brought to the surface a very important belief. In the discussion that followed, it became clear that most people believed that calming themselves in their bodies would be a sign of weakness. They believed that calming themselves was a sign of compliance and submission, an acceptance of conditions that they perceived as unjust and oppressive.

I had a different perspective. My hypothesis was that it did not help them to be in a tense physical state, activated into a fright/flight/fight reflex for hours while they waited to go through a checkpoint. It did not seem to me that holding on to physical tension helped them get through the checkpoint more quickly, nor did it help them respond more assertively or constructively.

I asked for another volunteer. A woman, a doctor, wearing a long dress and a head covering volunteered. I asked her to describe her experience of stress: she spoke of the tension she experienced as she thought about her son who was in an Israeli jail. I asked her if she felt the stress physically in the present moment. She replied that she did and described the constriction in her shoulders, her abdomen and her jaw. I asked her to continue to notice those physical sensations, not to try to make them go away, but to add to her awareness the sensations of the movement of her body with her breath, the sensations of her feet on the floor, the contact of the chair and the weight of her bones, and to notice what happened, moment-to-moment. After a few moments, she reported she was beginning to sense herself becoming more relaxed. That relaxation continued to develop. In a short time, to her amazement, she reported she felt quite comfortable.

I asked her once again to think about her son. As she did, the tension returned, but it did not seem quite as intense. When I asked her, once again to add to her awareness the rest of her kinesthetic experience, she was able to calm herself somewhat more quickly. We repeated this sequence several times. Then, when I asked her to think about her son, she reported that she no longer felt a physical stress response. What she noticed instead was a thought that her son would not want her to be worried about her, that her worry would add to his distress. Then, she smiled. I asked her what she was thinking about. She reported that she had an image of welcoming her son when he was released from jail, of smiling and hugging him, and thinking that the best thing she could do for her son was to be positive and strong.

Others in the room noticed the change in her demeanor. She reported that she did not experience herself as calm and passive or submissive or accepting, she felt calm and powerful and determined.

This demonstration led to further discussion about the potential value of a calm body under stressful circumstances. Someone told a story of a person at a checkpoint who spent hours entertaining children, of someone else who effectively and calmly challenged an Israeli soldier who was behaving abusively. They talked about the value of humor, of focusing on taking care of others, of thinking about their reasons for travel and their goals.

We talked about the culture of giving in their communities that encouraged attention and care of others, a positive response in many respects but one that also had negative effects. Participants also noted that body awareness and self-care was not encouraged or modeled in their culture. Moreover, in response to ongoing violence and trauma, people tended to further dissociate from their bodies, numbing themselves as a means to cope with physical and emotional pain and distress.

With the encouragement of Eyad and others on the faculty at Al Q'uds, students formed small groups and practiced the simple body-centered approach to stress they had witnessed. Most of them reported they were able to use this approach successfully. I ended this brief but quite intense experience feeling both despair and hope. I felt despair at the depth of the split between these two worlds, of their different perspectives and understanding, despair at the limited impact that any of us could have to create a different reality of cooperation, despair that we could make a difference. At the same time I felt hope, hope in seeing that I could cross that barrier and that others could meet me in spite of the war that had erupted around us all, hope that in the underlying common humanity of our biology, that the more each of us is able in our different worlds, to calm those instinctual urges to fight, flight, fright and freeze, that we can awaken to a higher sense of our humanity and of the possibilities for creative solutions to problems that appear to be insoluble. It is my prayer that we can build bridges to surmount those barriers.