

Letter from Ramallah

June 15, 2006

To my family and friends,

Just behind the headlines reporting entire families dead on the beach in Gaza, the deadly jockeying of Fatah and Hamas for primacy, the international meetings and self-important posturing, the well-crafted statements and photo-ops of Israeli, Palestinian and Western leaders--- just beyond the language of terror and retaliation, targeted assassinations and self-defense, is a network of well-organized and sustaining centers who provide information, resources, counseling, education and alternatives to Palestinians living under Israeli occupation. There is an infrastructure beneath the headlines; there are women and men working to heal bodies and psyches, training people in democratic values, working collaboratively to enliven the possibility of an alternative future. This work of ordinary heroism never makes the news.

I have made repeated trips to Ramallah to meet with Palestinians doing the daily work of institution building. Now I walk through the Qualandia checkpoint without the shock of my first crossing. Some days are easier than others. Some waits are longer. Some corridors are stuffier. Some soldiers are more condescending, but I have incorporated this passage into my experience of travel to Ramallah. Moving through the computer-controlled turnstiles has become part of the trip. But my horror remains, pushing against my ribcage with each breath I take in that obscene conduit.

Palestinian Center for Peace and Democracy

I was ushered into the corner office of Naseef Mu'aliem, Director General of the Palestinian Center for Peace and Democracy and served coffee with the ceremonial formality that precedes any conversation. The tenor of our conversation became immediately clear when Dr. Mu'aliem said neither he nor PCPD support Fatah or Hamas, groups he refers to as the Mafia or the Taliban. Leaning back, he keenly assesses me to see how I have responded to his startling introduction. I nod and begin to write furiously, because I understand all pleasantries have ended. He is angry and frustrated with the response of the Israeli government and the west to the democratic election of Hamas and doesn't wait for my questions but moves the direction of our meeting directly to the recently held elections.

"We monitored the elections scrupulously," he says. "We were joined by monitors like your Mr. Jimmy Carter's organization. It was a fair, just, free and democratic enterprise."

He sighs, sips from his coffee and begins to fill in the organization's history for me.

"During the Fatah years, as an organization promoting a strong civil society and democracy, we faced a political regime that could hardly be called democratic. We had to face retaliation and threats that made our work more difficult and negatively influenced the people we were trying to serve. People were often afraid to speak freely because of their fear of punishment. We were ruled by people who benefited from a state of chaos, corruption and the absence of law.

While it took our workers long hours to reach certain areas because of the roadblocks and checkpoints, and because sometimes our teams had to walk through gardens and unpaved roads in order to reach their location, and even when there was a risk of being shot by Israeli settlers, the total number of workshops and trainings we created were provided and in some instances even exceeded, due to the enthusiasm of the villagers."

"What were the trainings?" I interject. "What were you teaching people in these meetings?"

"We conducted training sessions on human rights, women's rights, women's participation in politics and children's rights. From the beginning, our goal has been to strengthen the peace and democratic culture and the services that are needed for a civil society to be developed." he replies.

"Even with all these obstacles, PCPD has established offices in Tulkarim, Jenin, Nablus, Jerusalem, Ramallah, Bethlehem and Hebron, built local democratic organizations and trained community activists." Pausing to let me finish transcribing his rush of words, he gives me an encouraging smile.

"We work on four fronts at once," he continues. The Palestinian front, the enemy front," glancing up at me to see if I understand what he means. I nod and he goes on. "The regional front and the international front which includes the United States, the European Union and the Quartet.

I had prepared for this meeting by reading the last several years of PCPD annual reports that are filled with strategies to encourage and educate villagers to vote, to have higher women's representation and participation on all levels, to enhance the democratic process and reduce the Fatah hegemony over the Palestinian Authority. Proportional representation, as opposed to majority or mixed representation is encouraged because such a system does not exclude

anyone, allows the participation of all political parties, weakens tribalism and extended families and hopefully can become a unifying system able to maintain stability. The goal, they write repeatedly, is to get rid of all forms of occupation and hegemony, both inside and outside Palestine.

Dr. Mu'aliem continues,

"We have struggled throughout the Occupation and through the first and second intifada to sustain real democracy. It is Israel, Hamas and Fatah who are keeping us from a democratic nation. In this last election there were nearly 80 thousand voters who said no to both sides. Those are the people who will be the future of Palestine. Our work is to find them and work with them to create our future.

Nevertheless, he goes on, Whether Hamas was elected because Fatah was corrupt, whether the people wanted a change, whether they felt that the services Hamas had provided signaled a government more responsive to their needs, our people participated in a democratic process out of hope that their votes would bring about change for the better in their daily lives. Their voting expressed a sense of possibility for the future. We cannot take that away from them. Then there is nothing left but despair, which leads to more suicide bombs and more violence, and the hope of democratic processes that we worked for so diligently over these years is lost.

Hamas was elected. Governments must speak to the elected governments of other countries. How can you say you won't even speak to them? Whatever you think about Hamas, they are the democratically elected government of Palestine now. And we have to find ways to talk, ways to begin dialogue, ways to reach out.

The Israelis holding our tax dollars are creating people who cannot afford to travel to go to work, children who cannot go to schools, people who cannot access medical care, daily life that simply cannot continue, even in the difficult forms we had before. The act of voting, of choosing, of democracy seems to have failed, leaving a greater sense of hopelessness. We cannot allow that."

He stops speaking then, gazing out the window behind me at a partially built home on a rubble filled street, perhaps seeing the years of work and dreams that has built a still only partially democratic nation of Palestine. The silence lengthens and I wait. After many long minutes, he turns to me and says,

"Tell them all this. People will act if they know. Go home to your America and tell them this. Tell your Congress, your President, your neighbors. You go back to your home and make your democracy work."

For further information contact: www.pcpd.org

Palestinian Medical Relief Society

PMRS is a grassroots, community-based Palestinian health organization, founded in 1979 by a group of Palestinian doctors and health professionals seeking to supplement the decayed and inadequate health infrastructure caused by years of Israeli military occupation. They are non-profit, voluntary, and one of the largest health NGOs in Palestine with 26 clinics in the West Bank and Gaza, specialized centers in urban neighborhoods, and mobile clinics that go out to provide urgently needed medical care in the villages.

On my way to Ramallah, I was met at the Palestinian bus station by both a doctor from Physicians for Human Rights and an activist from Neve Shalom who are a part of an on-going project at the French hospital in Nazareth, a humanitarian clinic for Palestinian children who have congenital heart disease. In the Occupied territories, he explained to me, as our car bumped along the rutted roads of Ar-Ram, each year 1000 Palestinians are born with congenital heart disease and 400 will need intervention during the first year of life. They are on their way for their weekly visit to provide care for these children.

Arriving in the PMRS Ramallah offices, I am greeted by Dr. Jihad Mashal who ushers me into his office, serves me coffee and begins to explain the history and functioning of PMRS. We are the biggest NGO health program with 490 localities in villages, cities and camps. We do exams and provide medication and focus on women's health, child health and development, emergency medicine, psychosocial programs. Thousands of people volunteer with us and we train students and youth to do emergency medicine in their communities. Over the years we have trained nearly 40 thousand people to administer first aid and casualty medicine as well as attend to ordinary accidents. Our concentration is primary health care, both in clinics and in prevention. We provide lectures, campaigns, education, home visits, first aid training, and disease prevention.

But the lack of medical supplies for our hospitals and clinics is urgent. Because of the withholding of Palestinian taxes, 40% of our staff have not received any salaries and cannot even come to work. There are 160 thousand Palestinians now without salaries. One third of our people have no income. Our mobile units with medications, supplies, laboratory materials, emergency kits can handle 25% of the need but 75% of our people have no medical care at all. In order to increase to cover more villages, we need more support. People with chronic diseases like diabetes, hypertension, heart diseases and cancer

get little or no treatment.

The conversation then turns, inevitably, to the current political situation and Dr. Mashal expresses his widely shared fear that if nothing is done, the rate of suicide bombings and internal conflict will increase. Palestinian voters thought that Hamas would solve their problems because they were disgusted with Fatah's bloated corruption. Our people are poor, unemployed, there are no changes in their living situation, more and more land is confiscated, and it seems that the world is not involved. PMRS serves communities under siege, he says. We are facing nothing less than a situation of humanitarian crisis rising insecurity and institutional dissolution.

"But remember," he said as we rose, "the Palestinians voted for Hams because, even with everything that has happened to our people they still have hope. Hope that Hamas will negotiate for them. Hope that the world will notice and come to our aid. Hope that we can live peacefully with Israel. It is this hope that we must keep alive. Without it, we have only despair and death."

To contact them: www.upmrc.org

Palestinian Counseling Center

The Counseling Center began in east Jerusalem in 1983 and was the first in Palestine. Their work synthesizes the well being of the individual embedded in the realities of the larger community and always with the backdrop of the Israeli Occupation and it's psychological and social effects on the well being of the Palestinian people. The PCC provides individual and group clinical work, education and training, supervision and lectures at institutions and organizations throughout the West Bank and Gaza.

Their politics and community mental health model are reflected in the titles of some of the articles and books they have available for concerned practitioners and lay-people. Here are just a few.

Violence Against Women: The Analogy of Occupation and Rape
Children in War Zones: Coping Strategies and their Long Term
Effects

The Psychological and Mental Health Effects of Systematic
Humiliation by Israel Against the Palestinians

Expressive Arts Therapy: Healing the Traumatized. The Palestinian
Experience

Zahirah and I sit in a large airy room, facing one another on two

cane chairs, a glass topped table between us with the telltale box of tissues in its center. The window is opened and a cool breeze fills the room.

She starts by explaining how the Center staff travel into small villages and approach people who might be resistant to conversations about mental health.

"We begin by educating the community about what mental health issues are, create brochures with basic information at the same time we start our programs, first individual, then group. We often open the conversation by asking parents if they are having any difficulties with their children, which parents will easily talk about. Then we gradually bring in what might be the issues in the marriage or the extended family, larger issues that may be operating in the difficulties of the child. It is still hard for men to engage in this process but we continue to work at it. There is still such a stigma about mental health. We have one hospital in Bethlehem for mental health and when we mention our work, people say 'oh like that crazy house in Bethlehem,' so a big part of our work is to overcome people's fears.

When the Intifada started in 1988, our travels were curtailed and people couldn't get to east Jerusalem where we had our office, so we opened this one in Ramallah. Now we have small centers in Nablus, Jenin and Qalqilyah where there are many on-going programs of awareness information, child and youth development, and a sort of social center for the community.

I ask for some concrete examples about their work with groups of children.

"For example, we go into a situation where there are a group of kids who are angry, acting out, depressed, having compulsive behaviors, are withdrawn. They have food, but no materials, supplies, games, nothing. We give them a sheet of paper and ask them to write on it what you most want.

What do they write? Desks. Shoes. A day where they can go swimming. So that's what we do. We created a theater project, bought them shoes, desks and took them swimming. Because we are a NGO, and because of our reputation, we can do what we think is best for the people we serve. What you call community mental health in the States is probably what we call public health here.

Last week I went to Nablus to give a talk. The meeting was in the Old City there and, without thinking, I said to someone, "How are you?" and they, also without thinking, replied, "Fine." And I realized right away that their answer was an automatic lie and I changed my talk.

Always we need to identify the Occupation as the background for everything. Nobody is fine. But once we talk about the Occupation,

even if we cannot change the Occupation today, we can begin a conversation about things we can change. I can begin to teach in small steps how to change relationships with neighbors, how to change things in our daily lives. We can change, even under Occupation. I teach people visualization and relaxation techniques to use. Our staff has degrees in counseling, social work and public health from both Hebrew and Bir Zeit Universities, and we're trained in behavioral, dynamic, cognitive, techniques and group process. Everything we do is supervised and there is a psychiatrist who comes twice a month for consultation. So we are growing in the kinds of things we can provide for people and feeling better about what we do. We're all able to make changes.

But the day to day is very hard here. You know, there were four murders in Ramallah last week, carried out just as Bush and Olmert were talking about peace. I had an appointment with a child at that exact hour and was worried about if the child was coming, if he was caught in the gunfire, if it was my fault somehow for placing him on the street when he might have been at home instead. You know, I sometimes dream about other situations, but this is what I have to live with.

She describes a day long Conference organized by a group of Danish therapists designed to provide current information about treatment for Post Traumatic Stress Disorders. It took her many stressful hours to get through the checkpoint, she arrived quite late and the Conference had already begun. None of the trainers asked why she had been delayed. During the day, reports came in that the Israeli army had killed 10 people, all in the same family. At the moment an entire family was being murdered, the Danish therapist was encouraging her Palestinian colleagues to find something beautiful and worthwhile to focus on in hard moments.

Think of a flower, the trainer suggested. See its colors, smell its fragrance, enjoy its beauty, because in the midst of the trauma, there are also the flowers. Listening to the well-intentioned Danish woman, she wondered, do the friends and family of the ten who were murdered see the flowers? Did that soldier who held me at the checkpoint see the flowers? But now, she tells me, I do see the flowers. I have to. Some days that's all there is.

Last week, I was with friends and we drove past some recent home demolitions and they said, 'come let us take you swimming to cool off and put your mind on other things.' But, you know, I couldn't go. It's like going to a restaurant sometimes, when so many of my people are hungry. I take a jog instead. At least for now.

What I try to remember is that deep inside each of us, she made a fist and rubbed her knuckles against the center of her ribcage; there

is a power so great that if we can just let it out, it will make a big whoosh. We smile together at the possibility of such a powerful whoosh as she accompanies me to the door. I thank her for taking the time to educate me about her work and psychologically prepare myself to walk across the Qualandia checkpoint on my return to the dissonant peace of my west Jerusalem apartment.

To learn more or to order their materials go to: www.pcc-jer.org

Alternative Information Center

I spent several hours at the Alternative Information Center with Yossi, an Israeli activist in his mid-20's who has been by his own account involved as an activist supporting Palestinian liberation since he was fifteen. Now he works with AIC, the only collaborative organization of people working within the framework of Palestinian nationalism and radical Israeli peace activism. They have an office in Jerusalem and Ramallah and a staff of 16 people who direct the range of current projects. I knew about their work because Bay Area Women In Black subscribes to News From Within, an excellent source of alternative news and information, analysis and images of life under Occupation. They publish versions in English, Hebrew and Arabic with different emphasis, content and analysis. AIC has economic bulletins with easily accessible graphics clearly showing the costs of the Occupation and are circulating (and selling) completed pieces from their video project with work created by both Palestinian and Israeli filmmakers.

Israeli AIC activists are also involved in a study of Palestinian agricultural traditions in the village of Budrus. They are paying a Palestinian family to teach them the history of permaculture, terracing and the art of being in relationship with the land in a respectful and intimate manner. Each of the 16 staff of course, is also a member of the "movement," which involves demonstrations, meetings, developing contacts with media sources and creating possibilities for international volunteers to come for 3 months, 6 months or one year commitments, often providing a small living stipend. They are an excellent source of news, organizing materials, informational resources and collaborative on the ground activism. You can contact them directly for information or to order their materials at www.alternativenews.org

I will be returning to the U.S. in a few short weeks. BAWIB is planning to create a variety of opportunities for us to gather and continue our on-going conversation about how best to use the skills,

talents, time and resources each of us have, to be trustworthy allies to the Palestinian and Israeli peace activists struggling so valiantly to preserve the dream of a peaceful and just future for both peoples.

Salaam/Shalom,

Sandy