

Reflections of my visit to the Palestinian Territories.



*God looks at the Middle East, looks at Palestine.
When you go to the Holy Land and see what's being done
to the Palestinians at check points, for us,
it's the kind of thing we experienced in South Africa.*

Bishop Desmond Tutu

I worked in a very multifaith area of Nottingham and at that time the Churches Together organisation on the Holy Island of Lindisfarne wanted to make multifaith links so they officially invited our 'Faiths in Action Women's group' in Nottingham for a five day February retreat for up to 15 multifaith women for three years running, with food and accommodation free of charge. This is the story of what happened after our second retreat. This paper is gleaned from 2 chapters of my book DARK HOLY GROUND , Chapter 7 (Spiritual Retreats to Action,) and Chapter 12 (After Retirement with reflections of my visit to the West Bank in the Palestinian Territories.)

Immediately after this retreat in February 2009 we came home to the news that Gaza had been bombed. The killing of so many innocent children was shown on television screens across the world. Our large Muslim community was in uproar. I was shown scenes on their Al Jazeera TV network where the BBC network apparently found the scenes too horrendous to publish. One unforgettable scene was of a dead baby, cindered black from top to bottom, being held in the arms of its father. One member of our group, Zarifa, was a Palestinian

Muslim whose family was living in Gaza.

The day after arriving home from Holy Island I was strongly encouraged to go to a *Stop the War Coalition* meeting with her and other women from our group, I hadn't heard of *Stop the War Coalition* before. The community came together to see how they could find ways to tell our UK government to help stop the bombing. The organisers offered a few suggestions: a march in Nottingham, and a march in London with others from across the country. I became quite worried when one suggestion was to have a silent gathering outside the Jewish Holocaust Museum near Nottingham. I, along with a few others in the room, felt extremely uncomfortable about this option. We were told that it would be a peaceful gathering in silence, but I felt nobody could guarantee that since there was always the danger of a tiny minority factor that could disrupt everything.

Another suggestion was to arrange a silent candlelight vigil outside Nottingham City Council House to **light candles for innocent victims of both sides of the conflict**. I immediately volunteered to help coordinate that group. I had the job of buying a giant candle and a few hundred smaller candles, and others arranged speakers from the Muslim and Jewish community. However there were still people who wanted to gather outside the Holocaust Museum. The decision on whether or not to do this was postponed until the next *Stop the War* meeting to take place the following week.

I was extremely worried. I didn't want it to appear that we were against the Jewish people, but only protesting against the Israeli government's disproportionate bombing of the Palestinians. Gathering outside the Holocaust Museum could be misinterpreted, and also would not respect all the Jews who had died in the Holocaust. I was afraid this could escalate into something explosive.

Meanwhile I had been nominated by the United Reformed Church to represent them on "Nottingham Interfaith Council." I was on my way to my first meeting with them the day after the *Stop the War* meeting. I already knew some of the people on the council. We made connections with our local Faiths in Action group, and planned a joint gathering on the Holocaust Memorial Day that they

organised every year. Since it was on their agenda to plan this year's Holocaust Memorial Day, I wanted to warn them to go to the meeting the following week and vote against campaigning outside the Holocaust Museum. I saw some local Muslims on the committee and I didn't know if any of them were involved or not in organising the march. I realised, because I was late finding the meeting, that I must have missed the Holocaust Memorial Day discussion as it wasn't talked about. At the end I found John, the chair of the Interfaith Council going out the door he grabbed me by the arm and in a panic said, "Do you realise there's going to be a demonstration outside the Holocaust Museum!" I said, "No John...they haven't decided yet. They're going to decide next Wednesday at their next meeting. They're going to have a vote. People need to get there to vote if they don't want this to happen." I had phone calls between John and myself throughout the week. I was so stressed about all of this that my doctor sent me to see a counsellor.

The Interfaith Council worked within the County of Nottinghamshire as well as Nottingham City. Its Committee seemed to be professional people from all faiths. However it seemed to me some were out of touch with the real issues affecting the local communities. John knew of the work I was doing in Hyson Green and asked my advice on what the feelings were among the grassroots of the community. I told him that they were disappointed that the Interfaith Council had not yet put out a public statement concerning the bombing. A statement was then put out but a number in the community were a bit dissatisfied with the narrowness of it. I urged John to get people to go to the meeting. At this point I was so stressed I wanted to give everything up and stay away. However I knew how important it was. On the day of the meeting to vote, out of all the many people at the previous meeting only eleven people turned up to represent the rest of the group. I couldn't see anybody at all from the Interfaith Council. However I sat next to a Union Rep and she told me that John had asked her to come. It was announced that whatever the vote was, all the *Stop the War* members would all have to abide by it. I immediately spoke up and said "I'm sorry, but whatever the decision, I personally will not demonstrate outside the Holocaust Museum." At once a Muslim girl said, "Neither will I." She continued to say, "When I left the meeting last week I was caught up in all the rhetoric and agreed to the demonstration without really thinking of the consequences. But

when I got home and told my father he was absolutely angry and shouted at me saying, “You fool! People might think we’re against the Jews and we’re not! We’re against the Israeli government and how they’ve used their imbalanced military super power against the bombing of innocent civilians.” This very same conversation went around others in the circle. Other Muslims had a very similar story concerning their family and did not want to be seen to be against the Jewish people.

The very close final result was six to five NOT to do the demonstration. I breathed a deep sigh of relief. I completely understood the anger of those who lost the vote. I know they had in mind the shrinking map of Palestine since 1967 and the ongoing grossly unjust humiliation of the Palestinian people.

*‘The conflict resulted in between 1,166 and 1,417 Palestinian deaths and 13 Israeli deaths including 4 from friendly fire.’ ‘Gaza War (2008–2009)’
Wikipedia’*

With the *Stop the War Coalition*, Zarifa and I marched in Nottingham and London together against the bombing.



Zarifa holding the Palestinian Flag



Our silent candlelight vigil outside Nottingham City Council House for innocent victims from both sides of the conflict went ahead. We listened to Jewish, Muslim and Christian speakers. Even the Jewish speakers were against the bombing.

A tiny light of hope shone when a Palestinian Muslim, Mousa, who was studying at Nottingham University came into the church community cafe where I worked. He told me of his three-year-old niece, Marah, who lived on the West Bank in Palestine and was seriously ill with leukaemia. He told me how a Jewish doctor was treating her without payment and how immensely grateful he was to her. He was also grateful for his Jewish friends who were helping Marah by taking her quickly to the hospital on the Israeli side of 'The Wall,' bypassing the checkpoint where many Palestinian people often waited in line for many hours.

This was a brilliant story to spread around the angry local community in Nottingham to show that not all Jewish people were against the Palestinians. However, a few weeks later Mousa returned looking very despondent telling me that the Jewish doctor was now unable to treat his niece for nothing. Marah's family couldn't possibly afford to pay fees. Her condition suddenly became critical as the Palestinian hospital, with far less resources, had no facilities to treat leukaemia.

I immediately set up a fundraising campaign to help Marah. I contacted all my contacts in the community including Nottingham Interfaith Council and Mousa contacted his friends at Nottingham University. Together we reached our

goal to get Marah her much deserved treatment. She eventually became completely cured.

One Jewish donor from the Interfaith Council had, in the past, worked in the Israeli hospital where Marah was treated. He included a letter with his donation that reached Marah's parents wishing her well. I heard later that Marah's family living in the West Bank framed his letter and hung it on their wall to show their Palestinian neighbours how a Jewish person helped Marah, even when the bombing was still taking place, killing their fellow Palestinians in Gaza.

This was telling me that, in the midst of what I have come to believe about the terrible Israeli policies against the Palestinians, and the terrible Gaza government policies toward the Israelis in retaliation (*Gaza has an independent governing body from the West Bank*), that ordinary Palestinians and Jews were stretching out a hand of friendship to each other. This still gives me a little candlelight flicker of hope for that troubled area. It shows me how ordinary people on both sides are crying out for peace, albeit peace with justice. This is the biggest issue to overcome, especially in the eyes of the Palestinian people and those Israelis who had suffered. One question still remained for me: Why were the Palestinians so poor that they didn't have the resources in their own hospitals to provide the treatment that Marah, this innocent three-year-old, so desperately needed?

I soon realised there was not one Jewish person on our local women's Faith's in Action Group. I thought if there was, maybe local relationships could be healed between local Jews and Muslims. The area boundaries of my local work place mostly consisted of fundamental and Liberal Christians of all denominations and cultures, and nearly as many Muslims. There were Sikh and Hindu as well, and many African house churches which were mostly fundamental with a church from Ethiopia. But I didn't know of any local Jews in the area.

I was sad, because very understandably, especially at this point, Zarifa had an aversion to Jews. I spoke to her beforehand, to test her feelings before I asked our group if we could invite a Jewish woman, Cindy, on board even if she didn't live locally. I met Cindy at the Interfaith Council and though she lived on

the other side of Nottingham, I invited her and she was welcomed by all the women, including tentatively by Zarifa. Zarifa was a little bit hesitant at first, and I couldn't blame her under her circumstances of intensely worrying about her family in Gaza. She eventually relaxed during a multifaith cookery project we set up which included Cindy and Zarifa. Zarifa loved cooking and was a brilliant cook. Cindy introduced the group to more Jewish women out of our local area. After my retirement Cindy played a major part in keeping our group together.

One **BIG SURPRISE** came to me in 2018. Mousa, my Palestinian friend who I had met in Nottingham, invited me to his home in the West Bank. There I would finally meet Marah, the three year old Palestinian girl who I helped raise funds for to heal her Leukaemia eight years earlier.

Before setting off for Palestine, I visited my friend, Ian, on the Holy Island of Lindisfarne who years before offered our multifaith women's group a five-day spiritual retreat with free food and accommodations for three years running. Though he now lives in Palestine, Ian used to spend half of his time between Lindisfarne and Palestine and when in England, was usually raising funds for his charity. He was back in England for an operation when I travelled 150 miles from home to visit him.

Ian had set up a wonderful charity in Palestine called Abraham's Children in Crisis (ACIC). It's open to Jewish, Muslim and Christian children caught up in the conflict. He showed me a video presentation of the work he was doing. Many of the children were orphans, and had horrific experiences. Some have seen their parents blown up. One child had his leg blown off, another was blind, others had been abused. He focuses on helping traumatised children in war zones go to school and eventually to attend university. Unfortunately, at the time I was to be in Palestine, Ian would still be in England so he couldn't be there to show me his work while I was there.

After our visit, I finally set off for Palestine to meet Marah. By this time, she was 11 years old. It was a wonderful warm experience to meet up with her and her family. I've never felt so warmly received anywhere. All the Palestinian people I met, in fact, were just as generous and welcoming. I also was glad to meet again with Mousa's wife, Rana, and their children. I last met them in Nottingham when I had the privilege of being at the birth of Bana, one of their daughters.

When Mousa left Nottingham University he went home to be a professor at Birzeit University on the West Bank. He invited me to stop by to visit him there. I was so impressed at the confidence and open mindedness of his pupils. There were more young women in attendance than young men. The students always called Mousa by his first name. I was a bit nervous when he invited me to give a lecture on Equal Rights to two of his classes, but I tentatively did, not ever having given a lecture in a university before. In my lecture, I mentioned the work of Ian's Charity (ACIC) and all of Mousa's students decided to raise funds for it. I was able to put Ian in contact with Mousa. The last I heard was an email from Ian saying that one of his boys who had once suffered so much trauma had graduated from Birzeit University. Rana, Mousa's wife and their son, Madj, took me to Bethlehem to pray at the spot where Jesus was born.



Bethlehem



I was then looking forward to visiting Jerusalem, but was advised not to visit on a Friday or Saturday as on those days conflicts between Jews and Muslims often arose. I also had the opportunity to see for myself the injustices that the Palestinian people endure.

While trying to get to Jerusalem from Ramallah, accompanied by one of Mousa's Palestinian Christian colleagues, I discovered my lack of knowledge of the political structures between Israel and the Palestinian territories. I naively didn't know that I needed a passport to get to Jerusalem. So I went back to Mousa's house to pick it up. I had to go through a checkpoint which felt so inhumane to me. It reminded me of when I've seen cattle passing through narrow iron passages when being branded for market, but this was far worse. I could see three enclosed claustrophobic *long* walkways about 3 or 4 feet wide with thick iron bars on either side leading through two tall cast iron turnstiles at different intervals. They were only big enough for one person to pass through. Barbed wire overhead led us to **one** window that I could see at the end of the passage where heavily armed Israeli soldiers checked the passes of the Palestinians. My friend and I queued for over 4 hours with hundreds more Palestinians queuing up behind us. There was nowhere to rest and sit down and a few people, especially the elderly, who were too hungry, thirsty or faint, decided to turn back. All Palestinians had to pass through this checkpoint to get to Jerusalem. My friend once waited 6½ hours to get through and he said this was normal. When we finally reached the window, I was detained. I was turned back because I didn't have the small piece of paper that was stamped on my arrival at Tel Aviv Airport when I first arrived. I had my passport in my handbag which was searched by the Israeli soldiers, but that little piece of paper was missing. (I later found it.)



Quilandia Checkpoint

This checkpoint was erected on lands that the Palestinians had originally hoped to establish their own airport. It is one of the largest Israeli military checkpoints, and is just one of 522 of them across the Palestinian territory. These barriers deprive Palestinians of their freedom of movement and are occasionally closed for security reasons, limiting the Palestinians from being able to travel freely.

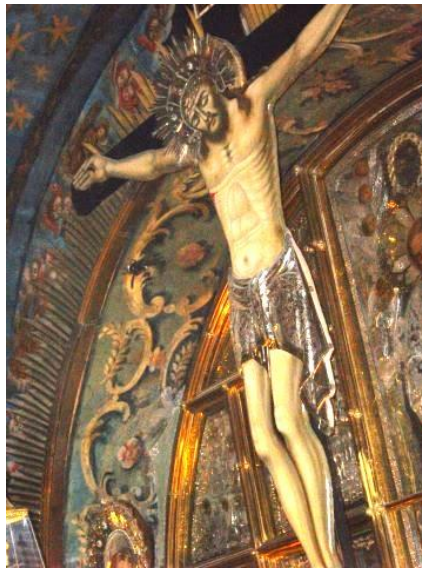
On my return through the tunnel, I squeezed past so many shocked faces of Palestinians who were seeing an elderly English woman being turned back. **I'll never ever forget the passion in their voices as they yelled at me, "Where do you come from!? When you get back, tell the world what's happening here! Don't forget! Tell the world!"** The next day, two of Mousa's wonderful female students from Birzeit University who both lived in Jerusalem volunteered, with permission from Mousa, to accompany me around the holy city. We all smiled at each other when we discovered that their names translated into English meant Faith and Hope.

Mousa and Rana couldn't take me to Jerusalem themselves because they needed a pass from the Israeli government to enter it. Apparently, there were many complications for them to get one. While travelling to Jerusalem, the Israeli high wall surrounding most areas dominated the landscape.



Faith and Hope took me into King Solomon's mine, then through the Lions Gate which stood at the entrance to the old city. On either side of the Lions Gate were Palestinian cemeteries, but the Israelis had completely obliterated one of the them. Faith was very upset by that. She said, "This was the sacred resting place of ancestors of Palestinian people. If

they obliterate the other one, who knows, it could start another war.” We then entered through the Lions Gate onto the Appian Way where I finally stepped in the footsteps of Jesus as he carried his cross to his crucifixion.



The spot where Jesus died



On the roof of the ‘Austrian Pilgrim Hospice of the Holy Family’ overlooking Jerusalem.

While looking over this view I reflected on Jerusalem’s ongoing conflicted situation to date. I couldn’t help but think of the bible passage. Luke 19: 41-44 which says,

‘As he (Jesus) approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it saying, “If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace, but now it is

hidden from your eyes.”

While travelling back to Ramallah, the beautiful gardens of the red roofed Israeli houses were noticeable, in stark contrast to the withered Palestinian gardens. I saw the sharp discrepancies between the Israeli tarmacked roads and the Palestinian dirt roads. Even in **some** parts of Ramallah, I saw no white lines distinguishing the left or right side of the road, or where to stop at a crossroad or junction. Except for city directions, signposts to name a street were few and hardly noticeable. There were few or very narrow pavements. One day I asked Rana, “How do you find your way around?” She said, “Everybody finds their way around here because we’re stuck in this place. We don’t get all that many visitors, and we know it by heart.” There was no government money to fix any of this.

I was invited to Mousa’s mother’s house. Around the corner of her house, looking down far below the steep cliff, I saw the olive groves which had been Palestine’s main economic staple for 2,000 years. Now the Israelis will only allow them to pick the olives for three days of the year. Beyond the olive groves was the white building of the Palestinian prison where only Palestinians were housed.



To my right in the distance, I could see the red roofed houses belonging to the illegal Jewish settlers in the Palestinian territories. I saw the beautiful gardens of the Israelis compared to the Palestinian gardens that were often dry and bare because the Israelis cut

off their water.

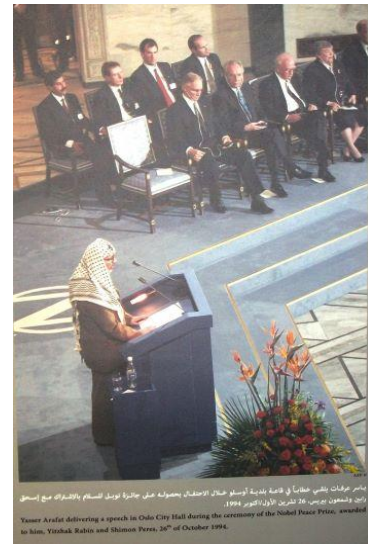
I saw the long Israeli built road leading directly down the middle of the scene into the far distance, with another road linking it to the illegal settlers. Most was partly on Palestinian territory where Palestinian people were never allowed to travel. I heard that in Mousa's mother's village they closed their shutters every Friday night. They stayed indoors because of the Israeli snipers – some riding through the village shooting sporadically at anything they saw. Mousa's young teenage nephew, Mohammed, has a bullet hole in his leg as a result of one of these incidents. A big house in the village was built, and once occupied, by a rich American family. I was told the family moved into the village hoping it would deter the villagers from being shot at by the Israeli snipers. This explained why Mousa and Rana didn't want me to visit Mousa's mother on a Friday.

In Rana's mother's house, in a different village, I saw the bullet holes in her window and she pointed to a red roof in the distance from where snipers shot at them. I was amazed how a bullet could travel so far.



Mousa took me to visit the Yasser Arafat Museum,

I saw his Nobel prize for peace. I also saw a photo of Yasser Arrafat delivering a speech in the Oslo City Hall during the ceremony of the Nobel Peace Prize awarded to him alongside Ritxhac Rabin and Shamon Peres, 26th October 1994 for their efforts to work for peace.



I ended up feeling deeply ashamed and saddened, and I found myself apologising to Palestinian tourists in the museum when I saw the role that Britain played in the original carving up of the country decades before. Somewhere else I saw a small framed statement which read something to the effect,

“Palestinians are deeply saddened by the Jewish people’s terrible suffering in the holocaust, but because of this, we can’t comprehend why you make us Palestinians suffer so much too.”

I know Hamas is guilty of killing many Israelis, but the death toll is considerably more on the Palestinian side. Israelis may feel it’s okay to kill all Palestinians, undoubtedly with much heavier weapons. However, the West bank is not ruled by Hamas, the administrative government in Gaza. The West Bank has it’s own Palestinian governing body.

Recently my heart sank when in the very last days of Donald Trump’s presidency, he finalised the third of his major interferences in the area which all negatively affected the Palestinians. In spite of international condemnation, he planted the American Embassy in Jerusalem. He met with the Israeli president to carve up Palestine into even

smaller pieces on the grounds that it was part of a peace deal. All this was done without any representative from Palestine in the initial negotiations to make these changes. Trump's very last act was to send his highest White House official to the illegal settlements, defying the **internationally recognised illegal occupancy of them**, and pronounced them 'legal'.

Ennobled by the American support for the illegal settlements, Israel went on to evict Palestinians from their homes, killing some, in East Jerusalem where Palestinian families have lived for centuries. Of course Hamas retaliated, which sadly resulted in some innocent Israelis dying. But this became a good excuse for the Israeli's to use their heavy sophisticated weaponry to once again bomb the already impoverished innocent civilians of Gaza, resulting in far more Palestinian casualties than Israeli.

I wondered if any of those voters who highly praised President Trump's policies on Palestine had ever taken the trouble to listen more closely themselves to the Palestinian perspective before voting for those policies. Or had they ever been encouraged by any American politician or newscaster to look more closely with an equilibria perspective?

It has been internationally perceived for years, and also sadly by myself, that America, the most powerful country in the world is the one country that has never really had an equal consideration for the Palestinian people. Although one American politician that I recently learned about has apparently always stood up tall against the human rights violations toward the Palestinian people, and that politician is himself a Jew. He's popular with a large number of American voters, but unfortunately not popular enough for the majority.



Meanwhile, the poster above has been hanging on my spare bedroom wall for many years. I feel it's wisdom. My Palestinian and Jewish friends who have stayed with me have each commented on its wisdom as well.

I can assure the reader who may think I'm anti-Semitic that I am not. I have Jewish friends in Nottingham who are wonderful people and who absolutely don't like what's going on in Israel either. Unfortunately, there was no chance for me to meet up with Jewish people on my short two week visit to visit my friend.

Our current economic and social structures and the way we see life in general have perpetuated a world of subordinates. Not only men over women, Israeli over Palestinians, but employed over unemployed, first world over third world, west over east, north over south, white over black, free man over slave, heterosexual over homosexual, one faith over another faith, rich over poor, religion over atheism, able bodied over disabled, and on and on. WHY?

I believe subordination of any kind is intrinsically linked and bound up in the universal conditioning of how we perceive God to be, and that conditioning is man made and power based. The male language for God in most religions inevitably perpetuates women's subordination across the world. God is love and love has no gender.

The world seems to be crucifying itself. But beyond crucifixion is the basic Christian belief of resurrection. Resurrection is not getting down off the cross and going back to the spot that put us there in the first place, putting tiny plasters on our wounds. It's about sticking with the cross, standing where the seeming opposites intersect, learning from each, and then going *beyond it* into a new and better all inclusive way of **be-ing**.

As a woman of faith, I ask myself, could the same truly loving God that liberated me as a woman be the same God that perpetuates this and oppressive subordination of others across the world?

I deeply resonate with a quote from Mary Daly's book,

'Beyond God the Father'

Why indeed must God be a noun?

Why not a verb, the most active and dynamic of all?

The human symbols for God may be intended to convey personality,

*but we fail to perceive that God is **Be-ing**.*

*That which it is over against is **Non Be-ing**.*

Women (and I would argue any other subordinate group) who have

travelled through their experience of Non Be-ing in the process of

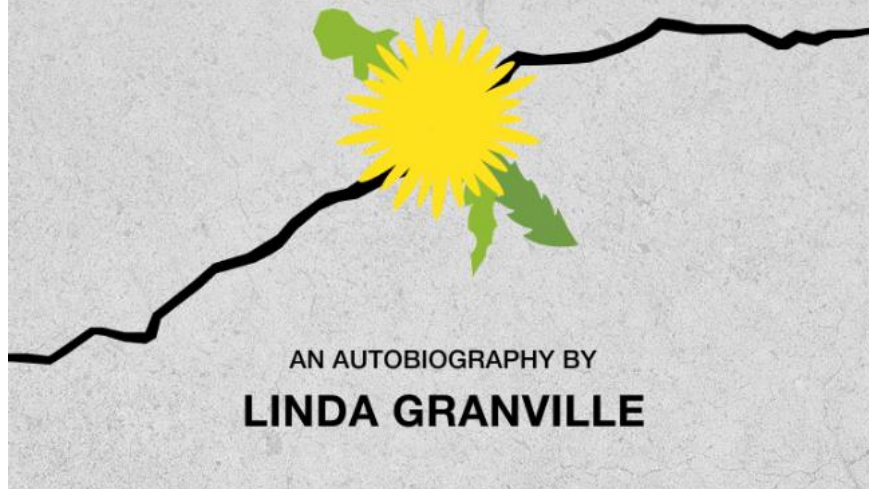
liberation, are able to perceive this because...

***Our liberation consists of refusing to be 'the other'
And asserts instead, "I am", without making another
the 'other'.***

Linda Granville

A journey into activism, to give voice to
the voiceless and hope to the hopeless

DARK HOLY GROUND



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