

**“WE REFUSE TO THE ENEMIES”
USING ON-LINE DIALOGUE TO ENGAGE STUDENTS IN LEARNING
SPIRITUALITY AND JUSTICE**

Sister Martha Ann Kirk, Th.D.

Parker Palmer in *The Courage to Teach, Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life* writes of the “subject-centered classroom” where all gather around concepts searching together for deeper truths. This is different from the “student-centered classroom” in which their ideas dominate. The “subject-centered classroom” contrasts with the “teacher-centered classroom” where teachers are endeavoring to control and dominate. (Palmer, 1998, 115-120) The “subject-centered classroom” does not mean that the teacher relinquishes the responsibility to foster learning. The teacher must make every effort to provide the structures for learning to take place. The teacher sees that different points of view are being respected, and that indifference, cynicism, or fear do not trap students.

In the University of the Incarnate Word Religious Studies class “Women and Faith,” students participated in an on-line dialogue with women in the Middle East. While the content and context of this class were unique, the method of an on-line dialogue which engages students, supplements news in the popular media, and invites critical thinking could be used in many disciplines. I discovered that I could not “be in control” of what was posted and sometimes disagreed with ideas or approaches. I continued, however, to recognize the value of learning that was coming from a quest for truth beyond both me and the students. People sometimes wrote with bad grammar or misspelling, but remembering that the original Greek text of Mark’s gospel had bad grammar and run-on sentences, I tried to be patient with these budding writers and to respect Hebrew and Arabic speakers willing to write to us in English.

I approached the historical and theoretical content of the “Women and Faith” class through some of women’s experiences today. We considered “traditional” things like cooking and sharing meals, engagement, marriage, and friendships among women. We considered “courageous” things like challenging the power structures and dominant voices in patriarchal cultural arrangements (e.g. marriage in the bible), government, or religious institutions. I would parallel the challenges of Sarah about 3800 years ago following where her husband Abraham was called and obeying him for his convenience and safety and the challenges of contemporary women considering which spouses’ career and dreams should take precedence. Then I would pose questions about equal human dignity and equal human need. Is jealousy and competition the same whether between Sarah and Hagar or among the women in class seeking the same opportunity or partner? What are ways that we might start to recognize God’s world of abundance and live in economies of abundance not of scarcity? Time, goods, forgiveness, and grace are abundant if we learn to recognize and to share. Faith in the Holy One which sustained our ancient sisters can give us strength to do deeper in spirituality and in the pursuit of justice.

During class periods, dramatic stories of ancient women in ritual contexts were shared. Discussion questions were posed. Out of class, students read the textbook. Once a week they were to post an entry in an area of the Women’s Global Connection web site

that been designated exclusively for our class. Women's Global Connection is a web site on which both men and women may initiate discussions. The site was founded by the Incarnate Word Sisters with assistance from many U.I.W. faculty and other friends. The site is available for U.I.W. faculty to use now. The site is

Rooted in a commitment to promote the dignity of all persons and to honor the web of interconnectedness of all life on Earth, we embrace the presence and the power of the feminine expression of the Devine. Women's Global Connection offers a virtual gathering place for sharing women's wisdom, experience, and spirituality for the purpose of nurturing transformative change and building a just and sustainable global community.

Students were reading the textbook, *Women of Bible Lands: A Pilgrimage to Compassion and Wisdom*, with stories of ancient Jewish, Christian, and Muslim women which I had written after a sabbatical in the Middle East and four other study trips. The web discussion "Daughters of Sarah and Hagar Seeking Peace" was designated on the web site "to build friendship and understanding with people of the Holy Land, an area sacred to Jews, Christians, and Muslims. The discussion has been initiated with students of the Women and Faith class of the University of the Incarnate Word, San Antonio, Texas, USA, and students and friends of Birzeit University near Ramallah and of Bethlehem University in Bethlehem, Palestinian Territories, and some friends in Jerusalem. This is a 'cyber pilgrimage' to the sacred center of the Holy Land and to the sacred center of ourselves. We seek authentic sharing and compassionate listening to learn, to heal, to reconcile, to grow, to create justice and peace, and to celebrate."

In this article, the names of the people who had messages on the website are changed, but some information on each writer is given. Knowing that personal relationships and family are extremely important in Middle Eastern cultures I began the discussion.

I am a professor of Religious Studies at the University of the Incarnate Word. Since 1991, I have both lived at Tantur Ecumenical Institute between Jerusalem and Bethlehem for a research sabbatical and taken groups of students and friends to get to know Bible lands and Palestinians and Israelis seeking peace.

I hope that my students can get to know some of my friends across the globe. I want to thank Rana who has been inviting students from Bethlehem University and Birzeit University and other friends into the discussion. I really love visiting both campuses and the libraries have been helpful for me in my research on ancient and modern women.

I grew up in south Texas and entered the convent to become a Catholic Sister when I was sixteen. Now I think that was young---but I am very happy and have no regrets. It is a joy to be a teacher and encourage people seeking knowledge and trying to develop their gifts.

My mother lives about two hours away in Cuero and she is a wonderful friend and inspiration to me. She has loved teaching all her life---she just retired at 80! My brother, sister-in-law, and two nieces also live there. They have enjoyed meeting George from Beit Sahour when he has come to Texas. Please introduce yourself.

Zenobia, a student wrote,

I am a part time student at Incarnate Word University in San Antonio, Texas. Where I hope that some day I will get a B.A. degree in Education. I am a native of San Antonio. Married and have two beautiful children. My daughter is a junior in college and my son a junior in high school.

I am a woman on a journey toward success. As a "journey woman", I carry my system of values wherever I go. My system of values plays a vital roll in my life. My values are priceless to me because they can never be destroyed. My career goals are significant elements of my everyday life, which depends upon the degree of higher education; I must obtain in order to be successful in life. My career goals are set by my values of hard work, dedication, perseverance, integrity, and most of all determination. As I set my goals of becoming an accomplished "millennium women" in the twentieth century. I know that with the education I have obtained, and the knowledge that I am about to conceive "I can accomplish anything".

I have worked as a dental assistant for nineteen years and a computer lab technicians for four years.

A man in the class, John, wrote,

My name is Standing Eagle and I am very honored to participate in this circle. I am married and have a beautiful and wonderful wife and two beautiful children. I come from a wonderful and supportive family of eight. My beliefs are simple. All things are sacred and come from the Mother/Father Creators. All things are connected, and that which affects one of us is felt by all. To realize that the Creators work through us with every breath is to truly be touched by the hand of God. My prayers are that this be a wonderful experience. Niewen

It is so beautiful to hear the blessings and honor you give to your family. I hope you share your thoughts with them regularly. My prayer for you is that the warm winds of heaven blow softly upon your house and the house of your family. May the Great Spirit bless all who enter there. May your shoes make happy tracks in many snows, and may the rainbow always touch your shoulder.

Rebecca is a Jew who lives in Jerusalem and is a leader in the Gush Shalom peace group. She wrote,

Gush Shalom together with other organizations calls for (a day of the worldwide campaign against the war)

No to the War Against Iraq! Yes to Living in Peace and Justice in the Middle East!
American attack against Iraq is getting closer, and all the peoples of the Middle East, including us - Israelis and Palestinians - are going to pay its price: death, destruction and more wars. And still, the Israeli public is indifferent towards it, and perceives it as a natural disaster which cannot be prevented. It is time to raise our voice against it, for the sake of all of us, for our future in the Middle East.

On Saturday, 15 February, dozens of demonstrations will be held in cities throughout the world, against a futile military attack for the sake of control over oil and other dubious aims. Ta'ayush has invited all the movements, political parties and organizations to join a mass Arab-Jewish demonstration on that same day. Let's express our opposition to the world's sheriff, who seeks to inflame the middle east. Arabs and Jews, Palestinians and Israelis, let's express our demand to live here together, in peace and justice.

On February 15th we will hold a demonstration in Tel Aviv, from 18:00.

A first year student who really blossomed in the class wrote in her first posting,

My name is Maria Flores and I am 18 years old. I was born and continue to live in San Antonio, Texas and I attend the University of the Incarnate Word as a freshmen. As of right now I am planning a major in biology with a minor in psychology. I work on campus in the Business Office . . . I am privileged to work there. Although business/accounting is not my major, I'm just trying to make myself a more well-rounded person and I am learning a lot there. I still currently live at home and I am the youngest of

three children. My sister is 24 years old and my brother is 21. My mother is very proud to be the only one of her siblings and relatives to have had all three of her children attend college, even though my brother and I are still attending. This is an honor for her being as how she did not make it out of junior high and my father did not make it through high school.

A young woman in the Bethlehem area wrote,

Hi everybody. My name is Rana, and I am a Palestinian girl who lives in a small town called Beit-Sahour, next to Bethlehem. I am a last year student of architecture at Birzeit University. Right now , we are living under curfew over here, and so I have much time to spend on the net, as if we didn't, I would be always busy doing all the things that I or my family might need to have before it's curfew again... Nice way of living!!

I am looking forward to enjoy your friendship, and lets all keep praying and working for a better human understanding.

I mentioned the names of all in the discussion so far and continued,

Thanks for entering the conversation. We all need each other. Friends, remember the first night of class when we watched the CD of the Palestinian engagement party with people singing and dancing. Well that was Rana and George's engagement party, so now you can chat with her.

Please remember in the third message of this discussion I suggested looking at web sites to know a little about each others universities. Rana studies at Birzeit University. Tonight in class I did a drama about Ruth and Neomi and how Ruth picked up barley in the fields. Beit Sahour where Rana lives. is in the area of Ruth's field.

A mature U.I.W. student with a grown family, Sharon wrote,

Hi Rana, You can be sure many of us are praying for a better understanding and for peace. We all feel the unrest. It must be very hard to have a curfew and such a lack of freedom to go and come as you would choose. I will pray for you and all the people around you, I will pray for all the people here and for myself too, that our prayers are answered with a better life and understanding and respect for all humankind.

A young enthusiastic U.I.W. student Shelly posted,

hi Rana, it is really and truly wonderful to be given this opportunity to be involved in this! you know, im such a dork but the one thing i was wondering was how different architecture school is in Palestine than it is here, basically that's what i do! besides that I am praying, i know God's plan is bigger than anything i can imagine. sometimes though it's hard to sit back and wait for clarity, even knowing it may never come! That is one thing i do know. But my God is huge and he sure has done some miraculous things in my life, all i have to do is be willing to believe!!

Shelly's inquiry about studying architecture in that country showed me that students were starting to cross boundaries and build friendships.

Fortunately a Jewish woman here in San Antonio who writes dramas invited us to her latest creation at Jumpstart Theatre. I posted,

Friends in the Middle East, we are going to a play called "Lost Recipes" that was written with both Arabic and Jewish women contributing writing. The title means that we have lost some of the recipes for friendship, for wisdom, for life. . . and we need to try to find the lost recipes.

I wish that you were here because we are having supper at my convent home first and people are bringing food, you could bring wonderful food like the women of Beit Sahour bring to us when we stay at the Arab Women's Hostel (near the Lutheran High School in Beit Sahour).

Zenobia responded enthusiastically to the play,

I'm so glad that each and everyone of you enjoyed the play "Lost Recipes". The play shared the recipes of life we all need, male and female. It taught us the values of love, peace, wisdom, friendship, courage and hope. It also gave us the ingredients on how to apply them to our everyday life. But most of all it was an inspiration to women. Peace be with all of you.

For almost a decade I have known Abigail, an Israeli who has been a leader in Women in Black of Jerusalem. These women and men who believe that violence from either side cannot solve problems, stand in vigil every Friday afternoon inviting people to work together for understanding. When Women in Black were nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, Abigail was the delegate sent to Europe to represent them. I posted about her and a message from her.

Abigail is the head of the Coalition of Women for Peace, which includes the Women in Black; Bat Shalom; The Fifth Mother (formerly Four Mothers Movement); Machsom-Watch; NELED; New Profile; Noga; TANDI; and WILPF. She is sorry that she does not have time to participate in answering questions, but she is sending news and invites you to see www.coalitionofwomen4peace.org. She writes of their meeting:

We spent three hours making plans for the coming 6 months: How to get our views into the media (into the TV, radio talk shows, the newspapers), what kind of message to put on posters that would combat racism and support a belief in peace, how to deepen the boycott of settler products, and other actions that we plan for the coming weeks.

And in a grand gesture of defiance to the election returns, we decided to hold a major international event in June -- the anniversary of the occupation -- to take place simultaneously in Israel, Palestine, and internationally, linked to each other by video conferencing. This would allow the voices of Israeli and Palestinian peace activists to finally reach large numbers of people on the other side, most of whom would be surprised to learn of their existence. Imagine simultaneous rallies, visible to each other on giant screens, and Israeli and Palestinian speakers declaring live that "WE REFUSE TO BE ENEMIES"? That would be breathtaking.

Then I posted an image of a weekly "Women in Black" vigil in Jerusalem where we were standing with Israeli and Palestinian women holding signs, "We refuse to be enemies!"

At the vigil pictured, Nurit Peled was speaking on her commitment to co-existence. Nurit Peled, an Israeli, and Izzat Ghazzawi, a Palestinian, both of whom have had a child killed in the violence, work towards a safe viable state of Palestine next to a safe state of Israel. They were awarded the prestigious Sakorov Prize by the European Parliament. Nurit was telling about her 13 year old only daughter who was killed by a Palestinian suicide bomber. When Palestinians came to console her about this, Jewish friends said that she should not talk to them because they were the "other side." Nurit responded that the "other side" is both Israelis and Palestinians who use state-sponsored or terrorist

violence. "Our side" is the people of the world who believe that violence never stops violence.



Rana, the Palestinian student wrote,

Well, here I am once again. I hope you enjoyed your play, and the food as well. Maybe one day we can cook something together, once we find the "lost Recipes" who knows!!

I think most of you watched the CD of the engagement party of Wisam and I... It seems that this couple has decided to get married. And they want to do it quickly, as they can't wait to that moment. So they have been planing during the last year to get married this month, and they set a date, the 22 february, of course you would have been all invited to share them their joy, if they ever managed to keep it as they planned. But what happened is that they no longer can get married on that date, and all their plans were just ruined...I can hear you wondering why??

As you know, right now, and for some years ago, lots of years, we are living under Israeli occupation. One of the tiny things this occupation can do is to force us stay home, and to be threatened to get killed if we get out to our very close balcony..I have an uncle who was shot and killed that way last year. That is called living under curfew. We spend weeks under curfew. WE have been spending a big part of our lives under curfew. People do not go to work, students go once a week to their schools, life is completely stopped and controlled by the Israeli Side. It's like we are living according to their "desires", and they decide when we should or should not act like ordinary human beings. Anyhow, our marriage is just delayed, as everything is delayed with this curfew, and with all the other circumstances the occupation implies. Then with this coming war on Iraq, we do not how things will end up over here, or how it will end up in Iraq, or in the States either.

You know I was telling Sister Martha I always keep thinking that why anyone, like an ordinary American soldier, or an Iraqi should deal with the war and pass through all the bad things it carries.... I mean these soldiers who are now away from their families and beloved, and who were just about to enjoy life.... instead of that, they are involved in a war that has nothing good but damage to human beings...

Elena, a mature U.I.W. student replied,

I am in tears as I read your message about the curfew that keeps you from making your dreams of marriage a reality for now. And even more serious for the fear and the threats of death that are imposed on you and your community on a daily basis.

I just completed a week long course on racism last week and I pray that I will never be the same again. Much of our time was spent learning about systems and the need for systemic change. So many of our systems in the U.S. and in so much of the world are corrupt and indeed dehumanizing. And yet most of us here in the U.S. blindly pay homage to them thus becoming a part of the problem. I came to understand that systems have a common language that so often separate us as the sisters and brothers that we truly are. We are all very much connected in soul and spirit and yet we are so ignorant to each others history, to each others personal stories.

I am so honored and feel privileged to be part of this circle. I want to know your story, Rana and I pray that as I learn your story I can gain courage to become an active participant in making a difference for you and your community. Know that I cry with you through the injustices and I dream with you for the day when life will be all that God desires life to be for all of us.

As the U.S. was moving towards attacking Iraq, the largest peace demonstration in the history of the world was held because the internet connected people of different countries. People were invited to demonstrate on the same day with the same purpose. Demonstrators did not think that starting a war would solve problems in Iraq. Rana wrote,

Hi! Were you amazed when realising the number of people who went in the streets asking the leaders not to attack Iraq!!! I was!! And I liked that a lot. That just made me feel better, thinking that we can make a difference. And thinking that people are still willing to understand better, and to act in the way they feel is right. So I guess that gives us much more hope, that we, you and me, can make this a better part of the world.

A U.I.W. student Ann who is active at her church wrote,

I just got back from a bible study group and we were discussing the night before Jesus was put to death. It is interesting that Jesus prayed so intently that he was sweating blood. It is so comforting to know that God is there for us waiting for us to just throw all our burdens upon him. He provides us with such wonderful things in life to enjoy that sometimes it is easy to get caught up in the frivolous things that we forget what really matters to us.

The textbook, *Women of Bible Lands: A Pilgrimage to Compassion and Wisdom* is the first book to associate stories about or by Jewish, Christian, and Muslim women with over 200 sites in Israel, Palestine, Sinai, Egypt, Tunisia, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Greece, and Turkey. The stories of women from the nineteenth century B.C.E. to the ninth century C.E. are from the Bible, the Qur'an, and many other sources, originally written in Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Syriac, Coptic, or Arabic. As my class was getting messages on-line about violence in Hebron, we read of the biblical matriarchs and patriarchs being buried there. When I received news from the Israeli woman Abigail about Hebron I posted some information on the place.

Hebron is a place sacred to Jews, Christians, and Muslims with the tombs of Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebecca, Jacob, and Leah. Herod the Great (37-4 BCE) build around the tombs, then Christians and Muslims added. Today a mosque is one side and a synagogue is on the other in the tomb area. Abraham means "friend of God," but Abraham's

descendants have not learned to be friends. Abigail, a leader in the Israeli peace movement, describes what has happened near the tombs.

Israelis razed the Palestinian food market in Hebron. This completes the work of the settlers in this city, whose teenagers would regularly overturn Palestinian stalls and laugh, a grotesque Israeli version of Hitler Youth, as soldiers look on. In fact, this was the second blow to this market: In 1994, when the settler Baruch Goldstein gunned down 29 Muslims at prayer in Hebron, the Israeli authorities responded by banning Palestinians from the street where the previous market had stood. Well, explained the army after raiding the market, we did it because 22 Israelis have been killed by Palestinians in the Hebron area in the last 3 months. What they do not mention is that 155 Palestinians were killed by Israelis during the same period (see <http://www.btselem.org>) -- 25 in a week. And it was not the tomato vendors who did the killing, anyway.

One of the Palestinian students expressed gratitude that Abigail was trying to clarify issues and build understanding. The U.I.W. students were also required to attend the Greek classic *Elektra* which was performed by the U.I.W. Theatre Department. I shared my thoughts about the play,

When I read of killing people because the other side killed people because the other side killed people. . . I think of how sad and STUPID vengeance is. The Greek tragedy, ELEKTRA by Sophocles, that our class is seeing this week looks at the cycle of vengeance. The family of Atreus, the son of Pelops was cursed because he invited his brother Thyestes to a feast, where he served the latter's children. Thyestes swore to revenge this. His son Agamemnon wanted the god's favor to win a battle with Troy so he sacrificed his eldest daughter Iphigenia. His wife Klytemnestra, angry about this, sought revenge and had him killed. Then Electra and her brother Orestes took revenge on their mother and killed her. About 2500 years ago, Sophocles wrote,

"A never ending chain
Of Vengeance stains this land,
Each link a new grief wedding anger
To spawn children of Violence crying for Revenge.
Ever with us at home are the offspring of this misery,
Suffering and shame."

As I hear talk of war, I fear that this will "spawn children of Violence crying for revenge." Violence never stops violence. Let us listen deeply. God is calling us to break out of this vicious cycle.

We studied Christian martyrs who would not submit to the idols of empire, to the quests for power and wealth at the expense of human dignity and life. About that time Rebecca, the Israeli peace activist active in Gush Shalom wrote of Rachel Corrie of the U.S. who was trying to protect a Palestinian home from being devastated by an Israeli bull dozer. Was Rachel a martyr or a foolish person who was the victim of an accident? This was Rebecca's message from Jerusalem,

WE forward the sad but courageous statement of the parents of Rachel Corrie [23 year old US student, part of the International Solidarity Movement, killed by an Israeli bulldozer as she was trying to protect Palestinian homes from being demolished], followed by a moving "letter from Palestine" which she sent them on Feb. 7, 2003, two weeks after her arrival in the Gaza.

March 16, 2003

"We are now in a period of grieving and still finding out the details behind the death of Rachel in the Gaza Strip. We have raised all our children to appreciate the beauty of the global community and family and are proud that Rachel was able to live her convictions. Rachel was filled with love and a sense of duty to her fellow man, wherever they lived. And, she gave her life trying to protect those that are unable to protect themselves. Rachel wrote to us from the Gaza Strip and we would like to release to the media her experience in her own words at this time.

Thank you.

Craig and Cindy, Parents of Rachel Corrie

Excerpts from an e-mail from Rachel on February 7, 2003:

I have been in Palestine for two weeks and one hour now, and I still have very few words to describe what I see. It is most difficult for me to think about what's going on here when I sit down to write back to the United States--something about the virtual portal into luxury. I don't know if many of the children here have ever existed without tank-shell holes in their walls and the towers of an occupying army surveying them constantly from the near horizons. I think, although I'm not entirely sure, that even the smallest of these children understand that life is not like this everywhere. An eight-year-old was shot and killed by an Israeli tank two days before I got here, and many of the children murmur his name to me, "Ali"--or point at the posters of him on the walls.

We read the text section on the Islamic Sufi mystic Rabia of Basra. Her courage to stay focused on God's purpose for her life and not to give in to what others wanted of her gave us strength. Her beautiful prayer texts about union with God which can bring complete joy and fulfillment nurtured our spirituality. The city where Rabia lived, Basra, was being attacked by U.S. forces. A U.I.W. student Cindy wrote on March 20, 2003,

What should I say? We are at war. Hatred, oil, terrorism, brutality, egos, media, FEAR, superpower's, bombs, guns, stupidity, blown way out of proportion, the innocence of my generation lost to the proverbial fear that this could possibly be the beginning of the apocalyptic WWIII, Bush and his pride, my friends on the line, why did we interfere in the first place, FREEDOM, dictatorship, sadness, terrible sadness.

I find it nearly impossible not to scream, "Why?". I just want one solid reason why this is happening. When did the straw actually break the camels back? Was it 9-11? Was it when Bush put down an ultimatum and the end result was not to his favor? I am tired of hearing survival of the fittest and population control, has there not been enough bloodshed from the Korean, Vietnam and WWI and WWII to have learned some kind of lesson? I just want to buy the world a coke.

From the Bethlehem area, Rana shared her struggles,

Hello everybody,

Right now, it's about one past midnight, I can't sleep, I am watching Tv, and what I can see would not help me sleep at all. There are pictures of the injured and killed civilians in Iraq. It sometimes can be out of reach to imagine how war can ever be. It means complete destruction, and it could be complete destruction of humanity. I believe that what the Iraqi people are facing right now should call us to pray deeply for them. There are kids killed over there, and there are people burnt to death, and many other painful situations.

My sister, a 13 years old, could not sleep in her bed yesterday. She is too old to sleep next to my parents, but that is what she did yesterday. She felt so scared after the news she heard about a 12 year old girl killed in Bethlehem yesterday. She goes to the

same school as my sister. She was shot, and her family was all injured, when some Israeli soldiers suspected their car.

I just refuse the fact that people's life is that cheap, that someone with some kind of weapon, either here in Palestine or in Iraq or any other part of the world, can decide whether one has the right to go with his life, or should be just finished (killed), as easy as that. Although that sounds completely impossible, at least to someone who has become used to living under such circumstances, but may this fact change to be some kind of history one day. Let us just pray for that. As I always believe We are ALL born to live, and We are all born to enjoy this precious gift God gave us.

For the St. Mary's University President's Peace Commission, I had been invited to exhibit some of my art. I decided to do a participative installation dedicated to Israeli Refusniks (selective Conscientious Objectors who will defend their country, but not go into Palestinian Territories) and to Rachel Corrie and the thousands around the world who seek nonviolent solutions to conflict. Part of the exhibit was pages and pages of internet print out about the Israeli Refusniks and about Rachel. Their news was quickly spread all over the world. Then persons seeing the exhibit were invited to write letters which would be forwarded to the Israelis (some of whose mothers we know) and to Rachel's family. Persons were also invited to write up their comments on large sheets of paper on the wall between parts of the exhibit. Then pictures of all this were posted in a section of Women's Global Connection called "We Refuse to Be Enemies." Anyone, including the students of this class, were invited writing reflections. (Rachel Corrie's parents found this exhibit and the solidarity from around the world comforting. They now devote much of their time to promoting the International Solidarity Movement.)

Aida is a U.S. woman of Palestinian background who is married to a U.S. person of Jewish background. They are both involved with the International Solidarity Movement. Aida mentioned the violent story of the concubine which was in our textbook. She wrote from Gaza:

I am drinking coffee with Chris, who was Rachel Corrie's friend and encouraged her to come to Gaza, Chris suggests that Rachel died because the soldier **didn't see her. Not that he didn't see her physically, for it is only too clear that he did, but that in some larger sense he didn't See her, see her as a human being, see her as a precious life to be valued.**

That Unseeing is the root of my own people's relationship to the Palestinians. I was never taught to hate them, only to discount them. When they taught me the story of Israel's founding in Hebrew School, the Palestinians were brushed aside, either not mentioned or dismissed as somehow not mattering.

I can understand how, to my grandmother raised in abject poverty in a Russian shtetl and living in slightly-less-abject poverty in Duluth, the Palestinians could disappear she never came to this land, never met one of its people. I can comprehend how Jews from the concentration camps and refugees fleeing Nazi Europe could long for a state of their own, and how from Hitler's Germany Palestinians weren't much of a visible presence in the consciousness of terrified people needing a refuge.

But those who were actually there on the land, creating the "facts on the ground" of their time, must have noticed and deliberately chosen to unsee that there was another people standing in the way, doing their best not to be bulldozed into oblivion. As Sharon and Bush and all their supporters and all who stand by silently and justify the current murders don't see. As we are not shown the victims of the bombs of Baghdad.

There's a Bible story haunting me that seems tangled up with this all. It's one they never focused on in Hebrew School: the story of the Levite and the Concubine. It goes like this: A Levite was traveling with his concubine and is given shelter for the night by

an old man in the town of Gideon in the territory of the tribe of Benjamin. During the night a pack of men demand to have sex with him. Instead, the host and the Levite send out the concubine, who is gang-raped and left for dead on the doorstep. When the traveler reaches home, he cuts up her body into twelve pieces and sends one to each tribe, to call them to war.

The war is bloody and involves several rounds of smiting and killing sixteen thousand here, twenty thousand there, in a frenzy almost as senseless as our current assault on Iraq, until Benjamin is defeated and all the other tribes swear not to give their daughters to wife with Benjamin. Whereupon they realize they have committed genocide, wiped out a tribe of their own. Repenting of this ethnic cleansing, they find some innocent town which has not participated in this oath and simply kill all the men and all the women who have known men, and give all the virgins to Benjamin. I am thinking about this as I try to fathom what has been done to the mind of the bulldozer operator to make him capable of deliberately crushing a beautiful young woman under his machine, and trying to comprehend the hatemail and diatribes her death has evoked along with the paeons of praise and the martyr posters.

When teaching spirituality, I emphasize the paradox that persons need to enter into the challenging realities of the world and share responsibility to create a better future. At the same time we dwell in the reign of God. We need to rest in the mystery of God's plan and God's time. Zenobia, one of the U.I.W. students who is married to a minister, often posted messages exploring that paradox,

Please take a moment to relax your mind and humble your heart to focus on Christ. Friends that pray together, stay together. Dear Lord, I thank you for this day. I thank you for my being able to see and to hear this day. I'm blessed because you are a forgiving God and an understanding God. Please keep us safe from all danger and harm. Help me to start this day with a new attitude and plenty of gratitude. Continue to use me to do your will. Continue to bless me that I may be a blessing to others. Keep me strong so that I may help the weak. Keep me uplifted so that I may have words of encouragement. I pray for those that are lost and can't find their way. I pray for those who are misjudged and misunderstood. I pray for those that don't believe. But I thank you that I believe. I believe that God changes people and God changes things. I pray for all my sisters and brothers. For each and every family member in their household. I pray for peace, love and joy in their homes. I pray that every eye that reads this knows there is no problem, circumstance, or situation that God can not solve. I pray that these words be received into the hearts of every eye that sees them.

Near the end of the semester, my mother suddenly had to have surgery and I got a substitute to take care of the students. The class was to have a symbolic meal using Passover books from Temple Beth El. I posted a message to the students the next day,

Many thanks for the prayers and good wishes for my mother. She had open heart surgery TWICE yesterday. May God hold her. In all of this I realize how much I love her. In this special season of Passover and of Easter, I have been reflecting on an ancient text used in the Passover books that we have. The story says that the Hebrew people escaped from the slavery of Egypt and crossed through the Red Sea. Then the Egyptian armies tried to follow them and they drowned in the sea. "Our rabbis taught: When the Egyptian armies were drowning in the sea, the Heavenly Hosts broke out in songs of jubilation. God silenced them and said, 'My creatures are perishing, AND YOU SING PRAISES?'" While some news media in the U.S. seems to be full of jubilation about Iraq, I can't really rejoice. People are suffering, I think that God weeps with all people who suffer.

I keep thinking of the experiences with my mother in the hospital. So many doctors and nurses who are doing everything that they possibly can to save her life and

the lives of others. War seems so absurd---when parents work so hard to raise children, when doctors work so hard to save lives, then wars just destroy them. Just as the world has delegitimized slavery as a civilized practice, war must be delegitimized. God does not rejoice that “we won,” God weeps that humankind is still so backward as to turn to killing. A recent Catholic Church document said, “War is a defeat for humanity.” My mother's life is precious. The life of each person is precious to someone. May this Easter season, a season of new life, help us cherish life.

Over two-hundred messages were posted on the web site during the semester. These were some things that emerged from this class: 1) the power of faith and hope to sustain one in trials, in places of violence, and in times of war, 2) an open question “Would there be more justice and compassion if women’s voices were stronger in religions and governments?” 3) a challenge for each of us to fully develop our gifts and actively contribute to religions and society. We agreed that prophesy, engagement, and discernment are needed. We need knowledge and persistent effort for democracy to work. A story is told of the wise rabbi who was asked who was the strongest. He replied, “The one who can win the love of enemies.” Students began to understand the authentic strength of the friends of God. Students began to echo the saying of the Israeli and Palestinian women peacemakers who stand together in Jerusalem, “We refuse to be enemies.” The students felt “We have cyber-friends all over the world and we refuse to be enemies.”

Despite the imperfect writing, these are some of the spontaneous student messages that indicated they were engaged and learning. Shelly wrote on May 5, 2003,

I am so happy to be a part of this class and this web site!!!!
You know y'all are really mushy and I feel like if everyone in the world was like this, praying for each other, encouraging each other, loving strangers, we would live in one happy world! I know this class has been encouraging for me to be a bridge to the next person and love them and pray for them.

Sharon, who had come back to finish a degree after raising a family shared,

As our class draws to an end I am sad, I hope this dialogue of care continues. I have learned much from several of your words. Thank you. I have smiled, and been saddened to tears. I have felt hope and confusion. This is the stuff of life. Peace be with you.

As was mentioned in the beginning of this essay, Parker Palmer values the subject-centered classroom where neither teacher nor students are dominant, but the quest for knowledge beyond both. Parker writes, “Such a classroom honors one of the most vital needs our students have: to be introduced to a world larger than their own experiences and egos, a world that expands their personal boundaries and enlarges their sense of community. That is why students often describe great teachers as people who ‘bring to life’ things that the students had never heard of, offering them an encounter with otherness that brings the students to life as well.” (Palmer, 1998, 120) God invites us to larger visions and larger communities. God invites us to the realm of justice and compassion where the lion and the lamb lie down together and the child plays by the cobras den.

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