

Chapter Four

Listening Our Way to Peace

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Challenge: What difficulties do you face in engaging people with extreme religious views, and how do you address those difficulties?

“An enemy is someone whose story we have not heard.”

—Gene Knudsen Hoffman¹

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has seemed intractable for decades, and by virtue of my living in Jerusalem for close to thirty years, I have been a part of it. Along with so many other residents whose religious sentiments connect them viscerally to this ancient land, I have internalized the ecstasy of its transcendent spiritual energies and the agony of seeing the hearts and bodies of its inhabitants ripped apart by hatred and violence. There is no comfort in Zion, no peace in Palestine. Perhaps the greatest single challenge I have experienced in Israel has been persuading people to lay their defenses down for just long enough to listen to those around them, those on the other side of the street or those beyond the wall. To ask themselves, “Can they really be human beings?” As a Jew who cares deeply for both peoples, it has pained me very deeply to hear my fellow Israelis say that they couldn’t care less about Palestinian suffering or that they “deserve it anyway.” When one challenges the casual apathy expressed in this kind of remark, angry accusations like “It’s as though you’ve never lived here,” “You are naïve and a self-hating Jew,” or “Whose side are you on?” follow. The barricades are up, and you are shut out and isolated.

In this chapter, I will attempt to illustrate how the skill of deep, empathic listening can be a powerful aid to us as we work to build peace with people who hold strong, perhaps even “extremist,” views about the conflict.

I have always felt that if people from both sides could just *see* each other close up and listen to each other, they would find ways to end the pain and destruction they were causing in each other's lives. It seemed impossible to simply stand by and watch it go on. Leviticus 19:16 enjoins us not to stand idly by while our brother's blood is at stake. As I understand this commandment, "brother" means "everyone," although there are some Jewish political and religious figures in Israel who would disagree with that. Witness the rabbis who gave actual written approval to assassinate Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin for taking steps to end the conflict. Pushing back against xenophobic and exclusivist religious interpretation is another painful challenge to peacebuilders in this region.

Despite the challenges, there are Palestinians and Israelis who are determined to join hands to end the fighting and misery. They began by listening. Being a good listener is not always easy, even when we interact with members of our families and our friends. Listening deeply to someone with whom we are in conflict is even more difficult, but I believe that it is the key to understanding, reconciliation, and peace.

FOUNDATIONS

As a child, I had a favorite fairy tale. It took place in a walled medieval town. The people of the town were very afraid of a dragon who lived outside the walls in a cave, but there was a small girl who would sneak out of the gates to visit the dragon and bring him cakes to eat. He revealed to her that he was miserably lonely and could not understand why the townspeople were so afraid of him. One day, she took him by the paw and brought him into the town center square so that everyone could see that he was harmless and friendly. And, of course, they all lived happily ever after as good neighbors. Obviously, I wanted to be that girl. The aspiration of bringing "enemies" together to see that they could be friends has been the thread that has run through my entire life. I was raised a Catholic but grew disillusioned with the exclusivist tenor of the doctrine at the time. So many of my friends were not Catholic, and I could not accept that they were not going to heaven with the rest of us, as the nuns had warned. As a teenager, I got deeply involved in peace and social justice work, which led me directly to Judaism and the concept of *tikkun olam* (repairing/healing the world).

Since my teen years, I had been involved in one sort of campaign or another. I was disheartened to learn that "peace people" are often not very peaceful. I have seen deeply rooted personal anger channeled into peace work, and that anger always found ways to express itself in ways that only perpetuated the conflict. I have also been guilty of harboring too much self-righteous anger at times.

Early in 2001, I learned about a practice called “Compassionate Listening.” From the first day of training, its message of “humanizing the other” resonated deeply for me. It just made sense: if you take sides in a conflict, you become part of the conflict. If, on the other hand, you don’t take sides and are able to listen deeply to each person involved, it might be possible to bring down others’ defenses and soften their attitudes a bit. Here was another way to approach peacebuilding that I wanted to try. I became a Compassionate Listening facilitator.

The principles of Compassionate Listening were inspired and developed by Quaker activist Gene Knudsen Hoffman (1919–2010) and distilled in the Middle East over two decades by Leah Green, founder of the Compassionate Listening Project (www.compassionatelistening.org). The practice of deep, respectful listening has proven to be a powerful peacebuilding tool there and in other places. In the Middle East, Israelis and Palestinians have actually been able to create peaceful interrelationships—the bonds on which future coexistence and reconciliation can be built—by learning to cultivate compassion for each other. Building on the foundational skill of being able to hear hard things, they are learning to acknowledge the suffering they have caused each other. But how does one go about “cultivating compassion” for a perceived enemy? How can we sit and listen to someone whose words and quite possibly even deeds are reprehensible to us, offensive to all our sensibilities? How can we seek to understand the killer of our child, spouse, or parent and see that individual as a fellow human being? Can we learn to identify some positive motivation with which we might connect on a human level beyond the hurtful words or behavior? If we are able to learn not to interrupt or correct what we think are mistakes or untruths in what we’re hearing, does it mean that we are giving our tacit agreement to it? Why do we need to be “right” so urgently that we often think our lives depend on it? Are we willing to look inward at our own carefully cultivated prejudices and stereotypes and recognize them as such? And more, are we ready to entertain the possibility that we, ourselves, might be part of the problem?

Compassionate Listening gives us one path toward coexistence and the concrete steps that must be taken to build that coexistence. It teaches us to open our hearts wide and listen deeply and respectfully. This means being face-to-face with people who may frighten us or make us very angry. It means making these “enemies,” even the extreme ones, feel safe enough in our presence to let down their guard and to begin to share their suffering with us. When this happens, our innate ability to empathize with another’s suffering makes us aware of our shared humanity, and the melting of hearts toward one another begins. Attitudes and behavior can shift, sometimes quite dramatically.

The poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow once mused, “If we could read the secret history of our enemies we should find in each man’s life sorrow

and suffering enough to disarm all hostility.” This is precisely the aim of Compassionate Listening: disarming hostility and creating a heart-to-heart connection among former “enemies.” Again, it does not necessarily signal agreement, but once the connection is made, the logistics of peaceful coexistence can be worked out together. By that I mean we can find the concrete solutions to each problem as it comes up. Obviously, there are going to be times when not everyone is happy with the new arrangements, but if enough trust can be established, people can allow themselves more flexibility as they journey toward everyday peace.

In 1978, as a newly converted Jew motivated by *tikkun olam*, I took the next logical step of moving to Israel. I eagerly anticipated the chance to help build this new country on the Jewish humanitarian values I had studied. And there was the attraction of being part of the traditionally underdog Jewish people. We would show the world what being “A Light Unto the Nations,” the biblical command to be a shining example of moral and ethical behavior, was all about.

For the first few years, as I studied and became a licensed tour guide, I was totally infatuated with “the Land,” the biblical term Israelis use for the country. I became familiar with every town, village, holy site, wadi, and path. I was thrilled to touch the stones of ancient history and to learn about all that had happened there.

But I hadn’t learned about *all* that had happened. As I paid more attention to things I saw in everyday life, I realized that there were major omissions in the official story of our modern history. The oft-repeated mantra of “a people without a land coming to a land without a people” was simply not true. There had been a people there who became engulfed in conflict and displacement when the modern state of Israel was born in 1948, and they resisted, some- times violently. Following on the heels of the Holocaust in Europe, the Jews who came to Palestine, as it was called before 1948, were too traumatized to care about these “Arabs” and often behaved as though they weren’t there.

As a tour guide, I traveled constantly throughout Israel and the West Bank Palestinian towns and villages. It seemed to me that until the First Intifada of 1988, there was an air of resignation in the Palestinian areas conquered by Israel in the 1967 war.

Despite the cautious coexistence that prevailed in most places, they were always friendly and welcoming when I visited with a tourist group or alone. Even after that, especially during the time of the Oslo Accords in 1993, we celebrated the new, hopeful atmosphere of peace amid anticipation that there would be Palestinian autonomy and independence very soon. The hope died with a gunshot at a Tel Aviv peace rally on November 4, 1995, the evening that Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated. Peace has retreated further and further away since then. Violence and polarization have brought the two peoples into agonizing gridlock. I used to tell my tourists

occasionally that in Israel both life and death are intensely real. There is not very much theoretical about this conflict. On both the Palestinian and Israeli sides, we are completely inundated with our cultural narratives about it, and they are diametrically opposed. This conflict saturates the heart, mind, and spirit of every person living in it. Israelis are perpetually frightened of Arab attack and see themselves as victims of Palestinian hostility as well as of worldwide anti-Semitism. Conversely, the Palestinians feel thoroughly victimized by the occupation of their lands by the Israeli state and by the discrimination they feel at the hands of Israel and Israelis. There are myths, songs, media story lines, and individuals to perpetuate and increase the mutual fear and distrust. Each side sees itself as a victim of existential danger from the other side, and here the cycle has remained and intensified.

RESPONSES

“Compassionate Listening” is the name given to this kind of deep listening by Buddhist monk and teacher Thich Nhat Hanh. The reader can find the concept in many of his books, especially *The Art of Communicating*,² or listen to his August 31, 2014, “Super Soul Sunday” interview with Oprah Winfrey. This practice has as its basic premise that every human being is born with an innate goodness, a natural longing for love and connection with other human beings. We know it as the heart, soul, psyche, “that of God,” our pure essence, or whatever we choose to call it: that place within each of us that longs for peace and connection. Thus, every human being deserves the chance to have his or her feelings and experience acknowledged. It is the “wounds” that each person receives throughout life that close down this heartfelt longing for peaceful connection—be they physical or emotional abuse, racism, sexism, war, poverty, or any sort of marginalization from others. In Israel and Palestine, these wounds are horrifically deep. Almost every family has lost one or more relatives to war, violence, and imprisonment. The pain and anger are, for many, insurmountable, or seemingly so.

What, then, can we as peacebuilders do?

Almost every spiritual tradition over the ages has held that love is the central guiding force for our lives, that we must love one another. Our hearts, therefore, are our best resource for creating peace within ourselves and in our surroundings. The Catholic background I had as a child and the Jewish path to *tikkun olam* that I chose as an adult have both sensitized me to the suffering of others and to the importance of compassion. As Compassionate Listeners, we work hard to discover what keeps our hearts closed—the fears, stereotypes, judgments about others, and so on. As we become more clearly aware of these obstacles to our connection with others, we can put them aside as we listen to them. We strive to become fully present to the person who is

speaking, not giving advice or solutions but unobtrusively accompanying him to his own wisdom deep down inside. This is a tremendously healing gift in itself. In the supercharged context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, just the act of stating, "I am ready to listen to you. I want to learn about your feelings and experiences," is revolutionary and monumental. Many of my fellow Israelis are on hair-trigger alert for any suggestion that Israel's actions might be less than righteous. When such a suggestion is made, even in mild terms, they become hyperdefensive. I have always joked that it is against the law to allow anyone to finish a sentence in Israel. Humor aside, getting Israelis to listen is one of the biggest challenges I have ever faced in peace work. I have lost many friendships over this, which saddens me greatly. The Palestinians, on the other hand, are far more willing to listen, in general, but quickly become frustrated with talk when they see no subsequent action to alleviate their plight. In the course of a Compassionate Listening Project delegation to Israel/Palestine, which Leah Green and I co-led in June 2010, we met Bethlehem University Professor Elias al-Hazin. As he spoke to us, he was vehement about what he viewed as the "uselessness of \$20 million spent on 'dialogue' programs" that take Israelis and Palestinians abroad to discover each other's humanity. "It must happen *here*," he thundered. He decried the "too many conferences [we have] with Israel," because when they are over, Israelis return to their home communities, and there is no organizational follow-up to solve the conflict.

The frustration is understandable, particularly as conditions deteriorate further with every passing day. Our Compassionate Listening delegations and local workshop sessions do not formulate specific plans or actions to solve the problems to which we bear witness. It is painfully clear, however, that there will never be social and political justice for the Palestinians in Israel and in Israel-controlled Palestine without radical and foundational change in Israeli official policy. Here it is important to differentiate between the role of the Compassionate Listener and the role of the advocate. When we are Compassionate Listening, giving our undivided, nonjudgmental attention to a speaker, we hope to offer at least some degree of healing by letting him know that he is important enough to be heard and that we care about how he feels. Advocacy is a very different undertaking. It requires that the advocate take a stand on behalf of someone who is suffering injustice or hardship at the hands of a more dominant power. The advocate confronts the more powerful party that is perceived to be causing the harm and demands that it stop. Advocacy is obviously a good and necessary thing, especially if it can be done in nonviolent ways such as the ones demonstrated by Mahatma Gandhi. In terms of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it is often difficult for the Compassionate Listener to keep him- or herself from straying into the realm of advocacy because the conflict is so self-evidently lopsided. Israel is by far the stronger party and maintains almost complete control of everyday life.

Yet Thich Nhat Hanh reminds us that if we take either side in a conflict, we forfeit our role as peacemaker.

During the time that I lived in Jerusalem, I struggled with the tension between remaining only a “neutral” listener and taking part in active advocacy. In searching for an answer, I decided to follow Gandhi’s lead, reasoning that while he never said a bad word about the British, individually or collectively, he succeeded in completely dismantling the Raj’s rule there. I would engage in advocacy as a separate activity, not as part of Compassionate Listening work. Once, while taking part in a peaceful demonstration against the establishment of another West Bank Jewish settlement, I thanked the policeman who threw his body between our small group of protesters and the hundreds of infuriated settlers who had gathered there for the cornerstone-laying ceremony. Although my thanks came as an unfamiliar shock to him, I could see by his expression that there was an instant of friendship and connection.

But even in that situation, Compassionate Listening was helpful because it trains us to maintain our inner peace, to stay “anchored in the heart,” even when subjected to intense emotion or physical threat—what Arnold Mindell refers to as “sitting in the fire.”³ One of the keystone principles of Compassionate Listening, as mentioned above, is learning to find the positive motivation behind acts or words to which we object. As I looked into the angry faces of those settlers and heard their shouts, it was very helpful to remember that they believed that they were doing the right thing, perhaps because they thought they were building a safer society for their children or for some other reason that I could understand (but not necessarily agree with). It was possible to gaze back at them without anger and without adding to the hatred in the air.

There are many ways to build peace, but I believe that the healing power of empathic listening cannot be overestimated. As part of my 2012 Compassionate Listening delegation of Americans to Israel/Palestine, we spent a night in the Galilee village of Tamra with my Bedouin friends of many years, Amal and Yassin Hamdouni. Tamra’s population, half Palestinian and half Bedouin (now identifying as Palestinian for the most part), are Israeli citizens. In response to my request, Yassin invited some English speakers from the village to meet with us in the evening after dinner. An English teacher at the high school came along with a history teacher and the mayor of Tamra. As I introduced the members of our group to these people and explained that we had come to listen to them, I could see that the realization that this was a different kind of meeting was dawning on them. In typical Bedouin fashion, they had thought that they were just coming to welcome visitors from abroad; it was part of their culture of hospitality. When they learned that these Americans had actually come from as far away as Hawaii just to hear how their lives were, they were flabbergasted. Shyly at first, they began to

speak. We listened fully and respectfully. Soon the floodgates burst open, and for hours they told us of the painful reality of living as Arabs in Israel, even though they are Israeli citizens. They described the difficulty or near impossibility of attaining a permit from the Israeli government to build new homes for their grown children who were ready to marry but could not until a house was ready for a new couple. The mayor took us to a hilltop overlooking the village and showed us how it is hemmed in on four sides by a road, a Jewish National Fund forest, a Jewish kibbutz, and fields. Therefore they cannot expand to accommodate the natural growth of the town's population. There were many other things that they told us about, such as not being able to communicate with or visit poverty-stricken relatives in Gaza. Although I had been a regular part of the Hamdouni household for over twenty years, I was hearing many things for the first time. I realized that Yassin and Amal had never complained about any of these issues because they did not want to make me, as an Israeli Jew, feel uncomfortable. My heart broke.

At the end of the evening, our hosts and speakers expressed how much they felt respected by our coming to hear them. They said that they were so amazed and happy that people from so far away were truly interested in them and their lives. The warmth of their farewell moved everyone deeply. When our group left Tamra the next morning, we boarded our bus laden with more fresh fruit and small presents than we could carry.

Often, however, persuading someone to speak to us is more difficult than it was in Tamra, particularly if that person is on the right side of the political spectrum, which is where more conservative, more ethnocentric feelings reside. In Israel, the prevailing belief is that if you are also listening to "the other side" (i.e., the Palestinians), you are automatically "anti-Israel." The same is true if you admit to being involved with "peace work" of any kind. A good number of Israelis do not ascribe to this and work very hard to promote understanding and peaceful relations among Palestinians and Jews. But in my experience, the majority of Jewish Israelis view any openness to hearing the other side with suspicion. The wounds are deep and defenses strong. For them, it is frightening to open their ears and hearts to hear about Palestinian suffering, to "humanize" the enemy. Likewise, many Palestinians are only now beginning to understand that without understanding Jewish suffering, there will never be peace. Courageous leaders like Sami Awad, Palestinian founder of the Holy Land Trust, teach their people about the Holocaust by visiting Auschwitz and Yad Vashem. He helps his fellow Palestinians develop empathy for Jewish Israelis by showing them what the Jewish people experienced in the not-so-distant past.

A few years ago, I wanted to bring a Jewish settler leader to speak at a Compassionate Listening group I'd brought to Jerusalem. For five days, she would not return my phone calls. When I reached her at last, I persuaded her to come and promised that our group would be very respectful of her, and she

would not be attacked in any way. She felt that we had probably already made up our minds that she, as a settler, was in the wrong, but much to her credit, she came anyway. She spent an hour or two detailing her history and beliefs. She had actually been one of the first to convince the government to allow Jews to live in the West Bank, which she called by the biblical names of “Judea” and “Samaria.” We learned that one of the main reasons that it had been hard to reach her was due to a terrible terror attack on a settlement neighboring hers. Just a few days before our meeting, two Palestinians had entered a West Bank settlement and murdered an entire family there. She had been given the task of going to tell the parents of that couple that their children and grandchildren were dead. The story shook all of Israel. This trauma made it much harder to meet with us, a group that was meeting also with Palestinians, but, as I said before, she did it. I will forever admire her courage for this.

Our group was attentive, and as we had practiced in our Compassionate Listening training, participants asked her many questions, always couched in respectful language. As the meeting broke up, she told me that she was very surprised at the kindness and friendliness of the group. She was so thrilled, she said, that she couldn’t wait to tell her sister, who had advised against her meeting with us. A year later, I asked our settler friend if she would be willing to talk to another group, and this time she invited us to her home in Neveh Tsuf, a settlement near the Palestinian village of Halamish in the West Bank, Samaria. When we arrived, she had even baked us a cake. She did indicate that she had to do something later in the morning and could only talk with us for an hour or so. Three hours later, she was still talking. As the morning wore on, she grew more comfortable with us and filtered her statements about “the Arabs” less. At one point, for example, she exclaimed, “They have no more maternal instinct than a cat!” She did not actually know any personally but told of skirmishes that her neighbors had regularly with the people of Halamish. She feared for her many children, most of them grown and studying in religious schools throughout the West Bank. Here was one of the points at which we could connect, for example: a mother’s concern for her children’s safety. Although it was hard for many of us to hear some of the things she said, we were able to speak to that concern. Like most Jewish settlers, our hostess was convinced that all Arabs wanted to kill the Jews and throw them out of the Land. When she was finished speaking, I asked her if she had ever heard of Sami Awad, and she had not. I told her about his trips to Auschwitz and his teaching fellow Palestinians about nonviolence and the need to understand their Jewish neighbors. She leaned back in her chair and was quiet for a moment. Then she said, “Well, maybe there *is* some hope.”

Sometimes when there is a conflict, the mediating parties may draw the line at speaking with certain persons or groups involved in the conflict. These “blacklisted” people are just too far outside the parameters of dialogue, and it

is felt that meeting them would undermine the credibility of the mediating parties. In our Compassionate Listening work in Israel/Palestine, we have no blacklist. We believe that every person has the right to be heard. This principle applied, for instance, to our meeting in 2010 with a member of Hamas. "Hamas" is an acronym for the Arabic name for the Islamic Resistance Movement. It is a Palestinian Sunni offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood and is dedicated to abolishing Israel as a Jewish political state.

His name was Farhan, and he was the former mayor of Beit Ummar, a village not far from Jerusalem. He had just been released from Israeli prison the day before our meeting. Israeli authorities had jailed him the day after he had been elected mayor of Beit Ummar a year previously. They had told him that if he would resign, they would release him, but he refused since he had been elected by the people of his town. We met in the home of his mother.

For most Israelis, Hamas is the ultimate demon. The United States follows the same line. But Compassionate Listening tells us that if we don't listen to our enemies, we have no hope of understanding what they want and how to find solutions to our conflict. So our delegation entered the home of a Hamas leader.

Forty-six-year-old Farhan was perhaps the least frightening person I had ever seen. A gentle man who sat with his five-year-old son, Salahadin, in his lap throughout our meeting, Farhan said, "I teach my three daughters and two sons to love, not to hate. To love is to be brave; it is stronger than hate. We may hate behaviors but not the person." He tells his children, "There are good Jews, not like the soldiers." We asked him to tell Salahadin how sorry we are for the long separation from his father. Farhan did this. He explained the Hamas understanding of Zionism: that Jews, Christians, and Muslims had lived there together in peace under the Ottomans, but when European Jews formed the Zionist movement to come there and rule over everyone, without giving equal rights to the people already there, the people who follow Hamas could not accept it. That is the context in which "eliminating Israel" should be understood, Farhan said. It is not eliminating the Jews; it means eliminating the political entity, the Zionist state, which does not give equal rights to the Muslims and Christians who have lived here for centuries. He added, "Making peace is harder than making war. Mohammed taught that it would be better to take the Qa'abah [the sacred black stone block in Mecca] apart stone by stone than to kill one human being." Obviously, there are other voices in Hamas, ones more prone to violence. Stepping back and seeing the bigger picture, we can understand that the violence has erupted out of frustration.

As we left Farhan's home, I told him that I was an Israeli who was very glad to meet him and hear what he had to say. As a religious Muslim, Farhan could not offer me his hand (just as religious Jewish men will not have physical contact with any unrelated woman), but he said, "Then, please let us

work together.” As our group could readily see, keeping people from meeting one another face-to-face and talking together is the best way of maintaining the conflict. When we cannot be together, we can much more easily succumb to the “us-against-them” narrative, and the conflict grows and endures.

While the more violent elements in Hamas make terrifying declarations about destroying Israel and fire rockets at Israeli settlements near the Gaza Strip, there are also renegade groups in Gaza who fire the rockets with or without Hamas’s permission. The result for Israelis is the same: ongoing trauma.

For those who follow events in this conflict, the name Sderot will be familiar since it is often cited in news reports as the target of rocket fire originating in Gaza. Sderot is a city of approximately twenty-five thousand people located in the northern Negev just outside the Strip. The campus of Sapir College, an enormous institution that provides kindergarten through college education and comprehensive social services to the local population, is located there.

Professor Julia Chaitin teaches psychology at Sapir College, specializing in the psychological effects of ongoing trauma. She, along with Dr. Tsvi Fierman, director of Sha’ar haNegev Psychological Services, and two other psychologists/educators, Shimona and Ortal, described life in their area to our group. We met in one of the bomb shelters, because over thirty rockets had already landed by the time we arrived. Every day, between twenty and seventy-five rockets are fired at the Sderot area. The red-alert system sounds with each one, and the people of Sderot have fifteen seconds to reach a shelter before it lands. Shimona described the day before when she had her five-year-old child by the hand but her toddler had wandered to the other side of the playground area when the alarm sounded. In horror, she realized that she did not have time to retrieve the toddler and get both of her children into the shelter within fifteen seconds. For a split second, she thought that she would have to choose one of her children to save. The rocket had already slammed into the ground nearby when she got her children into the shelter.

Professor Chaitin and Dr. Fierman discussed the near impossibility of coping with ongoing trauma. In traditional circles, trauma is usually one terrible event that the victim experiences, and then he or she goes on living and finds ways to deal with the trauma through therapy of some kind. Here, the traumatic events happen constantly. Dr. Fierman asked, “How can we treat a child for PTSD when another bomb falls in the middle of our conversation and we have to run to the shelter?” He estimated that at least 75 percent of the local population suffers from posttraumatic syndrome disorder, a condition first identified by the Israel Defense Forces among its soldiers in the 1980s. Many of the psychologists themselves are traumatized, he continued, and have great difficulty in restraining themselves from leaving their classrooms to find their own children on the campus during red alerts.

In Gaza, the population of 1.8 million suffers profound and relentless trauma. Since January 2009, there have been three concerted Israeli incursions into Gaza. Deafening nightly overflights and their targeted attacks continue. Besides the nearly four thousand Palestinians killed (the vast majority of whom were civilians), many thousands more have been wounded, and over a quarter of the population has been made homeless.

Here is an excerpt from the “Informed Comment,” published by the International Middle East Media Center on July 25, 2015:

The high percentage of Palestinian families in Gaza that is suffering from mental and psychological issues is not a new topic, nor a surprising one. According to Save the Children, “Homelessness and repeated exposure to violence, coupled with soaring unemployment for parents and limited mental health support, have prevented children from recovering from the mental trauma of war.” Save the Children CEO Justin Forsyth said in a statement, “Many children in Gaza have now lived through three wars in the past seven years, the last one notable for its brutality. They are emotionally and, in some cases, physically shattered.” According to the organization’s report, “An average of 75% of children surveyed experience unusual bedwetting regularly. In one area, al-Shoka, nearly half the children interviewed wet the bed every night. Up to 89% of parents reported that their children suffer consistent feelings of fear, while more than 70% of children said they worried about another war. On average seven out of 10 children interviewed suffer regular nightmares.”

One can only wonder how many future generations have been damaged by the devastation. How long will it take to recover?

Amid this chaos, there are still Israelis and Palestinians who maintain contact and strive for peace. Professor Chaitin and an Israeli friend of hers named Roni belong to an organization called Other Voices. Both live in Israeli communities abutting or near the wall surrounding the Gaza Strip. Until recently, members of this group, Israelis and Gazans, would gather in a living room around a speaker phone to talk with each other. They inquired about each member of the group on the other side and related their sorrow and distress about the ongoing misery. Each side has succeeded in humanizing the other.

One truly heartrending story is that of Dr. Izzeldin Abuelaish, a Harvard-educated Palestinian doctor born in Gaza who chaired the department of obstetrics and gynecology at the Soroka Medical Center in Beersheba, Israel. His life had been a model of what peaceful coexistence could look like. Then, on January 16, 2009, Israeli tank shells killed his three daughters and a niece. On the road outside Tel HaShomer Hospital in Israel, priests, imams, rabbis, and many of us laypeople held prayer vigils for the recovery of another member of his family. Dr. Abuelaish blessed us as he passed. Rather than succumb to hatred and despair, the “Gaza doctor” wrote a book titled *I*

Shall Not Hate,⁴ in which he insists that all of the people of the region must listen to each other to bring about peace

CONCLUSION

Inspired by examples such as these, we witness the transformative power of openhearted listening. By anchoring ourselves in our hearts and by allowing ourselves to be guided by healing intention, we create the possibility of deep, human connection. We build a true and lasting peace.

As we work toward this goal of transforming conflict into connection, especially with people who hold extremist views, we indeed face challenges that can be daunting as we “sit in the fire” of intense emotions. I have found, however, that the transformative shift in attitude and behavior can be stunning in its rapidity and depth. It is as though the longing for peace has lain just below the surface, waiting only for recognition and release. Often the change of heart takes much longer, but it is knowing that it may happen at any time that keeps us going.

Compassionate Listening has transformed me as well. Coming from a family with some very strongly opinionated members, I had learned two ways of handling disagreement: either shout them or flee the field. Learning to listen with genuine respect and care to people whose words and/or actions seemed outrageous to me has been both demanding and eye-opening. I discovered that by forgoing the temptation to prove how right I am, several things happened: (1) I did not die; (2) the one expressing these intense feelings or opinions visibly calmed down when he realized I was really listening without interruption or judgment; and (3), perhaps most meaningfully, the speaker would often muse that perhaps he had expressed himself in more extreme terms than he really felt, admitting that he could be at least partially wrong. One of the greatest challenges for each of us is to recognize our own fallibility and not feel threatened by it. As we engage in our peace-building work, one of the most powerfully disarming things we can do is to model this approach.

Another helpful tool is to ask open-ended questions of the speaker, inviting him to elaborate on his experience and feelings. These are questions that accompany the speaker into deeper clarity and understanding for both him and for us as listeners. Perhaps the most powerful tool that Compassionate Listening gives us, however, is to look for the positive motivation beneath what we see as objectionable behavior and to speak to that. Learning to discern in this way is not always easy, especially at first. But finding these things about which we can agree—for example, the settler mother’s fear for her children—gives us the bridge we can cross to connect with a fellow human being.

It seems so clear to me that the practice of building heart-to-heart, human connections is precisely what so many spiritual paths have at their core: the belief that we are truly one.

At the end of this chapter, I offer a short list of books that have inspired me to see the world and our humanity in this way. Perhaps you, the reader, will feel buoyed by their wisdom as you work to build peace in various parts of the world. As we know, it is often difficult.

As first-century Rabbi Tar'fon put it in the Babylonian Talmud (the ancient scholarly commentary on the Hebrew scriptures), "It is not incumbent upon you to finish the task, but neither are you free to absolve yourself from it."⁵

NOTES

1. Gene Knudsen Hoffman, *Compassionate Listening and Other Writings*, ed. Anthony Manousos (Torrance, CA: Friends Bulletin, 2003).
2. Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Art of Communicating* (New York: HarperOne, 2013).
3. Arnold Mindell, *Sitting in the Fire: Large Group Transformation Using Conflict and Diversity* (Florence, OR: Lao Tse Press, 1995).
4. Izzeldin Abuelaish, *I Shall Not Hate: A Gaza Doctor's Journey on the Road to Peace and Human Dignity* (Toronto: Random House, 2010).
5. Babylonian Talmud, Pirkei Avot (Ethics of the Fathers) 2:16, compiled by Rabbi Yosef Marcus (Brooklyn: Kehot Publication Society), http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/2011/jewish/Chapter-Two.htm, accessed June 2, 2017.

RECOMMENDED READING

- Armstrong, Karen. *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*. New York: Alfred Knopf, 2011.
- Barasch, Marc Ian. *Field Notes on the Compassionate Life: A Search for the Soul of Kindness*. Emmaus, PA: Rodale, 2005.
- Brady, Mark, ed. *The Wisdom of Listening*. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2003.
- Cohen, Andrea, Leah Green, and Susan Partnow. *Practicing the Art of Compassionate Listening*. Indianola, WA: Compassionate Listening Project, 2011.
- Fellman, Gordon. *Rambo and the Dalai Lama: The Compulsion to Win and Its Threat to Human Survival*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998.
- Gobodo-Madikizela, Pumla. *A Human Being Died That Night: A South African Woman Confronts the Legacy of Apartheid*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003.
- Hwoschinsky, Carol. *Listening with the Heart: A Guide for Compassionate Listening*. Indianola, WA: Compassionate Listening Project, 2001.
- Keith, Kent M. *Anyway: The Paradoxical Commandments*. New York: Berkley Books, 2001.
- Macy, Joanna, and Molly Young Brown. *Coming Back to Life: Practices to Reconnect Our Lives, Our World*. Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, 1998.