

To bring people together

Rutie Atsmon is director of Windows for Communication. She spoke to *healthmatters* about the fear and anger which fuels conflict – and the vital work of giving ‘the other’ a human face

Over the past 10 years, Windows for Communication has brought together children and adults from both sides of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. What does peace mean to you?

Peace has a different meaning for different people. For many Palestinians it means an end to the occupation, while for many Israelis it means an agreement that will put an end to suicide bombings and other forms of violence against them. For other Palestinians, however, it can be no less than the birth of a viable, independent state, while for some Israelis it can be no less than full recognition of the Jewish state by the Arab world. For others, peace means having the enemy on the other side of a huge wall, and to some it means open borders or even one state in which we all live together.

Leaving aside minorities in both societies that refuse to accept any recognition of the other, I believe that today most people on both sides are willing, by choice or not, to accept the existence of the other. Yet it is hard to reach an agreement about *how* to exist, one next to the other.

And what are these ‘windows’?

We try to open windows in the walls between us: walls of fear, ignorance about each other, hatred, anger. These walls are very thick – the result of 100 years of conflict. But peace will not be possible without breaking these walls and replacing them with trust and understanding.

Talking about walls, how does the separation wall that is being built contribute to peace?

It does not, because it is built mostly on land confiscated from Palestinian farmers and it separates them from their fields, rather than separating Palestinians and Israelis. It brings more anger, frustration and hatred and, as a result of these feelings, more violence. But the wall is an answer to one of the main problems of the Israelis and that is a very deep fear, not only of suicide bombings, which is very real by itself, but also fear for the future of the Jewish nation. Our history shows us that we are not safe anywhere in the world and that in time of danger we cannot count on anyone to help us. To many Israelis, the wall gives a sense of safety.

But this fear is not rational, given that Israel is an advanced independent state with a powerful and sophisticated army.

Call it paranoia or post-traumatic syndrome, the feelings of fear are a very real part of who we are as a nation. And such fears lead you to build huge walls around you as a protection from those whom you believe wish to destroy you. Many Israelis still believe that the final goal of the Palestinians is to ‘throw us to the sea’. The wall reflects also the lack of hope that peace and safety are possible in the near future. But while it gives Israelis an illusion of safety, the enormous damage caused by the wall kills the hope that Palestinians may have had for peace.

Hopeless people sounds more like a recipe for war than for peace

Definitely. This situation is especially hard for children. They feel there is no normal future for them, that adults cannot protect them and that they have nothing to lose. In letters and drawings by children one can see how many of them try to cope with this situation by dreaming of becoming soldiers who go out to kill Arabs if they are Israelis, or if they are Palestinians they dream of becoming martyrs who explode themselves on an Israeli tank or among civilians.

Other children cannot picture their lives without the horrors of occupation on one side or exploding buses on the other. Our main goal in Windows is to restore hope in the hearts of children and young people. We want to show them that there is someone to talk to on the other side and to show the human face of the ‘other’, which looks faceless and intimidating from a distance.

How do you do that? Are people willing to listen?

Well, many are too ‘locked’ to be able to listen to new or other voices. This is one of the reasons we work with young people aged 12 to 16 – they have more open minds, less set ideas about the ‘other’.

First we give them an opportunity, in the safety of their own national group, to express feelings and to become aware of their feelings and where they come from – maybe personal experience, the media, school and so on. We teach critical consumption of the media and



Dreaming Peace

The Dreaming Peace exhibition was produced by Windows for Communication with the Democratic School in Kfar Saba and the Open School in Jaffa (Israel) and several schools in the Tul Karem region (Palestine).

The act of artistic expression helped the participants in the exhibition to give vent to their difficult feelings, and Windows encourages the Israeli and Palestinian schools to create and preserve contact between themselves by an exchange of drawings and letters between the children.

The exhibition is available for loan free of charge although donations are welcome.

offer another source of information: children their own age, from the other side of the conflict. They begin to exchange letters in which they tell each other what is most important for them to share, and ask the questions it is most important for them to ask each other.

“Our main goal is to restore hope in the hearts of children and young people”

The facilitators, still working in national groups, help them to cope with the new information revealed by the letters. When they are more aware of the situation on the other side we bring them together, to go through a process of getting to know each other and coping together with the most difficult issues of living in a region in conflict. Going through this process they create an alternative media (magazines, exhibitions, videos) that can share the dialogue they go through.

What are the main issues that trouble participants?

The Palestinians from the occupied territories are eager to talk about the daily suffering under occupation, especially the checkpoints and the wall, as well as the right of refugees to return to their homes. The Jews, who all live inside the Green Line, are concerned with the suicide bombings but also want to hear from the Palestinians that they recognise the Jewish state.

No less complicated is the situation of the Palestinian citizens of Israel. The young people bring to the dialogue many questions of identity: are we Palestinians or Israelis? They identify with the suffering under occupation and talk about not having full equality in Israeli society.

What are the main obstacles you face in your work?

We face many obstacles, from the difficulty of getting permits from the Israeli army for Palestinians to enter Israel, or for Israelis to enter the

occupied territories, to the lack of a common language; from cultural differences, to the gap in the information and perception each side has about their shared history. But all these can be overcome when people finally meet.

The hardest thing is to bring people together. To do that you first have to deal with two main issues: for many Palestinians talking to Israelis as long as the occupation persists is considered negative ‘normalisation’, a kind of collaboration with the enemy; for many Israelis it is hard to cope with the sense of guilt.

On one hand, their fear justifies any military action against the Palestinians, but on the other hand there is awareness that sometimes, or too often, things happen that should not happen. To a large part of the Israeli public it is hard to cope with this information and with the guilt that often comes with it. The result is that too many people shut themselves away from news about the situation in the occupied territories. It is easier to believe there is a reason for everything or that nothing can be done about it anyway, so one might as well not know the details.

At Windows we try to show that our work is part of the struggle for a just peace in our region. We aim to empower young people to face reality and each other with courage, and to find ways to cope together, and together work towards creating change.

Windows for Communication was established in 1991. Members are Jews and Palestinians from both sides of the Green Line (in Israel and the occupied territories). It runs programmes to build communication and trust through educational and cultural programmes, media and art, especially between Jewish and Arab children. Since 1995 the programme has included a regular children’s magazine, written and edited by children on both sides of the divide: www.win-peace.org.

Windows for Peace UK has been set up to support Windows for Communication and to promote dialogue between Palestinians, Arabs, Jews and Muslims in the UK.

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