

Subject: Inspirational Stories – Peace Is Around the Corner

Peace Is Around the Corner by Marion Pargamin

I would like to tell you about a quite extraordinary event that happened to me during the walk organized by Tovana, the group of Vipasana meditation in Israel.

What happened was a very personal experience but I feel it is important to share it with other people.

The Walk took place on the first week of April. It intended to give an opportunity for Palestinians and Israelis to walk together, to develop dialogue and self introspection, inspired by the ancient traditions that guided people like Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King.

What I experienced on the last day was very much in the spirit of peace and coexistence, of calm and serenity created by the walk in the midst of the atmosphere of insanity and violence around us.

During 8 days, participants walked together from Tel Aviv-Yaffo to Jerusalem, passing by Jewish and Arab towns and settlements, in silence and awareness, declaring a commitment to deep listening and nonviolence.

I joined the Walk with a group of Palestinians and Israelis who practice meditation and mindfulness together according to the tradition of Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Zen Buddhist monk and famous peace worker.

I participated in several days of the Walk. Monday 8th of April, the last day of the Walk, was the eve of the Holocaust day, a day of deep emotion for the Jewish community.

It went from Ein Kerem, through Jerusalem to the foot of the old city walls.

I planned to join the group from the morning, but after a sleepless night I decided to join later.

In the early afternoon I parked my car at the final meeting place of the Walk. I walked up to the walls of the old city, to meet them on their way.

When I got to Jaffa gate, I found myself in front of a very agitated elderly Arab man exchanging insults with an elderly religious Jew who was standing at a bus station a few meters lower down.

Some policemen from a Border Police patrol were trying to calm them down, so that it wouldn't turn into a fight, as they were extremely angry.

I stood beside the Arab. I spoke to him calmly and asked him to sit down without reacting to the other's provocation.

I was quite impressed by the restraint shown by the policemen. They didn't defend one side or the other and respected both sides.

The bus arrived, the Jewish man boarded the bus and the situation seemed to have settled down.

Then, a Jewish woman who was there in the queue from the beginning of the argument, and who did not get into the bus, took it upon herself to start insulting the Arab who reacted immediately.

The police had gone and I was left alone to try to calm the situation. I gave my attention to the Arab who would have stayed quiet if he was not continually provoked by the woman. I tried from a distance to reason with her without success.

She stopped a passing police car and said something to the policeman who walked up to the Arab. I explained to him what was going on and he went back to the woman.

I was so happy that all the policemen in this situation acted so calmly to help to restore peace.

Then, a Palestinian woman on her way to Jaffa gate burst onto the scene; she jumped to the conclusion that the old Arab was under attack and rushed in a frenzy to rescue him.

She yelled some insults at the Jewish woman who was beginning to calm down, and the situation heated up again.

All my attention was now focused on her. I felt she was like a bomb ready to explode.

I tried to explain to her what was going on, but she became furious with me, screaming out her hatred, her despair and her pain.

This was Palestine accusing Israel. At this moment I represented Israel for her.

The whole situation was greater than the two of us; it took on proportions beyond our present meeting.

She shouted out her sorrow about what was going on now in the territories, the military incursions into Palestinian towns. She talked in particular about Jenin where some terrible fighting was now taking place. She has family and friends there; she said that our soldiers are war criminals.

She is convinced that we want to kill them all. Why do we hate them so much? They are not responsible for the Holocaust, why should they be paying the price?

She told me about the refugees and their constant suffering for which we are responsible!

Pointing at the Jewish woman, she assures me that this Sephardi woman was treated with honor, as a human being, in an Arab country from where she comes, and look at how she behaves with Palestinians now!

It goes on and on; she shouts and spews her hatred for Israel at me.

I don't try to argue with her at all. I don't show any reaction to all these accusations.

I feel a huge compassion and an intense need to listen to her, only listen to her.

My patience is nourished by understanding that behind this overwhelming hatred is a deep suffering and pain aggravated by the present situation of war.

It must express itself in some way so that healing can take place.

I am ready to listen to what appears to me as the worst accusations, distortions or calumnies, without reacting.

I am aware that what reinforces my strength at this moment is that I have absolutely no doubt that the suffering and pain of the Israeli people is not less real and legitimate. I don't let myself get tempted or trapped into guilt or anger. I am sorry for the tragedy on both sides. My compassion for her is not on the account of the compassion and sense of loyalty I have for my own people, for myself.

For me this is not an issue of who is right and who is wrong.

I feel very very calm and peaceful deep inside. I know that it is the only way to calm her fury.

I let her express herself for a long time without interrupting her.

As she continues to shout at me, I tell her that she has no need to speak so loudly because I am listening to her with all my attention. At the same time I find myself caressing her arm. She lets me do it and progressively lowers her voice, while continuing to let her despair overflow.

She says to me: Do you understand why some of us come and commit suicide among you? You kill us anyway, so why not kill you at the same time? She even mentions the possibility of coming and blowing herself up out of despair.

I tell her softly that I don't want her to die. Nobody should come to this decision. We all suffer on both sides.

She goes on and on claiming that the Zionists only want to get rid of the Palestinians.

I tell her: You see I am a Zionist and I don't want to get rid of you. I wish we could live together as good neighbors. She listens to me!

She tells me about the demonstration that took place the week before near Ramallah. She complains about the Jewish organizations who took part in it. Then she asks me to donate some money to buy phone cards for Palestinians who need them. I give her some money.

At this stage the conversation is quite normal between us. She doesn't shout any more, she is even able to listen to me.

She is almost calm when I notice the people of the Walk approaching us slowly, at the top of the street.

They are in a line, a hundred of them, one after the other walking in silence, slowly, quietly, aware of each step, creating an atmosphere of peace and safety around them. They are very present. They radiate calm and warmth.

I point them out to her and explain that this is the reason I came here, to join a walk of peace in which Palestinians and Israeli are together. I tell her about the Walk, its message of coexistence and peace; peace at every step, here and now.

I suggest that she come into the line with me. She hesitates and rejects my offer.

At this moment they reach us. Several people I know shake my hand warmly as they go by.

A young woman very active in a group of rapprochement between the two peoples, approaches her and gives her a kiss. It appears that they know each other.

I notice that she is very moved by the Walk and the atmosphere it radiates. She seems to me calmer and calmer. Nothing like the furious woman I met only several minutes before.

The end of the line passes by us and I want to join it. Again I invite her and again she declines. I tell her that I understand and respect her decision.

Before I go I tell her: I am sure that someday we will succeed in building peace between us. She smiles and replies: Me too.

Then to my total surprise, she comes close to me and kisses me on my cheeks!

She walks alongside the line for a while. She tells me that she likes this Walk, that it makes her feel good, gives her relief and that her mood is much better now.

I am very very moved. I feel overwhelmed by this encounter, especially by its unexpected ending.

Peace was there around the corner, I did not miss it!!

I was aware that an intense moment of real reconciliation had taken place.

Everything contributed to it. Incredible timing that brought me to this place at this time; that brought her, in her turn, with enough time to first pour out her anger, to receive needed listening and compassion, time to calm down, so that she could be receptive to the subtle quiet energy of the Walk.

The Walk, emanating intense healing, bringing the tangible presence of peace and goodwill of a whole organized group, appeared just in time to complete the scene, adding a wider perspective to an individual encounter.

The thick walls of her hatred were shattered allowing her to express what was deep in her heart.

Kissing me was a miracle!

Within a short period of time, laden with emotions, her energy of hatred and death underwent an incredible transformation.

I don't know if, or how quickly, she returned to her initial state or how long she remained calm.

I know that this profound transformation was very real and intense; no matter what followed, it will leave a trace and a memory that cannot disappear.

A seed of peace was sown in her heart. We must plant many more, and water them thoroughly.

I never understood so fully the deep meaning of the words pronounced by Thich Nhat Hanh in Shanghai on 19th October, after the 11 September tragedy:

“Terror is in the human heart. We must remove this from the heart. Destroying the human heart, both physically and psychologically, is what we should avoid. The root of terrorism is misunderstanding, hatred and violence. This root cannot be located by the military.

“Bombs and missiles cannot reach it, let alone destroy it. Only with the practice of calming and looking deeply can our insight reveal and identify this root. Only with the practice of deep listening and compassion can it be transformed and removed. Darkness cannot be dissipated with more darkness. More darkness will only make darkness thicker. Only light can dissipate darkness. Those of us who have the light should display the light and offer it so that the world will not sink into total darkness.”

This story is not mine alone. I know I have the duty to tell it to as many people as possible, so that planting seeds of peace may go on and on.