

*Becky Thompson Ph.D.*

Come as you are, all of you.



## FREEDOM GAZA MARCH BLOG—DIANE HARRIFORD AND BECKY THOMPSON



### A Report Back from Cairo

#### DECEMBER 26TH

We're sitting at Arabesque, a restaurant in the heart of Cairo, two blocks from the American University of Cairo to the left, the Egyptian Museum to the right. Mosaic tiles on the floor; the sweet smell of cardamom; red Christmas balls hung on a white branch; eclectic art work hanging with partially clad belly dancers and abstract renditions of the pyramids; the menu and waiter parlance both in Arabic. The Arabesque is a fancy restaurant in comparison to the Sun Hotel, a hostel where we arrive this morning on the 9th floor of a seemingly ancient building whose elevator operates from 3:00-8:00, otherwise nine flights of marble stairs taken by foot, each floor with faded signs of different businesses—travel agencies, import stores. The sixth floor entry hall floor is graced with a green indoor/outdoor carpet with a man kneeling, praying. The seventh floor houses a series of dormitory rooms with many men perched in the hallways smoking. Coke machines keep rumbling time on each floor.

We hadn't expected to be staying at a hostel, with unlocked dormitory doors, young men. Other women and men are arriving, each with their own stories—upstate New York who looks like a lion, thick red hair, round full body, here to planning to stay in Gaza for five months, listening, working with people who a seasoned therapist, Sheila comes with a huge suitcase packed full of figurines—buildings, rocks, shells, trees, bridges—and a sand tray to use a Jungian technique working with the unconscious. Spreading the tray with clean sand, the children and elders, “play” with the figurines, their imaginations speaking truths that are not able to retrieve right now. The lioness-therapist tells a story about last year when over a hundred mental healthcare workers tried to travel to Gaza, some having planned for years, learned Arabic, only to be turned away, not allowed in. It is dawning on Diane and me that we are part of a long stream of people, maybe more like a river, trying to connect with the Palestinians as the Israeli government continues to erect all kinds of barriers. Feels like Cuba again, our trip several years ago, needing to go through the Bahamas, meeting so many people in Cuba who can't get off the island, so many who can't get on.

Here we are now, people arriving through the day, planning a meeting for the morning, 8:30 am, as the central planning committee continues to try to update us, create a plan, to find a way to be able to cross the border, as the Egyptian government announced there would be no passage for us into Palestine, that the bus permits have been revoked, that we should go home.

We don't think the hostel has been informed, exactly, why we are here, as the Egyptian government has said that no more than five of us can meet together at the same time, that such a meeting would constitute a political meeting. On the other hand, we are guessing that at least nonverbally, the hotel management knows what is going on, that the organizing committee worked carefully to decide which hostels to approach. It may be a “don't ask, don't tell” situation, this time in our favor.

As for the world outside the hostel, the guidebook tells us that no matter what, don't run across the busy city streets, that the car drivers don't know how to gauge the pace of running. This is the most dangerous passage of pedestrians we have ever witnessed. Makes crossing the streets in Mexico City, New York City and Rio look peaceful. In awe, we study the Cairo locals—young women in high boots, old women in burkas, teenagers with tight Armani shirts making their way across multiple lanes of rapidly approaching traffic, weaving around the rushing cars, almost looks like a dance, dancing around the rivers of cars, honking.

Diane remembers from her travels to Morocco and our trip to Tunisia, that in public space that is largely

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male, a number of genders emerge among the men. They don't all look male in the same way—some more effeminate than others: men in carefully pressed white linen suits and polished brown leather shoes; boyish-looking lean men with black designer jeans jackets; middle age soft, slightly pudgy men with poorly fitted pants and plaid shirts; men in kaftans looking quite serious, intense; and older men who look like women, softer, walking more slowly. There is not as much hand-holding among the men as we saw in Tunisia; Cairo is more westernized, more industrialized. But still some. We smile at each other, enjoy the intimacy of such holding.

In such male spaces, we wonder what the young men at the hostel might think of all these women coming together, many middle aged, without men to accompany them? We wonder if there will be a space for us to talk about how we are studying each other? There is such a range of skin colors, facial features, ways of dressing among the men and women on the streets of Cairo. There is every kind of dress among the women. The stunning array of headscarves among the women affirm religious sensibilities about modesty and privacy as well as provide aesthetically rich looks—the flashes of color, the silky fabrics, and jewels framing women's faces. Many women's eyes look so beautiful, partly because of their creative and elaborate use of mascara and eye shadow, but also because their eyes come out even more when their faces are framed by fabric.

Diane said that custom of wearing head scarves speaks to the sexualization of women's hair—the hair must be covered in public because it is sexual, sensual, powerful. It is interesting to think about which women's body parts are sexualized and not. In sub-Saharan Africa, breasts were not historically considered “sexual.” They don't need to be covered as they must be in the United States (as Janet Jackson was so reprimanded about). What is to say that breasts are more sexual, more tempting, more needing to be protected from the male gaze, than women's hair.

Our food comes, absolutely delicious, delivered after a young Egyptian carefully lays a folded crimson linen napkin over our knees. What they listed as “oriental” rice is simply divine—cardamom, pistachios, and cashews that are so succulent. The vegan (Becky) announces that there is a flavor I love and do not know, only to discover small bits of animal hearts (the vegan jumps). We eat finely fried falafel with toasted sesame seeds, lentil soup with match stick carrots, spinach and fava beans with sufficient garlic to scare away any microbes. The vegan self consciously clutches the bottled water, afraid of fresh vegetable she adores, having spent too many nights examining tiles on hotel floors. Travel is fate. Fate is travel.

**DECEMBER 27TH**

Since the Egyptian government has denied permission for us to meet at a church collectively this evening, smaller groups met this morning at various hostels. Our group was led by Ann Wright, a former colonel in the US army who resigned in 2003 in protest of the US war in Iraq and has, since then been organizing for peace with Cindy Sheehan, Code Pink and other organizations. She is a bright blond in her sixties, southern accent, tall, strong build. She is skillful in presenting to the group, giving order to a seemingly unmanageable situation, as more than 1300 people need to regroup at every hour as the plans change with new contingencies about how to move us forward toward Gaza. She speaks in a calm voice with an ability to be reassuring while still not sugar coating, as she delivers the message that we are basically on hold, waiting in Cairo indefinitely.

The actions for today, she lets us know, include tying ribbons and notes around a bridge that extends over the Nile, commemorating the 1400 deaths of Palestinians last year during the 23 day siege, a ceremony tonight on the Nile releasing biodegradable boats onto the water, each for one of the deaths last year. When she gets to the part in her presentation about the power of our attempts to stand along side the Palestinians, she begins to cry, the room becoming quiet, witnessing this former Colonel, now a mother for peace quietly drying her tears as she continues.

She tells us that there will be another delegation meeting with the Mubarak government this morning to see if there will be a change of heart, asks if there are people who want to join them. After the meeting Diane tells me she wants to be part of the meeting, aware that the leadership she has met so far has all been white. Diane approaches a Palestinian woman, Sandra, who is also interested in joining the group going to the Parliament. They both approach Ann who says that they don't want to bring too many people to the meeting, don't want to overwhelm the officials. Sandra and Diane and I speak off to the side about the possible implications of an all white delegation going to meet with the officials, how it might help to have Sandra there, who speaks Arabic, who would go in heels, nice slacks, proper attire. She would speak in Arabic as Nelson Mandela spoke in fluent Afrikaans when he met with the de Klerk government, knowing that was an act of respect as well as a power move. We wonder how the Mubarak officials have taken to meeting with the white women with their high voices. Ann Wright emphasizes diplomacy and sensitivity while deflecting Diane and Sandra when they approach her. Diane, Sandra, and I caucus, talk about when might be a good time to talk with the leadership about these issues. We meet Nitin Swahney, one of the organizers of the Palestinian Film Festival in Boston on the street outside of the hostel, say we hope to meet for dinner, with Sandra as well.

## **LATER ON THE 27TH:**

Being on hold here in Cairo can make you think. One of the realizations that Diane has had is how many

people in the world can't count on predictability and order. Diane says, "I read all these books about people whose lives need to be so much in the present, but I rarely experience that. My life is organized, orderly. But to live even for a day or two not knowing what our next step will be, makes me feel anxious. Makes me appreciate how hard it must be to live that way all the time—to have so little control, so little external stability. I appreciate what that takes."

This reminds me of Marilyn Buck, a political prisoner in California who, through her many years in prison has been practicing yoga as a way of linking to some internal stability, taking her anxiety to the mat. At the moment, we don't know whether we have a place to stay tomorrow or not. The American pragmatist, American problem solver, the one who must get a hold of this, is not working. Diane says, "I find myself trying to retrieve mindfulness. I am in a new place, I am alive. I am with Becky. Everything is fine. That is my mantra." Diane explains, "Mindfulness is hard for me to access in my daily life. We all get distracted by the future since we can plan for it. Mindfulness is all about not getting distracted by the future. I can't say, Becky, we are going to this today, that tomorrow. We are just doing right now. Right now, we are eating really tasty lentil soup, drinking mint tea. This is a time for seeing that a spiritual experience doesn't have to be about hearing voices or having a romantic experience in an expensive space somewhere. This can be a spiritual experience now."

I got an email this morning from my former student Crystal letting me know that she will be going to a solidarity march on New Year's Eve in Boston. Crystal is Southern Ute, from Colorado and African American. She was adopted when she was three into a white family and grew up in the South. With those many identities, figuring out where she belongs in the world and who really recognizes her is a challenge. Her email included a beautiful paragraph about what she calls living in an "emotional diaspora." She writes, "So tonight I started thinking about all the blogs from people there including yours and one from a woman who was under house arrest and the Huffington Post article as well as stuff from the Gaza Freedom March site and I kept thinking that similar to the Palestinian people I am searching for a place to belong, a place to call home...It is sad to see the physical borders that are limiting them in the same way that the non-tangible borders guard me. So I guess what I am saying through this random note is that I am realizing something about all humans...we have an innate desire to belong to something larger than ourselves whether it be a land, a family, a home, wherever. Something that helps define us—for example, I want to point to a family and say that is where I come from, that is who I am...for the Palestinians, they want a home land...it is sucky to be in a state of emotional diaspora for them as well as myself... so, I miss you and I hope you continue to be safe...oh yeah, I kind of borrowed a blanket from your house as a comfort object, no worries it will be returned when you get back."

I marvel at Crystal's insights—the new term she has created, "emotional diaspora"—the emotional

experience of feeling flung about and split in pieces as a result of multiple inequalities—in her case, the attempted genocide of Native peoples that has included such a high rate of adoption. I read her email many times, amazed at the connections she sees between her emotional diaspora and the struggle of Palestinians to not get flung off their land.

Brandi, another former student from Colorado writes to say I can send her the blog and she will post it. I feel a strong intergenerational connection through the internet communication and among the delegates in Cairo. It means a lot to me that Brandi will enter the blog, that we are not sending it into cyber “space” without a human intermediary, that Crystal is on the move with young activists there. The whole ripple in the water, jostling molecules half way around the world and back concept. Embodied.

Diane and I are both seeing that many of the people know far more about the specific situation in Palestine than we do, have been to Gaza before, know about the check points, the pros and cons of trying to enter from one town rather than another. At the same time, all the attention to the logistics, the specifics, the contingencies, back and forth about Israeli-Palestinian relations, can leave people uptight and bantering with each other. All the talk can also leave those without those specifics feeling intimidated. Diane says, “during the meetings, I had to remind myself that I might not know about the check points and geography, but I know something. That is what spurred me to offer to go with the delegation to talk with the Mubarak officials. I need to remember that we wrote a book about spiritually engaged activism. We can bring that knowledge here, respectfully.”

Last night, at dinner with ten activists, the pitch at the table began to heighten over causes—who is to blame for the conflict over Gaza. One of the young women used the verb “instigate” in relation to the European Jews and World War I and II. Diane and I both tried to intervene. The pitch heightened further and then I pulled back, took some breaths, tried to shift the conversation, asking each person what brought them to this march, the delegation now, in their own lives. The tenor changed. Bodies opened a little. A white man, Billy Kelly, who had been involved in the heated discussion backed up, got quiet, focused on his food. At first, it seemed like he was uncomfortable with the shift in the conversation, the more intimate air, only to eventually talk about how since returning from Vietnam in 1969, he has been going back each year, in March, to commemorate the My Lai massacre. He brings 504 multicolored long stemmed roses, each for one of the people massacred. He was not part of that massacre, but was in Vietnam a year later, in charge of an infantry company that killed many soldiers. When the crimes of William Calley hit the news, the name was similar enough to Billy Kelly’s that his family called, asking if he was being investigated. Implication of guilt through linguistic association. Now, each year, Billy Kelly goes to the My Kai beach close to where the My Lai massacre took place where they do the rose ceremony. He says he is trying to “work off the karma of being responsible for the killing” of Viet soldiers. He excuses himself half way through the meal for a

cigarette. Says he needs the distraction. No wonder about that. Two days later, it will be Billy who slips into the French Embassy protest, who stays with the French delegate over night, who continues to put his body where witnessing counts.

## **TRAFFIC UPDATE:**

Last for now, update about the traffic. This morning, we were on our way to the bridge to tie ribbons for the Palestinians who died a year ago, needing to negotiate the crossing of four different eight lane streets (across Tahrir Square) in Central Cairo that have no traffic signals. We somehow figure out that to get from point A to point B alive, we will need to attach ourselves to an Egyptian who knows how to cross. We sidle up to a very handsome Egyptian man in a finely made suit. He acknowledges us with a slight nod. He raises his hand, holding a row of rosary beads, uses it as his protection against the oncoming cars. We somehow make it across. We are stunned. Don't know how, for the life of us, we made it without being rolled into the pavement.

## **DECEMBER 28TH**

Today is a sad day. Everybody is trying to be brave but that is taking much energy since we were all hoping that this morning we would be getting on buses to drive toward Gaza. Instead, we are all regrouping both physically and emotionally. Yesterday morning Ann Wright announced that the Egyptian government was still denying access out of Cairo and that we would spend the day negotiating to be able to leave. During the day we learned that a small international contingent had found their own buses and were attempting to cross the border on their own. We waited through the day thinking that their fate would help predict subsequent attempts. By last night we learned that they had not made it. This contingent had been stopped in Al-Arish (a resort town on the way to Rafah, a border town) and were put under house arrest in their hotel. We also learned that various other groups had met similar fates. At lunchtime we went to the October 6th Bridge in downtown Cairo with the hopes that we could tie ribbons on the side of the bridge to honor those who died. We were met by police cruising up and down the length of the bridge—either making people cut down the ribbons they had tied on or stopping people from making more bows. At that point, there was a bit of a game-like quality to the event as people were sneaking around tying red bows on the bridge rails when the police had turned their backs, using our bodies to block their views so that we could tie ribbons, doubling back to tie bows after the police left.

By the time we arrived at the Nile a few hours later, planning to board boats in order to set 1400 tiny cups into the water, the mood had shifted dramatically. As hundreds of us arrived at the dock, we learned that the police had taken away the boat permits and taken out the engines on the boats as well. We were left standing on the sidewalk with cars rushing by us as police began to surround us. Within a matter of minutes

it became clear that hundreds of us had been cordoned off by a ring of plain-clothed police. Unlike in the US, they were neither armed nor hostile. In fact, many of them smiled at us while they kept repeating, “Please, go away.”

We were being allowed to sing and chant but could not leave the gathering without the police permitting it. They also intended to keep us completely separate from any other people passing us on the streets. At this point, Diane and I were both aware that, without literature written in Arabic, without chants in Arabic, most all of the people passing in cars and walking by us would not have a clue about what we were doing. Having not expected to be denied access to the boats, few people had signs to publicize our work. No one had literature in any language. The people in cars may well have thought of us as a nuisance since our presence certainly was slowing traffic. As the chanting got loud and more intense, Diane and I decided we needed to go, feeling that, at any moment, violence could begin—there could be an agent provocateur among us, or the police could change the rules without warning.

As it turns out, the gathering remained peaceful, but we, along with a few other women walked away, talking among each other about our own worries about the possible fate of the event. As we walked, we talked about how aggressive the chanting had become; that there was very little singing (that keeps things softer than chanting); that there had been no non-violent training before the event; and that there was no literature in Arabic that we could have handed out. There seems to be little way to control the narrative, to take charge of it in the media. While we were glad to be walking away with other activists—which helped to guard against feeling bad that we had left the rally alone—we also knew that the stakes had gotten quite serious and that we, and we suspect many people, had not been prepared for the intensity of the Egyptian response.

By the time we arrived at Tahrir Square that evening, for a meeting scheduled for all of the delegations (since we could not meet inside a building big enough to house all of us) there were so many police that Diane and I were very hesitant to even enter the Square. There seemed to be as many police as delegates. The police were both stopping those who entered the square to leave it and were stopping all Egyptians from joining us. The two Swedish blond daughters of Palestinians who were fluent in Arabic (who we had left the boats with earlier that day) asked the police what they intended to do if we entered the Square. The police informed the women that they were only interested in keeping us separate from Egyptians. We joined the meeting with hundreds of others who then were asked to break up into affinity groups.

Diane and I wandered around checking out the various groups, ending up where we began, with the women’s contingent. At some point as the women’s contingent was meeting Ann Wright joined us which



gave Becky a chance to dialogue with her. I said that while I appreciated her calm and orderly way of running the meeting that morning, I was concerned that the leadership was overwhelmingly white and that it did not appear to include in Arabic speakers, and that I did not know if there was a link between organizers from Code Pink and activists in Cairo. I talked about the power of Mandela's use of language in negotiations. And Diane and I talked about how multiracial feminism taught us that effective organizing needs to be multiracial.

Ann told us the Egyptians officials they had been dealing with all spoke English well (in fact, she said that one had an "American" accent) and that she didn't think language was at issue during the negotiations. She deflected the other point—about multiracial leadership—by saying that the current leadership was the leadership and that it would be risky to bring in new people at these critical moments.

At that moment we understood that we were part of a hierarchical organization and that despite Ann Wright's calm and conviction, her military training was still being put into practice as she skillfully side stepped our critique and reasserted her leadership. After Diane and I talked with Ann, we turned to Starhawk and Lori (a long time organizer from New York) and lamented how little progress we seemed to have made in the last thirty years—still white leadership, still hierarchy, and now, in a way we never would have thought years ago, a woman trained in the military serving as one of the spokespeople for a feminist organization. We were, as you could imagine, grateful to return to our dorm room last night, to talk freely with the feminists about what it meant that we were being asked to engage in nonviolent protest without training, that we desperately needed to know each other well if we were going to be in such intense situations together, that multiracial feminism began and ended with being grounded in community—linguistically and physically.

We were too wired to sleep. Too tired to write. Too overwhelmed to dream. The bedbugs Becky discovered with her flashlight at two in the morning didn't help. The dueling banjo snoring queens in the room did not help. The Egyptian government's decision could easily lead us to start eating on each other instead of finding ways to keep the momentum moving forward. Meanwhile we were aware that hundreds of people were still arriving from all over the globe to join us, even as they were learning that their final destination might be Cairo, not Gaza.

## **DECEMBER 28TH**

This morning hundreds of people met in each of the three key hostels to share the latest updates and figure out the next steps. One of the rabbis said that we had come to walk, that we still needed to walk, and that if

we could not find buses that would take us to the border, we could start walking. Everybody clapped about that idea. It sounded like one of the best we had heard in days. Others talked about the pros and cons of demonstrating at the UN, at the American embassy, at the French embassy, etc. People talked about the danger of splintering, that single actions could help keep the momentum going. I requested that we have literature in Arabic so that when we went into public spaces, we could let the Egyptian people we met know what we were doing. I put in a plea for nonviolent training so that we wouldn't be caught off guard again. I also talked about how we came thinking that we were going to be on Palestinian land, with Palestinian people, but that the terms had changed. Now, we were primarily going to be working in Egypt—very different land, different people. To me, that required different strategy, including having the linguistic skills to reach out to people.

## **MOMENTS OF LIGHT:**

\* One of our roommates, Sheila, reported a conversation she had with a young cab driver about the US sponsored wall between Egypt and Gaza. He said that the US has no business there. Then he talked about why everyone treats the Palestinians so poorly. Sheila told him about trauma reenactment—when kids are abused, a lot of them feel too weak, not able to protect themselves. The logic: I gotta be so strong that I can keep this from ever happening to me again. A lot of kids who have been abused never abuse anyone. Israel has always said that they never will be in the situation they were in before. The cabbie said, “what do they want to do with them? Do they want them to die, to go away? They are killing them slowly. The majority of the Egyptians know, they care, but they can't do anything about it. They are living in a police state themselves. “

\* The French contingent had a series of meetings. 230 of them went to the French Embassy yesterday morning, very organized. The ambassador didn't have much to do with them at first. He told them he would help them, but then called military trucks to come deal with them. After witnessing his dishonesty, they decided to take over a boulevard, right in front of the National Zoo, in one of the most beautiful parts of Cairo—streets with valleys of trees and white egrets. They started with a line of people braving the traffic, with a second and third line behind them, others behind them, each laying down on the street. The police were forced to stop traffic at each end of the block which meant that the French had a whole block to themselves where they set up their tents, with flags. They were sleeping in the tents. Then a whole convoy of trucks with water cans arrived, raised, ready to shoot water., flood out the delegates and all of their belongings. The police gave them an ultimatum. If the protesters left the center of the street and moved over to the wall of the Embassy, then the police wouldn't spray water. The French moved to the Embassy wall. The police had been standing there all day and night, changing shifts, getting reinforcements. There were two levels of police—very young police in matching black riot gear who were being bossed around by older police in properly appointed military uniforms. The embassy was providing food—Kentucky Fried Chicken

(which for many of the French was a first in their lives). Part of what helped them is that they had many people who spoke Arabic in the group. People sleeping at the edge of the wall, talking, reading. Others, forming a contingent of chanters. At the back there was a woman blowing a whistle and keeping time. They were chanting and getting face to face with the police—chanting “my brothers, the Egyptians are our brothers, Palestinians are our brothers.” Some of the police looked astonished, embarrassed that the protesters were chanting for them.

The 200 plus people were allowed only one bathroom and had to get permission to go. The ambassador had told them that they would not be allowed to spend a second night outside. They were threatened with being taken to an Egyptian jail or to a French high school or out in to the desert until their plane tickets kicked in. Billy Kelly (the US vet) is with them, said he didn’t want to leave them. Yesterday we had talked about how there aren’t enough people speaking Arabic on the march. The French changed that picture—they are such a multiracial group—Asian, Palestinian, Black, white, their chants in Arabic, French and English. They seem to be tapping into the energy of 1968 student organizing. They are serious, disciplined, focused, ahead of the rest of the contingents in terms of taking on their embassy and getting significant media attention.

## **DECEMBER 29TH**

When we go to support the French contingent at their Embassy in the morning, the police are still in two formations—the first row of young riot police backed up by the older, tougher police, watching the young ones like hawks. I decide to go down the line of young police, shaking each of their hands, giving greetings with my poor Arabic phrases and asking their names. Each young guy is respectful, friendly. We are laughing across language, until older cops come up and reprimand them. I wait until the bossy guys leave and then continue down the line. The next young one make a motion with his arms, crossing them at the wrists to let me know his hands are tied, smiling to let me know what was up, his own act of solidarity. As I continue down the line, each man whispers his name to me.

We didn’t want to leave the French, so inspired by their unity, but after the Four Season’s hotel bussed in a group of terrified looking young recruits (who looked like they had just been released from detention themselves) who tried to shoo us off the hotel sidewalk, we got in taxis to go downtown to the Journalist Syndicate building where there was going to be a press conference for the dozen hunger strikers and a rally. Arriving at this downtown building was truly thrilling. There were hundreds and hundreds of people there with the hunger strikers in the middle. The rally took place on the steps and marble landings at that front of the building. The many levels of stairs and gorgeous architecture created an aesthetically beautiful scene—you could see all of the banners, the strikingly multiracial and multinational activists, the many colored tee

shirts, scarves, hats, etc.

The first rally began at 3:00 and was still going strong at 6:00 when the second rally began—this one initiated by Egyptian journalists who had invited us to join them in their organizing for freedom of speech, freedom of the press. We were so happy to be part of a rally that was all in Arabic. The Egyptians were spirited, happy, so enthused. We had been worried that the Free Gaza people might try to take over the rally or that we would somehow be separated from Egyptians. Instead, the Egyptians were clearly in charge of the rally, drawing upon the Gaza Freedom energy to rally for their own freedoms. Given that people had been cheering loudly for hours, it was exciting to see that everyone was still there way after 9:00 in the evening. The South African contingent began dancing at one point, several media groups were somehow able to get into the crowd to interview people (including Al-Jazeera, an Egyptian nighttime news broadcast and WBAI). Diane interviewed with Al-Jazeera, Becky with WBAI and with an Egyptian news program.

News began to circulate that there had been a major breakthrough in the afternoon after Suzanne Mubarak had agreed to allow two buses of people to enter Gaza with a third bus carrying supplies. Rumor had it that Alice Walker was among the women who met with Suzanne Mubarek to help make it happen. The process and politics by which 100 people (out of the 1300 plus) will get to be on those buses remain to be seen. In the meantime Diane and I are writing in a cafe, eating divine rice pudding as Diane gears up for what promises to be a series of late night meetings about this latest bus possibility.

## **THE LATEST TRAFFIC UPDATE:**

We are getting quite expert at weaving through 40 mile an hour multi-laned traffic. We have realized that it helps to recite ‘Allah is great’ while trying to cross since we don’t have a rosary to clutch in our hands. It is essential to not speed up or slow down one’s pace while crossing. The honking of horns, which we used to think of as a warning sign is actually a sign of encouragement to continue crossing. Losing one’s leg to a whizzing by car might not hurt if one is high from a historic rally. According to Diane, Becky has learned to go into traffic and become fearless. “She simply asks the cars to be nice as they miss her by inches while pulling me along.” Someone called out to Diane today that she walks like an Egyptian when she is crossing the street. We think this was a compliment. We notice that the little icon on the street posts at the intersections have a flashing green icon of a figure that is running (in contrast to the yellow and green and red walking figures in the United States.) We learn to emulate the Egyptian icon.

I notice that as crazy as the driving (and crossing) seems, I have not seen one traffic accident, not even a fender bender. And the cars are not banged up either. It takes some level of trust to survive the street crossings. The ritual seems to calm people. In New York, drivers would just run these pedestrians over. Here, the cars and walkers seem to coexist, like they even each other somehow. It feels like a certain kind of

urban symphony playing. Walk, toot, toot. Walk, toot, toot.

## **DECEMBER 30TH:**

Code Pink exploded last night. Diane attended extremely contentious meetings until two in the morning. When the Egyptian government tried to create a wedge by offering us a “deal” that 100 people could go to Gaza, unfortunately, the Code Pink leadership agreed to it and so 100 were chosen to get on buses in the early morning. But by then, there had been enough process meetings late into the night that most of the people realized the divide and conquer tactics. So, after everyone had gotten on the buses the morning of the 30th, most got off and rejoined the rest of us.

Looking back we wished that we had much more discussion among the delegates about the politics of sending just a few people to Gaza before that possibility was presented to Madame Mubarak. Because it wasn't fully discussed, many people were caught from behind, having to make principled arguments for or against such a sending just hours before the scheduled departure.

In one of the many discussions Diane had about this issue, she talked with Bill Ayers who argued that the two buses should have gone forward because getting a portion of your goal is a success. He said that the media spin could be that the mass demonstrations and negotiations were successful as evidenced in the moving buses. Diane told him that he was losing it if he thought that was right, that he was being short-sighted. For Diane, his argument sells out the process in order to get a certain product. The process needs to include transparent and democratic decision making, attention to the hierarchy that is created when the “talented tenth” are chosen, and, most importantly, attention to the Gaza leadership's position (that has its own enduring process). We are not sure, if there had been a vote early on what the decision might have been about sending the two buses or not. However laborious feminist meetings can be when so much process is discussed, in this instance we found ourselves missing that attention. The big decisions that needed to be made so quickly over the last week and the Gazan reliance on principled discussions about policy and plans, made us wish that democratic decision-making had been instituted from the beginning and throughout the week.

As you can imagine, there was much anxiety among the 1300 plus of us who are in several different hotels and couldn't meet all together in any one place following the bus confusion. Meanwhile, the South African contingent called a meeting in order to write up an international declaration to stop the Israeli apartheid following the demands written by the Palestinians. We are hoping that this means that the South African contingent will assume some of the leadership now, will help negotiate a shift from US based leadership to

more international representation.

At the early morning update meeting (the 30th) at our hostel, I was asked to facilitate the meeting (which was an honor) since Ann Wright was not there. (She had led all of the meetings at the Sun Hotel prior to that so it was confusing to many that she didn't come). During the previous day's meetings I had spoken about how essential it was to have signs in Arabic, that we needed to be respectful of the land we were on—Egyptian, not Palestinian land, that our organizing needed to start with the land. I also spoke about non-violent training as essential and that we needed to know each other to be able to resist falling into violence (including screaming, divisiveness, hostility). We had heard that there was much screaming and upset on the buses—that the speed of the decisions had left people frantic, anxious.

At the meeting I tried to call on as many people as possible and help people come together, feeling a sense of connection again even as the leadership was shifting. Diane reminded the group that there was tremendous leadership in the room among us—all the white hair, for one, told us that. During the meeting, several of the people who had been on the bus climbed up the steps to the 9th floor to join the meeting. I can imagine that it was completely disorienting for them to be back after they had geared up for the journey to Gaza. I tried to emphasize that the South Africans had stepped up to the plate in terms of giving us next steps. That we would be looking to Palestinians for guidance as well—that this shift was an excellent sign in terms of continuing to build an international movement.

Following that meeting, Diane and I went over to the South African meeting at the Lotus hotel where about 100 people were pressed into a very small room with people spilling out in the halls and restaurant as the South Africans led a meeting about continuing to build internationally—with a focus on boycotts, divestment and sanctions. Toward the end of the meeting, there was a call for the formation of a steering committee. At that meeting that followed immediately, people asked for a small group to be willing to meet intensely after lunch to draft an international declaration to stop Israeli apartheid. I volunteered which meant I got to spend four glorious hours with two of the South African activists, a long time activist from Liverpool, and a Jewish, Anti-Zionist activist from New York. It was such a heady time. They all knew more than I did about the specifics of the Palestinian organizing but I tried to offer what I could in terms of writing skills and inclusion of information about the UN Declaration on Rights of Indigenous Peoples, etc.

## **FLASH DEMONSTRATIONS IN A MILITARY STATE:**

Much happened in the evening focused on getting ready for the march planned for the following day—to be in conjunction with the 31st December march in Gaza. The plan was for hundreds of us to take a symbolic

walk to Gaza from Cairo, en masse, knowing that we might not get far but we could try. We needed to organize as a flash demonstration, That meant kind of milling around in small groups (like mosquitoes) until all of a sudden we would converge in a single spot in front of the Egyptian Museum. At the meeting, the expert facilitator Scottish trade unionist, Mick Napier reminded us that the only people we had kept information from during the last week were ourselves, that the many listening ears meant that it would be impossible to keep secret the location or the time of the demonstration. He also said, in his own hilarious way, that the method of staging a flash demonstration was appropriate when organizing under marshal law—that people all over the world had known this for a long time.

So, the plan was to walk toward the museum looking like tourists (which was ironic since we had spent a good deal of time prior to this trying not to look like tourists—that we were there as activists) and be ready for long detention in the street and possible arrest. There were jokes about needing to bring power bars (which by that point, everybody was sick to death of) and sunscreen (which was also funny since it was clear that sun in the afternoon while being detained on the streets might be as close as any of us were going to get to sunbathing on this trip).

It was an amazing moment when, very close to ten o'clock, all of a sudden the mass of about 500 people started to coalesce. It was as if we sensed that it was time to run toward each other, to become one united group with Starhawk and the other fearless women leading the charge. The sea of human energy was coming together.

At first, we were all able to walk forward as one big, growing group on the boulevard but within a few minutes it seemed like hundreds of police in riot gear were surrounding the group, trying to cordon us all. The police panic as palpable. They were clearly caught off guard—by the enormous size of the group; the way we had been able to walk into the boulevard and stop eight lanes of traffic from three different directions; and the fact that the word had gone out that the demo would be closer to the museum than it turned out to be, shifting the tactics the police had to use to surround everyone. There were hundreds of us and so all traffic, coming from multiple directions around the crazy rotaries started to have to slow down as the police tried to completely surround the group.

Diane and I stayed just outside of the perimeter of the mass of demonstrators for as long as we could until we could tell that we would get folded into the mass if we didn't back up some. Earlier, Diane and I had decided that we would not risk arrest, that we would go in support; the combination of Diane being afraid of what the police might do and my history of arrest let us know we were not candidates for this particular event. Then, a group we knew from New York, who I had affectionately been referring to as dykes and their

friends, passed by with these really fine looking “Free Palestine” posters written in English and in Arabic (it is a true testimony to Lori and others that they found a way to get all of these posters made in Cairo—perfect signs, just the right size to be able to hold above your heads, in bold letters, in two languages).

After they handed me a sign, it occurred to me that, since I was not inside the mass group, I could walk/run up and down the rows of very slowly moving traffic, along side the rows of buses and cars with my sign and chant “Free Gaza, Free Palestine.” By this point, the media had been so intense, so comprehensive in Cairo that most everyone passing in the cars seemed to know about the actions (as is true for many on the streets). I ran up and down, feeling as high as I ever have felt, chanting, almost singing, up and down the rows of cars and buses on the streets, up and down the boulevards. The police clearly saw me since they were everywhere but they seemed to let me do it—I guess because I was a single protester, or maybe because I was moving through the rows quickly and it would have been hard to stop me without causing more fuss.

At one point, I was able to cross a center divide into a median with flowers and then slip onto the other side of the boulevard and then flash the sign that way too, with much honking and thumbs up from inside the cars—especially the taxi drivers. Many of the men and women on the crowded buses smiled, some gave a thumbs up. At one point an older woman reached her hand out to me—and I reached to her, a touch that will stay inside of my body for a long time.

So I kept speed walking up and down in my jeans and clogs since the police were not bothering me, with my feather earrings and handmade hair ties that I got at the Gandhi King conference. I was grateful that I was not inside the mass of people, knowing myself well enough at this point in my life to know that was not the right time to be inside the police’s menacing hold. I felt like I was doing my little part, by letting the people in traffic know what the demonstration was about. I also felt safely invisible somehow, since the police attention seemed to be fixated on forcing the large group away from the middle of the street. The police were in a frenzy, pushing, shoving, corralling the mass group.

Then, all of a sudden, four police (the older ones in fancier uniforms, the serious ones) came from behind me and literally picked me up, carrying me toward the mass demonstration. I kept saying “put me down, let me go” but their grips got tighter and tighter. I had not seen them do that to anyone and they seemed to have come from nowhere behind me. I felt panicked that they might carry me to a car or a van and take me away. Diane had my passport that meant I had no documentation on me. I had no way to know where they were carrying me until they began shouting at a few of the riot police to step aside. They then hurled me into the mass of demonstrators.



I fell on to several demonstrators who were sitting/lying down. They clearly were not expecting someone to be thrown on top of them. It all happened so fast and there was such mayhem in the circle. I had called to Diane, who was on a sidewalk when the police had picked me up, actually screamed to her, so she knew what was happening. They had thrown me so hard that I was in the center of the group, looking around as people, mostly women, were laying, sitting on the ground, trying to keep their arms linked as riot police were pushing, shoving, trying to divide them. I was frantic, trying to find someone I knew, thinking that if I got thrown down, I at least wanted to be with someone familiar. One woman in a headscarf who was linked with other women lying on the ground was screaming at the police. Her screaming doubled my fear. I was panicked, thinking that I just couldn't last with that level of chaos, particularly since I had felt invisible when I was running up and down the traffic alone.

I tried to make my way toward the area where Diane might have been and started pleading with the row of riot police that I had to get out. There were two layers of police. The younger police and then the "real deal" police. The younger ones tightened their grip. I tried to get an older one to consent to my getting out but his face was totally closed. Diane started screaming at them that it was a mistake, that I was a tourist. I told them I was feeling sick. That I had to get out. There was so much noise and pushing and shoving and shouting that my mind had to get totally focused even while I could feel myself starting to feel light headed and disoriented. It felt a bit like half of my body was there, and half was disappearing or melting (signs of dissociation). There was a tall railing in front of the police. I realized I could try to scale the railing and maybe jump out, over the arms of the police. I scaled that railing so quickly I don't know how I got up and then tumbled out on to the side walk, Diane right next to me. Once again it was clear that the younger police were not fully invested in their jobs. They let their arms be passive for the moment it took me to scale the railing. In that moment I remember thinking that the many handshakes I had initiated with the rows of young police at the French embassy had come back to me, my feeble, trying to say "hello, my name is" in Arabic, their willingness to smile, tell me their names in return.

I couldn't believe I was out, still in shock about having been thrown in. The inside of the demonstration felt so different than the other demonstrations—much more violent, aggressive, as if the police rules before the buses went to Gaza had changed, as those of us left behind were being portrayed in the media as the crazy ones, the radicals. When they picked me up and threw me I got scared for the first time. The years of visiting friends in US prisons, my experience watching friends dragged in handcuffs by US police, my own experience having my elbow broken by police several years ago—these memories were still in my body, catapulting me away from the crowd.

The police started to do a sweep of the sidewalk, pushing toward the end of the block to try to cordon off

another section of protesters. With the other dozen or so people doing support, we walked, then ran away from the police and toward the Sun Hotel. The Lotus Hotel had been cordoned off entirely, no one allowed to go in or out. For some reason, our hotel has not been surrounded. The older man who had been sitting in the first floor hallway of the hostel all these days working the elevator and greeting people saw my eyes and immediately got up and told me to sit down in his chair. We communicated so much with our eyes. I wondered whether women wearing head scarves allows people to fine tune their abilities to read each other's gazes. A younger man who also worked in the building sat close to me and told me his name, told me it was safe at the hotel and that he was sorry about what had happened. Within a half hour my breath was starting to get steady again. We began to figure out our next steps.

We climbed the nine floors to the hostel rooms arriving to find about ten other demonstration supporters who were scanning the Internet, talking about what they had witnessed, figuring out the next plan. For the first time since we had arrived, the owner of the hostel was there, working on spreadsheets, talking with us. We were all thanking him for allowing us to be at the hostel. I asked him why the police had surrounded the Lotus Hotel and not his. He said that each day, the authorities came by to get a list of the people staying at the hostel. He said it was no problem, our staying there. He pulled out one of the daily newspapers and showed us an article in Arabic and a big photograph at one of the demonstrations. He explained that the sign in the photo in written Arabic said "Peace in Gaza starts with Justice in Cairo" (a sign that I think had been made by Egyptian journalists). He said that what the police most wanted to stop was an escalation of organizing among the Egyptians, especially journalists, fueled by our demos. (That synergism was, of course, for us, one of the biggest hopes—that we could all be spurring each other on). Most of the people on the streets seemed to be in big support of the demonstrations even as we have disrupted traffic for hours, caused such a ruckus. The Egyptian press has been giving the demonstrations so much coverage.

When I returned to the hostel, I felt both grateful that I was not inside the mass group and sad that I wasn't there. I felt like I was letting people down, weak, even as I knew that my place could not be there right now. The other people assuming support roles talked about similar pulls. Someone came up with the great idea of hiring a taxi to drive us around the perimeter of the demonstration so we could, at least, be witness through cameras. Four of us piled into a taxi. I didn't say three words before the taxi driver knew what we wanted to do. We circled several blocks a few times, Diane rolling the back window up all of the way so she could film the demonstration safely—without police snatching the video camera.

We could see that people had shimmied up a big tree and had managed to hang glorious signs from its limbs. That made me think of the Native American reverence for trees, rocks, mountains. Something about seeing the signs on the trees made the demonstration feel stronger. People inside the mass group—which we were getting reports of including between 400-500 people—had found ways to get on top of each other's

shoulders so they could lead chants. From the taxi, it seemed like the inside of the demo was much calmer, safer than before. The police had been able to push the entire group out of the street and onto the sidewalk so that traffic, while heavy, was not stopped anymore. That had seemed to calm the police back into silently surrounding us (rather than pushing and hitting people).

We had come to see that, in these intense days, rationality could suddenly switch to irrationality—no rules; flashes of violence by individual police even as the protocol was to not be violent; moments of insanity followed by predictable behavior. Emails we received at the hostel said that a few people had been injured but that most were okay. We learned that Hedy Epstein was among those in the demonstration. Several of the women from our dorm room, what I had affectionately begun calling the queen's dorm were there too—Miranda, the Spanish woman with flowing shirts and a deliciously proper accent; the woman in her fifties in the next bed on her fourth day of the hunger strike, and of course Sarah, the eighteen-year-old (on her way to Oxford in the fall) who came back to the hostel later to scoop up the bong she had bought to share with her young comrades. All reports from inside the demonstration were: the spirit is high.

## **JANUARY 1ST**

On our way home, sitting in the Cairo airport, with a lot of time to think together about the trip. Despite our critiques of Code Pink's organizing, some aspects of their approach seemed to be effective, including their broad call to action. Their platform was essentially: come let's go to Gaza in support on the anniversary of the Israeli attack. That general call was one reason why such a range of people came—people who had been active in the peace movement for decades, mainstream politicians, a lot of second wave baby boomers, young people, people new to the movement. The delegations were also intergenerational—one man came with his eighty-year-old father who was worried because his father kept throwing himself into the demonstrations. A middle-age woman came with her nineteen-year-old daughter and father. In our experience, it is hard to remember that degree of familial-intergenerational participation in other actions.

We saw examples of the range of people who answered the call in our dorm rooms at the hostels—a New Yorker, Alan, who identifies as a revolutionary communist roomed with a high ranking Canadian legislator. Alan said, "We argued politics constantly but we could agree on Gaza." In our queens dorm, there was such a range of ages and experience—the Canadian, Muslim woman in her twenties, now living in Bangkok; the Spanish woman, Miranda who after the demonstration provided a hilarious retelling of how she "allowed" the police to graciously help her up after she had been sitting on the street; the woman in her fifties who, with her husband has run a home for schizophrenic vets in rural Massachusetts for thirty years. We also thought it was unusual to see the religious folks so integrated into the action—revolutionary folks and the religious people don't tend to hand together. Code Pink's leadership in terms of their political genealogies—

from Medea Benjamin who founded Global Exchange to Ann Wright with her military background—may have also left room for a range of people to feel comfortable coming. The leadership may have been one reason that the March did not have the sectarian exclusivity that sometimes accompanies left organizing.

At the same time, while there was a range in terms of politics and religion, the US delegation included very few Black people, Arab Americans, and other people of color. In our days there, we counted four African Americans, no Latinos, and no Native Americans. This speaks to the enduring racism in the US in a supposedly “post racial” time and the effects of class apartheid in the US. It was particularly difficult to see that the New York contingent was so white given the enormous range of African American, African, Caribbean, Middle Eastern people living in New York. The white dominance in the most visible leadership of Code Pink may be the reason why the organization seemed over its head in terms of being able to organize from the ground up in Cairo and build a truly multiracial alliance in the US.

Retrospectively we think the ability of the international movement to grow will require keeping the leadership of the people of Gaza central. In this effort, it was often unclear when and if the Gazan Freedom Movement leadership was consulted by Code Pink. For example, it was unclear how soon in the process of discussion about the buses that Code Pink consulted with the Gazan leadership. We know that it wasn’t until after the hundred people were on the bus that Ann Wright placed a call to Gaza, putting the conversation on speakerphone so that everyone could hear their clear position that the two busloads should not come. The Egyptians had already twisted this decision into portraying the hundred people as the “good activists” while those remaining would be considered the hooligans and extremists.

At this point, we are hopeful about the future of this movement because of the strength of the South African delegation, the enormous principle and fortitude of the French, and most importantly, the recognition that the next steps need to be directed by the people of Gaza. When I shared with two of the South African activists the concerns that Diane and I had about Code Pink, both listened and then spoke with respect for Code Pink. One said, “It is quite an accomplishment for an organization to get people from 42 countries here. That should be commended.” When I said I was appreciative that the South African contingent assumed the leadership following the confusion about the buses, another South African activist quickly clarified, “We have no intention to take over. We can work together. This is no coup.” Their response (and helpful shifting in my thinking) was, to me, one of the most impressive aspects of their leadership as they carefully provided direction while they honored all of the work others had done to make the march possible. It is this vision that went into the principled and efficient creation of the Declaration to Stop the Israeli Apartheid, that was conceived of and written in less than twelve hours, was studied and revised by Gaza activists, and then signed by hundreds of Gaza Freedom March activists on January 1, 2010.

This campaign will now go forward, including a week long world tour of Palestinian and South African trade unionists supporting divestment plans, boycotts, and sanctions; an international anti-Apartheid week in March, 2010; and campaigns against the charitable status of the Jewish National Fund. We come back to the US with a real hopefulness of the possibility for change. It was thrilling to see 1300 plus people come together in Cairo at a time of the year when we think about renewal and regeneration. We come back hopeful about “the people.”

About the writers: Diane Harriford is on sabbatical from teaching at Vassar College and is the co-author (with Becky) of *When the Center is on Fire: Passionate Social Theory for our Times*. Becky appreciates getting to travel and write with Diane. We can be reached at [diarriford@vassar.edu](mailto:diarriford@vassar.edu) and [becky.thompson@simmons.edu](mailto:becky.thompson@simmons.edu). Thank you to Crystal Rizzo and Brandi Ballard for help with this blog.

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