



*Meganne Forbes*

*Listening*

## *Compassionate Listening*

An Exploratory Sourcebook About Conflict  
Transformation

**Gene Knudsen Hoffman**

**Cynthia Monroe**

**Leah Green**

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**Edited by and with an introduction by  
Dennis Rivers**

**[www.NewConversations.net](http://www.NewConversations.net)  
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Dedicated to Thich Nhat Hanh,  
my teacher of reconciliation.

G.K.H.

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## *Introduction*

Gene Knudsen Hoffman is a remarkable woman, and this book is a report from the growing edge of a movement she has pioneered, nurtured and mentored.

Forms of compassionate listening have been practiced among Quakers and Buddhists for centuries, and among psychotherapists for decades. Gene is both a Quaker peace activist and a pastoral counselor, and she has achieved two great things over the past thirty years. First, she has taken the practice of compassionate listening out of the quiet environs of the Quaker meeting house, out from behind the closed doors of the therapy session, and on to the stage of the world's greatest conflicts. Her many trips to Russia and the Middle East have made her a legend in the peacemaking community. Second, she has popularized compassionate listening in a generous way that invites and encourages other people to take up this practice, develop it and apply it in new areas. This book is an expression of that generosity. Available for free around the world as an e-book, it includes both her lesson plans for Compassionate Listening Workshops and reports from Leah Green and Cynthia Monroe, two of her co-pioneers and creative colleagues.

Leah Green is Director of Mid East Citizen Diplomacy and organizes Compassionate Listening delegations to Israel and Palestine. Compassionate Listening embodies Gandhi's teaching that we must be the change we want to see. By listening to all sides in a way that acknowledges everyone's pain, these delegations help the Israelis and Palestinians grow toward listening to one another's pain, and hopes and dreams as well. Of course, there are powerful forces on both sides seeking to worsen the conflicts rather than heal the wounds. Only a practice grounded in something like the Quaker belief in the light of God residing in each person could keep alive the vision of possible peace in the face of all the violence and anguish into which the Palestinians and Israelis have stumbled.

Cynthia Monroe is a staff member of the American Friends Service Committee, living in Anchorage, Alaska. Over the past decade a serious conflict has emerged in Alaska between the indigenous peoples of Alaska who hunt and fish for survival, and the professional and recreational hunters and fishers who are drawing down the food supply available to the indigenous peoples. When the usual forms of conflict management (mediation, lawsuits) failed to produce results, Cynthia enlisted Gene's assistance in founding the Alaskans Listening to Alaskans About Subsistence Project. A new dialogue began that is continuing to this day and is transforming the context in which the conflict takes place. Compassionate Listening is not about resolving conflicts directly. It is about helping conflict participants see one another as human, which creates a new mental and emotional space out of which resolutions can emerge.

In this respect, Compassionate Listening represents the next step beyond the "interest-based bargaining." Conflict resolutions based only on interests, even on the interests of all the parties to a conflict, are vulnerable to fall apart as soon as someone's material circumstances shift. What is needed is for the conflict participants to be able to identify with one another's sorrows and joys, to feel connected enough to one another to make the peace worth keeping.

In a word, only love will save us. But there needs to be a gradual "on-ramp" to that love, and a person's gradually deepening practice of Compassionate Listening is one such path, a path that Gene and her courageous partners-in-hope offer to a world clouded with violence.

I am honored to be a support person and web helper for this great team. We hope this source book will empower you to bring the practice of Compassionate Listening into the conflicts in your community that cry out to be transformed.

Dennis Rivers  
www.NewConversations.net

# 1

## *Compassionate Listening A First Step Toward Reconciliation*

**Gene Knudsen Hoffman**



From a talk given at University of California at Santa Barbara

*Host's introduction: Gene Knudsen Hoffman, a writer, therapist, and international peace worker, was invited by Project Crossroads[at UCSB to talk about Compassionate Listening, a unique tool for reconciliation. She developed this tool after realizing that all parties in a conflict were wounded and needed to be heard. Her overarching principle is that hearing each other's story reveals unhealed wounds and allows for mutual compassion and understanding. In this way Compassionate Listening helps to build bridges between individuals and communities in conflict and can ultimately lead to reconciliation.*

Reconciliation is the most difficult of peace processes because it requires the resumption of relationship between those in conflict. It means the coming together in harmony of those who have been sundered.

My sense is that if we would reconcile, we must make radically new responses to the radically new situation in a world where violence is mindless, hopeless, meaningless,

and almost every nation has nuclear weapons—or soon will. We must move beyond initiatives we formerly used, into realms we have not yet considered, not yet discovered, trusting that there are always open to us new divine possibilities.

We peace people have always listened to the oppressed and disenfranchised. That's very important. One of the new steps I think we should take is to listen to those we consider 'the enemy' with the same openness, non-judgement, and compassion we listen to those with whom our sympathies lie.

Everyone has a partial truth, and we must listen, discern, acknowledge this partial truth in everyone—particularly those with whom we disagree. That remarkable Saint, Thomas Aquinas, would support this, for he wrote: "We must love them both, those with whom we agree, and those with whom we disagree. For both have labored in the search of truth, and both have helped in the finding of it."

To reconcile, we must realize that both sides to any violence are wounded, and their wounds are unhealed. From my study of post-traumatic stress disorder in Holocaust victims and Vietnam veterans, I am persuaded that a great source of violence stems from our unhealed wounds.

In 1980, I had a life-changing experience. I was on a world tour of peace centers to learn what new ideas I could bring back to the USA. Outside the London Quaker Meeting, I saw a huge sign which said: "Meeting for Worship for the torturers and the tortured". I'd long known I should listen to the tortured—but listen to the torturers? I'd have to think about that.

I soon realized that without listening to the enemy I could not make informed decisions. If I was an advocate for one side, I would never know the causes of the oppositions' anger and violence, and I couldn't possibly know the suffering they

had endured. My choices would be half-ignorant ones. So when I arrived in Israel, I began listening to Israelis and Palestinians. I found it changed my perspectives on each. I began to practice listening to both sides everywhere I went.

In 1983 I worked for the Fellowship of Reconciliation, creating their US/USSR Reconciliation Program. This was in the depths of the cold war and a way I found to listen was to try to “Put a Human Face on the Soviets” for Americans. It was a remarkable learning experience and the perspectives of quite a few people were changed on both sides.

In 1989, after Glasnost and the feelings that the Soviets were no longer a threat, my work moved to the Middle East. In that year a small group of us went to Libya to listen to the Libyans after we’d bombed Libya twice, first to kill Khadaffi and second, after we’d downed two Libyan planes over Libya. We knew our government’s side and we wanted to hear the other. We did.

We met with Libyan leaders, professors, government members, religious representatives, and many more. We had new messages for our government such as “Please remove the mines you’ve sown in the Sahara desert [in World War II]; we can’t do it alone. Please resume conversations with our government over our differences.” and “Please let Libyan students return to American universities.”

Our government wouldn’t listen to us since we’d gone there illegally. So we wrote our articles, spoke publicly where we could—and were considered dangerous.

My next efforts were on my own. Between 1989 and 1996 I went to Israel and Palestine five times to listen to both sides. I listened to Israeli psychiatrists, settlers, government officials, peace people, writers, publishers, the Knesset and just plain people. Since I stayed in Palestinian homes in the Occupied territories, I had more

opportunity to listen to the people: refugees, families, parents whose sons had been killed, some of their sons who hadn’t, academic and peace leaders, and twice I met with Yassir Arafat. Out of these experiences came a book for Pax Christi, *The Just World Book of 1991* called *Pieces of the Mideast Puzzle*.

The breakthrough for practicing compassionate Listening on a wider scale came in 1996 when Leah Green, Director of Earthstewards’ Mid-East Citizen Diplomacy Project, contacted me. She said she had read everything I’d written on Compassionate Listening and she would like to have her delegations to Israel and Palestine begin to practice it.

She did. In January of 1998 she took a group of American Jewish leaders, including two Rabbis and one Rabbinic intern. The participants came with varied prejudices, stereotypes, and deep fears. Some had never set foot in Palestine before. On her return Leah wrote: “All the participants submitted positive evaluations, and all have expressed that they underwent some degree of transformation from the experience. ...I can honestly say I have come away from this trip with a new level of compassion, awareness, and understanding for people who hold views with which I have been in deep disagreement.”

Possibilities for reconciliation occurred among both the visiting Americans and the Israelis and Palestinians. It was in three words—an astonishing success. Much was due to Leah’s skills and deep commitment to the spirit of the process.

Now—back to process. Compassionate Listening is adaptable to any conflict. The listening requires a particular attitude. It is non-judgmental, non-adversarial, and seeks the truth of the person questioned. It also seeks to see through any masks of hostility and fear to the sacredness of the individual and to discern the wounds suffered by all

parties. Listeners do not defend themselves, but accept what others say as their perceptions. By listening, they validate the other's right to their perceptions.

I'm not talking about listening with the 'human ear'. I'm talking about discerning. To discern means to perceive something hidden or obscure. Like the potential for good-will in hostile people. We must listen with our 'spiritual' or psychological ear. This is very different from deciding in advance who is right and who is wrong, and then seeking to rectify it. And, it's very hard to listen to people we feel are misleading, if not lying. Hard to listen to such different memories of the same event. Hard!

Two definitions of reconciliation were used. The first is by one of my teachers, Thich Nhat Hanh, Vietnamese Buddhist Monk, teacher, poet, and peacemaker. "If we align ourselves with one side or the other, we will lose our chance to work for peace. Reconciliation is to understand both sides. First we go to one side and describe the suffering being endured by the other side. Then we return to the other side and repeat the process."<sup>1</sup> Someday I hope Compassionate Listening teams will go wherever there is a conflict, listen to both sides, and work for reconciliation, I believe this is our next step.

Adam Curle, another of my teachers, and Senior Quaker mediator from England says: "We must work for harmony wherever we are, to bring together that which is sundered by fear, hatred, injustice or any conditions which divide us. I begin with a concept of human nature based on the belief in a divine element within each of us... We must remember, this good exists in those we oppose."<sup>2</sup>

There are similar traditions in Judaism and Islam. Michael Lerner in his book *Jewish Renewal*, reminds us that "Compassion must be extended to the enemies of the Jewish people...(for) they,

too, are created in the image of god, and the distortions which lead them to wish us ill are the product of a world of pain and cruelty that shaped them in this particular way."<sup>3</sup> From Islam comes this teaching by Abderrazak Guessoum, Vice Rector of the Great Mosque of Paris. "...Islam is tolerance, service, and mercy.. The Koran rejects all violence. Even Jihad... 'Holy war'...refers to the struggle of every Muslim to stay on the path of obedience to the will of god as revealed in the Koran."<sup>4</sup>

I believe the call is for us to see that within all people is the mystery, Spirit, God. It is within the Afrikaaner and the Africans, the Americans, Israelis, Palestinians everyone. By Compassionate Listening we may awaken it and thus learn the partial truth the other is carrying.

Finally, I treasure this quotation from the American poet Longfellow: "If we could read the secret history of our enemies, we should find in each person's life sorrow and suffering enough to disarm all hostility."<sup>5</sup>

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Gene Hoffman expands on this theme in her 1995 Pendle Hill Pamphlet, *No Royal Road to Reconciliation* (Pendle Hill Publications, 338 Plush Mill Road, Wallingford, Pa. -- 800-742-3150)

### Notes and Bibliography

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2. Adam Curle, *True Justice*, Quaker Home Service, London, 1981
3. Michael Lerner, *Jewish Renewal*, Harper Perennial, 1994
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**2**

***Listening to the Children of Abraham***

**Gene Knudsen Hoffman  
introduces the work of Leah Green  
and the Compassionate Listening Project**

In the spring of 1996 I received a phone call from Leah Green, who was then Director of the Middle East Program for Earthstewards Network. She wanted to talk with me about my writing on Compassionate Listening, a process in which people open up to new thoughts and ideas when they are carefully listened to. Sometimes they even change their opinions as they learn to listen to themselves. Over the years I have doggedly kept visiting the Middle East, pursuing this process. Leah invited me to come to Israel and Palestine in November of 1996 with a group dedicated to Compassionate Listening. It was to be followed by a similar journey there with American Jewish leaders in 1997. Thus began our work together

I found these journeys to be deeply moving. Some who came were not sympathetic to the Palestinians, and after they had listened to both sides they discovered there was truth and error on both sides, and that reconciliation was not only possible, but a necessity. A transformation had taken place.

Leah has been dedicated to the development of Compassionate Listening. Since then, she and her excellent trainer, Carol Hwoshinsky, have developed it beyond my original thinking. Their work has received a remarkable recognition and this October, 2001, we have been invited to listen in Lebanon and Syria. The latest development, came in July of 2001 when we were invited to take it to Germany in October, 2002, and teach Compassionate Listening to both Germans and Jews so they

can develop new and trusting relationships.

In Leah's process she has been taking Jewish and now Palestinian Leaders from the United States so both could better understand the situation. There is a stunning video of a Compassionate Listening delegation called Children of Abraham which is available from the Compassionate Listening Project, and they have just received funding to produce a new one! The key ingredient is the delegates go together to learn what's happening and seek the truths of both sides, recognizing that on both sides are wounded people who suffer and have grievances.

Leah Green and those who work with her are breaking new ground and many new projects of Compassionate Listening are seeding the world.

**3**

***Compassionate Listening in the Middle East***

**Leah Green**



I've been passionately involved with the Israeli - Palestinian conflict for the past 22 years. I started leading citizen delegations to Israel the West Bank and Gaza in 1990 in order to bring Jews and Palestinians and others together to break stereotypes and work together for peace and justice.

At some point, I made a clear decision to work for reconciliation, and the delegations evolved into the Compassionate

Listening Project. We also hold Compassionate Listening workshops now for Israelis and Palestinians. Our project is based on Gene Knudsen Hoffman's pioneering work. She's been working to bring Compassionate Listening into the peace movement for the last 20 years. One of the first things I read of Gene's was:

"Sometime ago I recognized that terrorists were people who had grievances, who thought their grievances would never be heard and certainly never addressed. Later, I saw that all parties to every conflict were wounded, and that at the heart of every act of violence is an unhealed wound."

Many Palestinians have asked me over the years, "How could the Jewish people, who have suffered so greatly, do such harm to another people?" The answer, of course, lies buried in the question... the abused child who grows up to become an abusive parent. It's hard to miss the wounding of the Jewish people. Collectively, Jews are still locked into the victim role. And when you're a victim it's hard to see how you could be oppressing another. It's identical to the abusive parent who still identifies as the victim. We have to remember that all parties to a conflict are wounded.

Now, unfortunately, the Palestinians are undergoing the same cycle of victimization. Dr. Eyad Sarraj, a prominent psychologist in Gaza, told us a story last year. He was put in Palestinian prison for his open criticism of Arafat and the Palestinian Authority's human rights record. The large, central prison used to be an Israeli prison, and his Palestinian interrogators had all once been prisoners there, themselves, in the Israeli prison. While sitting in his cell one day, Dr. Sarraj overheard another Palestinian being interrogated. The prisoner wasn't answering and the interrogator became increasingly loud and angry, until he suddenly erupted,

screaming and shouting in Hebrew, which of course was the language of his torturers. So again... At the heart of every act of violence is an unhealed wound.

The first premise for Compassionate Listeners is that we must acknowledge that every party to a conflict is suffering. And that our job as peacemakers is to hear their grievances and find ways to tell each side about the humanity and the suffering of the other. We have to find ways to bring conflicting parties to listen to one another — not to dialogue at first, not to argue or debate. Just to listen. We must drop any arrogance of thinking that we know how it is for another.

You might think listening is an easy thing to do. It's not! One of the most difficult listening sessions I've ever had was when 20 of us Compassionate Listeners presented our work to a large audience of Israelis at Jerusalem's prestigious Van Leer Institute. The audience was completely mixed — from far right to far left. Audience members attacked each other viciously - us too - if they didn't like what was being said. We were modeling Compassionate Listening really well — we had been practicing for two weeks at that point and we were getting pretty good at it. A woman stood up half way through and said, "You know, we Israelis have to admit that listening is a very radical concept in Israel, but I think these people are onto something." And there was actually a great deal of transformation that evening.

Compassionate Listening is the first step of a peace-building process. I believe in it deeply. I know it works because it has worked for me and those who've participated in the project. I have found compassion for some Israeli and Palestinian extremists. It doesn't mean I condone their actions, but the point is: How can we sit in judgement of someone whose life we have not lived?

There are critical ways in which Israelis and Palestinians don't see one another. While Israelis find it difficult to see Palestinians as victims, Palestinians find it hard to see Israelis' sense of vulnerability and fear. They see Israeli tanks, helicopters, missiles. They know Israel is the 4th largest military power. But if they had the opportunity to listen to Israelis as we have they'd experience their incredible sense of powerlessness and fear.

Israelis have failed to grasp how patient Palestinians have been with the Oslo peace process. Palestinians bought into Oslo with the goal of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza by the end of a 5-year interim period. Here it is seven years later, and they've watched each year as more and more of their lands have been confiscated to expand Israeli settlements. The new Palestinian Intifadah (uprising) is a revolt against Israeli occupation, against settlements. We were all predicting it 3 years ago. You could see it coming. They are enraged and feel they have nothing more to lose.

Peace-building is one person, one heart at a time. It's a slow process. And it's the only way. A paper piece — an agreement between governments for example, can happen literally overnight. But peace between people comes slowly, from relationship building.

It's no coincidence that the Israelis and Palestinians whose relationships have remained strong through this crisis are the ones who have worked to build relationships. I've read articles in the press these past months quoting both Israelis and Palestinians who are bitter that business associates they thought were friends haven't called to check in and make sure they are safe. They feel disappointed and betrayed.

But groups like Yitzhak Frankenthal's, whose remarkable Family Forum brings together bereaved Israeli and Palestinian parents who have lost their children to this

conflict, are stronger than ever- even today. What's the difference? Groups like Frankenthal's have sat in each others homes. They've met each others children, and they've shared and acknowledged each other's pain. They've reversed the process of dehumanization.

I would like to see us create places here in the U.S. where Jews and Palestinians could come together to learn from one another while making a public statement for peace... like the peace tents that sprung up around Israel. We need to hear each others' stories. There are successful dialogue groups across the country that are changing the human relationship and we need these in every city.

I have a vision: that one day, Palestinians will come by the thousands to the checkpoints, not with rocks but with candles or even flowers. And the international media will broadcast the mass nonviolent movement of the Palestinians and it will capture the imagination of the entire world. And Israelis will see that they don't have to be afraid.

Jews and Palestinians are cousins — we're Children of Abraham, and I believe we'll find our way back to one another. Some of us already have. We have to be willing to listen, to know that our truth is not the truth. We have to be willing to say I'm sorry. And if we want to work for peace and justice, we need to work with compassion.

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Leah Green is the founder of the Compassionate Listening Project: [www.compassionatelistening.org](http://www.compassionatelistening.org) which leads citizen delegations to the Middle East. Ms. Green can be reached at [office@compassionatelistening.org](mailto:office@compassionatelistening.org). Please see the following page for information about the video, Children of Abraham, which documents the dialogue process described in this article. This article was first published in the January/February 2001 issue of HopeDance Magazine.

## Children of Abraham

A documentary video produced by Leah Green and Peter Hwoschinsky



"Children of Abraham compellingly documents the profound possibilities within a society in which friends and enemies alike attune themselves to the voice of the other. It should serve as an urgent reminder of how badly we transgress and how much we forfeit when we dismiss the power of listening as too simple. This is not a promotion of a naive quick fix, but rather a call to the wrenching but essential heroism that Jewish tradition says inheres in making one's enemy into one's friend."

*Rabbi Gordon Tucker*

In January of 1998, twenty-two Jewish Americans traveled to Israel and the Palestinian territories as part of Mid East Citizen Diplomacy's Compassionate Listening Project. *Children of Abraham* is a 34-minute broadcast-quality documentary which chronicles this journey.

The film follows the Jewish participants as they visit with and listen to Israelis and Palestinians - from leaders to refugees, and seek to understand the complexities of religious, political and human rights issues. Participants include Jewish leaders and professionals ranging from secular to observant.

This stunning documentary introduces the Compassionate Listening reconciliation model, and humanizes each Israeli and Palestinian portrayed. The film delivers a compelling message that conflict can be transformed through the simple act of listening.

The following Israelis and Palestinians are featured:

- **Fatima al-Assad**, Palestinian refugee and High School Teacher, Kalandia Camp;
- **Dr. Haidar Abdul Shafi**, Founding member, Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and Director, Palestinian Red Crescent Society (the Palestinian Red Cross);
- **Maen Ereikat**, Palestinian Government Representative, Orient House, East Jerusalem;
- **Rabbi Menachem Froman**, Founder, Israeli Settlers' Movement and Religious Advisor to the Israeli Knesset;
- **Amos Gvirtz**, Israeli Peace Activist, Kibbutz Shefayim;
- **Eve Harrow**, Israeli Resident and Town Council Representative, Efrat, West Bank;
- **Yossi Klein HaLevi**, Journalist, The Jerusalem Report;
- **Yehezkel Landau**, Co-director, Open House Peace Center, Ramle, Israel;
- **Dr. Iyad Sarraj**, Director, Gaza Community Mental Health Programme and Director, Palestinian Independent Commission on Human Rights;
- **Sheikh Ahmad Yassein**, Spiritual Leader of HAMAS - the Islamic Resistance Movement.

"The politicians and the generals must ultimately resolve the issue, but only when the people on opposite sides speak their feelings, hear the other and so be heard -- will the healing begin. Only through compassionate listening is there any hope for the intergenerational hatred to begin to abate. In this moving film, we understand how restraint and humility are required of the compassionate listener, though not an abandonment of his or her strongly felt emotions."

*Blu Greenberg*

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Price of Video: \$29.95. Available from:

Compassionate Listening Project  
P.O. Box 17, Indianola, Washington 98432 USA  
Telephone: (360) 297-2280 Fax: (360) 297-6563

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4

***Working for Reconciliation  
Under the Northern Lights***

**Gene Knudsen Hoffman  
introduces the work of Cynthia Monroe  
and the *Alaskans Listening to Alaskans  
about Subsistence Project***

Cynthia Monroe, a Quaker in Anchorage, Alaska, was the second person who called me wanting to use Compassionate Listening as a way of responding to a conflict. There was a conflict in Alaska over the uses of hunting and fishing resources. Alaska Native and non-Native people who rely on wild food for subsistence and the professional and recreational hunters and fishers are treated differently by federal law and Alaska state law, creating a complicated situation that has become increasingly more heated over the past decade. Food supplies are precarious in the far North — there are no supermarkets, and supplies flown into remote villages are extremely expensive.

Alaskan Quakers had heard of Compassionate Listening and wanted to try it. Cynthia Monroe called me. She, like Leah Green, is beautiful, bright, and understood the program immediately. (It is part of our Quaker tradition to listen carefully and caringly to both sides of a conflict. This was the process Quakers used in the 1800's, well before the Civil War, to persuade their members who had slaves to free them.)

Cynthia had worked with Alaska Native people, and Alaskans were trying many legal approaches to resolve the subsistence conflict, from the State Legislature to lawsuits, and still the strife continued. She had heard of the Mid-East program and called me to ask if I could come to

Anchorage to train a group of eager listeners. When I arrived they had townspeople, members of the Athabascan and Yup'ik peoples, and Alaskan Quakers. They, too, were responsive learners, and I went back a second time to do more training. and then they went on their own.

For two years the team worked with small groups of urban and rural Alaskans separately, both Native and non-Native. They listened to each person's story. In January, 2001, Native villagers and non-Native., urban-based hunters and fishers came together and were able to listen to one another. As a result they came to agreement on seven core values. The report of this encounter is at the end of the next chapter.

For two years a dozen people have listened to both sides and now the participants so far want to continue the process so they can know each other better. and so they can address some of the more difficult issues in the subsistence conflict. The listening dozen have agreed to do it.

But, there are new challenges facing the Compassionate Listening group, which wishes to widen the circle of Alaskans being listened to, to address the most contentious aspects of the conflicts in the compassionate listening context, and to carry the message of what it is learning to the Alaskan community as a whole.

Meanwhile, Cynthia and her husband Jim had a baby girl last April who is named Néve Sustina. Cynthia took four months of maternity leave. Cynthia explained to me that Alaskans don't work at many tasks other than fishing and gathering food when it is warm and light outside, so she and the listeners will take up old and new listening in Autumn of 2001.

## 5

### *Compassionate Listening as Practiced in Alaska*

Cynthia Monroe



*These notes on Compassionate Listening were prepared for, and from the experience of **Alaskans Listening to Alaskans About Subsistence**, a Compassionate Listening project of Alaska Quakers and the American Friends Service Committee in Seattle. This project was founded by Gene Knudsen Hoffman.*

*It may be important to keep our specific context in mind while reading this section: that is, an ad-hoc group of peace workers coordinated by a single staff person to address a specific conflict over allocation and use of natural resources in Alaska.*

#### **What is Compassionate Listening?**

Quaker peace activist Gene Knudsen Hoffman, who has pioneered Compassionate Listening as a peacemaking process, likes to observe that “an enemy is one whose story we haven’t heard.” This is the idea that once you truly hear another’s story, and understand their grievances and sufferings, you will be unable to consider that person as an enemy. You may disagree with them utterly, or find their actions abhorrent, but even so you will see them as a human being.

Strangely, it doesn’t always take listening in both directions for this understanding to

run both ways. Once someone perceives that you see them as a unique human being, they will usually regard you the same way. This can open up tremendous opportunities for reconciliation and peace.

For Gene, as for many others, this is a spiritual practice, which for Quakers stems from the testimony of seeking “that of God” in every person. But Compassionate Listening is not solely a Quaker pursuit, and it does not promote or require any particular spiritual leaning on the part of those involved. This emerging discipline is being carried forward by (in person and with learning from) many faiths and secular fields.

#### **Thich Nhat Hanh’s Three Steps to Peace**

Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh outlines the three steps to peace as:

- First, listen to the sufferings of all sides;
- Second, relate the sufferings of all sides to one another; and
- Third, bring all sides together so that they may hear one another.

This is the essential map of Compassionate Listening. In *the Alaskans Listening to Alaskans About Subsistence* project, we have been very concerned about the second step, because part of the problem seems to be in people interpreting one culture to another and vice-versa. [As explained in the preceding chapter, there are serious conflicts in Alaska between the indigenous peoples who fish and hunt for subsistence and non-Native fishers and hunters who are part of the sport, recreation and commercial segments of Alaskan society.]

We did not want to exacerbate this, nor paint ourselves as experts or go-betweens. Technology has come to our aid, and video is proving to be a very good way for people from different backgrounds and points of

view to be introduced to one another in the middle step.

**How is Compassionate Listening different from mediation?**

Compassionate Listening should not be confused with mediation or conflict resolution. While it can mediate or resolve conflict, as an approach, it seeks to address the roots of discord, not necessarily its results. *Compassionate Listening directs itself not toward finding just resolution of conflict, but toward reconciliation* of those involved, trusting that they will find their own, or will initiate a process toward, resolution and justice. Of course, good mediation involves compassionate listening. The main difference is that Compassionate Listening as a practice is not directed toward an outcome beyond reconciliation. We go into Compassionate Listening with the understanding that true, lasting resolution is built on a foundation of mutual understanding, respect, even love.

Compassionate Listening seeks to establish this foundation by listening deeply to those involved in conflict, trusting that many people, when they truly feel heard, will be curious to hear the experiences of those with whom they have disagreed. There is a clear role for third-party listeners here, because very few of us are able to be listeners in situations where we ourselves are passionately involved.

Mainstream American culture generally does not teach listening skills. We function on a confrontational model of debate and reasoned argument, rather than on a model of listening carefully to all and arriving at understanding and synthesis.

Our paradigm is, “the best idea will win,” not, “everyone has something to contribute to the best idea—which is probably something no one has yet thought of.” It is important to note that both of these approaches are a search for truth, they are simply different approaches.

The combative approach will invariably leave someone behind, and may well sow seeds of future open conflict.

**How is Compassionate Listening carried out?**

This is a discipline in the making, and there are already a number of different models. Usually more than one listener is

involved, in a interview situation or panel situation with the speaker or speakers. There are varying degrees of formality to Compassionate Listening events, but they have in common that they are not venues for discussion or argument, but for listening. Speakers do not respond to what another speaker has said but relate their own experience.

Listeners do not contradict or respond with judgement, and limit their questions to open-ended questions to draw out more information or to make sure that they have heard correctly. Often one listener takes the role of moderator, and the listeners may agree ahead of time that only the moderator will respond to the speakers. Great attention is paid to the principle that attentive silence can be more welcoming of what a speaker needs to express than even the most open verbalized question.

**Learning Listening Skills**

So how can those of us who would like to be formal listeners (or simply to employ better listening in our lives) learn to listen compassionately in a culture which continually drowns out listening skills?

There are a number of resources for learning listening skills, all of which can be applied in the context of Compassionate Listening. Psychologists and counselors not only use good listening skills but often teach them to their clients, and many of the principles and exercises used to convey them can be found in popular literature on communication and relationships.

As with learning anything, observation, analysis, and practice will take you a long way. Hopefully, you have experienced being listened to at some time in your life when you really felt heard. You can learn a lot about what constitutes compassionate listening by thinking about when you do and don't feel heard.

*Some examples...*

A few "don'ts" in Compassionate Listening: Interruptions, advice, judgement or judgmental questions, are all barriers to true listening. In the context of friendship, the listener relating a similar story can help you feel heard or can feel dismissive or as though you've lost the stage. In formal listening, recounting "that reminds me of" stories is out.

The "do's" can be harder, especially when cross-cultural communication is involved. In general, it is important to learn enough about the other culture to avoid being rude, and it is also important not to worry too much, with or without culture as a factor. Some people find that nods and eye contact help them feel heard, others find this body language distracting and prefer to be listened to by someone who is very still.

The bad news is that it is extremely hard to train yourself to tailor your body language to someone else's preference, even if you know what that is (for instance, knowing that direct eye contact will be insulting to your speaker can help, but trying to keep much more in mind at the same time will effectively keep you from listening).

The good news is twofold: First, sincerity is the most crucial factor. Most people are able to accept a broad range of styles in a listener, provided that your attention is truly present and directed toward them. Second, this is one of the strengths of having a number of listeners present—speakers tend to pay most attention to the listeners who are giving them the cues that make them

feel most comfortable, and will not give weight to the other cues in the group.

Compassionate Listening focuses on experience, validating each person's experience regardless of his or her convictions. Compassionate Listening hears and accepts convictions, seeking to let go of personal reaction and bringing attention always back to personal experience.

We may, once a trusting relationship is established, indicate that our own experience, or that of others, has led us to different convictions. If we do this, it is vital to reiterate at the same time that we hear the speaker's experience and the convictions that come from it. We must not elaborate our own position! If asked to do so, we might invite a conversation outside the context of the listening session or interview, explaining that we do not wish to make any secret of our own beliefs but that right now we are trying to concentrate and to better understand where the speaker is coming from. We might then ask an open-ended question about the speaker's experience.

**In Compassionate Listening, we do not seek to change those who share with us, we seek only to love them.** The more people are loved, the more freedom they have to respond to their own inner truth—which may or may not prompt movement. The only change we can be assured of going into it is that if we truly listen to our fellow human beings, we ourselves will be changed. **As a listener, you are taking on the role not of judge or mediator, but of healer.**

**Where do grievances and sufferings come into it?** Everyone experiences pain, and pain is a great teacher. When we suffer, we also learn. But what we learn depends greatly on the reaction to our pain that we meet as children. As adults, chances are that we will internally and unconsciously give ourselves the same reaction to painful situations that we encountered growing up. Because all of us were raised by humans

with human faults and limitations, we all have at least some experiences from which we have never healed.

**What happens when people experience pain?** Listeners do not demand or direct that healing, and we come to the task knowing that our perception of what would constitute healing for the speaker may be wildly off—indeed, it may be we ourselves who most need to be healed.

**What are the results of Compassionate Listening?** People who are involved with Compassionate Listening projects report them to be transforming experiences—usually for both the listeners and speakers. Those who have been polarized by or are deeply entrenched in an issue have the opportunity to be seen as uniquely important human beings, and often make use of the context to learn more about those on opposing sides. Thus, those in conflict have the chance to learn about one another as human beings and potential friends. For listeners, their understanding of the complexities of issues addressed are broadened and deepened. Their preconceptions are often shattered, their abilities to listen and be present are challenged and expanded. They find new understandings of themselves and others. Often listeners remark at what a reciprocal experience they have felt, despite only taking the role of listener. As for direct results in areas of present conflict, averting future violence, and potentially helping the political process to be more truly democratic, we'll wait and see...

**A Word of Caution: When not to get involved with Compassionate Listening**

*What would happen if a listener responded negatively—even on the level of conviction and opinion—to what a speaker says?*

This would be experienced by the speaker as further rejection of experience and of self. Instead of healing and room for growth, you'll wind up with re-injury, confusion,

betrayal. Isolation of the speaker and further entrenchment may result.

Therefore, **you must not try to take on the Compassionate Listening role in any public way around an issue where your own experience is too fresh or painful.** You will get hurt, and you will hurt those with whom you set out to build bridges.

If you feel in your heart that a certain person or group is unreachable, evil, or beyond hope, DO NOT become involved in compassionate listening work with that group or individual! If you are already involved and find you feel this way, excuse yourself from the situation, or from the project.

It is perfectly all right to feel this way, and vitally important to recognize when you do. It may mean you need to rest and come back to it later, or it may mean that the work you are called to with this particular issue is not compassionate listening, but more direct activism. Consciousness-raising or working with other activists against the effects of those convictions that disturb you may be much more constructive work for you to do. You might wish to be involved in the Compassionate Listening project as a speaker, rather than a listener. No one of us can be a listener all the time or on every issue.

*If you would like to know more about **Alaskans Listening to Alaskans**, please contact Cynthia Monroe at address shown below. Also, please see project update letter on next page.*

Cynthia Monroe, Director  
 Alaskans Listening to Alaskans about Subsistence  
 1783 Morningtide Court, Anchorage, AK 99501  
 (907) 278-2582 -- [altas@alaska.net](mailto:altas@alaska.net)

March, 2001 -- UPDATE

An Open Letter to All who work for Peace

From: Alaskans Listening to Alaskans  
about Subsistence (a project of the  
American Friends Service  
Committee)

Like many, Alaska Quakers have been sad to see bitterness and division as our State struggles with the current issues surrounding subsistence uses of fish and game. Together with the American Friends Service Committee, we formed a Compassionate Listening project to gather small groups of Alaskans to learn about the experiences and values at the heart of the subsistence debate. Founded by Gene Knudsen Hoffman, and following her work, this expanding group -- listeners and participants alike -- has challenged itself to hear the human story of those with differing views. By listening fully to each other we hoped to find values we all hold in common.

We began with many meetings of either rural or urban groups. Then, from January 26-28, 2001, in Fairbanks, we brought participants from different cultures together. The two dozen urban and rural hunters and fishers who participated from Anchorage, Buckland, and Fairbanks found hope and common ground in the following:

- As Alaskans, we are stewards of a remarkable natural bounty. We share a sense of wonder, respect, and responsibility for the future of Alaska's wild places and rich gifts of fish and wildlife.
- Through our Alaskan heritage of hunting, fishing, trapping and gathering we are part of wild Alaska. We value respectful and sustainable use of wildlife, fish, and other resources.

- Each of us has a personal responsibility to learn about and understand human involvement in Alaska's land and animals.
- What we learn from elders and written history, families and communities creates our personal values. We want to teach new generations to hunt and fish with humility, to use resources without waste, and to share foods generously.
- Many Americans lead lifestyles which distance them from the natural world. Direct experience on the land teaches us about our dependence on our environment and strengthens our commitment to protect our home for generations to come.
- Alaskans can work together for sound management of hunting and fishing. Local people have deep understanding of resources and harvest patterns in their areas. Those who travel to hunt and fish have a wide view of Alaskan resources. Biologists contribute scientific tools for studying wildlife and its changes. We support advisory bodies in which local people, other Alaskans and resource managers use all these sources of knowledge to reach shared decisions.
- We are heartened by what we are learning from one another. Both our similarities and our differences can be opportunities for deeper understanding. We look forward to the questions we take with us from here.

Two dozen Alaskans is a small number. And there are difficult questions which the project has not yet explored. Yet the participants so far did not know they had so much in common. We hope that over time, more and more Alaskans from different backgrounds can build understanding and trust by listening to what we each care about the most.

Cynthia Monroe, Director

*Lesson Plans for a Course  
in Compassionate Listening*

**Gene Knudsen Hoffman**

**Introduction : An Evocative Approach to  
Teaching and Learning**

I am delighted to put into print these very personal lesson plans that have evolved over the last twenty-one years as I have explored the practice of compassionate listening with many groups and communities. And, I must add, the approach presented here is so unusual in comparison to normal teaching methods that it may need a little explaining.

Compassionate listening is a gentle and powerful way of intervening in conflicts. The goal of compassionate listening is not directly to resolve a conflict, but rather to awaken the hearts of the various conflict participants. If the conflict participants can come to see one another as human and to feel one another's sorrows, we advocates of compassionate listening believe, they will be able to resolve their conflicts. Without such deep, mutual empathy between the parties in conflict, conflict resolution efforts often result only in temporary truces, soon broken.

The process of arranging empathic encounters between conflict participants makes strong emotional demands on potential peace-evokers. Rather than pushing, enticing, threatening, or persuading, peace-evokers using compassionate listening have to create by their own centeredness a kind of forgiving and accepting emotional space into which the conflict participants can enter. Compassionate listening is an effort to be non-judgemental in a conflict, and to help each side be more compassionate with the other side. The listeners try to do this by embodying more compassion themselves. Compassionate Listeners

invite, they do not compel. As Gandhi put it, "Be the change you want to see."

Although each of these lessons contains inspiring quotes, the purpose of the compassionate listening training sessions is not simply to pass on inspiring information. It is about helping people learn to hold their own emotional ground in the middle of intense conflict situations. If we leap to the aid of whomever we see as the injured party in a conflict, we will not be of much help to the conflict participants in creating a new relationship.

Compassionate listeners bear gentle witness to the often painful feelings of conflict participants, and to the participants' struggles with some of the great issues of human life: forgiveness versus vengeance, self-interest versus generosity, and so on. Thus, we listeners need to be reliably in touch with our own feelings, and need to have given some thought to these kinds of issues, lest we be overwhelmed by the power of what we are called to observe. Each of the following lesson plans presents challenging content (about compassion, hatred, forgiveness, etc.) and then invites the class participants to listen to one another as each works to clarify thoughts and feelings about that topic.

I hope this kind of preparation will allow us to embody more of the patience, compassion and creative openness that the conflict participants need. And I hope these lessons will continue to evolve as more and more people around the world are drawn to practice compassionate listening.

Finally, in order to learn how to gracefully hold and discuss the pain and conflicts of others, this type of training asks people to share some (not all) of their own pain and conflicts. And, in order for people to feel safe about such sharing, I recommend that each training group agree to hold all its shared personal content as confidential -- not to be discussed outside the training group.

## Session One: COMPASSION

Love has many faces in this culture. The form we're considering today is Compassion -- which is described as *"to bear suffering with another; feeling for and understanding misery and suffering of others; recognizing that both victim and perpetrator are suffering people and deserve our compassion."*

This is a challenging request of anyone and it's a rocky path to walk. But, it seems to offer a new richness to one's life. First of all it was the kind of love which it appears was recommended to us in Jesus' admonition to "love your enemies; bless them that hate you; do good to them that spitefully use you."

It appears to be counter to most of our reasoning; counter (some say) to our nature, indeed, against it. However, if we follow these truths we will, in ancient words, "save our souls;" save ourselves from a maelstrom of attack and counter attack -- for we will see how quickly, in wars, we come to resemble one another.

So, we're going to explore whether or not we can or should practice compassion today -- for it is, of course, the basis for Compassionate Listening.

The process for these sessions is that I will read a quotation from some of the deepest thinkers on the session topic. Then I will give you my questions about them for you to answer. Each of you answers these questions in your own way, from your own wisdom. This is a participatory class. I don't have the answer. We will learn from one another as we each present our insights. We do not argue or debate each other's contributions. Rather, we listen and take what we like and leave the rest. If you don't like a quotation feel free to say so. We're all new to this. We'll be uncertain, say some things we may find later, we didn't mean. But everything will be valuable and bread for this journey.

### Quotes & Questions for Discussion:

1. *"We have to have a deep, patient compassion for the fears of people, for the fears and irrational mania of those who hate or condemn us."* Thomas Merton

- **Why should we have a "deep patient compassion for the fears of people."?**
- **Are there people you know for whom you wish you had a deep patient compassion? What are they like? Why do you wish this?**
- **What might you do for them?**

2. *"To retain contact with the oppressors neither condones their actions, nor weakens support for and commitment to the oppressed. To work for liberation of the oppressed can be helped by communicating with the oppressors, and may free the oppressors from the degradation by which they are trapped. It cannot be realized unless there is contact with them."* Adam Curle, Quaker international mediator

- **What does this bring up for you?**
- **What do you think he means by "the degradation by which they are trapped?"**
- **How might we free the oppressors from the "degradation?"**

3. Call me by my True Name – an excerpt from a poem by Thich Nhat Hanh:

*Please call me by my true name,  
so I can wake up,  
and so the door of my heart can be left open,  
the door of compassion.*

- **Bring to mind a time when you were an oppressor. Describe it.**
- **What hurts or, what unfulfilled needs were embedded in being an oppressor in this circumstance? Why did you do it?**
- **What have you learned from this exercise?**

## Session Two -- HATRED

Acknowledging hatred in ourselves is very difficult. Most of us don't want to do it. We often use less violent terms to describe it. We "dislike, can't stand, don't understand." Yet, it's obvious that people behave as though they hate some people, want to and do. For we find way of destroying them by bomb, sanctions, capital punishment, abandonment, and other ways.

Other words for hatred are "loathe, despise, detest." These attitudes don't make it easier, but they are powerfully descriptive.

Now we are going to explore hatred and what we might do about it. I think we hate what we fear, and we're going to approach it as it seems to exist in ourselves and others.

### Quotes & Questions for Discussion:

1. *"Perhaps everything terrible is, in it's deepest being, something that needs our love."*

Ranier Maria Rilke.

- **Can you think of someone or something terrible that might need your love?**
- **In rethinking this today, what might you do?**
- **If you could cross your barrier of fear and hatred, what might you do today?**

2. *"In a situation where there is an oppressor and an oppressed, the natural tendency might well be to feel such sympathy with the oppressed that we cannot avoid revulsion at the oppressor. This, however is contrary to peace-making based on hope for reconciliation. As Paolo Freire wrote: 'The people who appear to be responsible for the oppression are maimed by what they are doing.' They must be rescued from the total situation."*

Adam Curle, Senior Quaker International Mediator

- **What might enable you to listen to people you consider oppressors -- like Hitler, Saddam Hussein, or Slobodan Milosovic?**
- **Would you need to know how the person was maimed, or would you simply assume it from his behavior? Any other way?**
- **Could you create a 'safe place' for them?**

3. Alice Miller, author of the book *Paths of Life*, wrote this of hatred: *"I see it as a consequence of rage and despair that cannot be consciously felt by a child who has been neglected and maltreated before he or she has learned to speak. As long as this anger... remains unconscious or disavowed, it cannot be dissipated. It can only be taken out on oneself or alleged enemies."*

- **If punishment, jail or capital punishment does not make people better, what might?**

4. In Buddhism there is a saying: *"If you have an enemy, give him or her a gift."*

- **Can you think of a gift you might give someone you know personally who has harmed you?**
- **What gift might you give to a public figure like Hitler, Milosovic, or Saddam Hussein? (Hitler, as did Sadaam Hussein, are reported to have had exceptionally brutal childhoods.)**



### Session Three -- DENIAL

Denial seems to be a fixed position for many Americans. It may be for Europeans, Asians — and lots of others, too. Since I know my culture best, I can say, without qualifications, that we suffer from this systematic ignoring of our own problematic actions.

I wonder if being “number one” in the world has anything to do with it. If being a leader in the world, if having been right about many things, we’re afraid to admit that we might ever have made any mistakes?

And, we’ve been in denial about so much. We ignored the brutal details of slavery (millions died), and presented “sanitized” versions of slavery in many of our history books. We’ve gloried in saying we’re a peaceful people when we have the biggest store of weapons in the world, and we’ve fought many wars, beginning with the Revolutionary one. We continue to impose economic sanctions on Iraq for various geopolitical reasons and try to ignore the catastrophic consequences this has had on the children of Iraq.

Charlotte Kasl, author of the book *Many Roads, One Journey*, calls denial psychic numbing, which simply means being out of touch with reality, our own and the world’s. No matter what causes it it’s critically important to get over it. Denial is a deliberate “not seeing” of one’s own actions, a peculiar way of lying both to others and to ourselves.

#### Quotes & Questions for Discussion:

1. Denial begins in small ways in everyday life. Let’s look at a few things we might do about it.

- What do you answer when someone asks “How are you?”
- Can you think of something to answer that isn’t “fine”, and follow it with a “How are you?”.
- What might you say instead of “fine” or “great”? Please give me an example.

2. We’ve long denied the effects of having practiced slavery in our nation. This wounded the people we enslaved and ourselves. We held tragically wrong ideas about the equality of human beings, and the value of people different from ourselves.

- How important is it to you for a country to be able to admit its mistakes? Why?
- Do you find the legacy of slavery has affected your life? If so, how? And have you done anything about it? If so, what? If not, what might you do?

3. How much do you feel we should apologize to the people we have harmed in the course of history: the Native Americans, African Americans, Asians and all the others?

- How would you go about it?
- In what way would doing this change you?
- Would it make society better? How?
- Do you feel we should make amends and restitution? If so, why and how? Or if not, why not?

4. Each culture has its own areas of denial waiting to be explored. As a U.S. citizen, I am particularly concerned about the wars we’ve participated in, capital punishment, overthrowing governments we don’t like through acts of violence, the difficulties we have caused for countries like Cuba and Nicaragua by seeking to destroy their independent institutions, their economies, and their leaders.

- How important is it to you for a country to be able to admit its mistakes? Why?
- Where do you feel we should make public apologies, and ask for forgiveness?
- How do you think a listening group could be developed in your community that would make a practice of Compassionate Listening to public conflicts such as racial difficulties, capital punishment, abortion, affordable housing, and health care for all ages?

## Session Four -- FORGIVENESS

I think the experiment of Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa is one of those incredible shifts in history. For me, it is breathtaking and astonishing. Whoever thought people could truthfully confess to heinous crimes and be forgiven by the other side? That is what happened in some of the cases in South Africa. Who could have dreamed people could acknowledge they had murdered and tortured others and amnesty would be declared for them?

This has happened in South Africa in some cases, and it is an amazing adventure and an example I feel we need to follow. For, confession is a healing process -- it heals minds, bodies, and perhaps souls. It often enables the perpetrator to see the suffering he or she has caused, to feel remorse, to make amends and experience some kind of reconciliation. And, sometimes, the victim has a shift in perception of the perpetrator, recognizes his woundedness and quest for healing.

As Desmond Tutu tells us in his book *There Is No Future Without Forgiveness*, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was far from perfect, far from resolving terrible crimes, far from developing a society without hate and rancor. But, it was a step. It was a healing process. And, knowing the truth of what happened to friends and family is a comfort after one has lived long with unknowing.

Now, we're going to explore forgiving others and asking for forgiveness. My belief is there is no possible peace without reconciliation -- which means bringing together those whose relationships have been severed or broken. There can be treaties without reconciliation but history shows us they do not bring peace. They often bring resentment which bursts into

anger and ultimately the long-tried "solution" which does not bring reconciliation: war.

In Desmond Tutu's own words: "*I have said ours is a flawed commission. Despite that, it was, in an imperfect world, the best possible instrument so far devised to deal with the kind of situation that confronts us.... This tired, cynical, disillusioned world., has marveled at a process that holds out considerable hope... I believe God has chosen us... God wants to show that there is life after conflict and repression -- that because of forgiveness there is a future.*"

### Quotes & Questions for Discussion:

1. "*The faculty of forgiveness is the only catalyst for reversing the flow of pain from past hurts and injustices. They paralyze memory and poison the future.*" Hannah Arendt

- **Have you ever experience a catalyst for reversing the flow of pain for past hurts?**
- **If so, what was it? If not, how do you heal past hurts?**
- **What was the pain and what did you do to heal it?**

2. Bishop Tutu visited Vad Yashem, the holocaust museum in Jerusalem. When the media asked for his impressions, he said: "*It was a shattering experience*", and added "*The Lord I serve would have asked 'but what about forgiveness?'*" For this he was vilified and discredited in Israel.

- **Do you think Bishop Tutu's question was appropriate? Why? Why not? Can such a question be asked about the holocaust? What good does it do?**
- **How important do you think forgiveness is to peace? to reconciliation? Do you think it is right to suggest forgiveness without insisting on some punishment for the perpetrator?**
- **Does that go for any perpetrator or all -- what do they need to do to deserve it?**

(continued)

3. It's time to come to personal forgiveness and see how that works.

- **Have you been able to forgive hurts that you personally received? Can you describe them and how you handled them?**
- **Do you feel you're made weaker or stronger by forgiveness? How? Why?**
- **Why is forgiveness so difficult? Why have we chosen punishment instead?**
- **Do you see any hope in it?**

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**Session Five – RECONCILIATION**

Reconciliation is the most difficult of peace processes. It is rarely practiced. The literature on it is sparse, because it means each side must give up some of its hopes and dreams.

As you know, I do not believe we can make peace unless we listen to our enemies without judgment. We need to understand their sufferings and grievances. We must make a safe place for them to speak their hatred, anger, fears, hopes, and truths. For everyone has some truth. I believe Compassionate Listening is one of the radical turns we must take toward reconciliation, which I also believe is the only guarantor of peace. Pursing the practice of it enlarges our awareness of truth.

This will take time and work and attention to “the other”. Peace may be the goal, but it will never be ours until we practice reconciliation in our personal and public lives. Since this is new to all of us, we will all make mistakes. And, if we are serious, we will learn from them.

I think reconciliation happens when both parties acknowledge the harm they have done -- to ourselves, others, other

groups and other nations. After we know the harm we have done and acknowledge it, we can make our amends and ultimately make peace. (I say both parties -- each party may have different timing on this acknowledgement. Perhaps each acknowledges and pursues amends at different times. And this is part of “the work”. We must accept it).

No matter where we practice compassionate listening or for how long a time -- it's valuable. I learned that whatever we do to implement it takes time. But, it's fascinating and experimenting with it can teach us a lot about good human relations -- which I think are essential to peace. Indeed, I think bad human relations, not bombs and the military, are the causes of war.

What I see now, is to work for reconciliation in every conflict -- large and small -- with the tools we have. And, as we proceed we will find, as we Quakers say, that “the Way will open.”

**Quotes & Questions for Discussion:**

1. To be a reconciler, according to Adam Curie, *“is to consider each side without judgment -- seeking the healing truth of each side. It is an effort to establish toleration, friendliness, good will, and concern. Embracing all these, the listener must also embrace a set of convictions regarding human nature and its goodness. [My experience leads me] to truly trust that this approach is conducive to changes in perception that favor good sense, and, above all, mercy and compassion.”*

- **Can you think of a public leader you dislike for whom you might be able to develop toleration, friendliness and good will?**
- **What do you feel you need to know to develop these attitudes? How would you know they are true? How would you use them in a situation where push comes to shove?**

2. Now we're going to try an experiment: We're going to write a love letter to someone whom we truly dislike. As Thich Nhat Hanh says, "*The peace movement can write very good protest letters, but they are not yet able to write love letters. We need to write letters to the heads of State, to the president that they will want to read. If we are not peaceful, we cannot contribute to peace.*"

- **Write a love letter to anyone in the world you fear or hate, living or dead, and then we will read them aloud.**

3. There is a statement from a book on the Holocaust called *Messages from the Dead*. It reminds us that we should not "look too long into the fire, but look to that which gives us life." With it goes this message from Buddhism. The message is that there is a Great Ball of Merit in this world, and that no matter how many horrible things are happening, the world is also shot through with hidden acts of goodness. These secret goods are what keeps the world in balance.

- **In closing, let's shift our view from the fire to those secret acts of good, and spend the rest of the time sharing some that we know, or that we want to perform.**

*Each person has pain. We cannot be happy unless we are heard and understood. We must learn the art of speaking and listening. We want to listen to heal the suffering in the world. We must make no judgements. If we aren't listened to, we become sick. We go to therapists.*

- **Tell me of a time you were heard and understood. How did you feel - did it release new energies in you?**
- **Do you feel being listened to heals suffering? why? Why not?**

*In listening there must be no reacting. "Tell me what is hurting you" - then listen. If we need to listen to something negative about ourselves, instead of blaming another, making them feel bad, it is better to respond with "Oh - I see I made you suffer - tell me more so I will not do it again." This will stop our irritation.*

- **Why must we not react when we are listening?**
- **Do you think the above response to something negative about ourselves is appropriate? Do you think you could do it? Do you feel it would elicit a kind response? Why? Why not?**
- **Is this a creative way to respond to negativity? do you have another idea?**

*Mindfulness is the blood of our consciousness. It will improve the quality of our consciousness.*

- **What does mindfulness mean to you? How do you think it improves the quality of consciousness?**

*Western medicine "cuts out and throws away"... Breathe. Increase the quality of your mindfulness and you increase the "healing blood". Breathe three times before you respond to anything negative. BE mindful, or aware, of what you are doing. Mindfulness is being present. If you have pain and don't know it - it will stay forever. When pain is embraced by your awareness, it changes. If we expose our pain to suffering, it is transformed.*

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**Session Six -- Exploring Thich Nhat Hanh's Approach to the Art of Listening**

Here are some of the most inspiring and provocative sayings that I have gathered from the books and retreats of Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Buddhist monk, writer, and peacemaker whose understanding of peace was tested in the fire of the Vietnam war. To each quote I have added one or more exploratory questions which I hope will encourage you to encounter these ideas on a more personal level.

- **Has this happened to you? Do you expose your pain to suffering? How does that affect you? If you don't do this, how do you handle your pain? How does that way affect you?**

*When one has suffered so much, one cannot help others. Look at anything mindfully (awarely) and something will happen. Breathing helps restore awareness. The person who has made you suffer is very unhappy. Look deeply at individuals and community -- you will discover their suffering. A 'bad' person is deeply wounded.*

- **Have you ever seen a 'bad' person as a wounded person? Did that change your attitude if the person hurt you? Why? Why not?**

*Everyone hurt in battle is deeply wounded. Look deeply into their wounds -- ask them to tell you of their suffering. Try to show them truth with loving kindness -- even if they believe war is clean, liberating, moral -- try to show them how much suffering war causes.*

- **What do you think Thich Nhat Hanh means by "Everyone hurt in battle is deeply wounded? What truth will you show them through loving kindness? What do you think he means by "War is loss of the whole world?"**

*Reconciliation is a great art which requires us to understand both sides of a conflict, but we who are not in the conflict also bear some responsibility. If we had lived awarely, we could have seen the beginning phases and helped to avoid it.*

*The reconciler is not a judge standing outside the conflict, but becomes an insider who will take his or her responsibility by understanding the suffering of both sides. The participants to the conflict should communicate clearly how they see the suffering endured by the other side. The conflict's resolution should be offered on the basis of benefit to both sides. Our purpose is the realization of understanding and compassion.*

- **What attitude do we need to develop to be able to stand outside the conflict?**
- **What responsibility do those who are not in the conflict bear for it. Can you think of anything we could do about a conflict in our city, our country, our world?**

Here are three related quotes from other writers that you may use to explore the path toward reconciliation described by Thich Nhat Hanh

*We of the peace movement are obsessed with getting someone else to stop their war-making so we may have peace. I believe we must be the peace -- we must create small corners of loving consideration and live peace.*

Gene Knudsen Hoffman

*The hardest and most essential sacrifice demanded for genuine peace is that of one's self-image as the innocent victim at the hands of a cruel enemy. If we can be led to see the contribution of our own people to the conflict, both can assume responsibility for the tragedy.*

Yhezkel Landau, Israeli Peacemaker

*How could we make a place for an organization that could be trusted by both sides - that could find human faces of 'the enemy' and carry that message?*

Herb Walters, Founder of The Listening Project and Rural Southern Voice for Peace, Burnsville, North Carolina.



**Session Seven -- Adam Curle's Tools for Transformation**

Adam Curle is an international mediator deeply influenced by the Quaker and Buddhist traditions. His mediation efforts included encouraging a dialogue between the two sides in the Nigerian civil war (1967-1970). Here are some provocative quotes from his 1990 book, *Tools for Transformation*.

**Quotes & Questions for Discussion:**

1. *Whether people are ordinary citizens or heads of state, they are equally capable of manifesting the great quality of wisdom and compassion and, the insidious venom of ignorance, hatred and greed. The former impels us to sensible and humane actions. The latter impels into creating conditions that weaken awareness and smother kindness and generosity. These "poisons" give rise internationally as well as personally, to extremes of physical violence, persecution and famine.*

- **Can you give examples of these extremes in today's world?**
- **Have you experienced them?**
- **How did you respond?**

2. *The task for would-be peacemakers/listeners must be on two levels. They must dig out the roots of unpeacefulness within themselves; the blindness, the illusory sense of "I", the cravings, antipathies, and guilt. Without this effort, however partially successful, they can never hope to have any real effect on others.*

- **Do you think we have any of these roots? How would you "dig them out". Do you think this is a once-in-a-lifetime job - or needs to be done many times? Why?**
- **How do these "roots" affect our listening?**

3. *Listening, then, (working for peace) is working for the transformation of the world. This is not arrogant or foolish - if we... remember that everything we do or say has a universal impact. ... In this context to do NOTHING is to do SOMETHING.*

*Listening mediation is a psychological effort to change perceptions, both of the conflict and of the "enemy" ... to the extent that both protagonists gain some hope of a reasonable resolution and so are prepared to negotiate seriously.*

- **How does listening change the speaker's perceptions? Why do you think that would happen? In answering this, refer to your experiences of being listened to.**

4. Of his mediation work, Adam has this to say, which I believe applies equally well to Compassionate Listening:

*Quaker mediators have adopted a particular approach and style to their work. Its main characteristics are that it combines psychology with diplomacy and it tends to last a long time, years rather than months.*

*Wars may drag on because each combatant has so distorted a perception of the other's character that a non-military resolution seems impossible. That is the reason — when the time has come — we tell each side about the grievances and suffering of the other side — this is our attempt to bring about a change in understanding and includes continual interpretations of what the other side is saying, explanation of their attitudes, therapeutic listening and the development of a personal relationship of truths and friendship with the people we listen to on both sides. By such means tensions from hostility and anxiety may be reduced to a point where cautious hope prevails.*

- **Do you think you can develop a trusting relationship with some one with whom you totally disagree - or can you find evidence of truth in both sides? How would you go about it?**

6. Adam Curle quotes Paolo Freire in helping us to understand this important treatment of oppression: *The oppressed must not, in seeking to regain their humanity, become in turn oppressors, but rather restorers of the humanity of both.*

- **How might your listening help the oppressed to reconsider the humanity of the oppressors? Do you have the patience to wait?**

7. Again Adam refers to Paolo Freire: *However unpropitious the circumstances may seem to be, it is necessary to maintain a relationship with both sides. To maintain contact with the oppressor neither condones their actions, nor weakens support for and commitment to the oppressed: "to work for the liberation of the oppressed can be helped by communicating with the oppressors, for our goal is also to free the oppressor from the degradation in which they are trapped, and it cannot be realized unless there is contact between them."*

- **Do you think you could maintain a relationship with an oppressor over a long period of time? What would you need to sustain it?**

8. *No one can pretend that nonviolence is easy. It goes against all conventional habits of mind to love our enemies, to separate bad actions from those who commit them, to dissolve resentment and resign the prospect of revenge in an all-inclusive love. But attitudes of violence are simply bad habits superimposed on a mind that is eternal and universal. Fundamentally the doctrine of nonviolence is more natural than the dismal teachings of vengeance and retribution.*

- **Do you believe this is true, that violence is a bad habit? What does Adam mean to you when he says these habits are "superimposed on a mind that is eternal and universal?" How might you define the cause of violence? How would you eliminate this bad habit? (If you think you have it?) Can you accept Adam's definition of violence? Do you have another one?**

## Homework and Class Exercises

### HOMEWORK

The ideal way is to select a street in your town to listen to. Take a few blocks. Ask another classmate to go with you. Each of you should take one side of the street. Check with one another from time to time.

Then you ring doorbells. You explain to the resident that you are doing a survey for your class in Compassionate Listening and you would like to ask them a few questions about suffering in your area.

Here are the questions:

1. What kinds of suffering do you see in our town today?
2. What do you think our city should do about it?
3. What personal action do you think citizens should take to help?
4. (If it seems appropriate ask) How do you handle your suffering?
5. Report back to your class.

### CLASS EXERCISES

Here are some exercises that will help you start expanding your capacity to hold conflicts more compassionately, beginning with material from your own life.

- **Can you write a letter of appreciation to a politician with whom you disagree strongly?**

In the course of life we can come to see that even the most painful experiences can have deep lessons to teach us, or deep strengths to evoke from us.

- **Can you write a love letter to a person you hate? Describe to them what they did that felt hurtful. Then, how would you tell the person what you have learned and/or how you have grown? Can you thank them? How does it feel, stretching yourself this far?**

7

*An Enemy Is One  
Whose Story We Have Not Heard*

by  
*Gene Knudsen Hoffman*

First published in Fellowship, the journal of The Fellowship of Reconciliation, May/June 1997

In the spring of 1996 I received a phone call from Leah Green, Director of the Middle East Program for Earthstewards Network. She wanted to talk with me about my writing on Compassionate Listening, a process in which people open up to new thoughts and ideas when they are carefully listened to. Sometimes they even change their opinions as they learn to listen to themselves. Over the years I have doggedly kept visiting the Middle East, pursuing this process. Leah invited me to come to Israel and Palestine in November of 1996 with a group dedicated to Compassionate Listening.

On November 10, a party of eighteen left the United States - all committed to listen to both sides nonjudgmentally, non-adversarially, compassionately. This article is about some of the people we encountered during that remarkable experiment.

The first night we were there, we met with Mikado Waraschawski, Director of the Alternative Information Center in Jerusalem. I'd known him for some time as the founder of Yesh Gvul. Yesh Gvul means "There is a Limit." To Mikado and many Israelis of military age, it meant they would not serve in the Israeli Army of Occupation on the West Bank.

Mikado was the same vivid, clear-thinking and clear-speaking young man, with hints of Asian ancestry, that I'd met before. He spoke to us about the hundred-year struggle between Israelis and Palestinians, "two different realities in a very small land." The Oslo Declaration of Principles was based on important joint assumptions that recognized the mutual legitimate rights of both realities. But this is now being undermined by the Netanyahu government that "is replacing this mutuality with domination." Mikado also spoke of the fear in both societies of war between Jewish and Muslim fundamentalists, as well as deep concern over "the collapse of Israel's internal cohesion" if the militantly orthodox and extreme nationalists continue to grow in political power.

Sara Kaminker describes herself as a "devoted Zionist and a Jew." She is a former Jerusalem city planner and City Council member. She wants Palestinians on the City Council so that they can air their differences. Sara is a handsome, bold woman-larger than life, with an arresting voice. Her apartment is tastefully decorated, full of color, with rare impressionist paintings, Persian rugs, furniture of rich woods, and large windows opening onto patios and views of Jerusalem. She is beloved by Palestinians, for she is a public voice on their behalf.

Sara described to us how land is distributed in East Jerusalem-a burning issue for Palestinians. In the past three and a half years, Jerusalem municipality policy has destroyed 291 Palestinian homes. In the worst cases, the municipality gives families five minutes to two hours to take what they can and leave the area. Then bulldozers demolish their houses. Sometimes demolitions are held up for months in the courts. "Jerusalem," she told us, "was expanded after the 1967 war. In 1967 there were 164,000 Palestinians in East Jerusalem and no Israelis. Seventy thousand dunhams were then expropriated and annexed to West

Jerusalem." Today there are 170,000 Israelis in East Jerusalem.

To use Palestinian land, Israelis confiscate it for public use. This includes parks, schools, public buildings, the apartment complex in which Sara lives, and settlements. The Palestinian villages in East Jerusalem have been designated as "yellow areas." "Green" land is owned by Palestinians, but they are not allowed to live there or to build. Palestinians are always offered some compensation for their lands, but no Palestinian who values his life or reputation would accept it, since seeking this compensation denotes a traitor. The Israeli government offered twenty-five million dollars for certain Palestinian lands. No one took it, and the government confiscated the land anyway.

"Once they have lost their homes, Palestinians have the choice to live under poor housing conditions in 'yellow' areas, leave Jerusalem, or build new houses on 'green land.' No permits are issued to Palestinians to build on 'green land,' nor are there any subsidies. Homes on 'green land' are regularly demolished, often as soon as they are built. The Israelis have subsidized 60,000 apartments in East Jerusalem for Israelis, and only 5,000 for Palestinians. It is obvious," continued Sara, "that they want to populate Jerusalem with Israelis."

Sara Kaminker is an amazing woman. I feel Israel is blessed with her presence.

From Sara's we went to Beit Horon, a settlement in the West Bank. There we were met by Yehudit Tayer, Associate Director of the West Bank Yesha Settlement Council. Yehudit is a slim woman with long blond hair. She was born in the United States and has a fragile look. But she is far from fragile; her delicate chin is set; her brown eyes flash; she is a militant Zionist who believes unwaveringly that God gave this land to the Jews as an

irrevocable gift. She lives with her husband and two small children in Beit Horon. We met with her in the settlement's synagogue, a handsome building with stunning and unusual stained glass windows. "We moved here," she began, "because we are Jews and want one homeland. Here is where it is: these Judean mountains were biblically given to us. The first settlers here had the beginnings of a friendly community. There were lots of empty mountain-tops, plenty of room to live here for both us and the Palestinians. I oversee the 141 settlements of 150,000 Jews here in the heartland of Israel. We have a bypass road for the safety for our children; our drivers speak Arabic.

"I deal with the media. We residents are always depicted as fanatics. It would have been easier if in 1967 we had just thrown the Palestinians out. When we establish settlements we live on our ancient land. Hebron was established by Jews, and then we were 'ethnically cleansed' from there. We want to return; we have the right to return. We want to live in peace with the Arabs. Despite all the problems, we have grown. We have a high-tech economy, security doors, educational opportunities, even education for disabled girls. Terror attacks are blamed on us. The Government delegitimized us by not allowing us to expand. Hebron should not be given to the Palestinians. All Jewish children in Beit Horon are targeted by the Palestinians—they are calling for the blood of the Jews. This message is coming from mosques: 'First we kill the Jews, and then the Christians.' A few weeks ago our houses were under fire. Palestinians are afraid to come here as friends...."

We left feeling downcast—we could sense her pain. Next we went to Gaza and, at long last, met with a leader of Hamas, the Islamic Resistance Movement best known in the West for acts of terrorism, such as suicide bombings. We were to meet Ghazi Ahmed Hamad, 31, head of the Center for Research on

Palestinian Issues and spokesperson for the Political wing of Hamas.

The office we entered was small and full of plastic chairs for us. Soon Ghazi Ahmed entered and sat at the worn desk. He was a slim, handsome young man with a surprisingly gentle face. There was something about his presence that caught my attention. He explained to us that during the Intifada, Hamas was militarily oriented, but that now it is more politically and socially oriented, helping poor families, families of prisoners, and women's activities, "We don't want to throw Israel into the sea; we want independence like any other people" he said.

"The Israeli government," Ghazi Ahmed told us, "exact severe punishment from Palestinians in its effort to keep them under control. We may not export to anyone but Israel. There has been a four month curfew, and Palestinians may not go anywhere outside their own cities."

Then Ghazi Ahmed spoke about his personal life. He told us how his father and uncle were assassinated before his eyes when he was seven years old. How his mother had been shot, wounded in the lungs, had undergone surgery, but never healed. How on the night before the birth of his first child, while he and his wife were talking about possible names, Israeli soldiers dropped into their house from everywhere and arrested him. They told him to come with them for five minutes-and then told him he had committed acts against Israel, and was sentenced to five years in prison. He suffered thirty days of torture during interrogation. This was in 1989, during the height of the Intifada. He said he was never accused of anything specific; he did not know of what he was guilty.

"We live in isolation from the world," Ghazi Ahmed continued. "Here in Gaza we are in a big jail. We have lost the right to travel. The

world should not blame a nation under siege. When we react to the settlers' violence, we are called killers. But I'm re-thinking violence for us-it doesn't do any good."

We asked him if his religion helped him. He responded "My Muslim religion says 'Be patient.' If you do good and don't harass, you will survive. If you kill or harass, you and your state will be destroyed."

Our time with Ghazi Ahmed Hamad ended. We were all awed by the experience. I went up and spoke to him before I left. I told him, "you have great gifts-you can be a leader to your people. I hope you will explore nonviolence-it may be helpful to you." "You sound just like my mother," he replied. I told him I'd be glad to have him as a son. We laughed. He reached out to me; we embraced.

[Shortly after we left, Ghazi Ahmad Hamad joined in two nonviolent demonstrations in Gaza, as was widely reported in the Us press. GKH]

After returning to the West Bank, our group joined a busload of Israelis going to visit a Palestinian woman whose husband had been killed by an Israeli soldier while participating in a nonviolent protest over the confiscation of his land. We passed through the main room of the murdered man's house and shook hands with his despairing family. The widow was pregnant with her eighth child. On our way out, I noticed a lovely woman with wavy grey hair. She must have noticed me too, because we walked out together toward the bus. We sat down and our conversation began. Her name is Chava Keller.

Chava lived in Poland in 1940. She had to flee from the Nazis, first to Russia and then to Lithuania. She spoke forcefully when she said, "Israelis are not committing Holocaust atrocities on the Palestinians. But if I don't do anything about the atrocities we are committing, I am like the Germans were."

I learned that Chava was the mother of Adam Keller, a famous Israeli pacifist who spent years in jail for refusing to enter the Israeli army. He is now editor of the magazine *The Other Israel*, which is committed to ending the Israeli occupation and undertaking many reforms. Chava is a long-time worker for peace and justice for Israeli prisoners, many of whom are Palestinian.

The following evening, we visited Chava in Tel Aviv. We were invited into a small apartment which, between chairs and the floor, was still big enough to contain our large group. It was warm and cozy, full of foreign souvenirs. There we met her husband Ya'akov and two of their friends and contemporaries, Sara and Itzak. All four were veterans of the '48 war and were in their seventies.

In 1948 they, like Menachem Begin, had been members of the terrorist organization Irgun. They had all fought against the Palestinians. They were now against war and for the two-state solution.

They shared memories with us. Chava's feisty husband presented a picture of Jerusalem in 1948. "Few Jews walked with Arabs," he said. "Most were afraid to go to Arabs' homes." He had lived in Jerusalem. Parts of the city were destroyed by bombardments. His father lost his job. "We children were told to take Palestinian homes after, the Palestinians left. My father said, 'Are you crazy? These people will return?'"

Sara's husband Itzak was a writer; he reminded me of an elderly aristocrat. At that time, he had felt it was all right to kill. "The idea of killing Arabs gave me pleasure. 'Kill the tiger and become a man' was my motto." Later he became sympathetic to the Palestinians and began to think it was not right to kill them. "In wars everyone is right. Settlers feel they have a right to kill and die for the land." Itzak feels peace is impossible. "We

can have Jews and Muslims in a secular state but if we're seeking to be a religious state, we cannot live together as equal citizens."

Sara, Itzak's wife, was a fine-looking dark-haired, dark-eyed woman and a humanist. She had been in the army. She had watched the exodus of the Palestinians from their villages in 1948. She had brought Arab prisoners of war to work for Israelis. She had listened to Arab histories and had seen their villages flattened. She told the Palestinians to leave, run away—but they would not. They knew they could not return.

Chava sees Zionism as built on religion. "I am an atheist," she told us. "I would like a humanist, secular state. I want partition for both Arabs and Jews. It's my state; I'm not giving it to the religious, to the Palestinians, or to the nationalists. I want it to be democratic and I want it to be free."

"My main work is with political prisoners today. Jews get a lot of legal understanding. No one takes anything into account with an Arab. I send lawyers to the prisoners and try to get good legal care for them. In 1948 we had an army; the Palestinians had no army. Israeli officers were mobile. It was a time of no choice about our survival. One of the sides would win. It was one or the other. If we lost, we would be exterminated. The 1948 war was more horrible than any other."

Again, we left in awe. If people who had believed so strongly in violence could give up their violence and feel compassion for their former enemies, even while they were fighting, there may be hope for humankind.

Beit Sahour is a Palestinian town (largely Christian) outside of Bethlehem, and has long been known for its nonviolent struggle. For many years its people have refused to pay taxes for the occupation, and have been severely punished, losing homes, businesses, and money. Yet they have gone courageously on.

The people of Beit Sahour developed 'Palestinian Time.' They set their clocks and watches to hours different from the Israeli standard, causing many difficulties for the occupying soldiers. Their schools were closed for several years, and students were arrested if they were found carrying textbooks on the street. Yet they developed a curriculum for home teaching, and sent weekly lessons to parents. They held secret dialogue sessions with Israelis every fortnight, and called their meeting room the most democratic in the world.

On other occasions when I had met with the Beit Sahour group, they had been composed mostly of older people. This year, at the Center for Rapprochement, the majority were young, bright, eager young people, busy formulating policy and preparing new actions. Elders, who are their teachers, also attend. Planning involves activists from around the world. Recently a group of young people from Denmark visited and worked with them, and ended by inviting them to spend a ten-day holiday in Denmark. The group's newest project, teaching conflict resolution in Palestinian schools, is supported by Austria. In 1996 the Center was the recipient of the US FOR's [Fellowship of Reconciliation] Pfeffer Peace Prize.

"The Israelis are frightened of us," they say. "They think we are killers, terrorists. After they stay in our homes, they are less frightened-but they take the risk of losing their jobs if they visit us. Some still do it, but settlers don't come here.

"We know we'll survive better if we use nonviolence. We need many leaders and teachers; the quality of the leader should be open-minded and aware of peoples' feelings on both sides."

The people of Beit Sahour told us they are happy with their commitment-not confident of

peace, but still eager to practice nonviolence. They are daring, bright visionaries, open and aware. It began to feel to me that young people are once again becoming the hope of the world.

We returned home, deeply aware of the gulf separating Palestinians and Israelis, but also encouraged by openness where we hadn't expected it, and changes that adversaries can make. Both Israelis and Palestinians -like us all-may yet discover there really are divine possibilities in every situation.

## 8

### *On Preventing Future Holocausts*

by

*Gene Knudsen Hoffman*

A talk given at the Karpeles Museum  
Santa Barbara in 1997

*Gene Knudsen Hoffman is a Quaker peace activist, poet, teacher, pastoral counselor and writer. She has made many journeys to the Middle East to open her heart to the sufferings of all sides, and to embody and encourage the practice of compassionate listening.*

Writing about the World War II Holocaust is dangerous for one who was not a part of it, for I still have not fathomed its depths and breadth. But I have been immersed in it so long through my work in the Middle East, I will dare the risk. First, a definition: In the Old Testament a holocaust is defined as mass murder. I believe this to be true. In discussing it with a friend, he announced that "The Life of Compassion does not admit of distinctions between victims." I believe this also.

So, in addressing this question I need to say I have experienced many holocausts in my

lifetime. Among the gravest was the one the Nazis perpetrated upon the Jews. Many of us still suffer nightmare grief over this. Another was the relentless fire-bombing of the citizens of Dresden. Yet another was our incineration of the people of Hiroshima by dropping the first atomic bomb, thus forcing the world into the Nuclear Age. And then there were El Salvador, Nicaragua, Vietnam, Iraq... The list, alas, goes on. Perhaps all acts of violence can lead to holocausts -- at least every war becomes one.

Perhaps holocausts are wake-up calls for us to examine the seeds of violence in our own lives, to examine ourselves - not one another. Perhaps we are called to look at what we, in our personal and national lives have done to destroy precious human beings, and the one-time sweet earth.

To learn what we might do to prevent other holocausts, I want to examine what we have done about the holocaust against the Jews. For over fifty years we have hunted Nazis and described in harrowing terms how ghastly they were. (And their acts were ghastly -- beyond belief). It almost seems as though the concentration camps have become horrible fascinations for us. I've wondered about this. Is it because we think of this as the only holocaust? Are we in denial about the killer within us, our own evil genius, our own cruelties?

Is it because we want to hide from ourselves the deeds we have committed that we focus so intensely upon the Nazis? And what do we ask former Nazis to perform before we again admit them to the human race? Is it not to confess to their deeds, to repent, to turn away from such actions forever, to make amends, to ask for forgiveness?

What is it we have condemned them for? Is it not that they seem to have totally erased from their minds and hearts the sacredness of

human life in their terrible orgy of killings? Do we ask them questions to learn why? Can we trust them if they don't answer us?

And if we Americans ask this of others, should we ask less of ourselves for permitting the first atom bomb to fall on civilians? For threatening to 'erase the world' if we become too frightened? Can we assure the people of the world that we will never initiate another nuclear war if we won't destroy the bombs we have and agree never to build another? Can they trust us if we don't express remorse, repentance, and seek to compensate in some meaningful way for the harm we have done? And how might we do so if we wanted to?

Here are a few examples of what can and is being done today. We might begin with efforts to recover our sense of the sacred. We might study the wonder of creation, marvel at the mystery of living creatures. The marvel of blood and bone and tissue. We might reflect on the billions and billions of atoms which cooperate to create them. We might look at all these facets through a microscope and reflect on the beauty, the symmetry, the harmony required to keep the earth alive...

When we rediscover our awe and gratitude for life, we might be able to have spread before us whole new perceptions of the suffering at the heart of every act of violence.

To encourage such actions, Michael Lerner, editor of *Tikkun*, writes in his book, *Jewish Renewal*: "Listen to the stories of those you might be tempted to demean. Listen to their stories about their childhoods, and what they went through. Allow yourself to imagine yourself in their shoes. ...the more we hear the stories, the more we see that those who are our enemies are themselves fully human and fully deserving of respect."

With this attitude, we might begin a creative dialogue with one another, leading to what we think we can do together to prevent

future holocausts. We might even invite terrorists to speak to us and tell their stories. What might we learn about healings they need from lives full of terrors?

What might we do then? For one answer, I return to Germany. In 1958 at the Synod of the Evangelical Church, Chairman Lothar Kreyssig issued a call for the founding of Aktion Sunezeichen Action Reconciliation Sign of Atonement. He said "We Germans killed millions of Jews in an outrageous rebellion against God. Those among us who survived...did not do enough to prevent it. As a sign of this, we ask the people who suffered most from our violence to allow us to do something good in their lands with our hands and our resources as a sign of atonement..."

"The purpose of Aktion Sunezeichen is not to 'make good' wrong which has been done that is impossible, rather it is an attempt to atone for those wrongs."

At first Aktion Sunezeichen was not permitted to work in Russia or Israel or Poland. The wounds were too deep there was no trust of the Germans. So their volunteers built a center for International Reconciliation on the ruins of Coventry Cathedral in England which had been destroyed by German bombs. They rebuilt a Synagogue in France, an orphanage in Norway, and finally, a home for the blind in Israel.

Today Aktion Sunezeichen is one of the strong voices for peace in Germany. Members work in Catholic Worker Houses throughout the United States, and it has an office in Washington, D.C.

These, mostly young, people want to take responsibility for what their parents and country people did. Many are conscientious objectors, performing alternative services. All give 18 months of their lives to this work. They receive room and board, modest pocket money, and travel expenses.

To qualify, they spend four weeks learning about the work they will do and studying and discussing the Nazi period and its historic and moral effects on life today. For the central part of their training they must live for ten days in either Auschwitz or Majdanak concentration camps. The volunteers not only live in the camps, they meet and talk with survivors and work on documentation of atrocities.

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In April, 1997, under the leadership of South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was established in south Africa. Its intent is to hear the confessions of all who committed human rights abuses in that Nation's past. All who confess are granted amnesty by the South African government, which means they are pardoned for their crimes and may live as free persons in the nation now governed by President Nelson Mandela.

According to the U.S. News and World Report of April 28, 1997, during that first year of "painful exorcism ... grim faced brigadiers have confessed to their gruesome deeds. Maimed activists have detailed their torture. Sobbing widows have begged to bring home the hidden remains of their dead husbands. More than 10,000 victims have recounted their ordeals. An additional 6,000 perpetrators have requested amnesty for admitting their abuses."

"The acts many of them committed rival the German concentration camps in horror." But, continues the U.S. News and World Report: "More astounding than any of these revelations is the fact that the suffering [the confessions] recall has not stirred up wide-spread demands for vengeance. The African National Party, now the ruling party of the nation's first freely elected government, has given full support to the amnesty process, even as the killers of their comrades are freed from prison. The hope for reconciliation through truth so far is working;

many more victims strive to get answers than to get even."

An expected bloodbath was prevented and out of these acts of mercy, another may not arise.

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Some Americans are establishing a new precedent. Some veterans who regret the terrible damage they wrought on Vietnamese civilians during that war decided to go back to Vietnam and acknowledge directly the harm they had done. They offered active compensation in the very places they had fought by restoring what they had destroyed. When they had finished, they asked forgiveness of their former enemies and their descendants. Through these extraordinary spiritual and practical acts, each participating veteran gained a new understanding of peace.

Vietnam Veterans(1) are still making these pilgrimages, healing old wounds through mutual forgiveness, and commitment to making new relationships work. The Veterans' Vietnam Restoration Project is accomplishing its goals, and some of the old hatred and fear has ceased."

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The last example comes from Australia where this practice is flourishing. It's called Restorative Justice. It's a radical and compassionate approach to conflict resolution and has been taken up by many courts in the United States as well. Its primary focus is on the healing of all parties to any conflict: victims, offenders, and many others who are impacted by a conflict. Society, in the vision of Restorative Justice advocates, has the task of creating those conditions in which both victims and offenders may accomplish their own healing.

This healing is effected by an emphasis on restitution to the victim and accountability by the offender. Punishment of an offender is unlikely to heal her or his wounds, does not address the underlying causes of the offense, and increases the likelihood of future offenses.

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In conclusion I need to say I have personally felt the unremitting anger of painful loss and the passion for reprisal. The unmanageable extent of cruelty in the world is beyond belief; World War II's Holocaust is almost beyond processing in any previously known way. We have all seen and experienced examples of the generations of the incredibly destructive silence it produces. And yet, I am compelled to resist your understandable resistance, your understanding of me, and urge you to consider these vastly simple and vastly difficult ideas. I believe we need to begin practicing these processes today, even this evening.

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1. *No Royal Road to Reconciliation*, Gene Knudsen Hoffman, Pendle Hill Pamphlet, Pendle Hill, Pa.

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***Sources for Further Reading About  
Compassionate Listening***

1. *No Royal Road to Reconciliation*, by Gene Knudsen Hoffman. Published by Pendle Hill Publications, 338 Plush Mill Road, Wallingford, Pa. 19086-6099 (\$4.00)
2. *Listening With the Heart, a Guide for Compassionate Listening* by Carol Hwoshinsky, Compassionate Listening Project, P.O. Box 17, Indianola, WA. 98432, USA. (www.mideastdiplomacy.org) This book is an in-depth study of the psychology, the process, and practice of Compassionate Listening by one of its most experienced practitioners, Carol Hwoshinsky. (\$22.50)
3. *Tools for Transformation, A Personal Study*, by Adam Curle., Hawthorne Press, United Kingdom, 1990. Unfortunately, this book is currently out of print. But you may be able to find it in college libraries or in the used book sections of online bookstores such as amazon.com or barnesandnoble.com.
4. *Being Peace*, by Thich Nhat Hanh, Parallax Press, P.O. Box 7455, Berkeley, CA 94707, 1987. "Being Peace is a jewel of love and wisdom, a mirror reflecting our own happy Buddhahood, as Hanh always points out, and it is a recognition that will inspire everyone, regardless of previous religious persuasion, with the unexpected joy of smiling. Hanh reminds us of the fundamental importance for the world of just one person smiling, breathing, and being peace..." (from a review in Independent Publisher) (\$10.00)

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***Parting Words***

We cannot make peace  
with someone whom we refuse to listen to.

Seeking a merciful justice for the oppressed is part of the truth. Seeking recognition of the truths on each side of a conflict - and recognizing that all parties to a war are wounded - is another part of the truth and the part I want to see emphasized in [Compassionate Listening](#).

Many blessings,

*Gene Knudsen Hoffman*

*Compassionate Listening*

An Exploratory Sourcebook  
About Conflict Transformation

Gene Knudsen Hoffman  
Leah Green  
Cynthia Monroe

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Edited by and with an introduction by  
Dennis Rivers