

Dear Students in *The Arts of Building Peace*,

I'm writing to share with you my thoughts and raise several questions about the exhibition of *Voices from Palestine*, and the responses to it from the university community and administration. I want to affirm both how Lior's project, the exhibition of artwork and words from the youth of the Aida refugee camp, makes a contribution to peace, and also ask questions about how it might have been more effective and how we still could have a positive impact on events as they unfold.

There are several ways in which *Voices from Palestine* makes the possibilities of peace more likely. For the artists, the children in the Aida camp, the project created an opportunity for them to give shape to traumatic experiences through drawing and through telling a bit of their story. These processes can be an important part of reclaiming a sense of agency in the face of the violence that regularly intrudes on their lives. It can contribute to their mental health in a context of on-going trauma.

In addition, the exhibition opened possibilities for relationships, not only between the children and those who brought their artwork to the United States, but also between the children and American students. The envelope and blank cards at the site of the exhibition provided an opportunity for communication to begin.

For those of us at Brandeis, witnessing the words and images of the Palestinian children is important, even if they evoke uncomfortable feelings. The images reflect the experiences of the children whose lives are filled with violence and fear. When we allow ourselves to be present to those images, to imagine both the suffering and the longing that they represent, we might notice questions arising within us. What are the conditions of the children's lives that gave rise to these expressions? What thoughts and feelings do they evoke in us? In what ways might we, through our actions and inactions, words and silences, be contributing to those conditions?

*Voices from Palestine* provided an opportunity for members of the Brandeis community to encounter a perspective on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that is rarely given full expression here. Even for those who completely disagree with the political messages implicit within it, it offers the opportunity to learn about a point of view. If we disagree with the assumptions behind the children's expression, how might we communicate those disagreements in a way that the children might hear? Even for those who profoundly disagree, can we hold those disagreements without demonizing the children or the adults who work with them?

The responses by the university community and administration to the exhibition raise important questions for us as students and practitioners exploring the arts as resources for strengthening relationships across differences. There is no doubt that art can be powerful, and that it can provoke and challenge. These are important and potentially constructive possibilities.

But the power of art as a resource for building peace lies also in art's power to communicate, to actually reach beneath people's defenses. Artistic exhibitions and events can be crafted to support those who might, for either understandable or baffling reasons, resist seeing or hearing that which they are invited to witness. To be effective as peacebuilders, we must take into account the sensitivities of the people we are trying to reach. This doesn't mean that we refrain from exhibiting potentially upsetting art, but we take care in how we do it, what kind of support we offer people. How do we create the conditions that make receptivity most likely? When and where do we hold events? How can we support openness and learning within those who might feel frightened or threatened, ashamed or defensive? As people interested in engaging with the arts in the service of coexistence and peace, it is incumbent upon us to think through these questions.

In this regard, I think we as peacebuilders could learn from the experiences surrounding the *Voices from Palestine* exhibition. Might it have been contextualized differently? Should the images have been presented in the context of events, where conversation and responses could be mediated? Could the project have been more effective in reaching its goals if it were designed with more sensitivity to the range of views within the larger Brandeis community?

Working towards peace and coexistence presents many difficult challenges. Perhaps one of the hardest is to continually remember that as human beings we exist within a web of interdependent relationships that extends outward to others, even those with whom we disagree, even those who we call our enemies. The impulse to demonize and dehumanize others is a part of the cycle of violence. Now that the exhibition has been taken down, there is the risk of further polarization. How can we stay in relationship – both with the children in the refugee camp and also with others within the Brandeis community and administration? How can we support the community to respond in ways that strengthen relationships, refusing to succumb to the kind of polarization and dehumanization that are all too familiar in the terrain of violent conflict?

With the intensity of feelings that surround the university administration's decision to take down the exhibition, there is the risk that we might lose focus on the children of the Aida refugee camp, and, by extension, all of the children in the Middle East and in the world whose lives are filled with the fear, suffering, and despair that accompany war. We might lose sight of the significant commitments that Brandeis is making to support Palestinian institutions and to strengthen relationships among Palestinians, Americans and Israelis.

Are there creative ways in which we might harness the energy swirling within our community to deepen understanding and strengthen relationships across enmities and political divides? Responses to this question can influence events as they unfold.

I'm happy to engage in discussion about any of these questions. Feel free to e-mail, call or stop by.

Cindy