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Hope in the Room

Cheri Andes

The most powerful moment of the learning exchange for me was a discussion that Haifa and Boston leaders had about violence and post-traumatic stress syndrome during my second trip to Haifa. Quite a bit of relational work had already been done that allowed this discussion to occur. This was no theoretical discussion, but rather a deep sharing of personal experience.

Boston leaders talked about the epidemic of violence on Boston's city streets — the profound impact this violence had on the young people they served and organized and the profound impact it had on them as leaders. In particular an organizer shared about the brother of a youth leader who was shot in the head at 4:30 p.m. in a park that is not even considered to be particularly dangerous. There was a sense of urgency in Boston leaders' voices, an exasperation, yes, but also a hunger to address the violence head-on in an effective and creative way.

Haifa leaders, in turn, shared about the Lebanon War. They spoke of their fear for themselves and their loved ones. They spoke of bomb shelters and explosions. Their voices choked in the recollection of those days and weeks. The politics of war seemed overwhelming; Haifa leaders had suffered certainly, but they also publicly asked themselves how their own suffering compared with the reality of living in the dominant culture — the overwhelming power of the State of Israel, the expansion of the settlements, the checkpoints and control? The anguish and confusion and even disagreements between the Israelis were raw and compelling. Nonetheless, Haifa leaders seemed to have emerged from their shelters more determined than ever to make a difference in their city, country, and world.

Cheri Andes is the lead organizer of the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization, a broad-based organization that works to coalesce, train, and organize the communities of Greater Boston across all religious, racial, ethnic, class, and neighborhood lines. Our primary goal is to develop local leadership and organized power to fight for social justice. We strive to hold both public and private power holders accountable for their public responsibilities, as well as to initiate actions and programs of our own to solve community and economic problems. GBIO is affiliated with the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF). One of our major achievements was the passage of statewide universal health care reform, which was implemented in 2007. Cheri has a B.A. in English from Bucknell University and a M.A. in Pastoral Ministry from Boston College.

The room we sat in that day was heavy, silent, and full. But something, I felt, happened in that silence, a surprising sense of connection developed, unexpected commonalities seemed to arise, our shared humanity in the face of pain, fear, and loss was felt in a real and deep way. Strangely, there was hope in the room, a shared passion for action to address these and other injustices. We sensed in each other what trauma specialist Judith Hermon labels integrity, — “the ability to hope even in the face of death.” And this integrity generated a reservoir of respect for one another and our work. Integrity more commonly suggests the alignment of one’s actions with one’s values, and we sensed this trait in each other as well.

I was moved by this session to my own memories of suffering and trauma. I grew up in Mt. Pocono, Pennsylvania — a bucolic town set in the beautiful mountain range known as the Poconos. It was, and is, known as a resort town — a place where people go to get away from the world and its troubles. I shared with the Haifa exchange group a family tragedy that took place in this normally peaceful environment.

It was 1968, three days after the assassination of Robert Kennedy; I was three years old. My grandfather was out in his back yard picking tomatoes. His neighbor suddenly opened fire on him with an automatic rifle. Mr. Higgins was his name, and he was mentally ill, although my grandparents were not aware of that. My grandmother heard the shots and saw my grandfather fall. She rushed out to his side and was shot as well.

One of my grandfather’s sisters ran out to help and took a bullet to the chin; the other sister ran out the front door and down the street to our local church. There she pulled a state trooper out of services. He ran up the street, commandeered a truck from a neighbor, pulled the truck between the two houses to block the line of fire, and tear gassed the man out of his house. The ambulances arrived to take my grandparents to the hospital where treatment awaited.

My grandparents survived, but both lost limbs. My grandfather lost his right arm from the shoulder and his left leg from the knee. My grandmother lost her right leg from the hip. While they were in the hospital and rehab center recovering, my parents put a home in their back yard, and that is where I grew up, literally in the yard where my grandparents were shot.

As you can imagine, this story has lots of layers for me. My grandparents became my world, my center. They were my after-school program and my “say no to drugs” program. Their handicaps became my opportunity — to be responsible, to be needed, to be cherished.

This story is a big part of why I do organizing, why I lead. I have this feeling in my gut, this anger, this passion that comes from experiencing those I know and love being so needlessly violated and mutilated. I know there are so many things we can’t change; there is so much violence, craziness, and oppression in the world. My anger could be debilitating. It could have left me cynical, depressed or worse.

But I learned from my grandparents that there are some things we can change. We can influence some things. My grandparents were a witness to that. While they were literally maimed, limbs amputated, mobility lost, still they acted; they made a difference in the world by loving me and nurturing my spirit. I once asked my grandmother after my grandfather had died “how do you go on?” and she said “God wants us to live; there are people to love and work to do and we just have to go on!”

During my first trip to Israel, I was matched with Yedid in the Learning Exchange. During the second trip I was asked to give a talk at a Haifa University conference on the role of nonprofits in civil society and I acted a facilitator for some of the group work shops. My experience in Israel and especially with the Learning Exchange, reinforced a life-long belief that where there is suffering and grief, so too is there love, hope, and compassion. I am so grateful for both my trips to Israel and believe that they truly belong as part of my life’s biography.

Leadership requires hope-filled integrity. And integrity, Judith Hermon also points out, lends itself to trust — “the assured reliance on another person’s integrity.” Trust is what is needed for true leadership to flourish. Trust is what we were building with each other through the Learning Exchange.

