

Palestinians and Jews: Living beyond fear

by Lionel Traubman

As a children's dentist for 35 years, I know something about fear of invasion and pain.

I understand root cause.

Helping most of my 17,000 young patients transcend fear provided insights for shepherding our successful 16-year-old Jewish-Palestinian Living Room Dialogue through hundreds of meetings and public outreach activities to touch the world.

Our preventive and cure for protracted conflict was defined by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

People don't get along because they fear each other.

People fear each other because they don't know each other.

They don't know each other because they have not properly communicated with each other.

At the root of repeated Holy Land failures festers fear, ignorance, and normalized disengagement.

Except for a tiny handful, almost no Jews and almost no Palestinians have ever met, including within the state of Israel.

Two exquisite peoples remain at a distance, inside their clans and homes, satisfied being invisible to each other, repeating mistakes based on half-truths, fond of perpetuating their darkest stereotypes and exaggerated fears, claiming high ground while dehumanizing and driving each other further away.

Tragically, these same cousins remain passive spectators to "experts" and government professionals, "leaders" who often maintain personal power by manipulating our vulnerability to fear and reliance on wars and walls – physical and emotional – the predictable failures that make us heartsick.

Could Dr. King be right?

Is "knowing each other" the beginning of the end of fear and war?

Does root-cure start not with treaties or victories but with heart connections, deep listening-to-learn, and shared creativity that has eluded us and to which until now we've said "no"?

Yes.

To diminish fear, nothing replaces face-to-face relationships.

Listening is today's great act of healing and of love.

The person with the will and the skill to listen is the one with the power to transform the relationship.

Since the early 1980s, my wife Libby and I have convened Soviets and Americans, Armenians and Azerbaijanis, and Palestinians and Jews.

Nearly three decades of bringing together embattled people have assured us that "an enemy is one whose story we have not heard."

Hearing one another's narratives, we begin to see each other as human and equal.

Deep within, something amazing and powerful happens.

We begin to want the best not only for self but for the "other."

Fear melts.

The heart messages the brain it's safe to finally think rationally and imaginatively.

Knowing this, we need no longer allow fear to hijack perceptions to our primitive reptilian brain – the amygdala – that limits us to passivity, running from each other, or rationalizing unspeakably inhumane violence.

Today we desirous Jews and Palestinians need no longer feel hopeless, without partners, despairing – "nowhere."

Somewhere, the heartfelt song from *West Side Story*, provides our vision.

“Hold my hand and we’re half way there,” we’re rightly assured.

Hand in hand, never again letting go of our heart connections, many of us are already navigating our way to the new shore of our better life.

King was right; until now we “have not properly communicated with each other.”

A college student told us: “If we’re not communicating with each other, we might as well live in caves again.”

To avoid remaining primitives or wasting time, E.F. Schumacher reminded us to use our human energy not to resist and kill the old – the dinosaur – but to invent the gazelle.

Once we live the new life of communicating and cooperating, old fears and ways atrophy and become irrelevant – obsolete.

To cure fear, we Palestinians and Jews are one another’s best doctors.

Let this give you faith and courage to reach out to your “enemies” to first listen to their stories.

A teacher told me: “Faith is not sitting down on a chair that isn’t there.”

I’ve seen thousands of chairs supporting Palestinians and Jews face to face, discovering unprecedented empathy while creating inspiring projects and public activities together.

People ask me: “What is your greatest fear?”

I’m afraid that citizens will remain dependent on governments alone, and that vastly more Arabs and Jews will not have the courage and wisdom to sit down to become more human together.

So, what then is my faith?

From all my healing and community-building experience, there are a couple of things I know:

*The soul's oldest memory is of union,
And the soul's oldest longing is for reunion.*

Beyond fear and war is an exciting, shared life for Palestinians and Israelis – Muslims, Christians, Jews, and others – listening, living, and creating together as equals, neighbors forever.

Lionel “Len” Traubman, a retired pediatric dentist, was the 1998 Alumnus of the Year of the University of California School of Dentistry. With his wife, Libby, he co-founded in 1992 the ongoing [Jewish-Palestinian Living Room Dialogue Group](#) of San Mateo, California. Google “Jewish Palestinian progress”. Write to LTraubman@igc.org.