

Beyond the Conflict: Women Spiritual Peacemakers in the Holy Land

Andrea Blanch, PhD

*Non-violence, which is a quality of the heart,
cannot come by an appeal to the brain.*

Mahatma Gandhi¹

Beyond Conflict: A Revolution of the Heart

While politicians and the media discuss national boundaries and economic development plans and governance structures, a quiet revolution of the heart is occurring in the Holy Land. With little fanfare or public acknowledgement, women of deep faith from all four religions of the Middle East are creating the possibility of a more peaceful future for all of us. They are meeting in each other's living rooms, sharing prayers and practices, teaching and learning from each other. They walk together, hand in hand; they eat with each other and with each other's families; they laugh and mourn together — radical acts in a land where friendships between Jews and Muslims are rarely seen. These women are sometimes ridiculed and have on occasion been the target of open hatred. But drawn together by love for the divine and the desire to create lasting peace, they are showing their children, in a thousand little ways, that harmony between people of different faiths is possible.



The women of the *Women's Interfaith Encounter* (WIE), a program of the Interfaith Encounter Association, have organized themselves into three geographic regions in Israel — because traveling far from one's home or village is sometimes difficult in the Middle East, especially for women. Each region has a coordinator for each faith: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and the Mowahhidoon faith (commonly, but mistakenly, called the Druze). Coordinators are responsible for outreach and for facilitating the development of local interfaith women's groups. What the coordinators do is no small task, for it often involves traveling to remote villages to meet with the women and their husbands and families in order to develop trust.

The women meet together regionally as often as their limited resources allow and otherwise stay in touch by phone and e-mail, and through the ever-present "word of mouth." Deep friendships have developed among the women and among their families and their children. As their experience grows, the women are developing confidence and skills. In a recent conversation, Elana Rozenman, founder and director of WIE, noted that many women, herself included, have

been fundamentally transformed by this work. She described the experience of one of her colleagues:

One time she was at a grocery store, shortly after a bombing. It was an ultra orthodox environment, and people were all talking badly about Arabs. She finally spoke up, asking people, "How can you say these things? You know that we are all created in God's image. You are going against our religion when you discriminate like this." They were all shocked, of course, because they didn't expect that anyone would contradict them. This was a profound moment for her because it took a great deal of courage to speak up. It made her feel different; but she took a stand, and from that point on she knew she would continue to speak out and would be regarded differently by her community.

Hundreds of women are now part of the WIE network, which has grown rapidly since its inception a little over three years ago. They are doing what women do naturally — connecting with other women; but they are doing it with consciousness, intention, and a deep belief in the power of spiritual action. The work of the WIE represents a profound spiritual process, a process that reflects an emerging global shift in consciousness and simultaneously points the way toward the possibility of spiritual harmony.

Beyond Interfaith: Creating Interspiritual Experience

In "An Interspiritual Manifesto," Brother Wayne Teasdale states that the origin of all of the world's religions is in mystical consciousness and describes how focusing on an "unmediated experience of Ultimate Reality" can both unite different religions into a universal spirituality and initiate a process of personal and social transformation.² He presents a model of interspirituality that includes a focus on unmediated experience — experience that does not rely on priesthood but instead approaches the divine directly — and on a personal commitment to live a spiritual life. Because interspirituality has its roots in a consciousness that is part of all religious traditions, it can lead to constructive engagement between different groups and organizations and, potentially, to real transformation.

The work of the WIE, in concordance with Brother Teasdale's model, is better understood to be *interspiritual* rather than "interfaith" or "interreligious." The WIE provides a concrete example of how an interspiritual approach can create a forum for finding common ground among different faiths and, at the same time, transform us as individuals and as a society. Traditional interfaith efforts span a wide variety of forums, including interfaith religious services, "dialogues," and experiential projects (e.g., summer camps giving children of different faiths a chance to live and play together). WIE differs in significant ways from each of these forms of interfaith work.

Most *interfaith services* bring together representatives of various faiths — often sheikhs, rabbis, priests, ministers, or other religious leaders — to observe each other's traditions in some structured form. In contrast, the women involved in the WIE are not clergy or spiritual teachers, and they are not "representing" their own religion in any formal way. What they bring to their meetings and to each other is their own spiritual essence and a deep commitment to honoring each other, regardless of faith. They are thus free to stay centered in their hearts — in a mystical consciousness unmediated by formal spiritual leaders and unconstrained by the political

positions of their established religions. Yet, at the same time, all of the women are actively practicing and committed to their own religious traditions. As a result, every aspect of their work is grounded in deep spirituality and faith.

WIE differs from *interfaith dialogue* in a number of ways. Most importantly, it is primarily a matter of the heart, not the head. Dialogue brings together representatives of different religions to share perspectives on a topic and hopefully to learn from each other. At its best, it helps people to find commonalities among their respective traditions, to begin to see from the others' point of view, and to create empathy where there was once suspicion or hostility. Interfaith dialogue assumes that common ground can be found between religions. However, the very structure of "dialogue" — the presentation and discussion of differences — reflects the belief that the differences between religions are deep and important. In contrast, WIE begins with the assumption that underlying the apparent differences in form, ritual and theology there is an underlying unity — one God and one humanity — with many names, perhaps, and many different appearances, but still, in essence, One. Differences are presumed to be on the surface and to be less important than what ties us together.

Dialogue focuses on the verbal expression of ideas, beliefs, and theological premises. (Dialogue, in fact, is defined in the dictionary as "conversation.") In contrast, WIE is about *being* together, *doing* things together, *experiencing* together. It is thus both a uniquely feminine mode of interaction and a deeply mystical one. In addition, most dialogues are limited to two parties — Jewish-Muslim and Jewish-Christian dialogues being the most common. Bringing more than two parties to a dialogue often seems to confuse the issues and to make resolution difficult. In contrast, WIE brings together all four religions at once — not to the dialogue table but into the living room. Including multiple perspectives makes it much more likely that matters will remain ambiguous, that there will be no clear "winners" or "losers," that issues will be as complicated and unclear at the end of the day as they were at the start. Resolution is not the goal; therefore, the women are free to experience each other, to build inner spiritual connections unfettered by outer differences.

Finally, WIE differs from most other *interfaith experiential programs* in two obvious, interrelated, and important ways. First, the effort consists only of women; and second, it operates in the context of the participants' normal lives. As these women make WIE a part of their day-to-day activities, they are weaving a web of relationships not only with each other, but also with each other's families and communities. They are changing themselves, and in the process, they are changing the world around them. With many interfaith efforts, the looming question is, "Will we be able to maintain this spirit when we go home?" The women of WIE are already home — and homes and hearths are changing at the same time they are.

The work of the WIE is having a profound impact on the individuals involved, their friends and family, perhaps even on the world. In the conversation mentioned earlier, Elana Rozenman described how her own commitment deepened — and how it affected her family and friends — when she decided to invite her WIE colleagues to her daughter's wedding:

Its one thing to work with people of other religions in a work setting, but its another thing altogether to invite them to be a part of your most intimate family gatherings. I knew if I

didn't invite my women to the wedding, I would be a hypocrite and none of my work would be worth anything. Still, it was a big thing because it forced everyone else, my family and my friends, to deal with it, to accept it. Many of the people there were Orthodox Jews, Rabbis and others. Having them sitting at the same table with Arabs was an astonishing thing. We had a bus to take people to the wedding site, and one of my friends was taken back when she got on the bus and heard Arabic being spoken. She was afraid at first, but then she thought, "Oh, those are just Elana's friends," and then she could relax.

Beyond Trauma: Healing Each Other, Healing Humanity

Nearly every woman in the Middle East has a story of personal loss, of deep wounding, often resulting from religious conflict. These memories of violence and betrayal are carried deeply and are not likely to go away on their own. Often, traumatic memories remain embedded in the psyche of a culture until they are voiced, acknowledged by others, and released. Until such healing happens, old conflicts will continue to reemerge. In this regard, too, WIE is breaking new ground.

The WIE was started by a Jewish woman from Jerusalem whose son was badly burned and injured in a suicide bombing and a Muslim woman whose son spent almost two years entangled with the law, falsely accused of throwing stones at the Israeli police. Each of these women became involved in peace work in response to her personal trauma. When they found themselves assigned to share a hotel room at a peace conference, they discovered that each held identical stereotypes about the other. After confessing how fearful their respective families would be to learn of the sleeping arrangement, they realized that the real work of peace building had to start at home. Before they left the conference, the WIE had been born.

In the previously mentioned article, Brother Teasdale notes that making a commitment to the mystical consciousness of interspirituality can initiate a process of transformation of an individual's understanding, will, character, memory, imagination, unconscious mind, and behavior. By remaining focused on their personal connections and sharing their common inner spiritual truths, the women of WIE are entering into this transformative process. They are most certainly transforming their own understanding of the conflict they are involved in and their sensitivity towards others, thereby creating a strong will to make a difference. In addition, they are creating the possibility for transformation of the "higher" stages noted by Brother Teasdale — memory, imagination, the unconscious, and behavior — and in so doing, they are actively increasing the possibility of lasting peace in the Middle East. Transformation of memory is essential for individual and collective healing because it is the emotional memories of trauma that impede recovery.³ Transformation of imagination is essential for envisioning a world where trust is more powerful than fear and where harmony is more valued than maintaining a competitive advantage. Transformation of the unconscious is essential for preventing unconscious habits, desires, and emotional patterns from reemerging at critical points and sabotaging progress. Transformation of behavior, of course, is essential to embodying new habits and emotional patterns in reality.

The work of the WIE is having exactly such an impact on the individuals involved, their friends and family, perhaps even on the world. When asked if she thought that the WIE was affecting the larger world, Elana was hesitant to make claims. However, she noted that the WIE work differs from many peacemaking efforts in two ways — it focuses on ordinary citizens rather than on political leaders, and it actively involves people who profess deep religious beliefs:

I think this work is making a difference at the grassroots level. And I think part of the reason is because it involves religion. Its funny; Oslo failed because it was just the political people at the top talking — there were no ordinary people involved, and there wasn't a rabbi or a priest or an imam to be seen anywhere. Now it seems that we have a real grassroots movement beginning to happen, and the religions are starting to get involved; but at the upper levels, no one is really talking at all.

The work continues to inspire Elana and the other women who are involved, and it continues to grow:

I've been surprised by how easy this work is. I meet the women and we immediately feel a sense of sisterhood, of bonding. If you open your heart, it all comes easily. The hardest part is getting to the place where you're ready to open your heart. Many people have been very deeply wounded, but staying in a place of fear is so self-limiting, so life-denying. You have to trust and then just let it happen.

Beyond History: Creating a New Culture

The women of the WIE are doing more than just healing themselves and their families. They are creating a new culture, one that is based on embracing the beauty of differences, on the otherness that nourishes rather than on fear of the otherness that generates strife. Women are traditionally the carriers of culture since it is women who raise the children, who teach them the stories, songs and dances, and games that will shape their perceptions of the world. Until we have a new set of images and stories to pass on to the next generation, achieving a lasting peace will be difficult because peace is literally “unimaginable.” It is this aspect of change that is most often overlooked in “peace-making.”

Psychologist Larry LeShan has explored the relationship between the ways in which human beings organize their perceptions of reality — the basis of culture — and the almost universal tendency of humanity to wage war.⁴ His analysis is directly relevant to the interspiritual work of the WIE. LeShan notes that all human beings experience a basic tension between the drive to be more and more unique and individual and the desire to be part of something larger than one's self — to be a “member of the tribe” or a part of social forces beyond one's own circumstances. Historically, according to LeShan, humanity has resolved this tension in two different ways: by turning to mysticism, and by waging war. All mystical paths include methods to integrate our individual natures with a sense of merging with the cosmos, infinite consciousness, the “ground of all being.” LeShan suggests that war, by allowing us to feel as if we are part of something larger and more intense than our individual selves, can fulfill a similar purpose. He cites Tolstoy's *War and Peace*: “Every general and every soldier was conscious of his own insignificance, aware of being but a drop in the ocean of men, and yet at the same time was conscious of his strength as part of that enormous whole.” If LeShan's theory is true, the WIE

— and all other forms of interspiritual work based in mystical experience — are, by definition, moving us off the path of war and toward a path of spiritual awareness.

LeShan also notes that human beings use two distinct modes of consciousness to organize their perceptions of reality. A war mentality reflects what he calls the “mythic mode,” in which good and evil are reduced to “us and them;” God is on our side; conquering the enemy is the only thing that really matters; and our enemies are fundamentally different than our friends. A peacetime mentality, on the other hand, reflects a “sensory mode,” in which good and evil are shades of gray; life is complex with many important problems to solve; and people are seen as more alike than different. The women of the WIE are clearly moving from a mythic to a sensory mode. More importantly, they are creating and transmitting new images and stories that are based in the sensory mode. In short, they are helping to create a culture of peace.

Conclusion

When visiting the women from the WIE a year ago, a group of travelers from the United States expressed how optimistic the work made them feel. Nothing else they had seen, in the media or in person, had led them to feel hopeful that a lasting peace might one day be possible. One story illustrates how hope can grow. The young daughter of one of the Jewish coordinators was extremely fearful when she learned of her mother’s work; she was sure that her mother’s life was in danger. That is, after all, what she saw and heard over and over again on television and in her neighborhood. When the slightly older daughters of the woman’s Muslim partner learned about this, they spontaneously put together a gift package for the little girl. They filled it with things that girls play with and a picture of themselves, along with a note saying, “We are just little girls like you and we would like to be your friends.” Upon opening the gift, the young Jewish girl immediately forgot her fear and propped the picture of her two new “best friends” on her night table — only to inspire fear in the heart of her grandmother when she came to visit. The grandmother’s reaction led to another set of discussions and another chance to open a heart closed by fear.

This story is important not only because it happened or because it illustrates how an effort like the WIE, embedded in daily life, can affect ever-widening circles. This story is also important simply *because* it is a story, a story of harmony and friendship and healing rather than one of hatred and hurt, a story that can be — and already has been — told and retold. In the making, this story was about touching a place of spiritual oneness. In the telling and the retelling, it will help to reshape our collective global spiritual consciousness. That is reason enough to be hopeful.

¹ From Gandhi on Non-Violence: A Selection from the Writings of Mahatma Gandhi. Edited by Thomas Merton, NY: New Directions Press, 1964.

² Teasdale, W. “An Interspiritual Manifesto,” *Elixir*, No. 1, 2005.

³ Herman, J. *Trauma and Recovery*. NY: Basic Books, 1992.

⁴ LeShan, L. *The Psychology of War: Comprehending its Mystique and its Madness*. NY, NY: Helios Press, 2002.