

Healing Words:

**Storytelling as a Pathway to
Peace**

Tour of the Holy Land 2009

By Janet Dowling

This article first appeared in Facts & Fiction Autumn 2009, the UK's only independent magazine devoted to oral storytelling. (www.factsandfiction.co.uk)

Revised May 2014

The project "Healing Words : Storytelling as a pathway to peace" was an initiative by the Emerson International School of Storytelling <http://www.schoolofstorytelling.com> lead by Roi Gal-or and Ethan Friedman.

The Company of Healing Words Storytellers comprised of Roisin Murray (UK) , Karin Ferry (Sweden), Amie Hoff (US), Julia Leon (Chile), Umi Sinha (India via UK), Sef Townsend (UK), David Confino (UK), Michael Williams (Canada via Scotland) , Dvora Lieberman (Australia), Raphael Rodan (Israel/Palestine), Muna Sheehan (Israel/Palestine) & Janet Dowling (UK). Noa Gal-or was the logistics manager in the Holy Land

The Call to Adventure.

It was May 2008. I was in Glastonbury when I first heard the call for participants for the proposed “Healing Words - Storytelling as a PathWay to Peace” tour in the Holy Land. I had two simultaneous thoughts. “Who on earth would want to go out to a place in conflict like the Holy Land, and expect to bring peace by telling stories?” At the same time I was thinking- “Me- I want to be there!”

The whole project was a vision of Roi Gal-or, carrier of the storytelling course at Emerson College in East Sussex. An Israeli himself, he had been in Israel when the bombs were hitting the Galilee in 2006. Confronted by a group of angry Palestinian men, he found himself telling them about the two mice who both laid claim to a piece of cheese. As he finished telling, the Palestinian men nodded- “That’s about us isn’t it?” Their anger subsided as they reflected on the story.

The Mice, the Cheese and the Fox

Two mice both laid claim to a piece of cheese. A fox offered to split it in half for them, and then sliced pieces off to even the two pieces up (eating the spare bits as he went). Eventually the fox ate all the cheese

Inspired by this experience, Roi called upon the members of his home community at Kibbutz Harduf (in the north part of Israel), to set up a festival for peace in 2007. He encouraged them to use storytelling and other ways of sharing personal experiences. Students from Emerson College went out to help prepare the site under trees in the forest outside Harduf- clearing stones, raising canopies. He determined that for 2009 he would bring an international group of storytellers to work more intensively

on Storytelling as a Pathway to Peace. He believed that with a well placed story, listeners could learn to see the conflict differently.

Hitting the target

An archer was the best shot in the world, or so he thought, until he saw arrows slap in the middle of the target. He eventually found the better archer- who turned out to be a boy who shot the arrow first, and then painted a target around it.

As we shoot the story as an arrow- the audience will let it find their own targets in their life story.

And that's when I heard the call! Eventually 11 storytellers from 8 nationalities met at Emerson College. Each of them had been through a selection and interview process with Roi. Some had roots from afar- Australia, Israel/Palestine, Sweden, India, Chile, US and Canada via Scotland. Some of us travelled from just down the road –Ewell (in Surrey - that's me!) and Brighton. All of us had paid our fees to take part in this experience. We were joined by Muna Sheehan, an Arab who lived in Israel, who would work with us and be our Arabic translator in the Holy Land. The Israeli translation would come from Roi and Raphael (one of the course participants). Ethan Friedman joined Roi as course leader.

Preparation for the Quest.

So, one cold morning in April 2009, we met (and shivered) in a class room in Emerson College. Out of the windows we could see the rolling fields, the oak trees and the lush green hills of the Sussex landscape, as we talked of the

desert conditions, olive trees and the intense heat we would be experiencing in Israel.

We had each brought a programme of stories to tell, that we felt spoke of the meaning of peace, collaboration and forgiveness. For four weeks we were coached in ways to improve our storytelling- sometimes thinking “I thought I knew how to tell a story- but now I am not so sure!” But that uncertainty then allowed us to grow with the telling, and find new competences and confidences.

We learned new songs (you always do a lot of singing at Emerson!!), a few dances, lots of games. We shared our experiences and skills that we thought would be relevant for working with different groups in the Holy Land. All with the emphasis on how you can bring people together through sharing activities.

We learned new ways to encourage people to think about their personal stories – and became adept at asking “When did you first become aware of the conflict.” We struggled with the question for ourselves, and then began to understand how we could facilitate others with this and similar questions to promote their personal storytelling.

Two Wolves

An Old man tells his grandson how there two wolves who are at constant tension inside of him. One wolf is full of hate and anger, the other is full of love and forgiveness. The child asks the old man who will win. The old man replies “The one I choose to feed.”

And which wolf do you choose to feed?

Our time at Emerson College finished with a performance of the stories we had been coached on. Then packing and ready for the Holy Land. It was May 15th 2009. One year and a day after I first heard about the project.

Perhaps I should mention here that, sensitive to the conflict that could arise by saying either Israel or Palestine, we chose to refer to going to the “Holy Land” as the path of least offence. Even then, it caused difficulties for some people- but on the main it seemed to work. However, we were always aware that no matter what we might say, do or intended, it may be interpreted differently by the listener.

Debate in signs

Two people debate by means of gestures and think they have understood one another perfectly. In fact they have completely misunderstood each other.

To understand perfectly is to misunderstand completely.

Challenges, Obstacles and Hazards.

For the first 10 days we were offering workshops and performances to groups with an interest in co-existence. On our first day we were taken across the border into Palestine to meet with members of Combatants for Peace- former soldiers from both the Israeli and Palestinian sides.

We were invited to the homes of some of the Palestinians in Tul Karim- a Palestinian refugee camp. Special insurances had to be obtained for the three hours that we

were there. But it was important to them to feel that their stories were being heard, and that their experiences of living in Tul Karim were witnessed. And that, we found, was the crux of a lot of the work. *The need for their personal stories to be heard, and to feel that some one was witnessing their experience and pain.* With that, they could hear other peoples' experiences and eventually move towards finding a pathway to peace.

We returned to the venue where Israelis and Palestinians could meet. It was a makeshift tarpaulin over some Olive trees, on a patch of land that was neither in Palestine or Israel. A no man's land that was the only place where Israeli and Palestinian could meet without necessarily getting a permit to pass the boundary. There- one former combatant from each side told their personal story to a mixed company of over 80 Israelis and Palestinians. Then they split into 4 groups, and the storytellers, seen as neutral, facilitated them to tell their story -" When did you first become aware of the conflict."

For many this was the first time they had spoken about their experience to someone from the other side. For the Palestinians, it was the first time they had seen an Israeli out of uniform, and not carrying a gun. For some of the Israelis, it was the first time they had ever met a Palestinian face to face. But they were there to share, and explore possibilities for peace.

Two Warriors

A mighty battle had been fought, and the two remaining warriors faced each other to fight. As the sun went down they agree to rest, and then fight to the death in the morning. During the night they talked of their children, families, homes and experiences. In the morning they put their armour back on, saluted each other, then turned away to return to their homes. It is hard to fight a man when you know his stories.

From a story by Dan Keding, based on the Iliad

But nothing ever goes quite to plan. The Israeli army had been alerted to our presence, and they arrived. Leaving their vehicles on the Israeli side of no man's land, but carrying their machine guns, they walked towards the canopied area, and tried to break up the meeting. The organisers very quickly told them about the international group of storytellers from the UK- which caused the army to reconsider (they didn't want an international incident) and withdraw- only to contact the police and ask them to attend! After all- this was a civilian matter- wasn't it? And while all this was going on- we continued to ask "And when did you first become aware of the conflict?"

Tensions rose. Some people were reluctant to talk with the army around- so we told a short story for the moment, or maybe a song or two that cut across languages. Eventually the listening circles finished, thanks were given for persisting and positive feedback from all. As we left, the police arrived. Timing was everything.

Nothing to do with me

The King and his advisor were eating honey cakes. A drop of honey fell onto the balcony wall. The King said- "Its nothing to do with me- someone else will deal with it". The honey drop slid down the wall until a fly landed on it, and then a gecko caught the fly. But a cat had seen the gecko and lunged for it, just as a dog did. The noise of the two fighting caused the king to say "It's nothing to do with me etc."

Eventually the owners of the cat and dog arrived and started fighting. Then the whole town took sides, and eventually the country was in ruin. The King finally realised that it was most certainly to do with him, and if he had only wiped up the honey drop- none of this would have happened

The hostel we stayed at in Jerusalem was also used by the Israeli army for their cultural orientation courses for their young recruits. We became used to seeing 18 and 19 years olds in full uniform, their guns strapped to them, as they wandered in groups around Jerusalem, learning about what they had come to defend. After all- there is no "army"- just the Israeli Defence Force. And in a quiet moment, away from the rest of their group, each of them had a story to tell, and a desire for peace. They just didn't know how to start.

And so we met different groups all around the Holy Land. Some were in current co-existence projects, or were part of communities who hoped to set up new groups. We were able to show the facilitators how storytelling could enable participants to share their story by either directly working with the participants or developing skills for the facilitators. At the YMCA in Jerusalem, we worked with teenagers,

kindergarten teachers and parents- all keen to use traditional and personal storytelling as a way to share experiences in a more meaningful way.

The brave little parrot

The jungle is on fire, and all the animals run away. But the little parrot fills its wings with water to try to douse the flames. The God Shiva looks down, and in the form of an eagle asks why the parrot doesn't give up. The parrot replies "Because I want there to be a forest for the others who come after me."

Shiva was so moved by this, he returned to the heavens and wept, his tears putting out the flames

We met a mixed group of people in a theatre that was nothing more than a shell of a building. I worked with a group of bereaved parents who went into schools- one Israeli and one Palestine together – to share their stories. As one Israeli man shared his grief at the loss of his daughter, the Palestinian man next to him reached out to comfort him.

Some of the men had come from Hebron – a two and a half hour drive away. They had to leave precisely on time, because they could not be back a minute later than the time on their permits. And yet- they wanted to know how they could use storytelling to facilitate their work, and wanted to use every minute of the time available to them.

We shared some examples of stories which were neutral to both Palestinian and Israeli, and they could relate to stories with in their own cultures.

Red Coat, Green Coat

There was a village, split by a road. One day a man walked down the road. Neither side of the road would agree on the colour of his coat- red or green? A war broke out between them. Much later, when the village was in ruins, the man came back the other way. This time everyone looked- and realised that on one side his coat was red, and the other side it was green

You need to look at both sides of the argument.

We met with one group of 40 women who had been a developing co-existence group until 6 months previously. With riots, disturbances and death on the streets in their hometown, they had not felt comfortable to meet together. Some members of the group had experienced family deaths, and their suspicions were that the extended family of other group members were responsible. Nothing was said, but a barrier had been raised.

With a combination of storytelling, sharing games and songs, they were able to have dialogues with each other. Many issues still needed to be addressed, but they felt they had made a start and planned to continue the work with their local storyteller and facilitators.

Jo and the Carpenter

Jo and his neighbour are good friends until there is a dispute. Jo decides he will fence off his land and the river away from his neighbour. He engages a carpenter to build a fence. When he comes back, he finds the carpenter has built a bridge over the river, and on top of the bridge stands the neighbour, who is delighted to become friends again

It was not all work! Shall I mention floating in the Dead Sea, or swimming in the Sea of Galilee. Or standing at the Wailing Wall, or by the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem? Or walking through the lush, green Baha'i Gardens in Haifa or seeing the ancient fortresses of the Crusaders at Acre? So much history - so many stories to tell.

We arrived at the peace festival at Kibbutz Harduf -an Israeli settlement, nestled between several Arabic villages. The first thing we had to do was erect the canopies over the two storytelling spaces we were going to use. Over the next two days, we had a continuous presence telling stories for adults and children.

Time after time, people came to speak to us to tell us the meaning they had found in our stories, sometimes things we were unaware of ourselves. We had the opportunity to meet many people from different backgrounds, and hear their stories. Artists came from the local Arab villages to show their local traditions, dances and songs. Local Israeli storytellers told their stories, and there were musicians everywhere.

Coming from the multicultural setting of the UK, it might have been easy to be nonchalant about the mixture of cultures. But for many of the participants it was the first

time they had made that move to understand and appreciate someone from a different culture. In the eating area, a group of Palestinian women started singing. A group of Israeli women, sitting nearby, joined in the singing, and then they were swapping songs. The spontaneity of the exchange moved some people to tears. I heard time and time again people say “This is what it is all about.”

The Mother-in-Law

A young wife was finding it difficult to get on with her new mother in law. She was advised to go and see the wise women- who gave her a potion to massage into the mother in law every night- “and that would solve the problem”. Believing she was poisoning her mother in law by doing this, she was diligent in applying it every night. In time she came to know, and understand her mother in law better, and was horrified when the oil bottle was nearly empty. She sought out the wise woman for an antidote, and was reassured that there was no poison, but wasn't her problem with the mother in law now solved?

Many of the people we had worked with in the previous two weeks, came to the festival and greeted us as old friends. We were touched that they had come; they were pleased we remembered them (as if we could forget!)

Lion's Whisker

There was a man and woman who married. But things were not going well, and there was talk of divorce. The woman went to see a wise man for a potion to turn her husband into a loving man. He agreed but needed one ingredient- a lion's whisker, which the woman would need to collect herself. Slowly, over time, the woman got close enough to the lion to pluck the whisker. But when she saw the wise man, he told her that she did not need a potion, because she had already shown her patience, cleverness and bravery. So she went home, and in time she and her husband were reconciled.

Storytelling as a Pathway to Peace. Did we make a difference?

At the beginning I said how quickly we found that people wanted to tell their stories- to felt heard and their experience and pain witnessed. For many of the people we met who were actively working on co-existence projects, it was important that we witnessed their work, and our coming had given added value to their work both for themselves, and for the people they were working with. Sharing our experience of using stories with the facilitators also enabled them to develop their skills.

For the participants in the events when we were facilitating Palestinians and Israelis to meet for the first time- our neutrality was what made us acceptable as a first step. Our willingness to hear their stories and facilitate them to share their stories with others from across the cultures was the second step. Telling the stories we had to share, enabled some people to think of their situation in a different light- the third step. Every journey starts with just one step.

The Starfish

There had been a storm, and the beach was full of starfish. One man was walking along, picking up each one and putting it back in the sea. His friends called out to leave them- they would all be dead soon- it wouldn't make any difference. But the man, kept picking them up, and as he put them in the sea one by one he said "Made a difference to that one, made a difference to that one, made a difference to that one"

Whatever else we achieved, I know that when I remember the people we met, I can say "Made a difference to that one, made a difference to that one."

Any one of those people we met and shared stories with, that one person may be the one who inspires future generations to the peace process.

Janet Dowling

JanetTells@gmail.com

07834 194215

www.JanetTellsStories.co.uk