

WOMEN RAISE VOICES FOR PEACE

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A Muslim perspective

By AREEJ ZUFARI
SPECIAL TO THE SENTINEL

Our energy and compassion sparked in the air as we tossed out ideas and exchanged agreement over the urgency of the situation.

Seven women gathered at the First United Methodist Church in Orlando to discuss how we were going to spread peace.

It was not a Bible study group or a women's interest group. It was a group called Women for Peace: Jewish, Muslim, Christian.

We were gathered there not to tolerate our differences, but to celebrate them and draw on each other's intellect for ideas about how to change the urgent situation in our world today.

We left with promises that the next time we met we would all bring information, resources and a friend, because, ultimately, that is all it takes: for people to move beyond the false illusion that they are tolerating each other and to celebrate their differences.

The scarf I was wearing on my hair as a symbol of my devotion to God as a Muslim woman slipped off my head as I nodded enthusiastically in agreement with something one of the other women had said.

"Exactly!" I said. "People need to realize that we cannot have peace unless we know

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our neighbors and care about them first."

It did not matter that my hair was uncovered. I was there with other women, sisters, who were there only to learn from each other's ideas and grow from our exchanges.

The Star of David also glowed in that room. It was not hanging on a gold chain, but glowing in the heart of another woman, a Jewish sister. Her compassion and soft-spoken eloquence touched everyone in the room.

Christ's cross was strewn with white flowers of compassion and grief as the leader of the group announced to us that "in the past century 150 million people have been killed in wars. The majority of the people killed in these wars were Christians, and Christians are not the majority of the world's population. This fact makes me hurt."

Sincerity bonded us as close as sisters that evening.

Our sisterhood of peaceful protest was born.

Dedication and compassion are our banners.

Areej Zufari is a teacher in Orlando.

My roots planted in Judaism

By LOUISE FRANKLIN SHEEHY
SPECIAL TO THE SENTINEL

When people ask my religion, I tell them my roots are deeply planted in Judaism but my branches go everywhere. In my spiritual walk I have been deeply nourished by the lessons from my own tradition, but also from Christianity where I have found teachings of great value, especially after marrying a Christian man. All the religious traditions have offered me truths that I can embrace.

I was raised in a Zionist household in the 1940s that celebrated the birth of the state of Israel in 1948 as though a new baby had been born into our family. My first trips to Israel deepened my love for the country and its people. In the 1990s, these Mideast trips included meetings with Palestinian Arabs, and left me confused and troubled. These were "the enemy" with their stories of life in post-1948 Israel, often in direct conflict to the stories I held to be true. Clearly, we lived in two different realities.

I did not know then how to bridge the gap between those realities, a gap that has grown more hostile and violent every year until we have come to this insane place, in the year 2003, where treachery and terror stain the holy ground of my beloved homeland. But, also the homeland of my friends: Khaled, Rashid, Nijmah, Omar.



SHEEHY

I suffer when I hear their stories of displacement, humiliation and fear.

The God who asks me to help heal and repair this broken world suffers when we express hatred, distrust and arrogance toward one another. The God I worship welcomes all people to the table, men and women alike.

In the first two years of this new century, with the escalating violence and terrorism, I asked these burning questions: Where are the voices of women? What is our role of peace builders?

Women know a different reality. Women employ compassion in the service of peace building. Conflict resolution on every level must include women with our inherent powers for making peace.

I know that the only reliable way to bridge the walls between us and "the enemy" is by meeting, talking, telling our stories, listening generously with an open mind, but more important, with an open heart that wants to understand, be loving and patient, and most of all, remain vulnerable to one another. Perhaps through more of these conversations, the suffering we have known can teach us and lead to rebirth.

Louise Franklin Sheehy is the director of "PEACEBUILDING: Where are the Voices of Women?", a conference on Saturday at St. Luke's Methodist Church in Orlando. For more information visit matrixwomen.org on the Web.

An Arab Christian's view

By ADELE AZAR RUCQUOI
SPECIAL TO THE SENTINEL

I can't speak for other Arab women. I can speak only as one Arab-American woman, a Christian of Syrian descent, steeped in a desire for peace. I live in a world where there is so much war, and even more war talk: in families, in governments, in media, in just about every institution. So, I have taken myself to a place where I try to live in a manner that might, in some way, support a peaceful world:

1. I take time each day to be silent, to just be. I light a candle and sit in meditation, and envision the world finding a way to give peace a chance. I think of children who suffer because of our frenzy toward war, and I pray to behave in such a way that changes that frenzy.

2. I take time to commune with nature. I know God lives in that world of green, living things, and I observe how nature lives in harmony. I grow orchids and realize the patience required to wait until they decide to bloom.

3. I try, and sometimes succeed, to be non-judgmental of government, of illegal pathways that can destroy the peace of families and communities. This is a difficult commitment, especially regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict, and rarely am I successful, but the big thing is that I try.

4. I try to share my wealth,

I try to live in a manner that might, in some way, support a peaceful world.

whether it be \$1 to the homeless or a \$25 donation to True Majority, a grassroots education and advocacy project. I know that money is an expression of my values. Without giving some away, I further the plight of the poor and of injustice in the world.

5. I pray for our American society that puts so many men and women in jail, thinking that will solve our violence. I pray that somehow, despite the horror of prison life, they will work toward rehabilitation. I pray hard that we end the death penalty. In my soul, and because of my faith in Jesus, who said that only those without sin could cast the first stone, I believe that killing people is part of our sinful arrogance.

6. As an Arab woman, I'm proud of my passion for life. I believe that I am responsible for what goes on in this world. I believe I can take action in small ways, writing a letter, making a phone call, walking in a quiet demonstration. I hope always to live these commitments in the presence of God.

Nuschur Allah!

Adele Azar Rucquoi lives in Maitland.



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