

17 May 2008  
Just Inside the New Gate  
Old City, Jerusalem

Dear Friends,

Traveling yesterday, with two journalists and a Palestinian Christian, I catch just a glimpse of a nondescript monastery on the West Bank, somewhere between Bethlehem and Ramallah. I'm told this is known as the site where the wise men were warned, while dreaming, not to return to jealous Herod. Our driver adds, quickly, that these same wise men had come from what's now Iran and Iraq. Having worshipped the Christ child, changed by that encounter and wary of Herod, they took an entirely new road home.

The winding road from Bethlehem – through the heart of the West Bank – is indeed a new road for me. It's a bit like Highway 17 in its turns and twists and a bit like a slim 2-lane straightaway across the Central Valley. We pass impoverished Palestinian villages, camel farms, sprawling (and illegal) Israeli settlements, olive groves. Twice, we stop at checkpoints – to be processed by young Israeli soldiers. This may someday become a Palestinian state – but right now it's clearly an occupied territory.

We pass through Ramallah; my new Palestinian friend seizes the opportunity to tell a trio of Yasir Arafat jokes. It's clear he holds the former Palestinian leader in poor regard. He's saddened by the mismanagement and worse of the Palestinian leadership. The West Bank is passing by, outside my window, and its beauty is surprising to me. The hills are golden and rough and scattered with olive and almond and orange trees. The desert stretches, dry and holy, far to the east. Full of possibilities, rich with passion, and torn by war – another paradox in a month made for paradox.

In Bill'in, we meet up with more internationals, two French filmmakers and three Irish activists from Belfast. In the home of Iyad and Tasaheel Bornot, we're served tea and the playful enthusiasms of the

couple's four bright-eyed children. Tasaheel's an artist, a weaver, and a grateful hostess. It's Friday, and she's dressed in the traditional Muslim manner. I'm used to seeing such dress as an indication of serious religious pursuit, even isolation. But Tasaheel Bornot can't contain her happiness in watching an international convocation (Irish, French, American, Palestinian, Christian, Muslim) come together in her own modest living room.



**Little Mohammed Bornot, Interviewed**

Iyad is more serious, preparing for a weekly nonviolent action, one which he's organized every Friday for three years. The tea is sweet, the children, playful; we talk about the wall built to carve the West Bank into disjointed and disconnected hamlets. We talk about the acres and acres of prime growing land seized by occupation forces. Food and peace are hard to come by.

We've come to join Iyad and 50 or so others for the weekly action. Joyfully, powerfully, passionately, they march through the streets of Bil'in and head for the wall itself. Some time ago, this Bil'in Popular Committee against the Wall and Settlements won an important victory in Israel's highest court; the court determined the Israeli army should move the wall and restore much of the peoples' land to its rightful owners. And yet – and this is heartbreaking – the Israeli army refuses to abide by its own court's ruling. So the Friday march, the

Friday action, the Friday nonviolent witness continues ([www.bilin-village.org/english/](http://www.bilin-village.org/english/)).

We emerge from village streets into the fields of Bil'in and again I'm struck by their beauty – unlike any beauty I've ever known, numinous and luminous and alive with peoples' dreams. I'm praying – deep, deep within – for the strength to keep my heart open to whatever comes, for the good sense to be safe. And I'm thinking of all the amazing folks I've met in just two weeks: Sheikh Abed el Salam and his son, Sheikh Ghassan; Israeli author Yossi Klein Halevi; mother and writer Anat Moss whose family have invited me to their home next week, to celebrate Lag Ba'Omer and Shabbat; Elias Jabbour, a Palestinian activist and practitioner of restorative justice in an Arab village to the north. I have more questions than answers, but I feel very deeply that I need to be in this group, this pilgrimage, this gathering of courage. I need to see for myself.

I've been enjoying an essay this last week by the author, Christopher Bamford. It's a reflection on "The Gift of the Call":

***Grace taught me much, not the least of which was that the human state and the striving native to it are universal and that the call, though it takes different forms, is always one: to realize the unity of creation, the nonduality of reality, and thereby to transfigure the world.***

As we crest the hill and see the wall, the fence, the barbed wire; as Israeli soldiers move into place, beyond the wall, behind trucks and shields and weaponry; as Bil'in's activists shake their Palestinian flags and demand the occupation end; as canisters of teargas are launched our way, one or two sparking a fire downhill from where I'm standing; as it happens, I'm thinking of that essay and my own call. "The call is always one..." he says. "To realize the unity of creation, the nonduality of reality, and thereby to transfigure the world."

My call – standing on that hill or any hill – is to love and worship the one God who is God of the Palestinian and the Jew together, God of the occupier and the occupied together, God of the determined sheikh in Nazareth and the skeptical journalist in West Jerusalem somehow, together. My call – marching with Palestinians or celebrating Shabbat with Israelis – is to pray for reconciliation of all peoples and to work with mercy and compassion for justice. The unity of creation! The nonduality of reality! One God!



**Tear Gas into Protest, Bil'in**

I've promised Kate and the girls that I'll do everything I can to stay safe along this journey. When the teargas begins to fly, I take to higher ground. I turn to take some pictures – I've never seen or experienced anything like this before – and I feel that I'm out of harm's way. I'm not.

Suddenly and shockingly, a teargas canister – hissing and fuming – lands just five feet away. I turn to run – but another lands just five feet in that direction. Many others are scurrying to still higher ground – but many of us get a good whiff of the gas. (I missed out on the 60s – but I've been there now.) My eyes burn, but the oddest feeling is in my chest: a fiery, burning, retching that seems to last forever. I manage to get as far as away as the others – then I double over and wait for the pain to pass.

By the grace of God, an older Palestinian man is standing by me with a plastic bag full of onion chunks. “Take one,” he says in English that makes me want to cry (except I’m already crying). “It will help, it will really help.” I have no better ideas. So I hold the onion to my mouth and inhale as deeply as I can. I rub it against my nostrils and around my lips, and I commune with that onion as if the world depends on it. And within a minute or two, I can breathe normally, the burning subsides, life goes on. Many are making their way back to Iyad’s house – and I get there too. They’ve passed out watermelon, and the pinkish flesh has never tasted so good! Today’s eucharist: onion and watermelon.

I get to this point in my letter – and I want to sum it all up. I want my experience in Bil’in to make sense, to fit some neat categories, to point to some theological truth. But I can’t. Instead I’m left with impressions, pictures, sensory experiences that will stay with me forever:

- I watch Iyad Bornot lying on his back, after the action, and tossing his 3-year-old daughter into the air. He’s laughing and loving; she’s in heaven. She sniffles at his shirt and says playfully, in Arabic: “Yick! The gas! The gas!” And Iyad laughs too: “Yes, my dear, the gas.” He does this work for her.
- I smile as Tasaheel takes the picture I’ve given her – the picture of our family in Santa Cruz. She puts her finger on each face and asks a name. She laughs and smiles, “Tell them to come to Bil’in! They will like it here.” Little Mohammed gets a pen and has me write my address on the back of the picture. He carries that picture around the living room like a Christmas package.
- It strikes me, much like a COPA action: these families are building relationships, claiming a capacity to act in spite of huge obstacles, taking risks and organizing for the sake of their families, their children, their mosques and churches. What they want is not outlandish: lands to cultivate, olives to harvest, safe streets for their kids, homes that are not

searched late at night, schools that work, democracy. The teargas comes with the action; it's part of the cost they pay for power and unity and hope.

- My guide, George Rishmawi, insists that Israeli settlements in the West Bank are forbidden by international law, just as the Palestinian refugees' right of return is guaranteed by international law and U.N. resolutions. "We cannot negotiate away our legal rights," he says. "Negotiation starts when we agree on this."
- Even as I remember the stinging sensation of that gas in my chest and the restorative smell of onion, I think, too, of all those soldiers on the other side of yesterday's wall. Who are they? What will they study? How many really want to be there, hurling teargas at villagers and internationals? Do they fear for their lives when rocks get slung their way? What does a year or two of this kind of border-keeping do to a young person's sense of right and wrong, peace and possibility, respect for the other? I cannot and will not hate them.

I care so much about my own sense of call – in the midst of all this, in the haze of gas, in the living room of a Muslim family, in a land so dear to me and my Jewish friends. I want to act and love and dream and pray in the deep spirit of that call, my call. And it's not always so clear. Not here. Not anywhere. I turn again to Christopher Bamford's essay, to "The Gift of the Call":

***I [have] learned, too, especially in human relationships and above all in love, that if I become a question, if I shift from being an "I" to become a "who?," then experience begins the process of answering. It is a path from the monotony of the sameness of the ego to perpetually becoming "other," nonjudgmental, without boundaries, an open door. The way is unrestricted.***

God only knows where I am along this road. I only know that I experience, here as in Santa Cruz, a profound desire to live without

boundaries, to stand in an open door. I learn so much – about my heart and my world – from Yossi Klein Halevi, an Israeli Jew and centrist of great integrity and compassion. I'm challenged by his grace and his own passion for a world that cherishes beauty and decency and courage. There was a connection in our conversation that is rare and treasured in my experience; and I know he has something precious to teach me.

And I learn so much in the backseat of George Rishmawi's compact, charging over speed bumps and through red lights in the West Bank. I'm unsettled by his critique of dialogue as too comfortable, by his sense of urgency and grievance, by his profound commitment to his people. And I watch him embracing his friends, and tossing their children high, and I see there is a generous heart in this man: much like Yossi's, much like the sheikh's, much like the Moss family's in inviting a stranger for Shabbat next week. If there's one thing that seems clear after two weeks in this bewildering land, it may be this: there is one God and only one, and monotheism insists on open doors, welcome tables and love.

After my extraordinary day in Bil'in, I returned by bus to Jerusalem and found my way to a wonderful little restaurant in East Jerusalem. It had been a long, long day, and I resisted the urge to write it all down so fast. As I ate, a musician tuned an electric 'ud (pear-shaped stringed instrument) and prepared for his set. He played for an hour – without pause – a sound unlike any other: plaintive and passionate, searching and soaring. Just what I needed at the end of a dizzying day. His was like an hour-long blessing: every bite, every breath was sanctified. God is good.



**Christian Peace Activist, Bil'in, with Olive Branch.**

Before I close, I want to celebrate – from all these miles away – your victories in the California Supreme Court (on the right of all couples to be married legally!) and in COPA's Shared Prosperity Campaign! I know that many, many have worked tirelessly and faithfully to advance these efforts. You have every reason to be proud and grateful and deeply thankful for the Spirit's blessing. Across the time zones, I share your thanksgiving and a sense of what's truly possible when people of faith and conscience open the doors of the heart. Congratulations, all!

It's on to Bethlehem tomorrow and a visit to the West Bank town of Hebron later in the week. I'll be in touch as the week moves along, and I trust in your prayers for me and the people I'm meeting!

God's grace, my friends, be with you always!

Yours in faith,

Dave Grishaw-Jones