

Peace Talk Series by Mary Gloria c. Njoku

In this edition of the programme, peace, I will discuss once again my inspiration for this programme, peace, and how important it is for us to share stories of peace.

I begin with a story sent for the annual youth peace conference by Brandon Gray. I invite you to open your heart to join us in the peace promotion agenda. Do something for peace and send your story of peace to me. Brandon Gray sent the following story in response to my call for stories of peace for the conference.

Here is an excerpt from Brandon's true story:

*It was just after midnight in Israel when I landed, weak and weary from the twenty plus hours of travel. Ben-Gurion International airport, the only port of entry for most travelers into the Holy Land, is located just outside of Tel Aviv, a truly beautiful shore-side city with white sand beaches breaching the Mediterranean sea. My purpose in Israel was both academic and personal. Academically, I was traveling to Tel Aviv to join a group of graduate students, the majority of whom are pursuing graduate degrees in psychology at New York University (NYU), in a 6-week course. The purpose of this exploration was to examine identity, group dynamics, and their intersection in the stressful environment that is Israel. The opportunity seemed perfect for me both as a second year student in a clinical psychology-training program and as a self-proclaimed historian and pundit of the Middle East. It was a-dream-come-true to be in this place, to interact with this society, and to scratch the surface of living a life in this ancient yet modern land. During my undergraduate years, I put my personal interests in the area to use by obtaining a minor in political science, the majority of which consisted of classes in Middle Eastern studies. As a result, I entered this experience with a boisterous and misguided confidence in myself as quite knowledgeable in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. But I soon found out that I do not know the real story of Israeli-Palestinian conflict.*

*Consider the perception of Ismail, a 47-year-old lawyer and Arab Christian living in Northern Israel. Ismail met with our group to discuss his organization's attempt to have all members of a certain non-Muslim faith labeled as such on their I.D. cards so they would not be confused as Muslim: "all Muslim's are thieves, liars, and murderers. They give us Arabs a bad name and we are sick of it" he said as our waiter in a small coffee shop handed him his tea. "THEY are the reason we don't have peace in the Middle East." Naturally, our group was offended by these malicious pronouncements. Yet, his prejudice remained. As we left the shop disheartened by the discussion, one of our group members noticed a silent look of discomfort on the face of the waiter. "I am sorry for what was said here, are you*

*Muslim?” she tentatively asked to which he replied “yes, but it is ok, we cannot get mad at him every time he comes here saying these things.” How astounding, this man could serve Ismail tea while he berated his religion. Furthermore, even in the face of this contradiction to Ismail’s narrative, he avidly clung to the notion of a Muslim “other” as evil. This conviction even in the face of disproof is consistent in many narratives and drives much ignorance and violence today.*

*Finally, a similarity that seemed most unfortunate of these narratives is that each is acknowledged only by its proponent party, and is adamantly and diametrically opposed by its opponent. By accepting one narrative and rejecting any validity to another, one serves only to perpetuate violence, to continue conflict, and to act as a barrier to peace. One does so by disrupting dialogue between any two opponents in deeming the “Other” as one of “THEM,” as an advisory in any processes towards conflict resolution, and as inherently evil. Yet, this seems to be the vastly common path in the majority of my encounters during my time in Israel. Even the educational system commits these acts of partiality. Indeed, state-sanctioned schooling in Israel often places Arab and Jewish children in separate schools, with separate curriculum, and no opportunity for interaction (Bekerman & Shhadi, 2003). Fortunately, next to this majority of opposition and segregation stands a small but powerful and steadfast minority.*

*Enter the Hand in Hand Center for Jewish-Arab Education in Israel founded by Amin Khalaf and Lee Gordon. Hand in Hand’s first school opened in 1998 and today boasts five successful locations, including a Jerusalem school, the location I was fortunate enough to visit. Hand in Hand’s mission is to educate Jewish and Arab children, in the same setting, at the same time, on the same curriculum. Coming into the classrooms in Jerusalem in the mid summer of my visit to Israel, I’ll admit I was skeptical. After many weeks of confronting such harsh and diametrically opposed narratives, I was beginning to think coexistence between Jews and Arabs would never be possible. Our visit to Hand in Hand renewed my faith. The classrooms combined Arab and Jewish teachers, who instruct in Arabic, Hebrew, and English. The curriculum consists of education on both a Palestinian and Jewish narrative, bridging the gap between two historical accounts in opposition. The school even celebrates both Israel’s independence day and Nakba Day, two holidays commemorating the same event, statehood for the Jewish people and the loss of a homeland for the Palestinians. I was truly amazed at what this school is accomplishing. Outside the Hand in Hand school, in the city streets of new and old Jerusalem, Jews and Arabs often interact only violently, and rarely became friends. Inside, they were becoming partners, classmates, lifelong friends, and advocates for change.*

*Albert Einstein, in a speech to the New History Society in 1930, said “Peace cannot be kept by force; it can only be achieved by understanding” (Calaprice, 2005, p. 158). These words posit a path to peace that not only calls for, but also demands understanding. The Hand in Hand school and other organizations like it are answering that call. Ignorance, racism, prejudice, and injustice that exist in Israel and Palestine today are nothing new to this world. In fact, if anything, they are staples in the development of any society. They have existed in many social fabrics, in many cultural orientations, and in many historical contexts. They exist today throughout the Middle East, in America, and around the world. However, their prevalence does not and should not equate to acceptance. In order to begin to truly eradicate these indignities, to step towards peace, it is my opinion that societies must begin with understanding.*

*As I boarded my final connection flight on my long journey back from Israel, I realized how misguided I had been in thinking there could be a “simple” solution for change, for peace. There is no simple path to peace. However, I also realized that there is always a first step. I am no expert in peace, I am no authority of cause and effect, and I do not pretend to have any answers for Israel, for Palestine, or for anyone for that matter. But, I know that peace, like all things, must begin somewhere. I choose to believe that it can begin when the “I” understands the “OTHER” in any narrative. That peace can begin when “MY” narrative and “THEIR” narrative becomes “OUR” narrative. That the first step is taken when “I” interact with “YOU” on a day to day basis, such as children in school. Here, in such a place and time, the conditions can be set for when “I” can understand “YOU.”*

My dear I hope you followed Brandon's story. Did you notice that outside the Hand in Hand school, Israelis and Palestinians had no "our" story and yet Jewish and Arab children were learning together in Hand in Hand school and creating "Our" story. Someday, these children will become the adults in charge of the affairs of these two warring nations and when that day comes, if by God's grace their learning has not been tainted by opposing experiences, these two nations shall finally know peace and have "our" story.

Brandon's story brought me to tears and to a reflection on the importance of our educational institutions becoming places where there can be an "Our story". Godfrey Okoye University Enugu, for example, prides itself as a university with the mission of *imparting quality education aimed at inculcating in students strong personality that will ensure the promotion of religious, cultural and epistemological knowledge*. I wonder whether the university understands the implication of this mission and whether the students themselves understand that their education is geared towards enabling them to become agents of peace. The three-pronged dialogues of the university,

that is, religious, cultural and epistemic dialogues are the centre of several of the conflicts that have occurred in the Nigerian nation and among varied communities. I believe that when a person gets a good knowledge of religion, culture and unity of knowledge, the person will be in a position to tell "Our stories". This person will manage in-group and out-group ideologies well and promote peace.

I began this programme, peace, to tell our stories of peace and encourage us on our journey towards peace. I encourage you to send stories of peace to me. The stories might lead us to form "Our Story." Our society needs "Our Story" to survive. We cannot continue to tell the Igbo, Hausa, Yoruba, Efik etc stories alone. Our society needs "Our Story" to survive. Our families, communities and states need "Our Story" to make advancements and for sustainability. I invite you to key in to our story of peace. Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me.