

## Responses to Violence: Peaceful Resistance in Palestine

—Melissa Mullan

*SFU graduate Melissa Mullan's article is a powerful follow-up to Terry Gibbs' article, "Opinion Peace," in the 2003 issue of Humanitas (pp. 39-40). In that article, Terry Gibbs described her work with CEPAL (the Canadian-Palestinian Educational Exchange), and her experience working with refugee camps in Beirut. It also connects strongly with Marc H. Ellis's "A Revolutionary Coincidence" (p. 37 in the same issue), his reflections on the present situation in Israel and Palestine.*

It was six o'clock in the morning as I walked down the dusty main street of the camp, here and there turning sideways to squeeze through the claustrophobic alleyways. Despite the early hour, the sun was shining brightly, warming the empty streets. I was the only person up at such an early hour. As I neared the end of the camp I sat down and glanced towards the entrance. At first, I thought that I was seeing things—that my eyes, still heavy with sleep, were not focusing correctly. Unfortunately, this was not the case: what I was looking at was in fact a large, earthen mass blocking the entrance to the camp. The other entrance was sealed off by heavy cement blocks. Half an hour later I was standing on the roof of a nearby house as an armored personnel carrier and army jeep entered the camp and parked directly below me. The army presence would not leave the camp completely until much later that night.

During the spring of this year I spent a month working as a peace activist in the



Occupied Palestinian Territories. I was working with I.S.M., The International Solidarity Movement, a Palestinian-led movement made up of a diverse group of internationals from around the world striving to end the occupation. During my time in Palestine I was working with people from such varied backgrounds as a recently graduated high school student, a labor union representative, and a seventy-two year old grandmother. I.S.M. is devoted to the use of non-violent direct actions to challenge the Israeli occupation. We also document the human rights abuses in attempts to educate our home countries by telling a side of the conflict that is rarely reported in the regular media.

Most of my time in Palestine was spent in the city of Nablus, living with a family in Balata Refugee Camp located just outside the city. The camp is more a suburb of the city than an area separate and on its own. Two main streets run through the camp; they had once been paved but little remains of what asphalt formerly covered them. With a population of 20,000 in an area of 2.5 square kilometres, Balata is the largest refugee camp in the West Bank. It also has the reputation of spawning many suicide bombers and resistance fighters, causing it to receive a large amount of military presence.

The day before the roadblocks, appeared the Aqaba Summit had finished in Jordan and the infamous Road Map to Peace was implemented. What better

way to inaugurate the Road Map (which promises to ease restrictions on movement for Palestinians) than by erecting eight roadblocks, completely sealing off all roads into Balata Camp? That day the activists in Balata along with the local community set about removing the roadblocks. With only a few donated shovels and the use of scrap pieces of metal and plastic, we dug out the large rocks, car pieces and other bits of trash buried in the mound of earth.

Not long after beginning our work the army appeared. Though the busy main street of the camp was full of children, women and men going about their daily routines, the army first used tear gas to dissuade us and when that failed, they resorted to firing both rubber coated bullets and live ammunition down the street. Our shovels were confiscated directly out of our hands. The community continued to work after the loss of our shovels, using only our bare hands to move the earth. By this point our gestures were largely symbolic as we could accomplish little without tools. However, the energy was that of defiance; we would not allow the army to close in the camp. Eventually the roadblocks were all removed successfully with the help of a bulldozer, only to be replaced again that night. Over a period of days we continued to remove the roadblocks during the day and the army filled them in at night. Eventually however, the army gave up and the roads remained open. This is just one example of the many examples of what non-violence achieved while I was in Palestine.

One concern in Balata Camp, and everywhere else in Palestine for that matter, is finding ways for the children to escape from the violence and hatred they experience in their every day lives. Conditions in the camps for children are

dismal. There are few recreational possibilities, and schools are often closed or classes cancelled because of army activities; and for most children, leaving the camp, even for an afternoon, is impossible. Death and injury are alarming normalities to these children, many of whom live in a constant state of fear. It is not surprising, then, that in these conditions there is little hope for the future. It is of utmost importance to provide the children with an alternative to the violence that surrounds them and to show them that there is more than one way of dealing with their current situation.

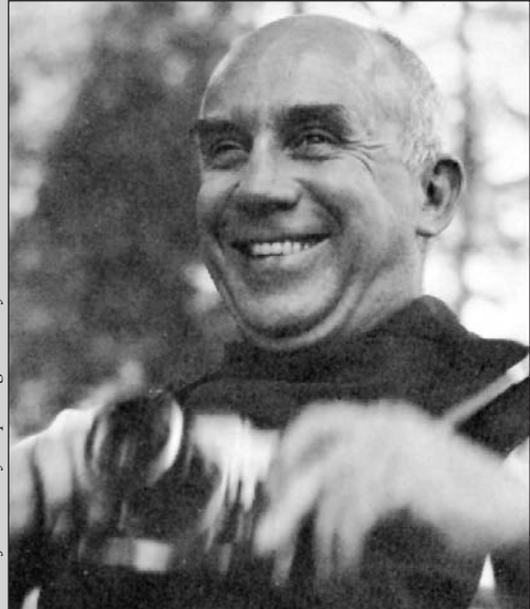
While in Balata, along with the Palestinian leaders of the local youth center, we organized a series of non-violence workshops. Our plan was to allow children the opportunity to discuss their feelings and to teach them about the peaceful resistance used in the First Intifada, which most of them are too young to remember. A video series entitled *A Force More Powerful* was to be shown to demonstrate examples of how peaceful resistance had worked in other situations, ranging from Gandhi's India to Martin Luther King's United States. During my last semester at Simon Fraser University, I had been exposed to these videos through a humanities course on Gandhi that I took. It was impressive to see the same videos half way around the world, translated into Arabic and reaching a completely different audience. Unfortunately and somewhat ironically, our non-violence classes had to be postponed because of an increase in army incursions into the camp, during which the safety of the children might have been put at risk.

Through my course work at Simon Fraser University I was exposed to many examples of peaceful resistance around the world. It was an amazing experience to be part of this movement and to see the results that peaceful resistance can achieve. Many people question the value of peaceful resistance, believing that it can accomplish little. Facing one of the world's strongest militaries with few weapons of their own, the Palestinian people have little real choice but to act in peaceful resistance to the occupation. For many of these people, waking up every day and continuing on with daily routines is in itself an act of resistance.

As an international I know that my actions are having an effect because of the large number of arrests and deportations of peace activists by Israel. Many activists are not allowed entry into the country. These actions taken by the government have made me realize that my actions are having an impact by impeding the army's ability to carry about its operations. Non-violent actions are possible for everyone to take part in, and do have a positive effect. Only with peaceful actions can we hope to achieve peace. Through non-violence the violent actions of the aggressors are called into question and become unacceptable. In the current bleak situation, non-violence has the power to mobilize people for positive change.

## SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

Photo of Merton by Ralph Eugene Meanyard



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