

Blogging in Bethlehem

from a blog written
in Palestine in June 2011.
Second of a trilogy

Palden Jenkins

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For another of Palden's books, *Pictures of Palestine*:
www.palden.co.uk/pop/

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Introduction

This book is taken from a blog I wrote when in Palestine in 2011 – I've written three such blogs and one, from 2010, is published as a book called *Pictures of Palestine – a humanitarian blogging from Bethlehem* (see www.palden.co.uk/pop/). The third is published online as *O Little Town of Bethlehem – Christmas in the Holy Land*, available on the same website.

This book wasn't published because its original contents would have caused significant security, legal and social issues, and they still could. So this version has had critical details removed, but the remaining material is nevertheless valuable.

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I hope you enjoy this book and its insights into life in Palestine – at least as it was in 2011. The information in this book was valid at that time. But although details change, not a lot changes in Palestine, in any way that Palestinians would really like.

Thurs 2nd June 2011, London Gatwick airport

It's ten in the morning. I set off at ten last night on the sleeper train up from Cornwall – and I didn't sleep. So this morning, though pumped up with coffee, I'm in a drowsy, floaty daze, waiting for my plane and people-watching. Check-in at 11am, flight at 1pm. I'm off to Amman in Jordan.

I go to Amman to give myself a day or two acclimatising to the Middle East and to get myself ready for crossing the barbed border from Jordan into Israel. It *should* take less than two hours to drive from Amman to Bethlehem, but it's a full day's journey because it involves a sometimes gruelling process at the border. This mainly involves standing for hours and waiting to be interviewed, followed by a 15ish minute interview, before being permitted to enter Israel. Or not, as the case may be.

It's Palestine I'm going to, but Palestine isn't a sovereign country and it has no airport: it is militarily occupied by Israel, which controls Palestine's borders and all movement in and out. Arabs from neighbouring countries in the Middle East have difficulty entering, on the grounds that they pose a security risk. After all, all Arabs are terrorists, aren't they? As a Westerner I am privileged with easier entry, but only by degrees – I'm *goyim*, non-Jewish, so that gives me only partial rights of entry, on a three-month tourist visa. So the entry process is lengthy and something of a test.

The departure process is worse, when leaving the country: the prospect of being interrogated about where you've been and what you've been doing and then being searched at length is not very attractive – it hangs over you while you're in Palestine.

It can make you miss your plane too. This is another reason I enter Palestine through Jordan. If I am detained or delayed on my way back, it means I don't miss my plane and incur extra ticket and accommodation costs, because I usually fly out of Amman a day or two after crossing over the border. If I departed through Ben Gurion airport near Tel Aviv in Israel – the other option – this risk lurks uncomfortably.

So I'm off to Amman and looking forward to it. Time to get ready for my plane. I'll continue this blog from Amman, in another world. My heart lifts at the prospect of going back there – I feel remarkably at home in the Middle East, more accepted and appreciated than in my home country and, after six decades in Britain as something of a dissenter and a stranger in a strange land, this is welcome. And, would you believe, it's Easyjet taking me to Amman, for a hundred quid.

Friday 3rd June, Amman

I overslept. After an eight-hour train journey, a six hour wait at Gatwick airport and a six hour plane flight, followed by a mad taxi ride around the sprawling metropolis of Amman, followed by a wander around the late-night streets seeking a bite to eat, sleep was very welcome!

Needless to say, arising late for breakfast, when I emerged the lady of the hotel made me breakfast. This highlights something I love about the Middle East – people here use their human discretion more than we Westerners do. In the West we go by the stated rules and norms and, if you miss opening time, tough luck. But here, if they like you, they'll do anything for you.

This can get a bit much sometimes, since many Arabs can also be too anxious to please. It can lead you into situations where, perhaps, you don't want what they offer or what they seek to help you with, but you have to go along with it in order not to offend them or trample on their efforts at pleasing you. Ah, well, such is the way of things.

So, today, I'm going to wander around Amman. I want to see a few of the Roman remains in this ancient city, the biblical Rabat Ammon, now with a population of four million. I'm not one for doing tourist destinations, but Amman's ancient remains interest me. Here we are at the eastern end of the once-great Roman imperium, while in Britain we were at its far western extremity. Interestingly, around the first century CE, the two big troublemakers in the Roman empire were the Brits and the Jews. We have something in common - a certain stropily self-important exceptionalism.

I'm planning to cross over the bristly border into Israel on Sunday, and to proceed then to Bethlehem. There's a chapter about the rigmarole of crossing the border in my book *Pictures of Palestine*.¹

Meanwhile, I'm off out into the streets of Amman, to check out the scene. It's Friday, the Muslim holy day, so things will be quieter than usual in this otherwise frenetic city. I'll tell you what happened later!

¹ *Pictures of Palestine*, see: www.palden.co.uk/pop

Friday evening 3rd June, Amman

Had I been a Brit in the Mandate period, in the 1920s-40s, when Britain ruled Egypt, Jordan and Palestine, I'd have worn short trousers in hot weather. But those were the days when we Brits were colonial occupiers, bossing people around and uncaring about Arabs', to us, rather primitive values and ways.

Nowadays, as a Brit, I am a guest here and bodily exposure isn't culturally cool. So my shorts stay packed, awaiting times when I'm out of the public eye - usually when I'm working at my computer upstairs where I stay and work at the school.

Everyone here says the summer heat has come early this year. It certainly was hot today, approaching 40° C. My feet were overheating in my desert boots, so I entered a shoe shop, eyeing some interesting sandals.

"I can't remember my size..." The man looks at my feet. "44", he says. Blimey, he might be right, come to think of it. The sandals fitted exactly. Brilliant. In Clarks shoe stores in Britain, there would be a complex measurement procedure on a digital gizmo with a fully-qualified employee doing it. Not so here. His guesswork was accurate, fast and economical. So now I'm the owner of some neat sandals made in Syria, for the princely sum of eight dinars (around £8 GBP).

Those sandals helped me up the hundreds of steps leading to the Amman Citadel, sitting on a high, largely steep-sided hill overlooking the old Downtown area (which itself is literally down in the lowest part of the city). Half-way up, a trio of cats, wrapped around each other in the shade in a graceful state of feline noblesse, eyed me lazily as I heaved up the steps, sweating as I was in the sun and pursuing my silly human intents when I should be having a siesta.

What a place the Citadel is. It goes back to 5500 BCE, around three millennia earlier than our stone circles in Britain. It's a fortified ancient town atop a hill, with water cisterns and baths, a Roman *temenos* and the multi-period remains of a souk, a mosque and houses.

Impressive modern marble plaques show the archaeological succession at the site, with a list of cultures including the Ammonites, Persians, Greeks, Romans, the Muslim Umayyads of Damascus and the Abbasid Caliphs of Baghdad, the Ayyubids, Mamluks, Ottomans and, down at the bottom of the list, there's the short British Mandate period of thirty years – a mere puff in the history of this place, yet it made its mark. The Citadel brought up some tears in my eyes, intimations of a far memory of being here in another time.

Down the hill, before coming up, I had met an Egyptian and bought two sets of Muslim prayer beads from him. He had instantly got out a Christian rosary for me. I said I wasn't Christian. "You're not Muslim – you Jewish?" "No." "What, then?". "I'm an aged hippy, my friend." "Like John Lennon? Ah, you in your revolution in your country?" "Well, yes." This meant instant mint tea and an enthused gathering of his friends as we shared with each other the rather mixed yet generally inspiring and life-changing joys of participating in revolutions. Egyptians felt rightfully proud of their country and its 2011 revolution (which at that moment in time had not yet been squashed) and the ripples it had caused across the world – it had restored Egypt's noble and proud heritage as a leading country in the Middle East.

I love the multi-ethnicity of Amman. Walk along the street looking at people's faces and you see signs of genes from so

many different cultures, fed into the local mix by long successions of wandering peoples, invaders and refugees stretching over many millennia. There's the heavily-bearded Persian look, the hawk-like Arabian look, the European Crusader look, the Greek look, the Afro look, the Turkic and Caucasian looks, and they're all here, milling in the streets.

But if you ever come here, don't look too much at other people because you'll fall flat on your face. The pavements here are thoroughly uneven, and negotiating them is a challenge in itself. Apart from the heat, this is probably one reason why people shamble along slowly, unhurried, chatting to people they pass and linked by threads of social relationship we Europeans have long lost and forgotten.

This part of Amman reminds me of 1950s Britain. The shops and stalls are stocked with whatever the owner cares to stock, and you need to know where to go to find what you want. Traders spend ages arranging everything: honeyed Arabic sweets and finger-cakes in a mandala on a big, round tray, or dresses arranged to display their remarkable embroidered frontal patterns, or cherries and melons stacked in pyramids. I even saw piles of nuts arranged in the shapes of Arabic script.

Up in West Amman is the modern part, looking rather like Los Angeles, with high-rises, corporate branches, hotels, billboards and freeways, and modern people living in an air-conditioned world that's totally different from downhill in the traditional area. Modern Amman doesn't interest me – it's faceless and rather like any modern city anywhere else. Its one redeeming factor is an enormous national flag, apparently the world's biggest and the size of several football fields, which flies gracefully on a towering, sky-scraping pole above the city.

I met a taxi-driver, Shawki, at the Citadel. An exiled Palestinian, he was born and raised in a refugee camp in Jordan, and now he is doing well as a driver for the International Red Cross. Amman is the regional HQ for many international organisations, by dint of its being relatively sane, stable and liberal by comparison to its neighbours Iraq, Syria, Israel and Saudi Arabia. Shawki drives NGO bigwigs to Iraq, Lebanon and the Israeli border, also rescuing refugee camp dwellers when they're in trouble. He's a good man.

When he heard I was from Britaniyya, he told me of an English doctor who rescued his cousin when she had a breach birth, for just seven dinars for medication. The Jordanian health service charged 150 dinars, but they had no space at the time, and a private clinic charged 1,500 dinars – it was for the rich. The Brit, working for the Red Cross, came to Shawki's cousin's house and saved the day. So this man liked Brits. He offered to take me to the border at an aid-worker's rate, for 15 dinars. Okay, *shukran* (thanks).

I checked with him whether the border is open or closed on Saturdays, the Jewish Shabbat. It's open in the morning, he said, warning that they're sometimes in a bad mood on that day. He knows, because he sits there waiting for people to come through from Palestine, often for a very long time. This can't be comfortable down in the heat trap of the Jordan valley, the lowest place on Earth. Try Sunday, he recommended. That's what I'd been thinking. I'll ask Shawki to drive me there.

He spoke good English. Many other people stumble along with a vocabulary of around 200-300 words. Arabic English has some interesting twists. Sometimes it can get you into tricky situations because of misunderstandings. Other times, it's just

quaintly amusing, like Ibrahim in Bethlehem who, when I texted him to say I'd be coming over on Sunday, replied "*You are mostly welcome!*".

I look forward to being with Ibrahim Issa again. He's in trouble, and I think he appreciates my solidarity at this time. I'm wondering if he'll be in one of his busily distracted states, or whether he'll have the time and focus to sit down and work at things with me.

Trouble is, as a humanitarian, fundraising and financial issues are not my baby, and I keep getting sucked into dealing with them. That is the case now, with this visit. It happens because, going to Bethlehem for longer periods of time, I'm useful for leaning on by people needing help with funding. I come from a rich country, so I am expected to know all about money-raising. Meanwhile, if supporters and funders visit at all, it is usually for an intense few days' flying visit, as humanitarian tourists – they don't *get into the zone*. This is an unfortunate habit. It means that aid and support, however well-meant and benign, is often done on a basis of incomplete information and inappropriate instructions and requirements from HQ, overlaying a Western mould on a Middle Eastern situation.

It leads to a disjunction between funders' requirements and reality-on-the-ground for fund-receivers. In the Middle East much is based on implicit interpersonal trust, while in the West our institutional distrust leads to all sorts of legal, financial and regulatory complexities which, in truth, contribute to the decline of the West – we've made things too expensive and complicated.

Western funders like limited special projects with a three year time-frame, and they prefer investing in buildings, equipment

and specific projects. This is good, but problematic. The core funding of the school is what is most important – the daily overheads and wage bills – and that’s not so attractive to fund, since it’s big and it goes on forever.

Secure Westerners don’t understand how, if you’re poor, you don’t plan your spending – you spend money on today’s most pressing need – and, in the end, everything usually works out somehow, *inshallah*. Financial planning and accountability aren’t easy when you have little money and the main task is to get through the day. This applies to people and also to Palestinian organisations like Hope Flowers.

This is the way things work in Palestine. This land has added operational constraints arising from the Israeli occupation, and reality in Palestine doesn’t square well with Western fund-managers’ requirements, who seek orderly, stated, scheduled outputs, working in the right order and according to the agreed timetable. Funding trusts, however benign they may be, still have their auditors and hard-nosed board members to be accountable to. This brittle, intricate system is becoming a source of problems in Palestine.

I wish I could somehow connect with a billionaire who might give the school an endowment, providing a basic, stable, core income to Hope Flowers. Western special-projects donations would then work well, on top of that. The school could build up momentum, regularity, consistency and a secure staff, even affording the expensive accountants, auditors and inspectors that Westerners demand and quietly omit to pay for.

I am not funding-oriented, except for one thing. Occasionally I’m good at pulling off bursts of sheer magic. The beginning of magic lies with the setting of vision and intent, followed by

putting out a clear signal to people and the universe, and it proceeds from there. I guess, on this trip to the Land of the Patriarchs, that's one of the things I'm setting about doing: the wee matter of attempting a miracle.

The Chinese call it 'treading on the tail of the tiger'. Which perhaps is why, a week before coming here, my stomach was churning, expressing an up-welling angst in my psyche. You can rest assured I trawl religiously through all my dreads and fears before coming here! But the great thing about fear is that it has little relationship with what actually unfolds. Reality evolves as it will, and relentlessly. Fears disappear, and you're simply in a different reality, and it's okay.

I've taken some good photos today. I missed the cats because, while I was fiddling with my lens cap, they got up and wandered off, so I caught just two of them, who no doubt were disgusted at this Westerner with his crazy eye-machine. Or perhaps they didn't feel like appearing on Internet that day.

When I got back to my hotel, I couldn't load the pictures onto my computer anyway – my digital card reader had decided to take a holiday. So I'll have to hunt for a new one. God is Great: he always teaches lessons just when you don't want them. Meanwhile, the ancient goddess of Rabat Ammon, called Tycho, just smiles.

Saturday 4th June, The Border

Tomorrow is probably the second most dodgy day of this trip – the day I enter Israel and go through the delightful border entry experience. The dodgiest day is the reverse, when I leave. For some reason the Israelis make leaving the country difficult –

and they charge an exit tax for the privilege too. It says something about a nation when you have to pay to get out.

This is all for national security since, until proven otherwise, everyone is a potential terrorist. This country is surrounded by barbed wire and concrete walls. It's such a tragedy for its inmates, both Israeli and Palestinian, though Palestinians experience it most. At least the nature and source of Palestinians' hardship is easy for them to perceive, since it's blatant and in their faces, and they know what they're dealing with. Compare this with Arabs in surrounding countries such as Egypt and Syria, run by dictatorships and insidious security systems of their own – an internal rather than, in Palestinians' case, an external source of oppression.

But the hardships Israelis themselves go through are insidious, and most are unaware of it. It's a deep cultural belief, drummed in from birth, that the world is ranged against them. This has some justification from their historic experience, but it doesn't, I believe, help their future. But in the short term it does bond Israelis together, who otherwise are quite disunited.

This is problematic, because Israel, with its population of 6-7 million Jews, is surrounded by four hundred million Arabs. It's tragic inasmuch as Jews have for millennia been spread around the Middle East, with a presence in Baghdad, Damascus, Alexandria and virtually every Middle Eastern city from Marrakesh to Tashkent. No longer – they are now confined to their own small country, the size of Wales or Vermont. The idea of going shopping, holidaying or working in Beirut, Medina, Damascus or Cairo is beyond consideration.

Many Israelis would consider me anti-Israeli because I'm involved with Palestinians. But this isn't my position. The

decline or demise of Israel, now that Israel exists, would be a major setback, and I support its continued existence, since it's there, and since many Israelis, *sabras*, were born there and have nowhere else to go. What I don't support is the way it oppresses Palestinians, taking their land and more than its fair share of everything. The Palestinians have lost so much - 78% of the land of historic Palestine.

Israel's national interests are defined by a Zionist ruling minority. Zionism, *tsionut*, is a belief that contradicts the heart of Jewish faith and tradition, as set down long ago by the Patriarch Moses - according to many observers. Zionism believes that Jews, a people chosen by God, are by definition different and superior to other peoples and an exception to rules and norms that apply to other peoples. It decrees that, whatever the cost to Jews or others, the state of Israel's priorities and worldview, as perceived by Zionists, *must* prevail at all costs. As a result of their terrible history as persecuted victims of, largely, Europeans, they have built deep psychological walls and fences around themselves to guard themselves from Arabs, and this has been a result of this persecution. This now manifests itself in the high concrete walls, 700km of them, that surround Israel - the separation, security or apartheid wall (choose your preferred term).

There are two main ways for foreigners to enter Israel, through Ben Gurion airport or over the King Hussein Bridge from Jordan - the route serving Middle Eastern traffic that I'm taking. You usually go through questioning about your purpose in visiting, other countries you've been to, the name of your father (not, for some reason, your mother), who and where you're going to visit, and whether you're going to have dealings with Palestinians.

Ironically, my father was involved with saving Jews from possible slaughter by Rommel and the Germans, fighting in Egypt and the Libyan desert in WW2. The main reason for the British effort was to protect the Suez Canal, a lifeline of the British empire, and its Middle Eastern possessions, but they had sympathies for Jews, ineptly trying to balance the interests of the increasingly fractious Palestinians and Jews in Mandate Palestine. In 1942 it looked as if the Germans might take the Middle East, mainly for its oil, advancing through Libya and the Caucasus in a pincer action, to meet up in Iraq. Mercifully for the Jews in Palestine, and thanks to Brits like my dad in North Africa, the Germans didn't make it.

I work with Palestinians because they are oppressed. If Jews were similarly oppressed I would work with them. I work in a peace-oriented school in Bethlehem – technically no threat at all to Israelis. Except that some Israelis believe peace itself is a threat, and that only military readiness and hyper-control of the whole of former Palestine will save them. As a consequence, Israel has become unsafe to Jews and home to one of the world's longest-lasting conflicts. Almost every Israeli, male and female (except Orthodox *haredim*), does national service to protect the nation from the many foes it feels it has. Army slavery, in other words. Germany, France and even Russia are arguably safer for Jews nowadays – though many of my Jewish friends would adamantly disagree.

Palestinians, meanwhile, are nowadays mostly little threat, and those who are a threat will, in the course of time, desist, as has happened in other conflict zones. On the whole, most Palestinians just want a normal life. They started to give up violence in the early 1990s, with Yasser Arafat recognising Israel's existence at that time and engaging in the Oslo Accords.

But the peace process didn't work. Though the Palestinians were not without fault, the breakdown was caused by Israelis more than Palestinians – the Baruch Goldstein attack in the Ibrahimi Mosque, the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin and more – even though the Israelis blamed the Palestinians for its demise. Israel continued its military control, land-grabs, detentions and settlement building. Out of sheer frustration around 2000, young Palestinians engaged in protest which then was so ruthlessly suppressed that it became war, the second *intifada*. But Palestinians' hearts weren't really in it and the price was high. They just wanted a decent life.

As a result of experiences in the 1980s, 1990s and the *intifada* around 2000, without really knowing it the Hope Flowers School became a world leader in education for trauma-recovery and post-conflict community reconstruction. This is a key reason why I'm involved: as a wizened Sixties peace-freak, I regard Palestine as a leading country in dealing with the effects of conflict, disaster and hardship, and I want to support that development since it can benefit other peoples too. In coming decades, Palestinians will have much to teach the world – they're experts in handling tough times and circumstances, not only in attitude and philosophy but in concrete action too. They could even teach a lot to the people of my own country.

So tomorrow morning at nine, Shawki the taxi-man is picking me up, and off we'll go, down into the Jordan valley, 1,200ft (400 metres) below sea level and into a geophysical crack between drifting continents. He'll drop me at the Jordanian side, where I get an exit visa and pile onto a bus to go over the border. At the Israeli side it's a matter of queuing, perhaps for hours, for my turn at being interviewed.

Inshallah (if it is the will of God), I'll come out the other side with a sigh of relief, then to catch a bus to Jericho, followed by a service taxi to Bethlehem. Otherwise I shall go to Jerusalem and then catch the 21 bus from the Damascus Gate to Bethlehem. Then I'll locate Ibrahim, who will take me to the school in Al Khader, part of Bethlehem, where I am to stay for the next month. My next blog entry will probably be from there.

Al Khader, Bethlehem, Sunday 5th June

Amazing. I suddenly realised that I had forgotten my weekly meditation. That's rare. It lasts for 30 minutes at 7pm GMT every Sunday, linking up with others elsewhere who are meditating at the same time. I looked at the time, and it was 10pm exactly, Palestine time, which is 7pm GMT!

'Upstairs' was knocking on my head, giving me a wake-up call. Just as well, because I had forgotten it was Sunday - time-warped as I was right then. I had been busy sorting out the apartment I'm staying in, having just arrived at the school around 5pm. So I did my meditation, a welcome pause after the long magic carpet ride to Bethlehem from faraway Cornwall.

A funny little karmic thread opened up on my journey here. I met a guy on the flight from London to Amman, saying he was heading to the Middle East to look around, to see what's happening. As soon as I mentioned I was heading to Palestine he perked up, and within fifteen minutes he'd decided to go there too. We parted company in Amman, but I somehow knew I'd see him again.

Shawki took me down to the King Hussein Bridge in the Jordan valley. He talked about the landscape - it's eerily captivating, a

visually dramatic, rather otherworldly setting for staging biblical events. We also talked about the recent protests in Jordan – Jordan’s own milder version of the Arab Spring. The short story is that Jordanians don’t want a radical change in their government or with their king because other options would be worse. But they do have problems with inequality, a privileged overclass, rights and economics, so the pressure is on, but there won’t be a revolution here. Jordan is like that – it schmoozes along, adjusting to the prevailing wind.

Guess what? I trolled my case into the departure area of the Jordanian border complex, and there was the guy I’d met on the plane, in the queue for an exit visa! So we accompanied each other across the border and into Jericho.

Jericho is the oldest continually-inhabited town in the world, dating back to around 8000 BCE. But what I’ve never figured out is, why is such a town located at the Earth’s lowest point, 1,200ft (400m) below sea level? Palestine and Israel are a bicameral repository of unanswered questions.

It turns out that my British friend’s uncle is Palestinian, so he’s following his genes. He’ll be rather overwhelmed at the sheer hospitality and inclusivity that will flood him when people find out he’s related to them! It’s bad enough being an utter foreigner like me – you get drawn into people’s hospitality to the extent that, first time round, it can be emotionally very moving, in the most positive of ways. It challenges your guilt and shame, your sense of undeserving post-Christian unworthiness. It’s necessary simply to *receive* such generosity. Trying to pay people back is offensive and the worst possible thing to do, though spontaneous acts are welcome, since generosity is what makes Palestinian society tick, and

everything goes to and comes from God anyway, in this land. So, deep in a Palestinian's heart, they are giving to Allah when they're generous with you, and it is best not to obstruct that.

When I got to Bethlehem, it took twenty minutes to progress from the service taxi stop-off outside the Church of the Nativity to my friend Adnan's shop – about 200 yards. Lots of people recognised me and wanted to chat. They just love people who return to Palestine, because few do so, and if to them you're deemed *a good person*, they take you in. Some, especially older folk, touch their heart in greeting when they meet you.

This remarkable openness, which you encounter even from people you've never met, arises from two main things: deep-rooted Arabic and Muslim cultural norms, and the 'war spirit' that Palestinians have lived under for several generations. This sharing, mutuality and spirited steadfastness under duress you see in Palestine far more than in neighbouring Jordan. Jordan is at peace, while in Palestine the conflict, though technically 'sub-acute', sharpens people's wits and sense of spirited resistance. In Britain meanwhile, we have an individualistic, privatised, affluently indifferent and rather indulgent collective containment of the soul that makes our society *socially poor*, even if it is economically wealthy. But the oldest generation in Britain fondly remembers 'world war two spirit'.

There is also a hard-done-by, downhearted and at times bitter side to the Palestinian psyche that spills out when things get tense or challenging. It's a collective state of bipolar turmoil and instability in which Palestinians try to look on the bright side, knowing that depression and loss of spirit charge a higher price, affecting their survival. But sometimes it doesn't work and they get desperately depressed. With good reason.

Transit through the border crossing was relatively rapid. That was unexpected. Last time I crossed over in 2009 it took seven hours from entering the Jordanian border complex to emerging from the Israeli one – partly because of laconic Jordanian delaying habits and obstreperous Israeli treatment of incomers, definitely making entry into the country a hoop to jump through. This time it took just three hours, with little questioning involved. Queuing is the main issue – that is, jostling and holding your ground in a pressing crowd. How did those two old nuns, two yards behind me in the throng, manage to get three yards in front of me without my noticing?

Then there was a gaggle of old Palestinian ladies returning from pilgrimage, each carrying two big water-carriers with water from the sacred spring in Mecca, plus a bag each. They were taking holy water to Jerusalem. Water is a major issue in Palestine, and this is *holy water*. This is Earth healing, Muslim-style, taking water from Mecca to Jerusalem.

Then there was an American couple from Oregon, she a secular Christian, he being what he called ‘Jew-ish’ (a lapsed Jew). He had just gained a doctorate in international relations, so we had plenty to chatter about in the transfer bus that carries you over no-man’s land, in the queues and when shoving bags and the contents of pockets into scanners. Our discussion embraced the Ottomans, the Iron Curtain, Israeli exceptionalism, Western vested interests and political paralysis at the UN – oh, and the moisture content of the thick air in the Jordan valley.

“What this?” said one Israeli inspector, pointing at a quartz crystal amongst my pocket contents. Er... “It’s good for your heart!”, I said, looking her straight in the eyes and beaming. I was about to say, “It’s good for your energy-field”, but I

thought that could create random complexities at this juncture. She accepted it. For good measure, I added, "I've sat at computers for forty years, and it's good to have a crystal close if you sit at computers or use a cell phone". "Yeah, I read about that somewhere." She nodded me onward. "Shalom!" I said, then proceeding to find out which queue I was supposed to be in next. My British friend was already there, beckoning.

The Hebrew greeting of *Shalom* and the Arabic greeting of *Salam*, both meaning 'peace', show how close and related the Jews and Arabs actually are.

In the end I left him in Jericho, but he might come to Bethlehem and find me, somehow (and he did). At Jericho taxi station I wandered over to a service taxi, nearly full, and the guy stowed my bag in the back and we were off. We pulled out of Jericho, up the Japanese-built 'Peace Road' of the 1990s, built following the Oslo Accords and intended to be an open artery linking Amman and Jerusalem, which should be just two hours from each other. Except the border rigmarole extends it to anything between five hours and a lifetime, thanks to the failure of the 'peace process' and the human habit of conflict.

Then we pulled on to 'Palestine Route One', heading off the main road at Ma'ale Adumim, one of the bigger Israeli settlements. Tortuously, the road heads across the hills and valleys to Bethlehem, avoiding Jerusalem. The Israelis, with their walls and checkpoints, have successfully isolated East Jerusalem from the rest of the West Bank, so the traffic from the north to the south of the West Bank has to follow this circuitous route around Jerusalem. It's a pretty inspiring, a mountain road with switchbacks galore.

But something has changed since last time: the road is being modernised – it will be dual carriageway eventually. The new part snakes through the valleys, sharply curving and steeply climbing in parts, but it's a great improvement. This is European and USAID funding. It's part of Salam Fayyad's state-building project (he was prime minister of the Palestine Authority at the time) plus, I should add, the work of Tony Blair. Yes, he's achieved little here that is politically dramatic, but in the background he pressured Israel to open checkpoints and make movement and trade easier, engineering things to help the Palestinian economy function better. So he's achieved a few things. One disappointing aspect, though, is that there are more roadside advertising billboards than in 2009. Capitalism extracts its price.

I'm staying on the top floor of the school building, which itself is on top of a hill. The view encompasses Palestinian small farms and houses in the valley below, then the separation wall and a military watchtower on the opposite hill, and the encroaching Israeli settlement of Efrat is behind. The whole story of the conflict lies encompassed in this view: of two peoples sharing space unequally, of intricate social and ethnic separation within a small, complex, historic land, and of the people on this side of the wall living in an occupied country while the people on the other side are the occupiers.

Finally, there is *sumud*, Arabic for steadfastness or 'hanging in there'. This is the Palestinian technique of staying alive. When all else fails, *simply outlast the bastards*. Hold your ground, however long it takes, whatever it takes, even if your territory is continually being eaten away.

In the 1980s, Ibrahim was a stone-throwing teenager in the first *intifada* (shot in the back and paralysed for a time), and for the second *intifada* he returned in 2001 from a safe, secure life in Holland to run this school, on the premature death of his father, the school's founder. Ibrahim knows about *sumud*. He seems glad I've come: he needs an empathetic, understanding foreigner to talk with, to spill out his soul.

"He is my brother", many male Palestinians will say of another. Sometimes this is genetically true, and often it means he's a special person for whom one would bust a gut. Well, Ibrahim is my brother, and I am gradually becoming a part of his family. True brotherhood involves a certain objectivity and truth too, and we have some honest sharings coming up.

Monday 6th June, Bethlehem

"Where is your wife?" I was being asked this by a lively young lady of about eighteen who wore the full *niqab*. Not many women in Palestine wear them (Palestinians don't like religious extremism), and most of them are young. "Er, I have no wife...". It was tricky to explain further. "Oh, I am sorry." I guess she assumed I was a widower. It was one of those situations where cultures scrape against one another, and there was no opportunity right then to reconcile the disjunction.

She liked me and spoke good English - a thoroughly modern young woman. Her sparkly eyes shone through the narrow gap in her *niqab*. Her mother, wearing a normal headscarf or *hijab*, came up, visibly proud of her rather intelligent daughter, who was busy explaining to me how Islam is the only truth and how I ought to become a Muslim. She pointed out some verses in the

Qur'an (it was in Arabic, and I pretended to understand) and, rather touchingly, she gave me her own pocket *Qur'an*. This was an honour, a gift from the heart, I could tell. In the Middle East, never refuse a gift – it's offensive.

In an Islamic way, this young woman is a feminist. Wearing the *niqab* demonstrates her reservations about modern ways and the sexual and psychological pressures modern women experience. She wasn't doing it to please her parents (I checked later) – it was her own teenage life-choice and her mother would have preferred otherwise. This movement of young Islamic women has some parallels to the bra-burning feminists of my generation many years ago, declaring that they are not just the appurtenances of men.

I had been at a women's empowerment course at the Hope Flowers Centre for adult education at Deheisheh, part of greater Bethlehem (population 110,000). It is dominated by a large refugee camp, a community for the underprivileged. The Issa family once lived there, working their way out of it, and they deliberately located the centre there. Palestinian families have a trans-generational ethos, and the Issa family's is altruistic.

The thirtyish women on the course came mainly from surrounding villages, with some from refugee camps and a number of educated women from Bethlehem. Some were illiterate, some had degrees, and Hope Flowers intentionally mixes them so that they can share the relative merits of both education and the lack of it. Apparently the educated ones initially had reservations, but these soon disappeared.

Today the subject was food hygiene. The purpose is to give women the necessary training to start cooperatives and create work for themselves. They were studying microbes, hygiene

and infections, as well as nutrition, proteins, carbohydrates and balanced diets. They discussed the *E. coli* outbreak in Europe at that time, fascinated that such infections could occur even in hygienic, chlorinated Germany and Britain. I said that this is one of the consequences of industrial-scale food production.

The lecturer, Ibrahim Afaneh, who had done his doctorate in Belfast in the late 1990s, during the time of the Northern Ireland peace process, was brilliant. He had them enthused. He knew his stuff about good practice and quality control in food production, and he had good teaching technique, eliciting the ladies' engagement and their existing knowledge, getting various of them to teach what they knew to the others. When someone made a good contribution, everyone would clap.

This is only one segment of the women's course. Another concerns group counselling, family therapy and self-development, another includes basic business practice, sales, packaging and computers, and another concerns the dynamics of cooperatives (meetings, decision-making and so on). Hope Flowers doesn't just train people: they emerge from courses with a start-up business to run.

Many of these women are so poor that providing for their transport is vital for ensuring attendance. But enthusiasm levels are high enough that it strikes me the women don't need much incentivisation, only help getting there.

Ibrahim Afaneh invited me to speak and, though as a man I had reservations about teaching on a women's empowerment course, it was clear that, to them, this was a unique opportunity because I was behaviourally non-sexist, and they loved having me around. Ibrahim, who had it in his nature, as many of the more liberal Palestinian men do, was pretty good at non-

oppressive male behaviour too. While in Britain he had learned a lot by being in a more gender-equal society. He was busy training a few women teachers to do his job and take over.

I shared some of my knowhow acquired from being a long-standing vegetarian. They didn't know that the best source of protein is nuts (plenteous in Palestine), or that sesame seeds and tahini, a dietary standard here, provide the full range of amino acids which themselves facilitate the absorption of all proteins. At one point I asked them what the most important ingredient in cooking is. They suggested quality food sources, hygiene in kitchens, balanced diets... and then, after a pause, one of the illiterate women said, in Arabic, "The whole of your being", which was immediately translated. Yes! She was closest to the point I was making: *love*. "If you cook with love, you bring Allah into the food, you heal people and it's just like painting a picture or making music." They all laughed, nodded and clapped.

We had a great time. I took lots of photos. I shall write a report for the course's UK funders, who have thus far provided £80,000 over three years. A Quaker trust connected with Clarks, the shoemakers, they fund women's empowerment projects throughout the Muslim world. They are one of Hope Flowers' steadier, more understanding, progressive and non-neurotic funding sources in their approach to funding.

Here I could see what was really happening at this course. These women aren't fools, and they are not dazzled or easily tricked: they have commonsense and motivation and, were there anything spurious about these courses, they would leave like a shot. But no, they were bubbling, rapt, eager to engage – and clearly their acquired knowledge would spread around

their communities, leveraging the educational effect of the courses. Which is precisely what Hope Flowers sets out to do: it has a philosophy of setting out to strengthen society.

Several women had turned up late, wanting to join, following reports from their friends. Maram Issa (Ibrahim's wife), who runs the courses, told them the course was ending so there was little point, but they insisted and joined in. The young lady in the *niqab* and her mother were two of them, and later they emerged inspired. What I read from this was that observant Muslim women, while their ideas about self-development might not accord with those in the West, nevertheless are taking the modern world by the horns and striving to make something of it, but within their own context and way of seeing things. Modernity doesn't involve emulating the West.

Ibrahim Afaneh invited me to introduce myself. I told them I had started out in my adult life in the revolutions of the late Sixties, that I understood and supported the recent Arab revolutions and, though I was British, I did not on the whole agree with the government and conventions of my own country. They loved that. So did I! I must confess that it is good to be welcomed and respected for this since, in Britain, being a dissident brings disadvantage, it's a disqualifier and a source of disrespect. Being a dissenter here is honoured. But I felt duty-bound to bring them some tougher truths too.

Talking about proteins and nutrition, I mentioned how meat production uses up far more resources and land than what is involved in production of vegetable proteins. The seas are being fished out too. This is unsustainable. Something must change with protein consumption worldwide. Throughout history, most people have been 90% vegetarian and 10% meat-eating -

meat and fish are dietary supplements, and their over-use today ruins the Earth. During my lifetime the world's population had swollen from three to [in 2011] seven billion, and industrial meat-production and fishing cannot continue as they do if humanity is to survive in peace, justice and decency.

Much nodding: they did know this, but I think they appreciated someone articulating it clearly. I added that I had no stomach hanging out in front of me because of my chosen diet.

Immediately there was excitement: it turned out that one-third of the women had lost weight in the last two months as a result of dietary changes they had made in connection with the course. One woman said, "*Look, the happy in me!*". She had lost twelve kilos. This training had significant consequences for the ladies - and other course segments, including counselling, family therapy and open discussion of women's issues which, for many of them, was the first time they had encountered this. This was a liberation process, tailored to them.

Finally I said that they will know that peace and justice have come when men do a lot of the cooking and raising of families. This raised the roof! As a Western eccentric I can get away with saying things like this, but I've also been privileged to be part of an historic change in gender balances in the West, even though it has at times been hard, and men like me, only 30 years ago, were still branded as failures and wimps.

Tomorrow I go with Ibrahim Afaneh to Yatta, south of Hebron, to witness a women's empowerment course there. Yatta is an area where there are many illegal land-appropriations by Israeli settlers, and Palestinians there feel ignored and marginalised, out of the world's sight. The area has many Bedouin, who sit at the very bottom of the apartheid pile in this segmented land.

Many of their villages are unrecognised and deemed illegal, especially when they stand in the way of Israeli expansion.

This afternoon, having only just arrived back in Bethlehem, I went around town buying pots, pans, utensils, a lamp and other bits for the apartment where I am staying. I had done this two years ago too, but they are all gone – dispersed no doubt around the building or down some community black hole.

This is one of the challenges of operating in Palestine – it's an escalated chaos zone and, if you like order, you've got problems. It's partially to do with Arabic cultural elasticism, partially to do with living under occupation and partially because of a deliberate Israeli strategy of creating insecurity and administrative obstruction for Palestinians. Conflict has thrown Palestinians into a mindset of perpetual firefighting, living day-to-day without plans, systems and rules.

So, when someone walked into my apartment while it was empty, seeing something useful, they *just borrowed* it, forgetting to return it, and someone else just borrowed it from them, and off it went and was put, no doubt, to good use somewhere. However, I hope the kit that I have just bought stays in the apartment in future. I'm going to get a Bedouin rug too, to make the place a little more homely.

Later I had another challenge. Arriving back home tired, it took me fifteen minutes to realise that the reason the kettle wouldn't boil was that the electric trip-switch had killed the power. I managed to fix that. Then, later, with cuppa in hand, I fired up my computer to start uploading my blog and found that the internet router downstairs was dysfunctional too. Of course, I had no key to access the room with the router. Another exercise

in existential flexibility! Hopefully I can do the uploading tomorrow morning before heading off to Yatta.

We have internet apartheid here. Israel has hot fibre optics linking it directly with the West. But Palestinian internet goes by limited microwave transmission to Jordan – the Israelis won't permit fibre optics or anything more than 3G mobile connectivity. Then it goes all the way down to Dubai, where a big fibre-optic 'pipe' leads through Saudi Arabia to Egypt, under the Mediterranean and into Europe. Actually, later it passes just 2km from my home in Cornwall before heading over the Atlantic to America.

When President Mubarak, in his last days, shut down the Egyptian internet, you can bet there were high-level phone calls from Riyadh, Brussels and Washington DC instructing him not to shut down that pipe. Had he done so, the world could have pitched into another serious financial crisis. The Palestinians would probably have survived it better than most – survival is one of their acquired skills.

Yatta, South Hebron, 7th June 2011

I am sitting in a formerly abandoned building converted by the ladies into a women's empowerment centre in Yatta. They are country people, doing Hope Flowers' women's empowerment course – or, more correctly, *process*. Half of them are illiterate. They live next to the Negev desert, a hot and dry place. Yatta is an embattled, growing town of 100,000ish people, most of whom have been ousted from the surrounding countryside. The area suffers Israeli encroachment and harassment – not so much by the government, though the army plays a part and the

government looks the other way, but by settlers, who eat away at Palestinian land, trying to move people out by making life difficult. But these people don't budge easily.

They resist the Israelis with the help of no one, and women lead the way. This course isn't so much about empowerment – the women are already busy with that. It's more about facilitation of their resistance and reconstruction process. Not armed resistance but, here, cultural resistance on two chief fronts: strengthening society and farming development.

Ibrahim Afaneh, picking me up from Al Khader, described how the area south of Yatta is under pressure from the settlers. There is no work, and much land has been lost. Many people have moved to Yatta and Hebron, leaving the old people behind. The headmistress of the girls' school in Yatta, a true social activist, started organising them. Nofa is a sweet lady – though I dare say she's also a firebrand who could scare the hell out of an Israeli officer if she gets worked up. She arranged it so that the youngest kids could live with the old people back in the villages, to help keep the community going. This would free up parents to work and earn money in the towns, also giving the old people less of an abandoned feeling. Recently a village had been cut off from Yatta by settler incursion, to try to make the community die off.

Then she got hold of some agricultural tunnels (plastic, metal-framed greenhouses), establishing a village school inside them and lending the school a teacher from her Yatta school. Next year they purloined breeze blocks to build a school building – the tunnels were getting blown away by the strong desert winds. Her supporters acquired and built chairs and tables, and paints and other equipment were sourced for the kids.

She is now developing an agricultural project there so that they can grow food locally. This is hampered by climate change-related drought. I said I would tell two friends about the project, to see if they could assist. One is a Welshman living near Beit Sahour, who runs a permaculture farm called Bustan Qaraaqa (though later he got thrown out by the Israelis, even though he was married to a Palestinian), and another is a Palestinian who had lived 17 years in Germany, who works with seeding and encouraging permaculture projects around Jenin in the north. Permaculture techniques bring together traditional farming with modern tricks researched and developed by permaculture activists worldwide. It originated in Australia, where desert-taming is a major preoccupation. So it's useful in Palestine, also in Jordan, grafting well with local traditional methods.

Ibrahim Afaneh is teaching these women and they're busy taking notes (well, those who can write). He certainly is a good teacher. He brought his assistant Sana from Abu Dis university – she is a jewel. I told him he'd better watch out because I might purloin her, because I need an assistant like her. Someone with a brain, who thinks ahead and deals with all the things I fail to think about and remember. He said she's priceless and not available. Oh well, good try.

Later on, Sana took over the lecturing, talking about the ingredients of a good diet. During the break she invited me to speak, with her translating. I talked about physical and psychological immunity and how our bodies will heal and withstand attack from viruses and infection if our immune system is strong. I reminded them that immunity is strengthened psychologically by cultivating happiness and good attitude – food for the soul, not just food on the plate.

Then I talked about immunity in the land, and how we must build it up through planting trees and plants to improve shading, cool, protect and re-fertilise the soil so that the water table will rise and rain can be drawn in too. We must give the land the medicine of compost and nutrients to improve its immunity and fertility.

This is a big issue in Palestine: Palestinians were at that time wary of investing too much effort in the land, though they love it, because they're so used to their efforts being wrecked by the Israelis. So what's the point? Despite this, at one point Ibrahim showed me an area where settlers had destroyed the olive trees three times in ten or so years, and the locals had just re-planted and carried on. This is *sumud*, steadfastness, in action.

I talked about the Palestinian resistance – not a matter of guns and fighting but one of building up society and its innate health and happiness. The medicines to help society's health are cooperation, community events, shared projects and effective social mechanisms – especially in handling differences, conflicts of interest, poverty and the suffering of the disadvantaged. So the health and immunity of body, land and Palestinian society are all interconnected, and women are crucial in this since men have created many of today's problems, and the people who create the problems are not the best at resolving them.

I mentioned that the world is heading for difficult times and this is one thing the Palestinian people are good at: they know how to survive adversity and hardship. The children of these ladies in Yatta, when grown up, will one day go to Europe, America and elsewhere to teach people how to face adversity. We'd better welcome them when the time comes, because they hold secrets we need. This is Palestinians' big resource: these

ladies in Yatta are tapping into an oilfield of social wealth by cooperating with and teaching each other, working together to strengthen their community and tackle pressing issues.

They were attentive to my words and I think they liked the way I connected up all sorts of different factors, linking the small with the big. I feel honoured to be amongst these people. I shall write to my friend Tom who has organised the funding for these courses to tell him that they should be proud of what they have supported here in Palestine. They have done the right thing. It is working, it is good, and it creates multiple outcomes for the future – not only in this embattled land but wider, ultimately across the world, by osmosis and the blowing of seeds in the wind.

As I write these words tears are oozing from my eyes. It's moving stuff this, the stuff of true humanity. Nita Noor, a Facebook friend in Indonesia, sent me an apposite quote: *Remember that slow progress is still progress. It's just change measured on a different scale.*

Bethlehem, Thursday 9th June

On Tuesday, after Yatta, Ibrahim Afaneh and Sana took me to see Sana's parents in a town called Dhahariya, south-west of Yatta, about twenty minutes away. Her family was delightful and very welcoming. We ate rice and a soup of something rather like spinach – though, as a vegetarian, I politely passed on the chicken legs. Her father was a sports teacher and referee, a genial man – no, I didn't support Barcelona or Man United – and her mother was very friendly. She estimated my age to be 45, probably around her own age – only 15 years out! This is, I

guess, because a Palestinian in his sixties looks older and more worn out than a European of the same age, and life expectancy is shorter – also I look after myself quite well.

Down here in the south they aren't visited by many foreigners, and I was feted with great aplomb and encouraged to return – though I hope not to the forthcoming wedding of their son in two weeks' time. Palestinian weddings are major events, and they go on for ages and become quite wild. No time for that at present. But there is no booze, meaning that the sad scenes one can see in the West when people get drunk or troublesome do not happen here. People just enjoy the social interaction and the sheer joy of such occasions. Mind you, the way they drink coffee – strong, black and dense – is rather like taking cocaine. Well, we all get off on something.

We left later as the heat began to decline, taking the bride-to-be to a wedding dress shop outside Hebron. She was staying with the family in Dhahariya for a while, and they visibly loved her. Some marriages here arise from love and some are arranged, but when you get married, you marry a family – it's all to do with sharing family capital, community life, extended-family security and procreation. Children belong to the family, not so much to the parents. Even with arranged marriages, choices are made thoughtfully, the affection and compatibility of the couple is taken into account, and prospective partners may say No to the proposition. Well, unless you have authoritarian parents, but these can exist anywhere. I've heard a few bad stories but not many, and am fascinated that Palestinian couples seem on the whole to be happy and dedicated to each other – marginally happier than many couples in Europe.

In Palestine, a family and the clan of which it is a part is a major survival mechanism. Between 1967 and the 1990s Palestinians lived without any government and its services, and they managed because of the strength of families, clans and neighbourhoods as functional communities. Half of the Palestinian population of 11-12 million lives abroad as exiles and émigrés, but families remain strong even when spread across borders. Palestinian communities in Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf, Chile, Europe and America are still concentrated in clans or former communities.

Palestinians are not permitted by the Israelis to sell or transfer land to other Palestinians – they may sell it only to Israelis or foreigners. So families hold onto their land, not least because they want to stop the Israelis getting it. To Palestinians, with a low-intensity war going on over land and every inch of it, it's a survival and a national security issue.

I say *low-intensity*, but plenty is happening. Sensing that the world is at present turning against them, the Israelis, or at least those who drive Israel's expansionism, are trying to establish as many 'facts on the ground' as they can before the chop comes down and it has to stop. Then they can claim that they cannot move the settlers out and destroy all they have built because this would be unfair and not even doable. But justice applies to everyone equally and, to Palestinians, making peace means the restoration of justice and lost land. Meanwhile, many Israelis have a strong sense of entitlement to all of the land from the sea to the Jordan River: the Palestinians should just go away, and their loss is of little consequence because they're barbarians, terrorists and no-goods, and they deserve it, and God gave this land to the Jews. Thus goes the logic.

So settlement and separation wall building, surveillance towers, the matrix of control, house-demolitions, arrests and other atrocities continue on a daily basis – not to mention the blockade and bombardment of Gaza – apparently with the support of God. It's a process of nibbling and chipping away at Palestinians and their lands and lives, enough to achieve results but not so much that it hits headlines internationally or even gets into the news in Israel. The justification is usually 'security measures' – which covers anything.

On Wednesday morning I attended a course for LD or learning difficulties teachers at the Hope Flowers Centre. The professor from Jerusalem University, Mohamed Asfour, was more professorial in nature than Ibrahim Afaneh, but his audience was nevertheless attentive. They were all graduates, many from Bethlehem University, or teachers being trained at Hope Flowers from a variety of schools. LD education is new in the Middle East. Previously teachers were accustomed to improvising and doing their best with LD pupils, using whatever knowledge and resources they had.

This course was helping them formalise and advance their educational ideas. I heard English words such as 'dyslexia', 'phrenology' and 'autism' amidst the Arabic, with occasional outbreaks of 'expressive language' and 'autism is a gift'. There was a lot of class interaction, with examples being given by teachers and students of situations they had encountered.

This is part of the Hope Flowers Centre's professional training project. It offers creative ideas and progressive training to professionals – teachers, social, health and emergency workers – in dealing with post-conflict symptoms and in managing intense and complex community situations. Many of Hope

Flowers' lecturers are academics who have lived, worked and qualified abroad, bringing back ideas. But Palestine doesn't lack its own ideas, and solutions arising in other countries are not always directly transferable.

I took photos and notes, went out to talk to a few people, went for lunch with the Issa family, then into Bethlehem Old Town to see my old friend Jack. Now his was a sad story: this man is a broken man. He used to be a tower of strength, a congenial community leader in the dwindling Christian community of Bethlehem, a very entertaining character and no less than a wheelchair-smuggler. He used to smuggle wheelchairs from Jordan into Palestine, and sometimes even into Israel, fixing them up and giving them to needy people. Some months ago, while renovating a house, he fell off a ladder, cracking his skull, breaking seven ribs and one shoulder, and injuring his back. He spent four months in hospital, waking up from the accident with considerable memory loss.

When I met him he remembered me though. He was much depleted, rather stiff, sad, deeply disheartened. After two months in hospital, his wife had died – she had suffered multiple sclerosis for many years. He lost his job as a guard at UNRWA, though he managed to regain it again later, and his odd-jobbing and work cleaning wells he could no longer do.

He had a disappointed tone, feeling that life had let him down. He was even angry with God. *"Allah, he is deaf – the calling to prayers is so loud we cannot hear our spirits"*, he said. *"The God of us Christians, he has no quality control – he lets the priests lie and abuse people, and they are sinners, all of them."* He had grown up in a Catholic school where the priests had sexually abused the boys, and probably him. *"The God of the Jews is a Zionist – how*

can God place some people over others like this?" Well, he has cause to feel disappointed in God, and it's a deep issue to deal with. But these feelings are an indicator of his disillusionment with life. Yet still, his philosophical side came through: *"This is how life is – like sand in your eyes and mud under your feet"*.

I said that the God I believe in is the God who sings in the wind and holds up the mountains, the God of the waves, birdsong and the twinkling of stars. *"You are a good man, Balden – you still have faith. I lost mine somewhere along the road."* My heart ached for him, a good man who had lost his hope.

Later I met Ibrahim Issa. We landed up having a three-hour brainstorming session at his house. Another 1am bedtime. Then I was bolt upright by 7am and got through some urgent work. Then Ibrahim came and we had another three-hour session. We spark each other off really well. He appreciates my calm certainty and unyielding resilience. I'm quite good in crises and can be right there, on the ball, dead calm.

By the time we were finished I was worn out. I spent twenty minutes meditating – or *vegetating*, as one of my teachers used to say. Then I was at it again.

The school janitor has developed a habit of coming up for a break in the late afternoon. Two days ago I gave him English-style tea with milk in – he couldn't handle it. So I then made him *tchai arabiyya*, strong tea with mint leaves and a bucketload of sugar, and fed him Arabic baklava. He liked that. He has five children and another on the way.

Here is another aspect of Palestinian *sumud*. If all other forms of resistance fail, there's a ticking time-bomb that lies in reserve: the Palestinian population is growing faster than that of the Israelis, and in the end numbers matter. To Jews, Israel is

democratic, and to Arabs it is Jewish. The Israelis have won many battles but they haven't won the war. In some respects Palestinians have won, since Palestinian society is happier and more wholesome – and they are still there.

Tomorrow I'm off to a big meeting in Beit Jala where Israelis and Arabs will meet to do some close-up relating. It's organised by the Centre for Emerging Futures, an American outfit run by Whit and Paula Jones from Idaho, USA.² This land gets plenty of people visiting from abroad bringing techniques, trainings and ideas about peace-building, and frankly this gets a bit tedious. But I have a feeling this lot might be interesting.

Before we go, permit me to introduce you to my anonymous friends, the Israeli soldiers in the watchtower over the valley. They have one of the most boring jobs this side of Arcturus: standing in a watchtower observing *nothing happening, at all*. I hope they enjoy observing nature, because that's the main event here – scuttling lizards, swooping swallows, barking feral dogs and the massed armies of ants on the march. The soldiers no doubt watch me too, but that can't be very entertaining because most of the time I'm just sitting exercising my fingers on this keyboard, writing verbiage to people like you.

I watch the soldiers too. Every now and then a car or jeep pulls up to the tower, disgorging guys for the next shift of *nothing happening*. The high mast above the tower has a surveillance camera and probably listening and interception devices. But in my case they are up against a weirdo with antennae atop his head, and I get to know a few things about them too. This is all about tapping into a different kind of intelligence. Pity them,

² See <https://youtu.be/raDDEepzMTU>

poor sods: they're slaves to a fear that we on this side of the wall are out to get them and kill them off. Sad military slaves to a system that fails to feed their souls, they're *just obeying orders*, officially speaking. It doesn't have to be like this.

My friend Jeff Goldstein, a healer in Jerusalem, puts it well: *This land is already at peace – it's just that a lot of people haven't realised it yet.*

Blogging in Bethlehem

Part Two

Friday 10th June, Beit Jala

"I want to live in a country where a policeman stops me because I'm speeding or drinking, not because I'm Palestinian." This silenced the gathering. The young guy from Nazareth in northern Israel, rather surprised that he'd dropped a plonker, had summed up the whole situation in a nutshell. To the Israelis present, it was a shocker. I was now at the Emerging Futures meeting in Beit Jala, a largely-Christian hilltop suburb of Bethlehem.

In the evening, when we were all socialising outside, a young Israeli rather fancied a Palestinian girl from Bethlehem. She was indeed attractive, though reserved and shy. He invited her to visit him in Tel Aviv. Well, first of all this was culturally confronting because Palestinian women are not accustomed to men brazenly trying to get off with them – it's not done. But most of all, he just didn't understand that she, a Bethlehemite, was not even permitted to go to Jerusalem, just 10km away. So the prospect of going to Tel Aviv just didn't exist for her. It's only 50km away, but she's not allowed.

Another Israeli butted in. He had been an intelligence officer in the army for a long time, and he knew she wasn't permitted to enter 'Israel proper'. A classic Israeli argument ensued, with the Tel Avivi adamantly disbelieving him and the intel man vehemently arguing back. The Palestinians, now excluded from

the conversation, waited for a chance to rejoin it. So I talked with the young Bethlehem woman myself. The guy from Tel Aviv had demonstrated how seriously unaware so many Israelis are of the Palestinians' situation, and they find it difficult believing the facts, even though their fellow Israelis impose those very facts.

The Tel Avivi wouldn't accept the Palestinian woman's word for it, that she wouldn't get a permit. Also, to be honest, she visibly lacked the confidence to go through all the necessary hoops to even *try* to get a permit. But the ex-intel officer knew. He said, "If you want to meet her, you should both go to Europe. But you must be careful, for her family and many of her people, and our officials and your family and neighbours will give you a lot of trouble". True again.

I told him that, if she couldn't come to Tel Aviv, why didn't he come to Bethlehem to see her? "But I am a Jew - I will get killed." *Bullshit* - though I told him so in more diplomatic terms. I said how Palestinians tend to judge people not on their nationality or religion, but on whether or not they are *good people*. "But they want to drive us into the sea and kill every one of us." No, my friend, you're running an old, defunct tape. C'mon, you're a soldier - be brave.

I was at a two-day meeting run by the Centre for Emerging Futures. These meetings happen here in Beit Jala quite a bit. Israelis and Palestinians meet for two days, going through the kind of group sharing processes that I used to run in Britain in the 1980s-90s. Truth processes, fermentations. These meetings can be friendly, genial affairs, but those who attend aren't typical of their respective peoples. These people *seek* to meet

people on the other side, enjoying the stretching feeling. They're relatively few in number.

We had a round of the fifty-strong circle, introducing ourselves and saying what we sought from the encounter. One woman from Nablus, with nine children, said that ever since her husband had been killed by Israeli settlers, she had tried to get to know Israelis better so that she could understand them. Another said, "Everyone talks a lot about the *Nakba*" - the disaster of 1948 when the Israelis ethnically cleansed what was to become Israel - "but to us Palestinians every day is a *Nakba*". An Israeli woman said she had come to listen and learn. Many of the Israelis reported that they had come out of curiosity, having had few opportunities to meet Palestinians, and this felt like a safe place to do so.

It was a great atmosphere and I felt nourished by it. Not only because I love the edginess and depth of sharing and bonding in such group processes, but also because it really stretches me. I like to reach out over wide gaps and spaces, and to get on with strangers. It's good for the soul. I was moved by the love and mutual support in this circle.

Poor old Hamed, the man sitting next to me, perhaps in his late sixties, was a brilliant translator, but he was getting brain-tired. This was a three-language situation, where over half of the people spoke at least two of the three languages - Hebrew, Arabic and English. Others partially understood but couldn't speak another of the languages, while some, like me, spoke only one. At one point he started translating Arabic into Arabic, and everyone laughed.

I felt sad at one stage, realising that I, as an English-only speaker, was being treated in a privileged way. The other

English person there spoke Arabic – she worked for an NGO in Jaffa, the Arabic part of Tel Aviv. Three American Israelis spoke only English, not even Hebrew. We had the advantage of speaking the global tongue, but also there was still a British shadow and an American influence in this land, which gave us that privilege.

One impressive character was a blind woman from Tulkarm, perhaps thirtyish. She had studied English and translation at Bir Zeit university (Palestine's top university), just north of Ramallah. She was a brilliant communicator, having overcome many of the psychological issues around her disability. She had me writing notes for her, and at times she took on a natural leadership role in the group. I wondered how much she sensed her audience as she spoke. Her sightless eyes would roll around and her hands were expressive. Afterwards I said to her, "You might be blind, but you see things that others don't see". "Yes", she said, "I am very lucky". She's one of those impressive people you meet in this land. They have seen so much hardship that they have made a breakthrough, creating a positive attitude that is so strong you wonder how the conflict has managed to last so long with such people around.

This land is energetic, and so are the events I'm caught up in. So I must hit the hay soon, because tomorrow will be a long day. This gathering is demanding enough, with a lot of listening and heart-moving stuff going on, but also Ibrahim, one of the organisers of it, keeps on coming along for a quick consultation about Hope Flowers affairs. So it's soon time for bed.

Saturday afternoon, 11th June, Bethlehem

I'm dead tired now, with an intense need to do nothing much. I caught a taxi down into town from Beit Jala with Vera, Ibrahim Issa's assistant, and wandered through town in a daze until my aching back demanded the utilisation of a seat. So I'm sitting at a cafe table on Manger Square, drinking mint tea, watching the world go by.

The Emerging Futures meeting is finished, and everyone has gone. I always find it a bit heart-wrenching when these meetings break up. I bond with people, sharing profound feelings, looking straight in their eyes, and then suddenly they're gone. Many of them will never be seen again.

The second day of the meeting had progressed into project formation. People with project ideas were asked to briefly state them, then others were encouraged to join whichever proposal moved them. These were to draw together Palestinians and Israelis. If a project made the grade, start-up funding of up to \$5,000 could be provided by Emerging Futures, with organisational assistance too. Before we began they gave examples of projects which had previously been started.

One was a women's embroidery project in a village not far from Yatta which, it had been alleged by some ill-wisher, the Issa family and Whit and Paula had been profiting from. The project's headwoman, dressed in an immaculately embroidered dress, told us about the project.

The village women did the embroidery, which was then made up into articles by Israeli women in Jaffa, the Arab part of Tel Aviv, which were then marketed in USA. Examples were passed around of lovely embroidered cloth sleeves for hot cups,

for use in restaurants. She told us that this small industry not only earned money for the village women, but also it had caused the women, many of them illiterate, to get educated so that they could run the business themselves and get connected to the wider world. The secondary effects of projects such as these are often the most valuable in the longterm.

Meanwhile, back at the meeting, the following new projects were proposed, and much of the day was spent thrashing them out and making preliminary project proposals for a follow-up meeting in Beit Jala in just over a month's time. These were the projects proposed:

- **saving water and energy in households on both sides** of the separation wall, in which Israelis and Palestinians would share knowhow, voluntary labour and sourcing of materials;

- **a Sinai Leadership Week** for young people from Gaza and Israel, to take place in Egypt, a neutral territory which was okay for both parties to get to, and jointly proposed by a young Gazan and a young Israeli former soldier who had operated in Gaza when in the army;

- **a literature translation project**, proposed by Ikhlas, the blind woman from Nablus, for the purpose of improving cultural understanding on both sides. By now I had a strong connection with Ikhlas, a brave and competent blind woman with a master's degree in translation who had a brilliant way of holding vast amounts of information in her head. In my estimation, she's a heroine, an example to us all.

- **a project turning rubbish into sculpture**, initially in a park in a Palestinian town close to the separation wall. An Israeli asked, "But where will we get all the garbage we need?" The Palestinians just laughed. "You just drive around in a pickup

truck – it's all over the place!". Palestinians have a real problem with waste disposal – hence this project will have the multiple effect of creating artistic park furniture and waste sculptures, tidying up the locality and also perhaps stimulating the locals to do something about their rubbish and local visual environment;

- **a gardening group**, in which people from each side would share gardening knowhow and mutual assistance;

- **an empowerment group for mothers** of young children on both sides;

- **an access group**, run by some Israeli ex-soldiers and some Palestinians from Nablus, arranging two-day visits to the other side for people from each side. Palestinians would go to Tel Aviv and Haifa, and Israelis to Nablus and Jenin. This sounds easy, but the main challenge is fixing permits, which the soldiers undertook since the Israeli government issues the permits. They had a strong and dedicated attitude – they really wanted to get these exchanges going. Good on them.

It was all very inspiring and, after this and our rounding-up session, the group broke up. Many of the Israelis automatically assumed that I, a foreign visitor, would be returning with them to Tel Aviv. After all, since Israelis consider Bethlehem dangerous, it must be perilous for foreigners. I assured them that neither was the case, and eyebrows duly rose.

Down in the Old Town of Bethlehem the bells of the Church of the Nativity are ringing. Bethlehem is cooling down after the heat of the afternoon. People are hanging out in Manger Square, chatting. I'm going to hang out with them, have something to eat and then go home.

By the way, I didn't take photos at the meeting because it was requested that we took no photos. There can be risks for people on both sides if they are identified fraternising with the enemy. Israeli right-wingers can consider peace activists as traitors, while the Palestine Authority is paranoid about Palestinians collaborating with Israelis, since the Israelis bribe and threaten some Palestinians into spying for them.

We live in a strange world where its inhabitants, called *humans*, have a weird tendency to believe that other humans are fundamentally different to and opposed to them. Don't go to Planet Earth - the inhabitants there are dangerous, mainly to themselves. This is a bizarre aspect of this particular world.

Hope Flowers Centre, 15th June 2011

Ooops, I blew it. The sink at the refreshment area at the Hope Flowers Centre was full of dirty cups. So, with nothing to do, I started washing them up. After all, I'm a Virgo! Just as I was finishing, the cleaning lady came along. She got all ratty with me, saying it was her job.

But I was saved. One of the ladies in a gaggle of chattering women broke in to explain to the lady that some Western men do funny things like this. Then she turned to me to say the cleaning lady had just told her she wished her husband and sons would do similar - and she wasn't used to it. Well, I said, washing up can be a pleasure when you don't have to do it too often, and the same should apply to women - we should spread these jobs around. Peace returned.

It's tricky. Gender roles here can be pretty emphasised - though this differs in extent and rigidity between traditional and

modern Palestinians. Yesterday I took a taxi with two women who automatically hopped in the back, leaving the front seat to me. Well, okay, but is this the *only* option? It's not just the principle of the matter: sometimes I want to sit in the back to get to know a person or to talk.

Nevertheless, it's important not to break too assertively into people's customs or to be too disruptive and self-important a Westerner – it demands some creativity and theatre, to demonstrate that increasing one's freedoms is safe and okay.

I was at the Hope Flowers Centre again, attending the women's empowerment course. They were all milling around upstairs putting the finishing touches to the meat and veg pasties they had made. The room was buzzing. Here were thirty or so women cooking together, applying methods and knowhow they had picked up on the course.

Not that they were unaccustomed to catering for large numbers of people – with large extended families, most women are used to cooking for ten-to-fifty people. But the course had let them in on new knowledge about nutrition, hygiene and catering, and here they were doing some practical work. One issue here was that Palestinians now use microwaves, freezers, plastics and mass-produced foods without having full knowledge of their issues and dangers – this was covered on the course.

Watching women cook is not one of those things one would usually rate as exciting and inspiring, but this was. These ladies were buzzing around, the volume and liveliness in the room were high, excitement bounced between gaggles of women, and the children were excited too. One of the kids showed me the literacy work she had been doing while Mum was busy. Her English was better than my Arabic – she was six years old.

I took lots of pictures. Record-keeping is important since these are pioneering courses. International fund-providers can see the results of their inputs, and I needed photos for the Hope Flowers website too, which I was running.

Later I spoke to Whit, who ran the Centre for Emerging Futures, putting money into projects that developed from it. The Two Neighbours embroidery project in Tuwani was one of them. He had been blamed for exploiting women workers, so he explained to me the full story, giving me the figures. Believe me, spend five minutes with Whit, and you'll know that exploitation isn't his game.

The irony is that, of all the projects in this country in which he had invested, Two Neighbours had been financially the most risky and the slowest to yield results, mainly because of the complications of organising a business across the Israel-Palestine divide. Also it was taking time to set up marketing in USA. Ironically, complications with the women working in the project came not from the Palestinian ladies, most of whom had never had a job or earned a wage before. They arose amongst the women in Jaffa who machine-sewed the product after the embroidery had been done by the Palestinians.

As a social entrepreneur Whit made no profit from his investments of time and money- the aim was simply to reclaim the capital with no interest or dividend and, thereafter, on top of the pay they received for the embroidery, the women would reap all the profits and own the business. So the allegations against him were doubly false. He was admirably patient and understanding about it all: through all his years working with this schizoid country, he had learned that nothing happens simply and complexities are routine.

But he did share with me one personal issue: he was getting on in years, and recently he had been wondering how much benefit he and Paula had truly been bringing, and how much their input had truly changed anything. This is a vexing question, since the payoff of humanitarian work is the joy of seeing things succeed and thrive. I sometimes wonder about this too, in my own work. But benefit does come in small ways and, perhaps, in the end, just by being a trusty friend, one can help these people, irrespective of whether anything dramatic is achieved. Tomorrow I'll be going with Whit to Tuwani, to see how the embroiderers are doing.

Later that day I wandered around Bethlehem Old Town and met John, a Palestinian Christian in his late sixties who runs a Christian craft and souvenir shop near Manger Square. Among other things I asked him what it had been like during the forty-day Israeli siege of the Church of the Nativity in 2002 during the second *intifada* – some Palestinian fighters had taken refuge in the church, and there was a long shoot-out. The church is 200 yards from his shop. He said that at the time he was already ruined financially, so the lockdown made only a marginal difference to him – the Israelis had closed down his business a couple of years earlier, because he was too well regarded by Westerners and the churches.

The Israelis want to hijack the Christian pilgrimage trade – it's good business – and to stop Christians from doing anything in Bethlehem more than visiting the Church of the Nativity. They don't want them wandering around Bethlehem, finding that it's really quite a lovely, friendly and safe town.

During the shoot-out curfews were imposed for two weeks and, during that time, John lost a lot of weight – though what he

missed most was coffee. Then the curfew was lifted for *two hours* so Bethlehemites could go shopping for supplies before being subjected to curfew again – pity the poor shopkeepers who had to deal with it all! The occupation continued a year or so after the lockdown, with serious restrictions imposed. But hidden activities took place down back-alleys and at night.

John was philosophical about the Israelis and the conflict, even though he would dearly love the nightmare to end and to have a normal life. He understood the suffering that Jews had been through back in history. But he also knew that, since the Israelis had failed to get rid of the Palestinians in recent times, they should end the occupation of the West Bank and the siege of Gaza, coming to a deal with Palestinians so that the Israeli national project – to give Jews a safe homeland – could itself succeed. For sixty years Israel had been insecure, over-taxed and armed to the teeth. It will not succeed, he said, while they're occupying land that is not theirs, thus needing to remain on a continuous war footing. It has ruined their society.

But he also said the Israelis are in a double-bind: if the Palestinians gain independence, Israel will lose a captive market of five million Palestinian consumers who currently have to trade through Israel, live on Israeli products and use Israeli shekels. This would lose the Israeli economy 20-30% of its GDP. At the same time, Israel would lose American and German financial and military support, which keeps it alive. So peace would mean an economic downturn for Israelis. This is why they resist making peace, John said, even though it's in their best interests to do so. It's one of many instances in which Israel confuses its aims and priorities, regularly shooting itself in the foot.

After doing some shopping I went back to the school for a quiet evening, sitting in a sofa, looking over the valley and reading Karen Armstrong's rather interesting *History of Jerusalem*.

Eclipse and Tuwani, 16th June 2011

I discovered a setting on my camera that I didn't know existed until the very end of the lunar eclipse. Well, eclipses are times of revelation... It removed the problem, classic for digital cameras, where the contrast between the light and the dark sides of the moon is too emphatic for the subtle details of the moon's pocked surface to be seen. Even so, witnessing the eclipse from my eyrie at the top of the school was a privilege.

When it started there was a full-scale racket going on in Al Khader – loud music and the customary summer evening pandemonium of this town, spiced with the barking of dogs and the croaking of geckos. But as a slice began to be cut from the moon, gracefully arching over the Israeli watchtower, the area fell silent. Typically for an eclipse, traffic disappeared, the dogs went quiet and all became still. Except for the shutter of my camera. It was late by the time it was over.

That didn't stop me waking up at 6.30 the next morning. I'm not sure why I'm waking up so early at present. But it permitted me to rise and process my photos, posting them on Facebook – and the 'likes' started rolling in. I had breakfast and waited for Maram, who was picking me up at nine. By ten, having filled time talking with Mohammed, the school's educational director, I rang Maram. Oh dear, car troubles. A taxi arrived to pick me up, then a call came to say 'hold the taxi and stay there – we're coming'. Ibrahim's car soon arrived and

Maram and I bundled into the taxi while Ibrahim went into the school, lugging his laptop, bag and bundles of files.

Off we went down the main road toward Hebron. The area south of Bethlehem, called the Etzion Bloc, is interesting because Israelis and Palestinians live intermixed with each other, unseparated by the (in)security wall. The bloc lies inside the Green Line, the 1948 Israel-Palestine boundary. This is a collection of Israeli settlements interspersed with old pre-existing Palestinian villages. It's a green, agricultural area.

We proceeded around Hebron, the third largest Palestinian city (after Gaza City and East Jerusalem) and the biggest in the West Bank, then past Qiryat Arba, an Israeli settlement outside Hebron, into a hilly, rocky district that turned browner as we drove south. This disputed area is where the most assertive wing of the Israeli settler movement is, stage by stage, staking out its claim, and where many outrageous settler atrocities take place. We were heading for a village, Tuwani or At Twani, where resistance to settlers is strong. It's also the place where the women's embroidery project is located.

As we neared the village Maram pointed out several Israeli settlements, such as Karmel and Ma'on, which periodically crop up in the news, being home to some of the most assertive settlers of all. Many Israelis disown them, and the Knesset (Israeli parliament) uncharacteristically declared these settlements illegal. That made no difference though.

This said, a schizoid situation holds sway whereby the Israeli government or other agencies pay for the building of the settlements, and the army makes symbolic gestures to clear the settlements away, in response to foreign pressures, while actually reinforcing the settlers and doing donkey-work for

them – such as clearing Palestinians off land that the settlers want, helping destroy trees and farmland, and ‘defending’ settlers whenever Palestinians push back.

There’s a double American involvement here. American money supports these frontline settlements, and many settlers are of American origin. But on the other side, Americans like Whit and Paula help the Palestinians, as also do the American Christian Peacemaker Teams, who accompany and protect Palestinians in risky situations. America fighting against itself? Politically, the West plays a strange double game, advocating peace and supplying weapons at the same time.

We attended a meeting of the women. Whit and Paula were with some of the women from Jaffa and the Israeli production organiser – a nice lady who sits in the more enlightened and principled sector of Israeli society. Whit spoke, various of the ladies spoke, I added my bit and a Palestinian activist spoke. Then the activist took us on a tour. He first explained the situation. This was tragic stuff.

These are old villages going back centuries. The people of Tuwani are simple folk, many of them illiterate. For the last twenty or more years they have been under pressure from the settlers, who have been chopping down olive trees, burning farmland, demolishing the local mosque and quite a few houses, beating up farmers and children, blockading the village and generally making life hell for the villagers to make them leave. The Israeli army has played its part: army units down here are filled with nationalist settlers, opting to be posted here to reinforce the settler incursions.

But the villagers aren’t budging, even though they have put up with a lot over the years. Two mountain tracks lead through

Tuwani to a number of other villages in the hills. If the settlers close down Tuwani, those other villages die too. This is what makes the settlers pressure the villagers of Tuwani and equally it makes the villagers resist them.

We were taken up a rocky, dry hill – the trees had been burned down and uprooted by settlers – to see the settlement of Ma'on just over on the other side, a half mile from the village. It was planted on the villagers' own land. An outpost of caravans in the trees, away from the settlers, was pointed out – apparently these settlers were so radical and insistent that even the settlers of Ma'on had thrown them out.

Whit asked the Palestinian activist how he had got involved. The activist explained how, when he was young, he had witnessed his mother being beaten up by soldiers. Running to rescue her, he was peppered with bullets from settlers and troops, who shot around his legs as he ran. Later he got his mother to hospital. She told him not to be angry and fight back because she would lose him – he would lose his life or freedom. He asked her what he should do. She said she didn't know, but please find another way.

So he studied and adopted non-violent direct action, eventually moving down to Tuwani once his mother died, to be joined by the Christian Peacemakers and some Italian Catholic activists. I met one Italian who had been here for two years, with whom I discussed the stresses and strains of going back and forth between Palestine and Europe and interfacing two very different worlds. It was a brotherly sharing.

He said his time in Palestine was coming to an end because he wanted to get out before he was blacklisted and thrown out forever – and he needed to go home to earn money. As it was,

he was here on three-month tourist visas, leaving every three months, returning to Italy for a month and then coming back – but this ploy wasn't going to last much longer. He was sad about that. We commiserated about how we both had fallen in love with our friends in Palestine, missing them when we were away, yet neither of us could move here.

The villagers gave us lunch – far more than we could eat – and showed us items of their work. Lovely embroidered dresses, bags, belts and other things. I bought a dress each for my three grown-up daughters, crossing fingers that the dresses would fit them and suit their tastes (in the end, I'm not sure they did). They encourage a graceful style of unhurried movement that doesn't work so easily in the hurried West – but they're useful for pottering around the house in a relaxed, off-duty kind of way. All of the money would go to the village women: as a foreigner, one must do judicious spending with a view to helping the living stay alive.

I would have liked to stay longer but by mid-afternoon it was time to go – Ibrahim Issa had come to pick us up. I was sad to leave these people – they need reinforcement, interaction and solidarity. But my duties lay back in Bethlehem with Hope Flowers. So we cannonaded up the road past Hebron and I was dropped at the school. I took a break in the late-afternoon sun on the flat roof of the school, reading. Then back to work.

I was nearly half-way through my month-long stay. It was going to be challenging to finish everything. There were friends to visit too, in Hebron, Jerusalem and Jenin. Ah, *time*: I was reminded of its passing by the outbreak of the calling to prayers from the local mosques. This isn't just a religious thing: it's the way Muslims section up their day. Even I, an infidel Westerner,

time my day by the muezzins' amplified chanting – the calling to prayers divides the day into periods which, in this climate, work well in the cycle of daily life.

The previous night, as the eclipse gathered strength and the world went quiet, one muezzin was chanting the ninety-nine names of God. The hundredth is beyond expression. These ninety-nine names describe divinity in all its aspects. To Muslims there is but one God, with no further complications – no sons, holy ghosts, angels or cherubim – just Allah, with ninety-nine facets. By the way, Arab Christians use the term Allah as well as Muslims – it's not uniquely a Muslim term. And it is pronounced Al-*Lah*. *The God*. In pre-Muslim times, Allah was the chief of all gods, though when Mohammed the Prophet came along, he abolished them, declaring Allah to be the *one and only God*.

As I concluded writing this piece, a donkey called out in accidental synchrony with the muezzin, croaking plaintively, reminding people it was there. Or perhaps this was Allah's ninety-nine names elucidated in donkeyese. Great Spirit expresses itself in remarkable ways.

Falafel in the Moonlight, Friday 17th June

The Palestinian equivalent of the British fish and chip shop is the falafel café or stall. A falafel sandwich costs around six shekels (\$1.10 or £1 at the time) – depending on how the owner feels and what he thinks of you. You get fresh-cooked deep-fried falafels stuffed inside a pitta with hummus, salad and spicy relish, washed down with fresh-squeezed juice for 3-4 shekels. A goodly stomach-filler for a pittance.

I sat there munching my falafel and became, of course, an object of attention for the local boys, who chatted with me, they in patchy English and me in patchy Arabic. They expressed surprise when they found I was the age of most of their grandfathers. To them, I must be positively ancient, perhaps even one of the Patriarch Ibrahim's buddies.

Al Khader (St George's) teems with young people. It's a very ordinary town at the southwest end of greater Bethlehem, and quite industrial – big marble quarries are nearby. Once upon a time Al Khader was a village gaggled around a Catholic monastery, even though the inhabitants were mostly Muslim. It had a reputation for religious tolerance – as has the whole Bethlehem area. Muslim-Christian intolerance is rare here. The Muslims would prefer Christians to stay in Palestine rather than emigrate, but most have emigrated.

The village swelled into a town after 1948, when floods of refugees landed in the place. UNRWA moved in, establishing Deheisheh refugee camp down the road. Among the refugees was the Issa family, booted out of Ramleh, and Ibrahim's father Hussein, born in 1948, started life in a tent. The Issa family's lands now lie underneath Ben Gurion airport.

Deheisheh started out as a tent town, then to develop into an unplanned, dense-packed housing area built with concrete and breeze-blocks, housing disadvantaged people and descendants of refugees. As these refugees gave birth to lots of children, who then grew up, the population of Bethlehem expanded rapidly, causing the old towns of the area to join up. Thus Al Khader joined with the historic Christian town of Beit Jala, the village of Duha and the town of Bethlehem, which joined up with Beit Sahour in the east of today's conurbation. So the population

skyrocketed over 60 years. At an altitude of around 2,500-2,700ft (600-700m), Bethlehem sits atop the limestone plateau of the West Bank.

Population density was exacerbated in the early 2000s by the building of the separation wall and by increased Israeli land-acquisitions, house-demolitions and takeovers, squeezing the town. This encroachment had been helped by the Oslo Accords, nominally a 'peace process' but in fact causing Palestinians to be locked into ever smaller enclaves – Areas A and B – enabling Israelis to appropriate land in Area C. Property prices in Bethlehem rose sharply, giving Deheisheh new significance as a refuge for poorer people.

I went to a grocery store. They have real, old-fashioned grocers here. In one, I spilled a box of tooth-picks all over the floor, and a boy helped me pick them up. They're really nice, these kids, helpful and respectful. He did a mountaineering job up the shelves to get a bag of toilet rolls for me – they were stashed so high that even I couldn't reach them. We communicated without words and, for his trouble, he got a few shekels – that made his day! When you're young here, you learn how to earn an income as soon as you can.

I sat down awhile on the roadside to smoke my pipe and watch the world. Now this became a matter of fascination to people around me, since the only pipe smokers around here are old Bedouin gents from the outlying villages, and I'm clearly not an old Bedouin. But they know that foreigners are odd, so it's just an exotic thing, not a problem. A group of boys chattered with me. They loved demolishing my halva, and one, bless him, gave me an apricot he'd probably nicked from a garden somewhere.

I wandered back home, down a back street with tenements, saying hello to two donkeys standing there. They're oh so patient, Palestinian donkeys. Usually they have a frame over their back, serving as a pannier for goods or a sitting place for children, or they have a blanket for grown-up riders. These donkeys are not just an archaic mode of transport for poor people and farmers – they're a useful reserve vehicle for times when the Israelis shut things down. They can go round the back routes and need no gasoline. Intelligent, they can be trained to follow routes without an accompanying human. Shutdowns hadn't happened much since the second *intifada* died down in 2004, but people take no chances. Pretty wise – we ought to have donkeys in Britain, in case of an oil shortage, *inshallah*.

Past the tenements there is an impressive Euro-funded conference centre built in the 1990s when peace was then in process, after the Oslo Accords. It's mostly empty, but it's architecturally tasteful. Next to it are the remains of an old Ottoman fort with wonderful stonework. After that, over the Irtas road, are Solomon's Pools, three enormous open tanks, each the size of several swimming pools and 25-30ft (8-10m) deep. They were built by the Ottoman sultan, engineer and lawgiver Suleiman the Magnificent in the 1600s, though they date further back to Roman times when smaller pools supplied water to Bethlehem and Jerusalem via aqueducts.

They're empty now, since the water from the five springs up-valley has been tapped by the Israelis for local settlements, located on the tops of hills where, of course, there is no water. Silly them – that'll bounce back one day. Magnanimously, they sell water to the Palestinians at a knock-up price, to subsidise Israeli settlers' cheap water. They sell enough for Palestinians to have running water for only 24 hours once or twice a month –

which is why the roof of every house is festooned with big, black plastic tanks, to store the stuff.

There's a new settlement outpost on a nearby hill. It wasn't there when I last came two years ago. The Israelis move in on a hilltop, chuck out the Palestinians, rip up the trees and old agricultural terraces, moving in loads of caravans and portable cabins. Then they stick up a big Israeli flag to make sure everyone knows who's boss. This outpost is the first step toward the building of a settlement. After a while, in go the roads, down go the wires and pipes, up go the houses and, wonder of wonders, here comes the master race, settling on Palestinian land.

It's all perfectly legal of course. According to Israeli law, land must be registered, which costs an arm and a leg, way beyond most Palestinian farmers' means. Many of these farmers occupy land by common law or Ottoman law, for which they don't have papers. Or perhaps the papers are not accepted. Or some other administrative ruse is applied. Then, *ergo*, the farmers are deemed illegal squatters, even if they've been there for generations. So they are evicted - legally, of course. Except illegally in the view of the international community, which doesn't do anything, so it happens anyway.

So a proud Israeli flag now flies in the breeze atop yonder hill. But the Palestinians aren't totally dumb. The PA decided to build a hotel next to Solomon's Pools, to serve the conference centre and spruce up Al Khader, strengthening the Palestinian presence here, establishing facts on the ground to resist the Israelis where they could. The wasteland near the pools had been levelled, ready for building.

This was part of then prime minister Salam Fayyad's development programme, to make the West Bank viable as a potentially independent state. Except that America and Europe didn't want the Palestinians to take initiatives: nation status was to be *bestowed* on them, not taken, and Israel would never give it, so USA would shrug its shoulders and give up, leaving it for a subsequent president to worry about. Such a bestowal happened in 1993 in the Oslo Accords, except it didn't. Saying one thing and doing another is the international community's way of avoiding doing *anything*. Intentionally or not, this ambivalence gives Israel scope for taking initiatives.

Solomon's Pools used to be a favourite place for the senior officers and administrators of those former occupiers of this land, the British. So it has a history. Suleiman the Magnificent liked it too, obviously. It would be lovely to see water restored to the pools today.

The pine trees climbing the hill on which Hope Flowers school sits, eerily casting their shadows in the light of the ascending fullmoon, whispered in the breeze as I trogged along, carrying my shopping, heading up the track to Waad Rahal Road. I was temporarily reprieved of the inevitable helloing of children, who weren't there. They were probably playing football somewhere. They attach themselves to a foreigner like me as I walk past, asking "*Hello, what yorr name? Wherr from you come?*", all silently hoping some of my relative freedom might perhaps rub off on them.

But one boy up the top of the hill *was* waiting. He knew me from my last trip and he called out to his big sister, then fifteen, whose English was good. They were both really glad to see me, and I them. I had been wondering about them. We talked

awhile about their family and my family, what I'm here for, what they're doing now, and why I must go back to Britain in two weeks' time. Then we parted company.

But not for long. The boy was soon back. "*Shekel?*" He knew I'm a soft touch, but he does gopher duties for me too. I gave him some change – he did well, actually, getting eight shekels. "Half for your mother." "*Inshallah, okay, shukran.*" "*Ma'assalam.*" "*Ma'assalam, nightgood, tank you.*" Actually, usually he gave all of it to his mother.

Back up in my apartment, tea in hand and about to sit down to my compulsive blogging, the phone rang.

"Balden, when are you going to Al Khalil tomorrow?" Al Khalil, or God's Friend, referring to Patriarch Abraham, who's buried there, is another name for Hebron. "About ten, Ibrahim." "Good. Can I come and sit and work in your place? I need somewhere quiet, and I love the view."

"Of course, Ibrahim. You're very welcome – you're the boss, after all!" He's a workaholic too.

I looked at the big Israeli flag fluttering over the valley. The Star of David symbolises of the interlocking of Heaven and Earth – downward and upward-pointing interlaced triangles.

Something is cruelly amiss with this symbol nowadays, and those settlers up on the hill seem blissfully unaware of it. Their behaviour isn't serving God's Covenant with his Chosen People – and one doesn't need to be advanced in theology to know it. It's all to do with greed, ambition and self-interest.

But then, we Brits have done our fair share of that too, stomping on the world and its people – it's not at all unique to Israelis. But what's different is that the world is now no longer

in a colonial period, and the Israelis are out of step with that. You can't just *take*. Something has to change, and quickish.

Yet this, I'm told, *is* a Holy Land, where miracles are possible. The precondition for a miracle is an absolutely ridiculous, paradoxical, unworkable situation. In this, the people around here are doing very well.

Hebron and Tarqumiya, 18th June 2011

"Stop! Stop! Must not!" the man shouted, clapping his hands, loud enough to wake up Allah Himself. I was sitting there cross-legged against the wall, meditating and in quite a deep state. I find this place always pulls me into an intensely spiritualised interiority very quickly. I was in the Ibrahimi Mosque in Hebron, Islam's fourth holiest place. It is the tomb of Patriarch Ibrahim or Abraham, father of Muslims and Jews, with the tombs of Sarah his wife, Isaac, Patriarch of the Jews, Ishmael, Patriarch of the Arabs, Jacob, Joseph and their wives Rebecca and Leah – quite a collection. Before that it was a Canaanite and Hittite holy place – this was why Ibrahim first came here – and after that it was a synagogue, a Byzantine church and for the last 1,500 years a mosque.

This, I think, was the root of this man's problem. The Ibrahimi Mosque is disputed sacred territory. To get to it you have to pass through three armed Israeli checkpoints, have your bag inspected and your presence questioned. The man, clearly on edge, and one of the Muslim caretakers of the place, presumably believed that no infidel spiritual practices were to be carried out here, since it might pollute the place.

Which is a little problematic if you're an independent silent meditator like me, with no religious affiliation, even if I am an infidel. But then, a devout Muslim laying out his prayer mat in Westminster Abbey would probably also be frowned on.

Nevertheless, it was a shock – I was truly in a deeply altered state at that moment. *"Come, come... out, now!"*. I wonder whether he would have said this to the Patriarch Ibrahim, who was an infidel too, since Islam, Judaism and Christianity hadn't crossed anyone's mind in his time. When, on my way out, I passed the man, I said *"Bless you, brother, Allahu akbar (the God is great)"*, and left it at that. Perhaps he thought I was a Jewish infiltrator practising dark arts, or a Crusader in disguise.

On our way here we had gone through the souk, the only way Muslims may now approach the mosque. Hebron is a frontline city, and it has a tragic, edgy feeling to it down in the souk. Hebron has about 200,000 Palestinians and [in 2011] 600ish Israelis, yet Israelis control 20% of the town, with roadblocks and fences preventing access to their zone – many roadblocks being made of trash, concrete and razor wire. Israelis even occupy the upper floors of buildings above the souk, to make their presence felt. There are EU-funded wire protections over the souk to stop settlers throwing bricks and rubbish down on Palestinians. An organisation called TIPH, the Temporary International Presence in Hebron, funded and staffed by European governments, exists to keep conflict down and to carry out social projects.

I was with Najah, a lovely Palestinian lady and soul-sister. She is poor but noble in demeanour and very hospitable. Born here, she was good guide to Hebron and the situation here. Near the mosque we met a collection of retired German teachers on a

tour of conflict zones in Israel and Palestine, later to progress to Egypt. Their guide, a German Christian priest, didn't really know much about Hebron, so some of them affixed themselves to me, plying me with questions about the politics of it all.

I had joined a gaggle of them talking to some TIPH workers who, on being questioned by the Germans, were reluctant to go into detail about the situation. They were sensitive to the touchiness of their situation as peacekeepers, and probably a bit fed up with it too.

Later I buttonholed one, a Norwegian, who said he was frustrated and looking forward to going home. He didn't feel he was bringing much benefit – though perhaps we had caught him on a down day. I told him I respected him for what he was doing. He said the problem was that his scope for action was restricted by his government and by TIPH, who insisted that they must not endanger themselves and must adhere strictly to the rules. This is why I don't work for an NGO or government agency, even though it would earn me pay and expense allowances – it would restrict my capacity to act.

The Germans were fascinated by the information I gave them about Hebron and the conflict, and my background as a Sixties veteran. One, around seventy, had been in the student protests at the Berliner Freie Universität at the same time as I was at the London School of Economics, and we hugged as brothers.

They were interested in my philosophy and sense of history, after one had asked me whether this conflict would ever resolve itself and what Europeans could do about it. I reminded him that our own two nations had once been at war, and also that the Berlin Wall, once a permanent fixture, had come down in 1990. Further, the more impossible a situation seems to be, the

closer it can be to resolution. This I genuinely believe. Even if I'm deluded, it keeps me going.

They bought coffee for Najah and me at a Palestinian coffee shop located behind Jewish lines, run by a family holding out and refusing to leave. The Israeli soldiers who let us through were quite nice, reminding us with a wry smile that it was the Jewish Shabbat (being Saturday) so we'd better behave ourselves – obviously not religious Jews, they displayed a sense of the irony of their situation as soldier-slaves manning their checkpoint when, probably, they'd prefer lying on the beach back in Tel Aviv.

Later Najah and her son Yousef took me to see their relatives in Tarqumiya, west of Hebron. The road winds down a deep-cut canyon in the limestone hills until it opens out and enters Tarqumiya (pronounced *Tar-koom-ya*). It's a nice town, milling with people, friendly, and the closest West Bank town to Gaza, just 40km away – though getting to Gaza directly is impossible. I was taken to Najah's father's house – one of five gaggled together, housing branches of the family.

The living room had eight sofas and four armchairs. That shows the size of families here. Over two hours, four generations trooped in and out, chattering, drinking coffee, smoking and eating chunks of melon. Melons here are twice the size of a football, sweet, juicy and picked the day before.

Feeling rather worn out, I found myself floating off as the Arabic conversation swirled around me. Then Najah's big sister, in her sixties, introduced herself. It was one of those moments of familiar recognition where you wonder whether you'd known one another in another life. However, you can't

talk about such things in Muslim society. You can't credibly do so in Western society either – it puts you in the 'crank' category.

It was great meeting the family – about 25 of them. Then we were off again, on a high-speed swoop back up the canyon in a cousin's car. Palestinians drive freestyle and often quite fast, unless they're in an old sputtering wreck. I stayed the night with Najah's throng in Hebron. This meant that, although I had a load of work awaiting me at the school, I couldn't get away until 1pm next day.

The morning included a visit to a nearby shop, taking over an hour. Najah was concerned that I was being overcharged for gifts for my folks back home. She was concerned that I couldn't find anything for my father, despite my having explained that, at age 93, he wanted nothing at all. I couldn't find anything for him, but I did see something for another friend – a small wall-hanging of the Dome of the Rock. Najah had it in her head that this was for my father, insisting on buying it for him. Palestinian generosity can get complicated and unstoppable.

After two rounds of tea and one of coffee at the shop, all densely sugared, and with loads of Arabic jabbering, we then had lunch back home with Najah, Yousef and his girlfriend, though I wasn't hungry. Eventually I got away, took a taxi down into town, then a service taxi for Bethlehem.

The young men in the service taxi were all interested in me – especially when they found out that I wasn't a rich NGO worker, I didn't support UK and US Middle East policy and I was clearly very much on their side. By the time I tipped out of the van at Al Khader, I was exhausted with intense discussion. But the driver let me off the fare – ridiculous really, because the 30km journey cost only eight shekels or £1.40.

Now, back to work, I'm reviewing and editing Ibrahim's stolid work, done on his day off. But at least my poor stomach, suffering somewhat from an overdose of gustatory hospitality, is getting a rest. And at least my meditation this evening is unlikely, I hope, to be disturbed by anything more than the croaking of geckos.

Blogging in Bethlehem

Part Three

The Gates of Doom, Summer Solstice

Bethlehem, 21st June 2011

Ibrahim, in his late thirties, is in process of making one of the biggest decisions of his life. He's having a life-crisis. In the end, it is down to him alone. He must decide what he feels is best within his own heart, and what is best for his wife, three daughters and wider circle of relatives. Accusations have been made suggesting he is making lots of money, misappropriating funds and engaged in shady activities. This is completely uncharacteristic of Ibrahim. The truth is that he is broke, with little money to fall back on, his salary has been very basic, and sometimes it is sacrificed to pay others first.

He carries the weight of Hope Flowers on his shoulders. This includes the children at the school, the adults at the centre, the staff and all who have invested energy and money in this visionary enterprise, as well as all those former pupils who have benefited from it. There's a sense of legacy, to continue the work that his father Hussein, the founder, started. It gets larger, because Hope Flowers has played a part in the long resistance effort of the people of Palestine, a resistance against forces which seek to evict five million people from this land.

I had been in a similar position myself, around his age, when ructions had broken out in an organisation I had started, the Oak Dragon Project, leading eventually to my leaving, with the

weight of people's opinions largely ranged against me. Later, many realised that I was not as wrong as I had been judged, and that things could have happened differently – but it was too late. It took years to get over it, but I came out alive and renewed despite everything – mainly by choosing to forgive.

I had a heart-to-heart conversation with Ibrahim last night, and he delivered me his truth. It was very simple. *“I've given eleven years to Hope Flowers”, he said, “and I don't know if I can carry on any more. I look at my daughters and realise they are missing their father and paying a price for Hope Flowers. I don't have the resources that my doubters believe I have. I have had enough of all this.”*

It's standard at moments like this to try to persuade a person that things will get better. That's not valuable in this instance. This man is speaking his truth – I can tell it in the tone of his voice. He's caught between the burden of his situation and that poignant feeling of lightness that can arise from suddenly having the option to drop it all and walk away.

When his father died in 1999 at the beginning of the second *intifada*, Ibrahim reluctantly returned from a promising life as an engineer in the Netherlands to rescue the school from disaster, amidst the *intifada* in Palestine. Now this man has reached what could be the end of the road.

You've got to respect these weighty moments. At times like this life reaches a junction-point, and you do have to do the right thing. Other people, interjecting their advice, preferences, fears and hypocrisies, just have to stand back, wait, watch and witness the unfolding of consequences.

I remember, in one of my own hours of doom, saying to people around me, *“Please understand that, once a bomb has been thrown, whatever you now feel, it cannot be unthrown”*. The one who was

the target of blame or disapproval pays a heavy price in the short term, but others, who perhaps did the bomb-throwing, or omitted to circle the wagons to stand firm in defence, pay a price in the long term. The price is the loss of a gift they were given by someone who stood in a unique position to give it.

I mentioned one thing to him. On an occasion when I had been ill and squaring with the possibility of death, eleven years earlier in 2000, I reviewed my life of thirty years as an activist and change-agent, and felt I had failed. I'd got something fundamentally wrong. I owned up to my weaknesses and errors, giving myself over to the Universe, as if handing in my resignation. I didn't die. It was an illness and a dark night of the soul, a loss of hope and heart.

I had to accept that world change is an historic process that moves slower than the span of a lifetime. I should stop seeking results and simply continue doing what I'm good at for as long as it takes, or until the end of my years, whichever comes first. Just get on with it, and the outcomes arise later.

One of my spiritual teachers talked of the wisdom of folly. One must dance the dance of life as if there is a purpose and meaning to it all, while knowing that it's entirely pointless and self-delusory. This leads to a lightness of being, a perspective that enables us to keep on going even when everything seems to go wrong. At times we must lose a battle to win a war. At times a bomb lands on us and it's all over. Sometimes things take far longer and more than we wish or foresaw. This is the way of things. We are cannon-fodder for the great universal unfolding. We are expendable and time forgets us.

It's then a question of what one leaves to posterity, if anything. I reminded Ibrahim of something we'd discussed two years

earlier. Hope Flowers has developed real-life knowledge and experience in post-conflict reconstruction. Palestinians have lived with conflict for a long time, living with that sharp human spirituality that conflict and ongoing insecurity can engender. They've done it for generations, accumulating experience that other people, mostly living through shorter conflicts, lose when peace comes. "*Peace and freedom*", wrote the BBC war correspondent Martin Bell, "*can be defined as the peace that makes traffic jams possible and the freedom to sit in them*".

Hope Flowers has developed ways of healing the psycho-social hurts of people wounded by conflict. These people have experienced tragedy of a kind that humans shouldn't have to deal with. The school has developed ways of turning defeat into constructive action. It's not theory, it's seat-of-the-pants, real-life experience, developed through two *intifadas* and three decades of hardship. This could now be lost.

Yet it does live on in the hearts of those who have learned from it, and it propagates in other ways. I reminded Ibrahim that, if he were to go, there is one thing he perhaps must do, and it would do him good to do it. He must write down everything he knows about trauma recovery and psycho-social reconstruction. I, as an author and editor, would help him.

What upset and hurt Ibrahim most, he told me, was not the allegations made against him. What was worst was that his friends and supporters in the West seemed to have believed the allegations, doubting him and demanding that he prove his innocence. They had given power to doubt. For a man like him, this can be a killer feeling of betrayal, of being dishonoured.

Ibrahim was in ill health, largely stress-related. I wondered at times whether he'd have a heart attack. He was wan, weighed

down, ill at ease. This kind of pressure could take him out. But in the end it didn't.

The painful fermentation going on in Ibrahim's heart was not yet complete. Sometimes one must go down into the darkness to see truth and light. Sometimes a diamond awaits recovery from the mud. Sometimes it takes time to revive.

I woke up this morning with a dilemma: I'm working with Vera, Ibrahim's PA, to build a website for the Hope Flowers Centre. This takes a lot of work. But if Hope Flowers is going down the pan, am I wasting my time? I have two only weeks left here. I decided to carry on. I had no evidence that it was worth continuing, but my choice would make a difference. It's a placing of a bet. If I didn't *decide* to do it, I'd become part of the problem. So, today, I sat at my computer crafting web-pages and lobbing e-mails over to Vera, and she back to me, and we carried on.

God bless Ibrahim. He stands alone, pondering the unthinkable. He's just decided to take his family on the first holiday they've all had together, in Jordan. He can't afford it but it must be done - they need some space and family time. They're going on the same day I leave Bethlehem, in two weeks' time.

The word 'doom' originates from ancient Nordic. It doesn't mean disaster or darkness: it means *choice* and *judgement*. Ibrahim is being judged - by Allah and by posterity. He must also judge himself. Though deeply wounded, he's still acting sensibly. If I am the only one standing by him right now, then so be it. What a privilege.

Now for a cup of tea. This is how we English deal with things. If as imperialists we hadn't invaded India and then stolen tea seeds from China by trickery, we might never have developed

this tea-drinking habit. This indeed is a world of paradox. *In the end there is no right or wrong, there are simply outcomes.* That's the way the cookie crumbles.

Broken Men and Other Stories, 22nd June 2011

One of the gay guys who hang out in Manger Square gave me a hug. I'd been talking to him and his mates while standing there in the square munching a falafel sandwich and guzzling fresh-squeezed orange juice. I'd mentioned that hugging was one of the things I missed while in Palestine. You can't touch women – with some, you can't even shake hands. He did me a favour. He gave me a hug.

This was great, because I'd just been with yet another man who seemed to be falling apart. We men, we need to hang together, whether hetero or gay. This appears to be a recurring theme during my current visit – some of the men I know are seriously breaking down. Life has been too hard on them and something inside gives up, deep down inside. I've mentioned Ibrahim and Jack – both altruists and heroes, both of them broken, starved of good news, dreams shattered. They've given their lives to holding up other people, keeping the community running and striving for a peace with the Israelis that never comes.

Down a side street there's a Christian, Alfonso, like Jack a descendant of an Italian Crusader of 900 years ago. He has a little streetside kitchen where he makes tea and coffee, taking it on a tray to people in the shops, stalls and offices around the area. A bright character, he's a community therapist.

I was sitting on a stool outside his kitchen drinking mint tea, enjoying a welcome sit-down after walking around town. A

man came along with head hanging down and tears in his eyes, almost falling into Alfonso's kitchen. There was a long, emotional discussion inside, in Arabic. Eventually the man left, looking better. Out comes Alfonso. "*It's the womens*", he said. "*Sometimes they veery strange.*" With a shoulder-shrug, he walked off with another tray of tea. I left him two shekels and disappeared myself. Oops, I hope this isn't the husband of a woman on the women's empowerment course.

I had done my shopping and something in me wanted some company, so I wandered around people I knew, exchanged thoughts with some of them and landed up in Manger Square, not having really connected with anyone. People were friendly but it wasn't a day for close fellowship. I had been working too hard, sitting on my own hammering on my keyboard. My brains needed de-fragging and my heart felt droopy.

Well, that was yesterday. Now comes today.

Ibrahim feels like throwing in the towel. If you're called evil and corrupt when you've given your life to altruism, it's deeply demoralising. He's worn out, stumped for solutions. He's not guilty, and he feels it's offensive to have to prove his innocence. He just needs to roll around on the floor with his kids, fly kites in the breeze and lie twiddling his toes in bed.

So I spent this morning writing a report I had come here to write, starting at 7.30am and finishing by 4pm. Seven pages in all, carefully crafted, revised three times.

While I was busy writing, sirens started up over the wall in the Israeli area – lots of them, wailing and howling, echoing amongst the hills in full-bodied surround sound. A war alert. What does this mean? Do I need to do anything? Three jets thundered past, low, heading south toward Gaza or Egypt.

We're not that far from Gaza, but surely the Gazan rockets don't get over here? Or are the Iranians firing nukes? Are the massed youth of Egypt invading? Have the lizards in the Negev tripped off the radar? Is this the end of the world? Or will I be able to finish my report? The cars on the Israeli settler road over the valley seemed not to be stirred, so I carried on. The sirens eventually stopped. I made a cup of tea. Life went on. My keyboard acquired more finger-sweat. It was 38 degrees.

Eventually I sent off my report, and then the nail-biting started. Had I overstated my case? Well, some might think so, and they might abreact. Will I offend anyone? Does it matter? I soon received an e-mail from one of the school's contacts in England. He made it clear he was right behind us, just needing some figures, please. That was heartening. Good on him – that's the first such message we'd heard. Trouble is, the pregnant silence we'd had from many people had made us wonder whether they were all abandoning us. I realised that, in that silence, Ibrahim and I had perhaps mistakenly conflated our supporters, believing that they all thought similarly. They didn't.

It's twelve days to go before my time here is up. I haven't had time yet to see my friends Yitzhak, Eliyahu and Izzedine in Jerusalem, and Wael in Jenin. They're so near yet so far.

Down the road there's a sign saying '*DANGER, now entering Palestinian Territory, Israelis not permitted*'. Maram Issa said she would love to erect a sign on the other side saying '*DANGER, now entering Israeli Territory, Palestinians do all you can*'. She's a sparky soul, our Maram. Technically, the sign means that Yitzhak and Eliyahu cannot visit me, though they live only 10km away from here.

As for Wael, he's busy with his permaculture garden, and Izzy is busy looking after his mother and family after his father Sheikh Bukhari's premature death. He was a lovely man of my age, a Sufi peacemaker who lived close to the Dome of the Rock in the Old City of Jerusalem, and he is much missed. We were like brothers – he, rather a bishop-like figure in the Sufi world, and me an aged hippy, feeling a connection of the soul that transcended our different positions in life. God is Great, and his hand moves in intricate ways.

But I've achieved one thing: I have at last found what I need for breakfast. Took a while. It was soya milk – I found it in a Christian grocery up a side street – unusually they have booze there too, for their sins. This was a strangely important minor detail for a Virgo like me – the soya milk, that is. Sometimes the greatest of pleasure is to be had from the smallest of things.

Honour, Bethlehem, 25th June 2011

All the seats in the square were taken. It was mid-afternoon, the hot time when everyone relaxes until the calling to prayers from the Mosque of Omar announces the beginning of the evening. I was worn out, again, wanting just to sit down quietly and write on my laptop. I stood there, wondering what to do.

"Excuse me, do you speak English?" "I *am* English." "So am I!", she beamed. "Does Jesus interest you?"

"Well, er, I've had some involvements with him, in a way – I've edited five books about him." These books all concerned alternative theories about his life, though I didn't tell her that. "But I'm not Christian."

“Well, what *are* you then?” “I guess I’m an aged hippy, cutting my own path through the brambles, with a little help from Tibetan Lamas, ETs and ancient sages.” Well, I was testing her out – either she’d walk away, or she’d attempt a conversion, or this might get interesting...

“I was a hippy too! Except I’m now a Christian.” Gosh. There followed an interesting conversation with this lady, who was about my age. She had done the hippy trail to India around 1970, then underwent a change, returning to England and marrying a church minister. She was one of the rather interesting, individualistic, genuine Christians you can meet out here – people who walk the talk of their master Jesus and who do some quite remarkable Christian things.

She and her husband run a Christian guesthouse by the main checkpoint into Bethlehem. As it happens it’s right next door to Bethlehem’s chief den of sin, the Intercontinental Hotel, where prostitutes serve foreigners and NGO executives on expense accounts. She was a good lady. She was feeling sad because their time in Bethlehem is coming to a close, after two years. When you come here on a volunteer visa the Israelis usually end it after two years to stop volunteers getting too dug in, becoming more influential. I sneak in and out on a three-month tourist visa, posing as a retired historian studying old Christian churches – that’s my story. I was experiencing wistful feelings myself, being due to leave before long, so we shared a dilemma. We had a long conversation, then parted company. That was pleasant. It’s funny who you meet.

Rather like the American I met yesterday. I wandered into a room at the Everest Hotel, where a circle of thirtyish people awaited Ibrahim and me for a talk about Palestine. As I

introduced myself, the group leader said, "You don't mean *the* Palden Jenkins?" I'm never sure whether fame or notoriety are preceding me in situations like this. "There's only one of me, mercifully", I replied. He said that, only last week, he'd been at a fire circle ceremony in Wales with my two Cornish friends Michael and Lucy. They had told him to keep his eyes open for me in Palestine. Lo behold, here I was. Magic.

I upset some of the Israelis in his group. I did an introduction to Hope Flowers while Ibrahim set up his computer and overhead projector. He was about to show an 11-minute Hope Flowers video. I had been thrust straight into it without forethought, assuming these were all internationals with liberal social values, on yet another peace mission, without Israelis present. We get loads of these groups, many of them landing up in the Everest Hotel just above Beit Jala, by dint of its location on the boundary of the Israeli and Palestinian zones.

Although I work with Palestinians, I always try to give a fair analysis of the situation here. But it is the analysis of a foreigner. My perspective differs from the views of many foreign Palestine activists, who sometimes look on Israel and Israelis with disgust and opprobrium, concealed or blatant. My view tries to take both parties as locked in a tango - though they are not equally responsible, and Israel chooses the music. It's loaded one way. So if I say that, in my estimation, Israel is 70-80% responsible (the Palestinians also have made mistakes), most internationals who are at all interested in Palestine would agree, but to many Israelis I am of course prejudiced, biased, and I do not understand.

The problem is that, for every Israeli who dies, 50-100 Palestinians lose their lives, and Israel is supported by

governments and arms dealers while Palestinians are relatively devoid of active, meaningful support. They get hand-wringing minority support from some people in the West, while most Westerners are ambivalent, pro-Israeli or shoulder-shrugging, and they get nominal though wavering support from other Arab countries.

It's like an abusive relationship where both parties are locked into one another, yet one party is colonising and dominating the other. So identifying and speaking about the balance of power and influences in this situation is tricky, and to portray the situation in this way is regarded by many Israelis as biased because, according to their perception, they are the victims and everyone is against them.

So at the meeting I upset some of the Israelis present, also unwittingly prising open a rift in this group, between those Israelis who disagreed with me, and most of the internationals, who tended to agree. *Ooops*. I think Ibrahim was glad it wasn't he who did it, and perhaps I prepared the ground for him. Up to now, the group had clearly reached a comfortable though shaky consensus, or a hushed silence, into which I had unwittingly chucked a grenade.

They were process-oriented psychologists, this lot, busy doing 'world work' – something I too have experience in. Other such groups are dedicated to prayer, meditation and all sorts of peacebuilding techniques, often taught in expensive workshops at hotels back home, and led by charismatics with a message. Every group is, of course, *the one* that will bring peace, the one that knows what others don't know. Yet little changes in reality and the conflict continues.

This sounds jaded, and I don't want to criticise their good intentions or the value of world work. But here in Palestine, the steady stream of visiting peacemaker groups gets a wee bit repetitive, and one wonders whether they might do better taking a risk, fanning out across Palestine, getting their hands in the dirt, staying longer and doing something more concrete. By their works shall we know them. The Christian woman I'd met earlier in Manger Square had engaged hammer and tongs in the blood, sweat and tears stuff here, probably also doing a lot of dish-washing and edgy situation-surfing, and I respected her for that. That's real peacemaking, when it comes down to it.

One of my own contributions here is photographic. I'm not interested in focusing on the usual old shots of destroyed buildings and anguished Palestinians, important as they are. I seek to photograph *ordinary life*, to show the world the daily-life reality of this land, with its beauties, ironies and tragedies, and to show the world the souls of Palestine's people. I hope to help the world realise that these are *real people*, just like us, living their lives just like we do. Most of the time they are not thinking about the conflict - they're thinking about getting the kids to school and paying the bills. *Just like us*.

Back later to Manger Square. Sitting on a bench, I was accosted by a chap who sat down next to me. He wanted to talk. Many Palestinians want to talk, often at length. That's alright, and *bearing witness* is one of the reasons to come to Palestine - except at moments when you want some quiet. He said he had four children and no work, and they were hungry. Except, strangely, he was eating a bag of nuts and offering one to me. I took it and told him to save the rest for his kids. Of course, in his head, I come from a rich country where poverty doesn't

exist – a paradise of plenty where everyone is happy and free. He doesn't know the reality of it and it's difficult to explain.

A boy comes along and wants to talk too. *What yorr name? Wherr you come from?* I answer but keep on writing. Must get this blog finished. "Palestine no good. No job. Britaniyya good", says the man. Hmm, what do you say? After all, people like this can only learn what Britaniyya is like by experiencing it, and there's no chance of that – so the illusion lives on.

By talking about his hungry babies, he's trying to blag money and, sorry, I'm not in the mood. I've just pledged 1,000 shekels (about 170 GBP) to Adnan's son's education bill, and that's enough for today. I believe his son has a spark of potential, being a bright lad, and he will bring good to the world when he's older – and it's a personal thing too, because I really like the boy, he's brainy and anxious to learn, and we've had some good conversations.

It's tricky. I come from a rich country and, relatively to Palestinians, I'm well off. Back home, I am not. I'm not a giving machine, and I have to be wise with giving otherwise I shall spend out, unable to return here to continue working with these guys. It's important also not to create dependency. But I stayed friendly with the man, because he needs to commiserate. Nevertheless, his perseverance eventually worked, and he managed to wring thirty shekels out of me (a fiver). At least he won't spend it on booze or drugs – you can rely on that. He even brought me some tea, bless him.

Once, there was a taxi-driver who overcharged me. I haggled him down quite fiercely because I wasn't happy with his 'screw the foreigners' attitude. I got him down to the proper price, 25 shekels. He had demanded 60. He looked rather stunned that

this foreigner had done this. But then I paused, to let it sink in, and then gave him 50 extra, saying, “And this is for your wife and kids”. He lit up. I had done what he needed, but I had also spoken to his Muslim sense of honour, since it is not good to overcharge. Meanwhile, a gift freely given comes from Allah and it is a blessing upon your day.

Earlier in the day I had been at the Hope Flowers Centre, working on a report on the women’s empowerment courses. Ibrahim Afaneh had wanted help getting his assistant and another teacher into a British university to do a one-year master’s course. So I sent out stuff all morning toward that end, also sending out some necessary information about the school to our American supporters. We’re now, after doing the homework, bombarding them with bucketloads of stuff. Well, they asked for it, and now they’re getting it.

After going to Manger Square and having a bite to eat, I went down to the Alternative Information Centre in Beit Sahour to find some internationals to hobnob with. At the meeting they showed two short films made by a young thirtysomething from Jenin, who was remarkably lucid. He had with him a black Palestinian – yes, there are some, left over from the Arabic slave trade. Around 200 years ago her ancestor came from, she guessed, Sudan.

The first film was about the discrimination that even Palestinians exercise toward black people. In the film she recounted how, as a child in Jenin, if she went to the swimming pool everyone would get out, to stop her blackness somehow rubbing off on them. The chance of marrying an Arab was zilch – so the few blacks in Palestine just intermarry. Tragic. Racism is universal – a point she made very well.

The second film was about honour killings and punishments in some of the refugee camps. The filmmaker portrayed how he, as a teenager, had beaten up his sister, who was suspected of having it off with another man. She had shamed the family according to traditional values, which are strong in some of the refugee camps. The film showed him returning to his sister to make up with her when he was in his twenties. In tears, and a ruined woman, she told him of her feelings of betrayal, how she wanted sometimes to kill herself since her marital prospects were zero. He was genuinely remorseful by that time.

After the film he spoke openly of his deep sense of responsibility and regret, and how this motivated him to work with this matter now. He said that his film had been banned in Jenin, where he lived, and this was its first showing – to an audience of internationals in Beit Sahour. His sister was now much better, but still damaged. What's worst, she hadn't had it off with a man in the first place. She had not harmed the reputation of her family. Again, it's the power of allegation.

He recounted how another woman portrayed in the film had disappeared after her ordeal. Then, recently, when he was in Ramallah a good-looking woman came up to him, asking him if he remembered her. He didn't. She was that woman. She was now working for an NGO in Ramallah, a changed person.

A discussion followed. These two were part of the Freedom Theatre in Jenin, once headed by Juliano Mer-Khamis, an Israeli who had moved to Jenin to run the project. He was murdered by a conservative Palestinian earlier in 2011. The guy said that this now meant that the students in the project could no longer shelter behind him – they had to stand up for themselves and the beliefs that Juliano had taught them. It was a moving story.

Afterwards I joined the remaining throng, after half of the people had left. They were all around thirty years old - progressive young Palestinians and international NGO workers. It was lovely: I felt very welcome. I even had a beer and a hug. I arrived back home at 1.30am in a taxi to find a dead beetle on the floor with a mound of ants swarming over it, dismembering it bit by bit.

In the end, we're all food for someone or something else, however special we think we are.

Blogging in Bethlehem

Palden Jenkins

Part Four

Life's Tapestry, Jenin, Tuesday 28th June

Lots happened between Bethlehem and Jenin. It started when Ismael the taxi-driver picked me up from the school at nine. The day before that I had had a ride with him into town, and he had invited me to his home in Deheisheh refugee camp. Dense-packed, Deheisheh is communitaire in atmosphere, well cared for by its residents and not as slum-like as you might expect. I met Ismael's son – a promising young chap who goes to the UNRWA school at Deheisheh. Obliging he made me tea and practised a little English with me.

Ismael is a professional surveyor by trade, in his fifties, who lost his job and now works as a taxi-driver. This trip up the West Bank to the Zatarah checkpoint (Tapuah Junction) will help his income. [It's pronounced Za-tara.] I'm not one for long taxi-rides like this, costing 300 shekels (50 GBP) but I was exhausted, wanted to get away, and I couldn't handle the effort involved in getting up there by public transport. So Ismael took me.

We headed through Bethlehem onto what I call 'Palestine Route One' (Israel route 398), the winding artery that weaves through the stark mountains and valleys, connecting the south with the north and bypassing Jerusalem. Jerusalem, surrounded by walls and checkpoints, is a no-go area for a West Bank Palestinian without a permit – which includes most of them.

This is the bizarre thing here: internationals have more access to all parts of the country than anyone. Palestinians can't go into Israel except with scarce permits, and Israelis can't go into Areas A and B of Palestinian territory unless they're soldiers on duty. Well, theoretically. Many Israelis are afraid to enter Palestine because they're drilled with the idea that Palestinians are dangerous, out to murder any Jew who comes near. That's apartheid of the mind. But a foreigner can go almost anywhere, except for military areas.

So we drove round Jerusalem, through Ubeidiya, Abu Dis and Al Azariyah (the biblical Bethany, pronounced *Aza-riy-ah*). It weaves up and down the steep hills on a dramatic road that is partially modernised, partially old and bumpy, and a testimony to the bizarre madneses of this country and the tragedy of the Palestinians. We stopped at various points so that I could take shots of the amazingly heart-stretching landscape. Then we went past Ma'ale Adumim, a major hilltop settlement and part of the Israeli greater Jerusalem project. It sets out to expand Jerusalem's orbital hinterland and to split the West Bank into northern and southern halves, ensuring Palestine's non-viability as an independent nation.

These settlements are a crisis waiting to happen. If the oil shuts off, then the settlements, relying on oil for motor access, water-pumping, electricity and supplies, will suddenly be rather isolated and redundant, and places to get out of. Israelis don't do donkeys. Palestinians would also suffer from such a crisis, but they live in better-located places where water is available, they know how to face adversity, and they do have donkeys. So Israeli settlers would probably get hit harder than Palestinians.

Then we joined the 'peace road' from Jerusalem toward the Jordan border, cannonading down it for a while, then turning left up a main road, route 458, called the Allon road after an Israeli general. It leads to Mikhmas and the north, joining route 60, the main artery through the northern West Bank. The signs along this road point mainly to Israeli settlements with biblical names such as Beit El (Bethel) and others such as Itamar, but all the time the majority of places are Arabic villages – Mikhmas, Silwad, Sinjhil and Turmussiya.

The mountains are dramatic, with valleys deeply incised into them, lined with olive trees and layers of old agricultural terraces. There must be a bazillion olive trees in this region – the northern West Bank is greener than the south, where desert encroaches. It's an historic landscape, populated for millennia and ruled by a multiplicity of kingdoms and empires.

Eventually we reached Zatara checkpoint between Ramallah and Nablus, where Wael was to pick me up (his name is pronounced *Wa-el*). But Wael was over an hour late, as he reported by SMS, running on *Palestine Inshallah Time* – a rather elastic time-zone. So Ismael took me to the next town, Huwara, where we sat in a cafe, waiting and talking. Huwara had expanded immensely during the second *intifada* ten years earlier when Nablus, much fought-over, was closed off by the Israelis. Locals, both Palestinians and Israeli settlers, didn't have access to the shops and services in Nablus, so many garages, shops and services started up in Huwara instead, and now it is quite a thriving place. [Huwara came up in the news in February 2023, following a settler rampage there.]

Wael eventually came. We had talked online for some years, especially when he was in Germany, where he lived for 17

years, moving there during the first *intifada* of the late 1980s. We had never actually met. He had moved back to Palestine to join his family's business. They, the al Saad family, are prominent in Jenin and one of the largest suppliers of carpets and furniture in the region – they even carpeted the Al Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, and those carpets are enormous.

But Wael's main interest is to bring permaculture to Palestine, and he had ideas about new economics, eco-villages and the revival of Palestine. Not the standard development model, but something different. That's where we connected – we both see the future to be different from today's perception of it.

Ma'assalam, Ismael, salam alekum, Wael. He took me to Marda, an ancient small town in a wide valley bedecked with olive groves, west of Zatarra. On the ridge above Marda is the Israeli settlement of Ariel, one of the largest settlements and home to many Russian and Ukrainian Jews who came around the time of *perestroika* and the end of the Soviet Union – though about one third of them moved back later. It's classic: Israelis are up the hill, dominant, and Palestinians are down below, in the more natural place to live.

We went to visit Murad, who runs a permaculture farm at Marda. After talking awhile – his sweet kids being a pleasantly disruptive influence – he took us to the farm, where I went round taking photos, which I gave to Wael the next day for Murad. I was shown different plants, permaculture techniques and features.

Permaculture is an ingenious system of organic farming and gardening with all sorts of imaginative ways of enriching soil, conserving available water and growing plants that otherwise wouldn't survive here. Wael had organised permaculture

design courses here, for people seeking to learn dry-farming methods that need no artificial irrigation.

Then came a special experience: I was taken to the old Ottoman part of Marda. I love Ottoman architecture, with its arches, domes, characteristic windows and particular style of stonework. The Ottomans ruled this area for 300 years until the British took over in WW1. The buildings were dilapidated but still lived in by several families, with their sheep, hens and doves. I met a family – or at least, a father and a clutch of teenage boys – who served us coffee and mulberries, and we chatted at length. I enjoyed the sit-down, because the feelings of deep memory that I was having during this visit were making my legs shaky. This felt like a return. It felt hazily familiar.

The teenagers were fascinated with their British guest and, at the end, I gave them a wee chat, reminding them that they were builders of the new Palestine, that many changes would come about during their lives and that they were here to carry them out. They should remember this and never give up, staying here to create their future. In the end it would be better to stay than to leave, even if staying is a harder option to take. For them these were words of power, somehow *meant* to be said, driven by a sense of history that had welled up in me while being shown around their historic home. They were duly stirred. The father was rather pleased with what I said.

We then went to another old Ottoman building to have food with Murad's parents. In traditional style, Murad's mother served us food, then disappeared while we ate it – men only. I picked around the edge of the chicken legs, eating my hummus, pitta, olives and salad, and afterwards Wael and I left for Jenin.

More hills and winding, swooping main roads, and high, rounded limestone mountains as we weaved up through the West Bank highlands. Most people don't think of West Bank Palestinians as a highland people, but they are, and in places it's a very dramatic landscape they live in. To some extent I can understand Israeli settlers' wish to live here – it's not just the biblical Samaria but it's beautiful and, for them, a tax break, a good climate and a cheap property mecca.

Nablus I had never been to before. We passed the outskirts. Its population is around 100,000. Its location is impressive, nestled in a deep, narrowish valley between two high holy mountains called Gerzim and Balata. Nablus, the Roman Neapolis of 2,000 years ago, is a much disputed city. Jewish settlers think it's the biblical Shechem. Settlers have tried nudging into the outskirts but the Palestinians resist and Israeli infiltration hasn't been successful. Nevertheless, settlers round here carry out burnings, murders, property-damage, mosque-defacement and all sorts of ploys to assert a 'price tag' on Palestinians for having the nerve to live here – after all, they've been here only 1,500 years. Many Nablusians are of original Greek origin, so they've been here over 2,000 years. Throughout the conflict Nablus has frequently been invaded or quarantined by Israeli forces.

We weaved through further impressive mountains north of Nablus, stopping at some big springs at Al Badhan, gushing with water and dotted with shops and cafes. I needed batteries for my camera, but the shop wanted 40 shekels for four AA batteries – about 7 GBP – *no thanks*. In the stream flowing from the springs, about three metres or 10ft wide, plastic tables and chairs were placed. They were packed with women and children, sitting with their feet in the water, with tables piled with meal leftovers, and many of the women smoking *shisha*

and chattering avidly. No doubt it is pleasant, having your feet in springwater in this hot, dry land. But all the tables and chairs were taken up and we didn't have time to sit.

Eventually the mountains gave way to a lower plateau land with wide agricultural fields. One thing I love here is to see people in the fields working - something you don't see in Europe. It's traditional farming, with donkeys, floppy-eared sheep, hand tools, old tractors and shelters on the field edges where the family can get out of the sun in the afternoon.

Jenin is perched on the north-facing slopes of the West Bank plateau, on the edge of a wide, green plain stretching west from Galilee toward Haifa and north toward Nazareth. The security wall separates Jenin from the Arabic towns of Afula and Nazareth in Israel, not very far away. This is Jesus country, and Wael, although Muslim, is enamoured of the Jesus stories here.

Jenin is lower than most West Bank towns - except Jericho, the world's lowest town. You can feel it in the thicker, moister, softer Mediterranean air of Jenin. A friendly town of 40,000 or so, we made stops at a workshop, then at Wael's family firm's sizable warehouses and offices. More coffee - I was beginning to get jittery and strung out on the stuff. But another special moment was coming up.

We went to the village of Birqin, west of Jenin, to see an ancient Christian church - apparently the world's fourth oldest church, founded by the Byzantine empress Helena. Here Jesus had healed the lepers, in a biblical story. It was lovely inside, with richly-painted icons and Greek Orthodox paraphernalia. While the caretaker talked to Wael, I went into meditation, perched on a wooden pew - the place was tranquil and atmospheric, imbued with radiance.

While in that state, spontaneously I became very aware of my mother, who had died 18 months earlier. Something in me suddenly wished, deep in my heart, that I could have brought her here. I don't know where that feeling came from, but tears welled up inside, trickling down my cheeks. Cleansing tears, tears of release and healing forgiveness. I had always wished to share with her some of the remarkable spiritual experiences I have had in my life, but she never allowed it. She loved old churches though, and she would have loved this one. Later I thanked the caretaker and Wael for giving me this moment. Another level of resolution with my mother had taken place, unforeseen, yet a great blessing.

Wael had a lovely Palestinian wife who had lived with him in Germany, and their family with two girls and a newborn boy. I had a delightful evening with them. Ismael rang to find out if I was alright – that's kind of him. He might also have been fishing for me to ask him to come and fetch me tomorrow, but I'll make my own way back home to Bethlehem.

The Spring of the Gardens, Jenin, 29th June

Being in Palestine is a perpetual process of being waylaid and sidetracked. If you try to change or resist it, or if you attempt to hold on to even the best-laid of plans, you land up worn out and frustrated. If you go along with the flow of it, remarkable things can happen.

Wael took me on a tour of Jenin – the market, the main street, the old town – though really the tour consisted of a series of stopovers for Wael to have conversations with people in the street, and with cafe owners, the director of a musical

conservatory and a former Marxist running a shop next door to it. Well, I'm here to plug into real life in Palestine, and it was an interesting process. If all I can do is to be a character in people's lives, and they in mine, something has been achieved.

People accost you in the friendliest of ways, even in the middle of a busy street. I was standing in a corner in the market, training my telephoto on people walking past, quietly taking pictures, and a steady stream of people came up asking me where I was from, where I am working (Bethlehem), whether I come from London (as if it's the only place in Britain) and why I didn't bring my wife (she doesn't exist, but sometimes I tell them she's back home, to make it simpler).

The former Marxist was interesting, an intensely ruminative man who struggles within himself to find a new picture of the world and where it is going, after the fall of the USSR and the shift of China to capitalism. He had gone to university in Russia, as a number of older Palestinians have done. "The past is our future", he said, "and the future is already come". He sold old relics. He asked me what I recommended for Palestine. I thought about it, knowing he was seeking original thinking, and then told him I thought Palestinians should avoid adopting the wider world's ways and becoming a client state - otherwise known as 'economic development'. Or at least, Palestinians should be more discerning about it.

'Development' involves an adoption of modern, market-oriented, high-tech, capitalist ways. It is assumed A Good Thing, but this viewpoint comes from one angle only - profit, gain and the assumption that economic growth makes people happy. Culture, society, nature, spirituality and finer human qualities are conveniently overlooked. Palestine would do

better to be a cultural originator, not a slavish adopter, finding its own solutions and modifying the best of others' to suit its own core objectives. He thought this was a good answer.

You can see the price of economic development by the plastic bags that blow around in the wind across the streets and hills of the Holy Land. Shopkeepers give them to you even if you have a cloth bag to use. My cloth bag slings over my shoulder, freeing my hands but, no, everyone carries multiplicities of plastic bags, destined to harness wind power and fly freely once they've been used. Or they get burned, releasing PCB toxins. The march of progress comes down to seemingly small issues such as these. Palestinians tend unthinkingly to believe that anything modern is good – it isn't always so.

In the women's empowerment courses back in Bethlehem they teach about the dangers of using plastics indiscriminately. For food use, Palestinians often use plastic bags that aren't food-grade. Thus, invisibly and insidiously, the bags shed phthalates, PCBs and all manner of nasties into people's food. On the course they teach about the dangers of those Alzheimers-stimulating nightmares called aluminium pans, and about microwaves that can cook you as well as the food, if you're close. Palestinians use these without knowing their dangers, then wondering why Allah awards them with cancer. I'm sure he shakes his eschatological head in dismay.

I said to the Marxist that they ought to consider banning cars from at least some streets, giving the streets back to the people. That couldn't happen, of course, and he said so – people wouldn't agree with it. But they won't support the idea unless they try it first, to see the difference. Manger Square back in Bethlehem is free of parked cars on Fridays and Sundays, and

it's wonderful – on Fridays hundreds of Muslims do their prayers in the square, and on Sundays churchgoers spill out of the Nativity Church to mill around, while boys kick balls and ride their bikes and people gather in gaggles to chatter.

Oh well, Westerners nagging about environmental issues don't necessarily help either. People need to discover these things for themselves, learning the connection between baby formula and their babies' depleted immune systems, or between cancer and the pollution generated from burning plastic.

We left the Marxist, with his visible back pain, to continue with his mental toil. One form of development aid would be really valuable here: squads of osteopaths and chiropractors. So many Palestinians are out of joint. Water dowsers would also be valuable, except that the Israelis would quickly deport them because they want control of Palestinians' access to water.

Jenin is a pleasant town. I came with an image of it as rather squalid, intense and somehow parochial, given its reputation for Israeli army incursions and Palestinian resistance. But no, it's relaxed, friendly and not as crowded and walled-in as Bethlehem. It has a large, wide-open hinterland with nary an Israeli in sight. Even the local Israeli settlements were vacated – perhaps the Jeninis had succeeded in their resistance. The separation wall is some miles away, leaving open farmland around the town and no sight of separation walls.

Jenin is populated with many refugees who originate from Haifa, on the coast of what's now Israel. It was once the most tolerant and multicultural town in historic Palestine but it was ethnically cleansed in the 1948 *Nakba* when it was taken by Israel. Many were killed and the remainder escaped to Jenin.

Tolerant people, if their tolerance is seriously betrayed by sectarian or racist separatism or violence, can become deeply distrustful as a result. Sarajevo in Bosnia is like this, as is Beirut in Lebanon. People's faith in humanity is more seriously destroyed than it often is for people who distrusted others anyway as a matter of course. That's why Jenin, in the second *intifada* around 2000, fought ferociously against the Israelis.

I saw a sign saying '*Dear Haifa, we are returning*'. Israelis might interpret this to mean driving Jews into the sea, but it doesn't. The Palestinian ethos is not ethnically exclusive like that of Israelis. It doesn't stop them wanting to go back to their foreparents' home though, to return to what had been a truly multicultural port city.

Jenin is a fertile place with many water sources, and it's greener than much of Palestine. Its name is derived from *Ayn al Janin*, 'spring of the gardens'. But 'progress' has had its way. Wael, an eco-campaigner, showed me where springs had been canalised, then to dry up, and where trees had been felled and the water table had thus sunk, and where a mosque extension had caused some old fountains to cease flowing. Then people wonder why.

The 'progress' ethos is adopted from abroad. It's a progress that bulldozes away key resources such as underground water, farmland, clean air and balanced societies, undermining the true and full interests of a nation and its people, ruining everything with concrete and garbage.

Wael took me to a bare, wide-open place outside town which, he said, was being built as a result of corruption. It was the site of a new industrial park, as yet unbuilt, where the foundations of what looks like a future eight-lane highway had been laid over rich agricultural land. In development logic, it's industry

and commerce that are priority number one. This will lead to regret one day. Development and resulting crisis go hand in hand, with but a time-gap between them. Perhaps I'll say that again. Development and crisis go hand in hand, with just a time-gap between them.

Eventually it was time to go home to Bethlehem. Wael had hosted me royally. He dropped me off at the taxi station, where I caught a service taxi – a ten-seater VW van – for Ramallah. These guys drive fast, but they do indeed get you there. I sat in the front seat. A young guy behind me was fascinated at what I was photographing, watching me closely as I turned my telephoto to focus on specific scenes, carefully calculating my shooting to avoid wires and roadside obstacles. I told him I was trying to catch a wide range of classic scenes, to build a website about Palestine. He said *shukran jazilan*, thank you very much, and the driver agreed. *Afwan*, it's my pleasure. It really is. It's an immense honour.

The checkpoints were all open. Things were improving year by year in Palestine and travel was getting easier. Just 5-6 years earlier this journey would have been a major expedition with no guaranteed arrival time – or no guarantee of arrival at all. Travelling to Ramallah from Jenin would have involved bringing out permits and passports at least five times.

The landscape on the way from Jenin, past Nablus and down to Ramallah, is lovely. At Bir Zeit, Palestine's Oxford, the uplands look west over the Israeli plains with wide-open vistas to the sea – to a Mediterranean which, though not far away, few West Bank Palestinians may visit.

On arrival at Ramallah I bundled out, with *ma'assalams* (goodbyes) all round, and bundled straight into a service taxi

for Bethlehem – again, luckily, in the front seat. We sped off down to Qalandia, the main Ramallah checkpoint for Jerusalem – a place where queues are guaranteed – but we passed it by and headed down the Jerusalem bypass road, weaving through valleys and up and down hills, down to the Jerusalem-Jericho ‘peace road’.

One wonders why aid donors don’t feel ripped off by the lack of progress in building peace. But it was guilt money, really: on some level aid-providers know they perpetuate injustice and conflict, simply by using money to soften the blow of Israeli occupation. So, really, though it appears that they are helping Palestinians, in reality they are helping Israelis by keeping Palestinians quiet.

The desert mountains east of Jerusalem are hauntingly, barrenly, dramatically stunning. High limestone ridges, starkly bare of vegetation, sit there like a rock installation of God’s geological artistry – lacking vegetation due to millennia of sheep and goats and a good dose of recent climate change. This is the land of the prophets, the stomping ground of Jesus and John, of the Essenes, Sufis and the Magi. The road does some tortuously sharp bends which everyone takes at speed. Israeli and Palestinian cars, with different coloured number plates, vie with each other and, generally, the Palestinians, free-range in driving style, get there first. It’s not *all* Israeli dominance in this crazy country!

Sub-surface Activity, Bethlehem, 2nd July 2011

My friend Jack tells me that a friend of his, a Palestinian geologist living in California, is predicting a major earthquake –

a Richter 8 or 9 – in the Jordan valley. The last major one was in 1938, at the time of the Arab Revolt against the British. There are occasional tremors every few years – one was a Richter 4 two years ago. The Jordan valley is a geological rift between continents, where two continental plates are separating and the valley is sinking. Jack says that building earthquake-proof buildings hasn't been done since the time of the Ottomans. Apart from constructing such buildings now, there's not much one can do about it, except to be ready to run. There are enough social-political earthquakes to be dealing with for now.

Regarding these, in 2011 things have been relatively calm here for a few years, as things go. In another country, what has happened recently would still be regarded as outrageous, but here such things are reluctantly accepted as normal. In Israel they're called 'security measures', a catch-all phrase covering anything. When Palestinians carry out 'security measures' against Israelis it's called 'terrorism'.

It looked as if a confrontation could be hotting up in late 2009 and 2010, with settler takeovers in East Jerusalem and attempted invasions by religious Jews of Haram al Sharif (Jews call it the Temple Mount), the disputed sacred centre of Jerusalem's Old City, but mercifully things have simmered down for now. Acts of war on the West Bank, perpetrated mainly by Israelis, whether they are soldiers, contractors or settlers, are localised, mostly involving violence and force but only sometimes bloodshed (once every few weeks), with the net effect of nibbling at and eroding Palestinians' land and rights. You get strangely used to it.

It's going to be interesting to see what happens when I leave the country next week. I might be able to slip through unnoticed, or

there's a chance I might be hauled in for a wee interview. It depends how efficient these people are, and whether luck is on my side. I'm feeling okay about it: either nothing will happen, or hopefully I'll have my wits about me, to say and do the right thing. The main thing is not to indulge in fear. When I reach Cornwall, I think I'll have a long sleep and a few walks on the cliffs to debrief from it!

Eventually I got back to the school. Westerners would call it a 'peace school', though Palestinians wouldn't call it that because the word 'peace' usually raises something between a wry smile and an angry look. *What peace, and where is it?*

When Ibrahim's father, Hussein Issa, founded Hope Flowers in 1984, non-violent peacebuilding was unheard of in Palestine. The ethic then was to fight back at any cost – and anyone who didn't was betraying Palestine. At times the Issa family were therefore seen as Israeli collaborators, since they had started with Muslim, Christian and Jewish kids at the school. This ended around 1999 when the Israelis withdrew the Jewish kids on the outbreak of the second *intifada*. At times the Issas were harassed by the Israelis, and their house was partially demolished in 2002 – the Israelis issued an apology a fortnight later, saying they'd made a mistake. Thanks, guys, that's really nice of you.

Around 2003 the Israelis wanted to build their security wall right next to the school, across school land, thus seizing the valley below it, but the school's international supporters made a fuss and the wall was re-routed further away on the other side of the valley.

In later years I wondered why the wall over the valley had not been completed – there's a gap of a few hundred metres in it.

This is strange. Only recently did I find out why. It's because building the wall constitutes the fixing of a *de facto* boundary – and Israeli interests still wanted our hill. So they left a gap.

Things went quiet for a few years. Then someone attempted to take over the school by surreptitious means. They tried making allegations to discredit the school and ruin its international relationships. We had to move quickly but we headed them off. Now we were getting signs of a new strategy from these invisible adversaries. If you hear of Ibrahim being jailed, you'll know this new strategy is unfolding – someone wants him out of the way.

Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do. Forgiveness is important, not least for one's own mental health. But *forgiving is not forgetting*, and those who bring harm to others must be held to account and served due consequences – this is justice. And this is a justice-starved land. The moral dilemmas involved in dealing with this kind of issue are large, and it helps to have ethical clarity already firmly established. Otherwise you get angry, losing your centre and, before long, you become a criminal like them.

So we are treading carefully. This is just one part of something bigger: the ending of conflict through the establishment of justice and decency – for this is the only way that this conflict will truly be resolved. Neither military victory nor diplomatic peace processes will do it. The Palestinians are holding out for a fair deal, for as long as it takes.

This situation plays its part in a larger world picture, for Palestine and Israel represent a microcosm of the world, and the correction of all that is wrong here in Palestine will have a

significant effect on the wider world and its manifold injustices. And vice versa.

That's why I work here. I've worked for peace and positive change for over forty years and, while it's a job too big for me on my own, it's still worth trying. For, as the Dalai Lama is understood to have once said, *if you think you're too small to make a difference, just try spending a night in a room with a mosquito.*

Blogging in Bethlehem

Part Five

Hugging Jerusalem, Sunday 3rd July

The passengers' obligation is to fasten the safety belts. That's what it says on the 21 bus. This is one of the favourite bus routes of my life. It goes from Bab-al-Sqaq (pr: *Babiskak*) in Bethlehem, up through Beit Jala, down to Route 60 from Hebron, through the Gilo checkpoint (the least exciting bit) and into Jerusalem, landing up at the Arab bus station at Damascus Gate at the north end of the Old City – Arabs and Israelis have different bus stations. At shared bus stops, the Israeli buses have timetables and the Arab ones don't – they come when they come. Meanwhile, the timetabled buses often come late.

Actually, I prefer coming *back* from Jerusalem. Usually, by then, I'm relieved to get onto the bus after a customarily exacting time in this strangely intense city. After passing through the suburbs, it progresses into the hill country north of Bethlehem, weaving over bridges and through tunnels, and usually we don't stop at the checkpoint in this direction. That makes the return trip better. On the way in, you have to get out, queue, show your passport or permit, sometimes to have your bag examined, and then you get back in again. The best bit on the way back comes when we leave the Hebron road, weaving uphill, and then we tip over the top of the hill and past a sign that says 'Israelis not allowed', and down into the old Christian town of Beit Jala. Ah, *home*, back in friendly territory – full of dangerous terrorists, of course. They're everywhere.

This time I had the company of Ani, a young Basque journalist, who got onto the bus just after me. She recognised me from meeting up briefly at the Alternative Information Centre in Beit Sahour, and sat down next to me. I think she was relieved to find someone she knew. A slight, rather elvish woman, she writes articles for Basque newspapers about the situation here. This is a matter of interest to Basques who, like many Irish, identify with the conflict in Israel-Palestine – they know what the issues are since they have lived through similar things.

Yesterday I went down to the AIC to attend a talk about the non-violent protests in Bil'in (pr: *Bil-een*), north of Jerusalem, where the Israelis had walled off and cleared over 2,000 dunums of Palestinian land to build a settlement (a dunum is 1,000m² or a quarter of an acre). A recent court decision ruled that this was illegal – well, *partly* so – and 800 dunums were returned. The separation wall was to be pulled back to where the courts considered it legal. It's still illegal in terms of international law, but that doesn't matter – Israel is part of the wider world only when it wants to be. So Israel nevertheless acquired most of the land, and the Palestinians, though they counted this court case a victory, still lost much of theirs.

In a film about the Bil'in protests – protests that had gone on every Friday for six years – they showed a group of Basque musicians and dancers, dressed in traditional costumes, performing an exorcism of bad spirits at Bil'in. Up in Marda just over a week ago, I saw some rather stridently-painted Basque wall-graffiti too.

I was impressed with the theatrical creativity of the Bil'in protests and the perseverance of the protesters. Knowing they didn't have much chance against the Israeli army, they took the

approach of simply tying them up in time-wasting, at times newsworthy, politically embarrassing and non-violent confrontations with the Israeli army. The protesters included villagers and also Palestinian, Israeli and international activists. Nevertheless, the price was high – some people were killed, hundreds injured, the village was invaded regularly by soldiers at night, and people, including kids, were carted off regularly. But the people of Bil'in eventually gained a partial judicial victory, just a month ago.

Israeli army vehicles are seriously ugly. They have no style at all. They look dreadful, welded together in the strangest of shapes, painted dirty green and entirely unimpressive. How they manage this, I do not know. But I guess they have no need for smartness.

On walking to the bus earlier in the day, at Bab-al-Skaq, I happened to meet Ibrahim Issa. He was returning from an interview with the Israeli security people in Jerusalem. He had a bright smile on his face, looking happy. I soon found out why: he had been given a reprieve, probably from jail. Not that he had done anything wrong except run a peace school, standing up for his principles and blocking Israelis from taking over the school's land – which *could* be construed as crimes, of course. He knew that certain security people were after him – this proved to be the next stage of the campaign against the school. What made them decide to let him off, I do not know. But Ibrahim had confronted them. Everything is at stake for him and the school, so he took the bull by the horns and seems to have won. I'll find out the details tomorrow.

Meanwhile, I've been doing some work, tucked away in my eyrie atop the school. The next question is how to retrieve some

of the funding that has been lost, how to expose this campaign (since we have insufficient evidence to please journalists or a court of law) and how to kill it off once and for all, to turn it to advantage. I'll discuss this with Ibrahim tomorrow. It's just two of us, up against a number of people, financiers and intel people, but we seem to be doing quite well.

I'm rather sad I'll be leaving soon. I like it here, and feel far more useful and valued than in Britain. I'm concerned about what might happen when my calming influence on the Issa family disappears when I go back to Cornwall. It's a trying time for them.

Anyway, I went to Jerusalem for three reasons. One was to tune into the Israeli mindset, ready for my squeeze through border control on Wednesday. Another was to see various Israeli friends, whom I knew would be at an event I was to attend. And the third was to attend the Jerusalem Hug, to which I had been invited.

In the end, the Hug was not as momentous as it might have been – it has seen better days – but it was worth the trip. Originally it had been a big gathering of Israelis, Palestinians and internationals encircling Jerusalem's Old City to pray, dance and party for peace around the city walls. A powerful event in earlier years, there weren't many Palestinians or internationals, and only about 300 Israelis, when once it had been thousands. But we all had a good time.

It was a bit like an old hippy gathering, with lots of flowing dresses, hugging, celebration, guitars and singing bowls, people doing healing, a few native Americans, and the pervasive smell of smudge-sticks.

I'm not at all averse to consciousness-work, prayer and meditation for peace, since I do it myself. But, for me, if it's going to yield anything more than a groovy time for its participants, it needs to be *really focused* and people need to *really work at it*, to shift the energy-field that feeds conflict and destruction. If you're just going to do five minutes' meditation for peace, breaking off to answer your mobile phone if it rings, or to take happy-snappies of the proceedings, well, I might sound jaded, but it strikes me as rather fatuous, even a wee bit narcissistic and self-congratulatory.

Sorry, but there are people suffering right now *just down the road* – kids getting hurt, old ladies getting beaten up, trees getting wrecked and soldiers and settlers running rampage. No wonder Palestinians don't come to these meditations – they have a much closer-to-the-bone perception of what peace needs to look like, and by necessity they have to take a hands-on approach. Nevertheless, the Jerusalem Hug had moments of brilliance and inspiration, as well as moments of chaos and drift best forgotten.

At one point two really good drummers headed the parade, and we blocked the busy traffic while crossing the road. Then we danced at the Jaffa Gate under the walls of the Old City, then proceeded up and around the city to the Damascus Gate. Even a bevy of Orthodox Jews in their 18th Century attire joined in for a while, jigging around. I thought we were going to go round the whole of the Old City but, no, the procession wound down at Damascus Gate, one-third of the way round, with a few too many speeches and some half-hearted chanting.

After this there was going to be more dancing. Faced with the choice of surviving through more of this, then to stay overnight

in Jerusalem afterwards, or catching the last bus home, I chose the latter – and met my Basque journalist friend instead. She was tired, having done a day of interviewing people. I think I did the right thing coming back now.

I had met up with my Israeli friends, which was good. I've had so little spare time during this trip to do things like that. Six or seven people had all told me to come to see them, and I cleared them all in one fell swoop that afternoon. On the networking front, it was 'mission accomplished'. I was glad to get home, though it took until nine in the evening. I cooked food, did meditation, blogged, and now I'm off to bed. Goodnight!

Mission accomplished? Amman, Weds 6th July

I made it. One of the things that bugs you when you're in Palestine is that final challenge – departure through Israeli border control. It's impossible to predict what will happen. It depends on what's happening that day, who is on duty, whether a record of you has gone down in their computers, and whether your star is rising or falling. This time I got through, in a slightly anticlimactic, rather quick way.

I piled out of the service taxi from Jerusalem before anyone else – the cousin of one of Ismael's friends, a Palestinian taxi-driver living in Israel, had dropped me in Jerusalem at the service-taxi station. Now down at the border crossing, I strolled into border control, paid my 175 shekels (about 35 GBP) departure tax and smiled at the two Ethiopian passport control ladies who were sitting there chatting with one another. My passport number was tapped into the computer and, thankfully, nothing came up. The stamp went down on my passport, it was returned, and

I was free to go. The guy at the next control looked at my passport and let me through, and *that was it*. As I say, anticlimactic. But I'm not complaining!

An incident happened just after this. A group of ten or so German 'conflict tourists' came through. Their approach to border control was nervy and confrontative – and of course the red button went down, soldiers suddenly emerged and a dispute ensued. The Germans protested at length, arguing for their rights, and the soldiers pushed back, arguing that Israeli law pertained here and this wasn't Europe. They were still noisily gagged there, blocking everyone behind them, by the time I boarded the shuttle bus to leave for Jordan.

While this was going on I went for a coffee and croissant (not much choice was available), spending twenty minutes swatting the annoyingly plenteous Jordan Valley flies until the bus came. Getting through the next bit – over to Jordan and Jordanian passport control – was lengthy but uneventful. The shared taxi ride to Amman was just great. I sat there with the hot breeze blowing around me as we sped along the road, mulling over the events of the last few days.

It was a steamy 47 degrees down in the Jordan Valley. This is Earth's lowest place. Border control is quite close to where John the Baptist had baptised Jesus and, though baptism and border controls both represent liminal transitions, to me the similarity stops there. Climbing the gradual 3,000ft (1,000m) ascent from the Jordan Valley to Amman, passing through breathtaking mountainous scenery, is a joy hardly affected by the belching trucks crawling up the slow lane. The air clears and the pressure lightens in a succession of ear-clicks, and spirits rise as we move above sea level, only to climb even higher.

A feeling of relief comes over me now that I'm outside Israel. Relief because I had not only spent virtually all of my time in Palestine – which Israelis immediately find suspect – but also I had been brushing with the intel and security services, so I was wondering whether trouble would come at the border. We had been thwarting the designs of a mysterious and malignant land-grabbing faction and, as far as I could see, our work succeeded.

Things had taken a turn for the worse in the final few days of my stay. A new phase was opening up. It made me wonder whether I should delay leaving. I put this to Ibrahim. Staying longer would cost extra and eat into my resting time on my return to Britain, before other issues started up. But I'm one of those who doesn't abandon a challenge if I can help it. That's what made the difference for Ibrahim – he and I are a good team, seeing eye to eye and inherently trusting each other.

But Ibrahim said, well, either this new phase will resolve itself or, if it gets catastrophic, it's probably better for you to be out of the country and back home, to take up the cudgel from there. This is what I had thought too, though I had needed to consult him and also to hear the latest round of events that had unfolded yesterday. This was a day-by-day thing. I didn't know until the last moment which way things might go.

Last night I packed my stuff and cleaned my computer of potentially incriminating material, in case they took my computer on departing – as they sometimes do. I put the potentially dodgy stuff – writing and photographs – on two memory sticks and stashed them amongst some dresses I was taking to my daughters. It was also in a disk drive hidden amongst my socks at the bottom of the bag. But my computer itself was clean.

This morning I finished cleaning the apartment, and Ibrahim and Maram came to see me. After I'd given my food leftovers to the neighbours and locked up, we went to the Hope Flowers Centre for a final meeting before I was to head off to Jerusalem and then down to the King Hussein Bridge. We had to look at the various possibilities of what might happen next – especially if Ibrahim was taken in by the security services.

But no, no meeting. As soon as we arrived, Ibrahim's phone rang and he was called in by the security men – this time by the Palestinian intel people. Intel services on both sides were eyeballing him, each for their own reasons. Why? Because, to some people, anyone doing activities with the other side is suspect. Ibrahim's father Hussein had suffered exactly the same problem, decades ago. This situation had been developing over the course of a week. Each day we didn't know if or when Ibrahim would return. I'm amazed that Maram, his wife, seemed to handle it – she's a real trooper.

I had to leave for the border before too long, so I waited patiently. But not unfruitfully. There was a lot of activity at the centre – a women's empowerment course and the school's remedial summer course for kids. So I went around taking photos and saying goodbye to all the staff members I had grown close to. It would be good to have innocent photos of women and children in my camera, in case I was searched – a camera without photos in it is suspect.

I said goodbye to Ibrahim Afaneh, who leads the women's empowerment courses. I felt part of the team now, part of their lives, and they were part of mine – it was rather emotional to say goodbye. The ladies on the staff are fascinated at seeing a man who sheds tears so easily.

But I was deeply moved by this. Going through this crisis with them, where the 28-year Hope Flowers project had been at risk of ending, had bonded me with them. I've been through this kind of crisis myself a few times, and I know how devastating it is when a good project fails. It's doubly devastating when it fails because of the malintent of other people, as is the case here. It's fair enough if a project folds because of its own errors, but when other people screw things up for you, it's different.

The women on the women's empowerment courses, when told that Hope Flowers probably couldn't afford to continue the courses, felt betrayed, having trusted that Hope Flowers would follow through in what it offered. [As it happens, it did later find a way – sheer Palestinian improvisation, as usual.]

Finally, and perhaps worst, some classes at the school would have to be closed down, and scholarships for poor children cut back, and many staff members would have to go on half-time pay because insufficient funds were available.

Disaster after disaster was kicking in. The whole edifice seemed to be crumbling. Ibrahim was having to face flak from all sides, and he felt unhappy about what was unfolding. The plot against Hope Flowers was ruining it, stage by stage.

Ibrahim told something to me. He managed to get back from the security people just before I left, and we had a short and intense talk. From what he said, it looked as if the security issues might turn around and the manoeuvrings of a few corrupt people in the Palestine Authority, who seemed to be shadily collaborating with the Israelis, seemed to be losing out. Good sense was dawning in Palestinian corridors of power, and they were beginning to look favourably upon Ibrahim and the school. This case had exposed this little group of collaborators,

who were being rooted out. Oh dear, the punishments would no doubt be merciless.

Ibrahim was increasingly being seen by the PA as a man of integrity and principle – a patriot, neither a collaborator nor a traitor – and the Hope Flowers project was now beginning to be seen as the national treasure it truly deserves to be. Something is turning around. We might well be getting there.

[As it happens, these events drew the attention of the PA education authority, which had been seeking new ways of dealing with the effects of war-trauma in schools. Hope Flowers had many answers to this, already running training courses for teachers and social workers and demonstrating the value of the Hope Flowers approach in tangible terms. In the years that followed, funding came from the PA and the school and centre entered a new phase. However, further down the road, as foreign funding of the PA dwindled because of a creeping loss of international interest in Palestine, funding issues reappeared in another form.]

This matter with the security services had been phase three of an ongoing assault on the school. Phases one and two had been foiled, but the price had been high. Yet both phases failed, and the background financiers and controllers of these attacks were now pulling strings in the security services, trying to disable Ibrahim by putting him in jail on trumped-up charges. But they had a problem: there wasn't much they could nail on Ibrahim – he's clean – and even those things they could nail him with were debatable, a matter of interpretation.

I'd been working hard on all this with Ibrahim, penetrating these misty connections, keeping him afloat psychologically

and keeping going with our 'never surrender' approach. Our kind of intelligence had, I hope, overcome theirs.

Ibrahim said something that meant a lot to me. He was devastated by recent events. Resigning as director and giving up would probably mean the weakening or the end of Hope Flowers. Well, today he told me he had made up his mind.

He said that Hope Flowers and he are so bonded with each other that he cannot and shall not stop now. This is his life. Hope Flowers depends on him - he is irreplaceable, at least at present. He also said he had noted my advice that he should shift his role, focusing on being Hope Flowers' protector and guide, pulling back from day-to-day hands-on management tasks to do what he can do best, and in which he is irreplaceable - he is a visionary educator and peacemaker.

There are fine people at Hope Flowers - particularly women - who can manage its affairs, if a new system is set up right. But no one except Ibrahim can hold a clear vision of Hope Flowers' core role and purpose. No one has the inner strength to face down the kind of challenges that arise. No one else is good at thinking about overall strategy, or can represent the school amongst people in high places.

Ibrahim has resolved to carry on. He has found new strength amidst his vulnerability. I told him today that he must still take a break, to ready himself for the next chapter. But he's carrying on. This is good news. It also means he has experienced a rebirth within himself: he knows afresh what he is alive for.

Perhaps I helped him get there. Ibrahim, Hope Flowers and Palestine have also given me a new lease of life. I had recently felt redundant, unwanted and undervalued in Britain. This feeling had gone. So thank you for that, *hamdulillah* (thanks to

Allah). I've worked my socks off, taken risks, self-financed my trips here, missed my loved ones, sweated, had sleepless nights, and it has all been worth it.

Here at the hotel in Amman, they're happy to have me back, and inquisitive about things over the Jordan River in Palestine. With tears running down my cheeks I told them that all is well. Well, *I hope so*. The saga isn't finished yet.

I return to Britain tomorrow. My plan is to return to Bethlehem later in the year – which I did, for five months. This story is recounted in the third book in this trilogy – *O Little Town of Bethlehem*. Hope Flowers now has to find a way to survive the short term. It has to rebuild confidence and regain momentum. We must see off the current threats once and for all. But I think we've cracked it, and the tide is turning.

Inshallah. If indeed it *is* the will of God.

Concluding, 7th July 2011

Ismael, my taxi-driving protector and intermittent Arabic teacher, took me to his home in Deheisheh for a goodbye invitation to coffee. He has been so good to me. People like him are valuable to know, since they look out for you, help you solve problems and pick you up when you're worn out.

He told me about his then twenty year old son who had recently been arrested by the Israelis. A few weeks before, troops had invaded Deheisheh, looking for someone. This is distinctly against the rules of the Oslo Agreements since Deheisheh is in Area A, Palestinian controlled, and the Israelis are not permitted there. But rules and the Israeli army don't

mix. This aroused local anger, and youngsters started throwing stones at the soldiers (these kids are a good shot too).

Ismael's son was arrested and carted off. He was blamed for throwing a petrol bomb – unlikely. When Ismael and his wife went to the court case in Ofer, past Ramallah, the proceedings were delayed until September. His son's knees and hands were tied together in court. They were permitted a few minutes' talk with him, and that was it.

Ismael's father, now deceased, had been a wee bit famous. In the 1948 war their village of Zakariah, between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, was ethnically cleansed. His wife was shipped out with other women and his father was lined up with ten other men, tied up on the ground and sprayed with bullets. Somehow his father was shot only in the legs. All the other men died.

He was found the next day by Israeli troops who were not involved in the ethnic cleansing. Please remember, some Israelis are really good people, and Ismael's father's luck was in. They took him to Haifa hospital. When he was better, he wanted to leave but some Israelis sought to arrest him. He escaped (with other Israelis' help) and friends helped him get to Hebron. Later he found his wife and they moved to Deheisheh, where Ismael was born. As he grew older, a constant stream of journalists passed through their house, interviewing his father.

Many are the stories you hear of the *Nakba* of 1948, the Disaster. To Israelis it was a war of liberation. They took more of historic Palestine than the UN had allocated to them, forcibly clearing their conquests of Palestinians.

Two days before I was to leave Bethlehem, Ibrahim and I met up in the evening. He had his family in tow. We went to a falafel restaurant and, at the end, I went to pay. "You cannot do

that, Eengleesh. You bring shame to his family. We Palestinians must always give welcome to our guests.”

“Yes, I understand. But Ibrahim’s family cannot come to my country where they can be *my* guests. They have looked after me, and today I want to look after them.”

The man in the cafe, who knew Ibrahim, was reluctant to take payment for the meal. But I knew the Issas were broke. Besides, it had cost only 80 shekels (15 GBP) to feed six people – this wasn’t going to break the bank. I insisted. “It will be alright. Ibrahim understands Europeans. I am his friend and brother. I understand your concern. But here is the money and I am paying.” He relented and accepted the money. It was not a problem for the Issas, though the man had discreetly consulted Ibrahim, who nodded that it was alright. Honour is important to Palestinians, but Ibrahim knew it cuts both ways, and I must be permitted my honour too.

Ibrahim’s three lovely daughters, Maram and his mother Hind were there. It was a special moment. We needed to be together, but Ibrahim and I needed to talk too, and not here. Ibrahim didn’t want Maram to know he might be jailed – it would worry her. But he told her the next day and she took it calmly. After all, they had been through all this so often.

On the way home I chattered with Ibrahim’s daughters. Considering the eldest was only ten, they were pretty good at English. I’m closest to Zena, whose birthday is the day before mine. I gave her a leather-bound book to write in, and the other two received some lovely blue glass marbles, psychically charged by a spiritual healer in Britain. If they wanted to think of me, they should hold them for a while. Connections like this are important for children growing up in a high-risk society

where life can get raw and edgy – they need to know that someone loves and remembers them, even if far away.

It's the same with the kids at the school, and teachers and staff members. It matters to them that this funny man with blue eyes from Britaniyya is part of their lives. It's a line of contact with sanity, safety and psychological reassurance. When I'm roaming the cliffs of Cornwall, where a strong sense of space and freedom feeds the spirit, I often think of them.

I know this, because I have felt similar while in Palestine. Many friends in Britain were preoccupied with their busy lives, and at times I felt rather cut off. It was important to feel monitored by friends, just in case something goes wrong. If I went silent, I hoped someone would try to find out why. Strangely, it's not being injured, captured or imprisoned that worries me: my pet irrational fear is that of disappearing off the radar, with nobody knowing where I am. This must be a far-memory imprint in my psyche. But then, it's a lot to ask of a person back home to keep track of what seems a very worrisome situation – it conflicts with the secure relative regularity of their own lives.

I am now in Amman, sitting in a coffee shop, biding time before my flight this evening. A loud TV is blaring away – mandatory in many cafes. Unless it's tuned to *Al Jazeera*, *Al Arabiya* or *Dubai Nat Geo*, the programmes are, frankly, rubbish. BBC World isn't popular, as a consequence of the Anglo-American habit of invading Muslim countries and bombing hell out of ordinary people. The worst thing the West can do is to kill innocent Muslims, for in their eyes this makes us indiscriminate killers as bad as the terrorists and dictators we inveigh against.

I'm looking out of the window at a space here in the Downtown area which used to be a park with palm trees and seats. That

has all been swept away and it's now a building site. Pity, since I came along here to sit in that park - now finding myself frequenting this noisy coffee shop instead.

But that's life. We must live each day as if it is both our first and our last, counting the blessings that life provides. This situation exists as part of my soul-education. Which reminds me of my soul-sister Najah in Hebron, who lives a tough life, with a grace and nobility that is a great teaching to me.

Many Palestinians, whatever their faults, are noble souls. They live in a crazy world, but at least they *know* it. They keep their heads up. They live in hope that, one day, all wrongs will be righted - even if it is generations away. That time will come.

Israelis need this too. Living in a militarised society is not good for any nation. Israel, though a recently-founded nation, is so unclear and ambiguous about its primary aims that it doesn't even have a constitution. Jews deserve a safe home, and it will become safer as they make friends with their neighbours and merge more into the Middle East. It's a matter of trust-building and it will take a few generations to get there. The Middle East is naturally multicultural, and peace will be embedded across the region when the artificial borders established by the British and French in the 1920s melt away.

It's time to end. Thank you and bless you for reading this story. I'm signing off now. The story is not over yet. I'll be back. Greetings from Amman, Jordan.

Palden Jenkins,

West Penwith, Cornwall, UK, 2011