

The Fault Line of Fear – a Tectonic Response : The Muslim Observer

By **Samia Moustapha Bahsoun and Brenda Naomi Rosenberg**



Our world is in emotional HIGH RED ALERT with fear as our compass. Headlines read: Are terrorist masterminding another Sept 11? If the Palestinian authority gets formal UN recognition does it mean no peace treaty with Israel and another war? Will more Muslims immigrants result in Sharia being the law of the land? Is the Arab Spring a venue for Islamic fundamentalists to take over the world? Today the world is afraid of Muslims and their motives. Sixty years ago, Hitler used fear to rally half a continent against Jews engineering their total elimination. “Fear continues to be the weapon of choice in small and large conflicts worldwide used to manipulate and control”¹ as leaders play on our physiological responses to these fears – fight or flight.

Originally discovered by the great Harvard physiologist Walter Cannon, this physiological response is hard-wired into our brains – and represents a genetic wisdom designed to protect us from bodily harm². We have been indoctrinated to believe that these are the only responses to fear. In fact, such conditioning is so prevalent that it is rarely questioned when leaders use fear-mongering for their own personal ambitions, acting as protectors for their constituents. The fight or flight response fuels the tension and fear generated by mistrust, lack of respect, unmet expectations, denial of identity, and targeted aggression. This tension cannot be eradicated but can be addressed in a new way.

We are proposing a third and new response to fear – a Tectonic response to fear- one that connects not separates, one that engages the other and does not alienate, one that empathizes and does not destroy – one that distinguishes us from the animals who are limited to fight or flight. Using earth plate tectonics as a metaphor, we recognize that human interactions in situations of conflict are like fault lines between tectonic plates; plates interacting and building friction at their boundaries, causing earthquakes to occur when the natural elasticity of surrounding rocks has been exceeded. Human interactions can similarly create fault lines. When the pressure generated by tension and fear becomes unbearable, the energy released is tsunami-like, creating mass hysteria, inciting hate and fear, separating nations, destroying businesses and communities, oppressing people, and instigating wars. To give the rocks back their elasticity, we must move beyond the fight or flight model and use the tension as an opportunity to inform ourselves of the deepest fear, pains, and trans-generational wounds that separate people in conflict, and plague our world, build trust and create a new discourse. To construct this new relational architecture that can sustain seismic events inherent to our civilization, we are proposing a less 1 “Fear and Argentina’s Dirty War” published in July 2010 by Crystina Wyler for course work at NOVA Southeastern University.

2 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fight-or-flight_response

instinctive and more evolved paradoxical and Tectonic response to fear, one that goes beyond (“para”) our common sense (“doxa”).

We developed this Tectonic response to fear by utilizing the tension in our own relationship – a relationship defined by our separate national, professional, religious, cultural, and political identities – Samia Moustapha Bahsoun, an American Arab of Muslim descent, telecom executive, pro-Palestinian activist, and Brenda Naomi Rosenberg, an American Jewish Zionist, pro-Israel, global fashion executive. Together, we tackled the hot topics that separate our communities – Zionism, Holocaust, Gaza, Lebanon War, Jerusalem, occupation, settlements, suicide bombing, right of return, flotilla, the Cordoba Center at ground zero – and used the tension surrounding these elements of conflict to deepen our understanding of the other. We expanded the holocaust story to include both our narratives without changing our core beliefs, connecting without comparing the death of 70 year old Holocaust victim Dora Shklyan, who died at Teofipol in the Ukraine to the death of Samia’s 70 year old grand-mother Mariam Bahsoun, who died in 1982 under Israeli raids on Southern Lebanon.

As we used tension as an opportunity to face our realities and deepen our understanding of each other and not as an obstacle in partnering, we learned that being committed and disciplined to care equally about self

and other is essential to building trust, transforming conflict, and sustaining our relationship.

The September U.N. Conferences on Palestinian Statehood and Durban III give us an opportunity to apply a Tectonic approach to conflict transformation.

Leaders responding to the upcoming conferences are falling into the “fight or flight” trap. In the upcoming UN vote on Palestinian Statehood, the Palestinians are presenting it as a “fight” for their denied identity, the Israeli are “fighting” against it as a threat to their security; both parties are “fleeing” from the peace process. Their respective allies are not responding any differently; a veto by the United States is a “flight” response to the fear of alienating its ally in the region, broadening the divide. Reactions to the upcoming Durban III UN conference are no different. Australia, Canada, the United States, Israel, the Czech Republic, Italy and the Netherlands have announced that they will boycott Durban III, charging that the Durban process has been used to promote racism, intolerance, anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial, and to erode freedom of speech and Israel’s right to exist. Such boycott unfortunately does not address the tension surrounding these issues, broadening once again the divide. Both are “fighting” for what they believe to be right, both are “fleeing “ to the comfort of those who share the same point of view instead of addressing the fear and real issues that are creating the tension with the people whose views are different.

Under the Tectonic response model, leaders on all sides of conflict can instead use the tension that separates Israelis and Palestinians and their respective allies to articulate the real needs of both people, common to both; need for a national identity, safety, equality, and freedom. To transform conflict and give peace a chance, we must move beyond the fight or flight model to a tectonic response to fear – one that brings tension to the negotiating table instead of seeing tension as the enemy, using it as an opportunity to reveal the unspoken barriers to peace, addressing the deep trans-generational wounding, the cultural, sociological and motivational differences of both people.

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