

A New Year's Resolution for Peace: Try a Hug

In recent months, the world's billion-plus Muslims have marked the fasting month of Ramadan, the pilgrimage to Mecca and the Islamic New Year 1433. From the Eastern Christian church to the Western church, the world's 2 billion Christians are celebrating the season of peace that leads to Christmas. The world's millions of Jews are looking forward to the season of Hanukkah, a celebration of religious liberty in a diverse world that begins at sunset on December 20, 2011.

And all of us—all 7 billion of us on planet Earth—are thinking about our New Year's Resolutions.

Writer Teri Bazzi-Oliveri has a simple yet profound suggestion: Resolve to open your arms.

THE POWER OF A HUG

By Teri Bazzi-Oliveri

I never thought that I would say this, but I like Jews. Yes, a Lebanese-American-born Muslim loves Jews. Are you surprised?

The world tells us that Arabs and Jews should not be loving one another—that we should be killing and shooting and destroying not only each other, but also our homes, our lands and our religions. I know that some in my own community would not approve of friendships that I am forming these days. I know that even my father might have some harsh words for me for opening my home and sharing a meal—like iftar, the joyous breaking-the-fast dinner after sunset in Ramadan. This year for one special iftar, I hosted not only some of my closest Muslim friends, but Jewish friends, as well. I just might be let off the hook if I mention that I mixed it up at my diverse iftar and had some Christian friends at my home as well. I was crossing several boundaries as I opened my door.

Writing as a Muslim-Arab-American, I feel the tensions around me when I risk this kind of openness. The most prevalent media stereotypes of Muslims show us as strict and unwilling to compromise. If you doubt this, just look at network television, websites, magazines, Hollywood movies. We're usually portrayed as extreme. In fact, the whole Middle Eastern situation usually is depicted as impossible to resolve. I have often heard people say things like: "The Middle East does not want peace."

I can tell you: This is not true. Peace is possible. For long stretches of Middle East history, families enjoyed peace. We want peace to return.

The question is: How do we define peace? I have learned from my Jewish brothers and sisters that what I define as peace in the Middle East from my perspective as a Lebanese-American does, indeed, involve different steps than the definition of peace by a Palestinian or an Israeli. We share the same deep desire for peace—but finally achieving peace across the Middle East does involve different requirements for each group.

Think of asking a Palestinian who is living in occupied territory to explain what peace means. What do you think that this person would say? How would a Palestinian living in Gaza define peace? You will hear many common themes. Yes, peace involves a years-long yearning for land. Yes, peace involves mourning lost parents and children. And, our dreams of peace also involve practical hopes that most people overlook—like clean water and a good education. Like the freedom to live without the terrors people face each day in many places. What does peace mean to my father and his Lebanese-American friends? You will hear yet another somewhat different definition. No question: Dreams of peace are big and diverse, drawing on deep memories and aiming at high hopes for our children and grandchildren.

Now think of this: If we were to turn and ask a Jew, perhaps a European Jew or an Israeli Jew, about the meaning of peace—what would we hear? A Jewish friend once told me that she will never feel safe unless the State of Israel is recognized by all nations. But does that step alone define peace? I cannot answer that, of course. But think about the many perspectives within Judaism. Try to put yourself in the shoes of a Holocaust survivor. What might peace look like to this person? The answer likely would include freedom from the haunting memories of all that has been endured during and after the Holocaust. For Jews answering this question, would peace include shaking hands with a Palestinian? Or, as people do every day in the cultures of the Middle East: Might peace involve an embrace, a hug, a friendly kiss on the cheek?

These are the questions—and the hopes—that inspire me to open my mind and my heart and my home to all of those who are trying to figure out the same thing—this “peace” thing that we all keep talking about. Can we, one by one, begin to achieve this “peace” thing? Or is “peace” just a buzz word we feel cool and sophisticated tossing around—and almost confident enough to have the audacity to say that we know what the hell we are getting ourselves into when we talk about it?

I—for one—blatantly admit that I am still trying to figure out my role in the peacemaking project. I know that I will not make waves in the Middle East. I know that I will never get heads of state and the UN and the IDF and Hamas together in the same room for a hug. But I do know that I am part of a larger, diverse community where I live. Christians, Jews and Muslims live around me and we all want this thing called peace that seems so elusive. I do know that we can, at least, discover what peace means for each of us as individuals. And, most importantly, each of us can make sure that we listen carefully and find out what peace means for “the other”—whoever that “other” may be for each of us.

That is why when Abbey, a Jew, tells me about her Holocaust study in Poland, I listen. That is why, when she comes into my mosque, I kiss her not in the American way on one cheek, but I embrace her and kiss her twice, once on each cheek, in the style of my Lebanese friends. That is why when Jeff, a Jew, comes to my house, I hug him, even though my religion has strict rules about socializing with the opposite sex. I cross a line in embracing Jeff because I want Jeff to know that I care about him so much that even this social barrier will not prevent me from fully showing my concern for him. That is why when Jacob, a Christian, offers his opinions about the crisis in the Middle East, I try to listen with my head instead of my heart. And that is why when John, another Christian, asks questions about culture vs. religion, I try to give him an unbiased

answer. That is why when Molly, a Christian, tells me about her experiences with Arab culture, I try not to cry because it is so refreshing to hear that someone is out there is trying to learn rather than merely spout slogans at me. That is why when Amy, a spiritual Christian, responds to some of my concerns, I know that in her answer I am hearing her concern for me, as she speaks. And that is why when Hussein, a Muslim, tells me his “philosophy” about how to handle the world, that I find I respect him so much more every time I hear him speak. And that is why when I find myself in the same room as Sarah, a Muslim, I know that I am in the presence of greatness and I find that I have a lot to live up to and, at the same time, I am somehow responsible for her.

Why do I do these things? Why do I dare to open my door and my arms in these ways? Because, in doing so, I realize that I am not alone. I discover, for example, that my notion of taking steps toward peace is much like that of Rashid, a Muslim friend. We have that bond—cut from the same cloth and now we understand one another in a deeper way. We are reaching toward the same hopes.

I know that my Jewish and Christian brothers and sisters want the same thing: to understand what peace means to one another. As I enter the Muslim year 1433—and we collectively approach the new year 2012—I am urging all of my friends to follow a simple yet powerful suggestion.

Open your eyes.

Open your ears.

And, open your arms.

Open arms. That’s the only way we can even begin to cross barriers—and truly enjoy the warmth of a hug.

Peace, Shalom, SALAAM.

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As readers, we welcome you to contribute your own stories of cross-cultural friendship. (NOTE: There are helpful tips under “We’d like to publish your story”)

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