

***LISTENING TO CHILDREN UNDER SIEGE***

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***REPORT FROM THE BESIEGED CITY***

*Too old to carry arms and fight like the others—*

*they graciously gave me the inferior role of chronicler*

*I record – I don't know for whom – the history of the siege*

*I am supposed to be exact but I don't know when the invasion began*

*two hundred years ago in December in September perhaps yesterday*

*at dawn*

*everyone here suffers from a loss of the sense of time*

*all we have left is the place the attachment to the place...*

*Zbigniew Herbert 1982*

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A state of siege constitutes an attack on the possibility of ordinary life, and so is also an attack on children's psychosocial and cognitive development. Children's cognitive and emotional development is scaffolded on a sense of ordinary life from infancy onwards. Ordinariness means continuity and recurrences of experience over time; expectations that can be sustained; understandings that can be shared and grow and emerge into reflectiveness. In ordinary life damage and harmfulness can be repaired,

differences negotiated, responsibility nurturance and caring can be taken in so they become part of each child.

Let me expand a bit on the developmental issues above in regard to early childhood especially to suggest their relevance for thinking about psychosocial provision for children and families under siege.

***Continuity and recurrence*** are basic to the infant's developing a sense of self and other, and taking in experiences in a way that they can be the basis for representation and symbol formation. Infants and small children need to be able to mull over familiar experiences, in a setting of safety.

***Expectations that can be sustained:*** are basic to developing trust, a sense of mutuality, and also to taking an interest in cause and effect, and to developing agency. Expectations are satisfactorily met if what happens is close enough to what is anticipated that it can be recognized and not intolerantly rejected or ignored. Of course there has to be room for newness and disappointment. A child, whose parent reliably responds, learns about being able to affect others positively, and comes to feel he/she can make a difference.

***Understandings that can be shared and grow:*** Shared and shareable "intersubjective" experiences encourage development of communication and capacity to link up experiences and later, to build concepts and link ideas. You can think because someone thought with you and about you, early on.

***Shared understandings emerge into reflectiveness:*** mutual pre-verbal understandings (as simple as peek-a-boo) are a basis for being able to understand the mind of the other person and for the child's learning that everyone has his or her own subjectivity. It means being able to reflect on what is going on in your mind and feelings, to take perspective on yourself and not always assume everything is only as you see it. You can take

perspective because family caregivers and teachers have been able flexibly to take your perspective.

***Damage and harm can be repaired:*** Developmentally this is an understanding that children arrive at, test out, and work through between two to five years. In some psychoanalytic views, it is a lesson which we re-learn throughout life's stages. Confidence in the possibility of repair is a basis for resilience, and a protection against despair. Despair involves the loss of hope that damage can be put right, and loss of confidence in our own reparative capacities.

***Differences can be negotiated:*** The first differences are between mother and infant, then between members of the family and their different needs and wishes. Negotiating differences means you do not have to be just like another person to stay in a relationship with them. The early learning to accept difference supports the search for solving problems without violence.

***Responsibility and nurturance can be internalized:*** this summarizes the child's taking in aspects of the parents that lead to taking caring responsibility for herself or himself and permit the child's joining a larger social world.

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**Ordinary Life in Siege**

Where can the sense of humane ordinary life be found under conditions of siege? How much can families, such as the ordinary good Palestinian family, “buffer” the effects of a prolonged siege? Can families and community workers living under the contradictions and sudden shifts in circumstance of the siege – or shall we say sieges - of Gaza help children by listening to their experiences ? Understanding the world around you is accounted as a protective factor for children under chronic threat. Should adults support children in their efforts to make sense of irrational damage and violent harm? Or is it more important to concentrate on keeping alive the sense of ordinary life?

A woman whose mother taught primary school throughout the Siege of Leningrad recalled how that mother and other teachers met daily in a work support group. “For it was important then to devise lessons that stimulated the will to live. That also was a skill. After all, everyone’s relatives were dying” (Simmons & Perlina, 2002, p. 119).

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The study of trauma, in psychoanalytic discourse, broadened and deepened from looking at single events in an individual life to considering “cumulative trauma” or “strain trauma,” the early developmental effects of chronic deficiency in the provision of emotional nurturance. Similarly, the study of “resilience,” which began in the US with psychiatric/psychoanalytic research on of children thrived despite having a mentally ill parent (Anthony 1987b), or living in poverty, also broadened and deepened as it moved to considering what happened to children “when danger comes from the violent

overthrow of day to day social reality,” as in war, and community conflict (Garbarino & Kostelny, 1996, p.40).

Trying to approach the siege of Gaza from afar, and having done some comparative reading about recent historical sieges, I am impressed by the importance of community morale. The dimension of solidarity vs. factionalism is central in siege conditions. Theories of resilience which stress an “ecological” approach, in which child and family are situated in the community as a whole are certainly called for in considering siege and mental health. I would not be alone in supposing that under siege most children are affected by the hardships, struggles, and morale of the community as a whole: it is not just a matter of which traumatic experiences an individual child has been exposed to, or how closely.

Quantitative studies of children’s mental health in Gaza are exploring ways to design research so as to embody the complexity and richness of resiliency theory by bearing equally in mind specific exposures to violently demoralizing events, some especially characteristic of the occupation in Gaza, e.g. home demolitions, along with measures of individual family strengths, and the relative welfare and morale of the whole community at different periods (Punamäki, R.L., et al., 2001; Qouta, S., et al. 1998, 2003).

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**Thinking about how a community’s relation to ordinary life can be distorted by protracted war or oppression.**

During the counter-insurgency terrors in Central America, Ignacio Martín-Baró wrote:

It would seem unnecessary to emphasize something as obvious as the fact that El Salvador finds itself submerged in a terrible and protracted war. Nevertheless, it is necessary to remember some basic facts, not only because the state's propaganda apparatus systematically attempts to deny them, but also because the immediacy and everydayness of the war paradoxically renders these facts less conscious. We incorporate the war, like everything else, into our daily routines, and accept its existence as a commonsense fact, if not the doings of a presumed human nature or some pre-ordained social order (Martín-Baró 1994: 128).

Martín-Baró originated the concept of "normal abnormality," to designate this condition, in the midst of which, he pointed out, children in his society were being socialized. So he alerted us to the danger of an adaptation to a state of long lasting "normal abnormality," in which "normal abnormality" is confused with ordinary life, violent oppression accepted as natural. Oppressed youth, he believed, then identify with their attributed pariah status, whether they submit or rebel as outlaws.

The psychoanalyst Yolanda Gampel works with Holocaust survivors, who were children or adolescents in the de-humanized world of the camps and who went on to reconstruct reasonably productive adult lives. She contrasts the "background of safety" (Sandler 1960) carried by those with secure early attachments, with a background of "the uncanny" carried by those who encountered atrocities as children (Gampel 2000: 54).

She cites a participant in a survivor's group. He had been taken to Terezienstadt at age 8 with his mother. Recognizing how he is intruded upon in the midst of daily life by aspects of the uncanny, he poignantly asks "But where is the everyday? Where is the always? Where is the all the time?" (Ibid. 56).

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### **Approaching Gaza: two interviews**

To approach Gaza from afar, I was fortunate to be able to speak by Skype phone to some Gazan children, adolescents, and parents in the summer of 2008. (I am grateful for the help of Zeina Jallad, who has just begun teaching at the Faculty of Law, Birzeit University, who spoke with the children in Arabic. The spontaneous quality of the interviews owes much to Ms Jallad's facilitation, and the comfort with bi-lingual collaboration we had gained through working together in leading discussion groups for Arabic speaking new immigrant girls in New York).

I will present two interviews with brief commentary. They were not meant as clinical interviews, and there were no pre-set questions. They were deliberately unstructured, and focused only on learning about the texture of the children's everyday lives at that time, letting whatever emerged around that be expressed. The interviewees were told that I was speaking from New York City and was a psychology professor interested in how the children in Gaza were doing that summer, since I knew there was a siege. My reflections on the material are clinically informed in the sense that I look at the process of the conversation as one might look at a transcript of a clinical session, including my own involvement.

**Interview with 12-year-old boy “Ahmed” who grew up in Gaza. Lives in XY refugee camp. Interview conducted via Skype on August 1, 2008.**

**How is your life now this week with the siege and summer vacation?**

“Oh life is better now this week...two weeks ago it was worse...all the supermarkets were empty...we had only sugar and rice. Mother could cook only rice and what she grows in our little garden...okra...and other vegetables. And say our garden also has a palm tree!”

“With friends I go to the sea, to the beach...we walk there together. We fly kites on the beach. I make my kites from paper, sticks and glue.”

*[We also learn from Ahmed that he passed his swimming test last year. Father had insisted he learn to swim. Father was away in a European country for one academic year for professional studies.]*

“It was hard when Father was away. Now since Father is back I am happy every day...”

**When did he come back?**

(Stops to think.) Beginning of the summer, in June.

**Is it safe now on the beach?**

“Yes, it is safe. There is always shooting around us on the way but we ignore it. We got used to it.”

**Who is shooting?**

“The executive powers. Yes, Hamas, there is no Fatah here.”

“You know there is no gas for cooking? So I hand built an oven from clay for the family - an outdoor oven where you can cook with a wood fire. It is in the yard. I went to where the Israelis were (unclear if he means razed settlements or border zone) to find the clay. Now sometimes I make tea for the family and recipes I get from mom. We all sit in the yard together.”

**Can you bake bread in the oven?**

“Well I know how to bring water and soak flour in it and then make dough but actually I haven’t done it yet.”

**Do you ride a bike?**

“Yes I got a bike this year. Before father left he gave me money towards a bike and then I earned some and saved and got a bike. Only a few of my friends have bikes...most kids do not.

**Do you have a curfew?**

“Not really. I can stay out after dark. Sometimes this summer I stayed out until 2A.M. Well... that is with my Father. I go with my Father to a clearing near where the settlements were. Friends of my father get together there at night. They make little wood campfires and toast bread on sticks, and talk and tell stories. Dogs come out and sit around the campfire too.”

**Wishes?**

“Yes I would like to travel to see other places some day. But a person cannot leave my country..(He says *this uncomplainingly, conveying a sense of loyalty to this country of his which a person cannot leave.*) I have lived in XY camp all my life.”

“The day when they opened the borders [*He now spontaneously volunteered this subject of the day of the breaking open of the iron fence between Gaza and Egypt, on Jan 23, 2008*], I went right away on my bike. I rode all the way to Rafah. It was so crowded when I got there, 200,000 people all together!

**What was that like for you to be in such a crowd?**

“I was so happy! So happy! I was happy to see so many people were getting out and were getting food for everybody, and supplies they needed.”

*[Ahmed says he biked as far as the town El Arish in Egypt and then turned around. He himself brought back two saddlebags full on his bike.]*

**What did you bring?**

“Mostly chips -- and milk.” (Presumably powdered milk.)

**Can you say something of what you know about your grandparents?**

“They are from Beit \_\_\_\_\_. They were farmers. Came in 1948.”

**Why?**

“The Israelis kicked them out by weapons and by force from their land.

They used to live in a mud house and had a lot of land and then they came to Gaza and lived in a tent. Grandma is now 84.”

My sister wants to talk now OK?

### **Commentary**

This is an impressively resilient youngster. Listening to Ahmed, as I am calling him, I felt he had the liveliness spontaneity and capacity for enjoying life one hopes to see in a 12 year old. Ahmed has confidence in his ability to make constructive contributions, which suggests he has hopes for a future in which he could have a place. He exuberantly volunteers the story of how he built an outdoor wood burning clay oven for his family to cook on, and the story of his amazing bike ride through the Rafah border. What he volunteers to tell about are ways he has been able to show agency and resourcefulness in dealing with the deprivations of the siege, and to help his family.

There may be touches of 12-year-old bravado, but not arrogance. He and his friends have “got used to” gunfire in the streets, but he does not rely excessively on denial to deal with troubling realities and feelings, nor is he inured to violence. If his homemade kites are like those in snapshots of Gazan boys holding their rickety kites with shredded newspaper tails up proudly for a local photojournalist, Ahmed’s kite flying— if one can say so without irony- makes the best use of available materials and environment. This week is better than last he reports: his short-term perspective allows him to cultivate optimism when there are fluctuating alleviations in the

siege. His cheerfulness connects with having a family that is “a going concern,” as Winnicott referred to such families. It is meaningful to him practically and symbolically that Mother cultivates a kitchen garden. His internal representation of his mother is of a provident and resourceful figure. Ahmed is able to identify with her strengths as well as with his father’s. His experience of his father is also of a competent supportive parent, who sets expectations and limits, in a way that evidently communicates confidence in the boy’s development. Father offers a window on comradeship and adventure (the campfire) despite the severely limited horizon of the siege. The fact that father was able to travel for his professional development must contribute to this boy’s having hope in a future, a key element in resilience.

Ahmed shows a capacity for concern and solidarity in his feelings at the opening of the Rafah crossing. Ahmed can think about what he can do to solve a problem, and he recognizes that his family is relatively fortunate, but despite his wishes to help others, he doesn’t seem to imagine working with others, with peers or older youth, outside his family, to benefit the community.

With school in recess, he seems to have no contact with organized activities. The lack of civil society structures that might allow this boy to channel his constructive wishes outside the family can be felt here, a reminder of the systematic undermining of Palestinian civil society associations through decades of occupation (Roy 2007).

**Interview via Skype with 15-year-old girl from X-Y—on August 1, 2008.  
School vacation. Oldest child in family.**

**Marhaba...Can you tell us what you did today so we can learn about what your life is like now?**

“What I did today? Just the usual. I went to my aunt’s house, then to my uncle’s house, then to grandmother’s house. They all live nearby. I go every day to visit my grandmother. Grandmother always tells stories of *zamann zamann*, long, long ago...what their house was like and how if they even bought one kilo of bananas everyone in the village would know right away they bought a kilo of bananas because the smell was so strong.

*[Interviewer is not clear if this is about neighbors knowing everything about each other in the close-knit old village, or how fragrant fruit used to be.]*

“...Grandma always tells me about their land; how much land they had and how good it was, and how everywhere you dig you would find gold under it.... The house was in Beit X.---- near Haifa and Acca and close to the villages the Jews took.”

**What does she think of the story about the gold?**

“Oh I don’t mean gold is everywhere under the soil, but that when they left the land they put all of their gold like jewelry or coin under the land, buried it, for safety, because they thought they would be coming back soon.

**Have you traveled?**

“I’ve been to Gaza City...”

“This summer I am taking classes in English and French but you shouldn’t think I am more than a beginner...”

“You know I live in a refugee camp? I go to visit friends who live nearby but not friends who live farther away. I don’t like to walk in the street.”

**Translator asks: because of ---(shame/modesty).**

“Yes, a little may be *saeb*, but also I do not feel comfortable walking any distance in the street. Although in the camp it is generally safe. There are no checkpoints inside the camp. It is in Gaza City that it is not safe. In Gaza City Hamas and Fatah shoot and put bombs for each other...”

“Just a few days ago, a group from Hamas was going home from the beach. Fatah put a bomb in their car. The explosion killed a young girl and some of her family who were just walking by. A young girl was killed and I feel so sorry and depressed when I hear about this. I didn’t have anything to do with this girl...but I am so upset. I don’t know her...but I feel as if she was a friend I lost.”

[*Silence...*]

**Can you tell us about your dreams?**

“Night time or for the future?”

**Both or either..**

“I would like to go back to my village...not to live there but because it is our land. My grandmother always talks of how she wishes she could go back

and see her village again- as if it is just waiting there. But I know it is ruined. They demolished it. I would like to rebuild it and make it nice and beautiful. This is what I dream. I see myself rebuilding the village. Yes I see that in dreams when I am asleep. For my future, I want to study to enter the same profession as my father – to help the Palestinians.”

**Do you like to read?**

“Reading? Yes I love to read! I love to read so much that sometimes I read books in English even though I do not understand them! My favorite book that I read recently is *Les Miserables* - in Arabic translation.”

*[Now suddenly there are sounds of gunfire in the background. Sounds are every loud and near and the exchange of fire keeps going.]*

**Sahar:** “There is some shooting. Can you hear that?”

**Is it nearby?**

“Yes it is near. I can see it.”

**Can you see who is shooting?**

“No, I cannot see the shooters but I see the smoke or bullets.. They are just below on the street. I am up on the roof terrace. I came up here to take the phone call.”

*[Interviewer gets motherly and suggests strongly to Sahar to go down inside.]*

**Sahar:** “Yes now I am going down.” *To translator:* “Tell her I already started to go down before she said anything.”

*[Sahar sounds very composed, cool and collected. Once downstairs she continues...]*

“The other day close to my house and near the beach some kids were playing and they found something and there was an explosion so strong it shook our house and the children were injured.”

*[Interviewer asks if it was yellow, a cluster bomb, and in the grip of motherly concern also asks whether Sahar and her friends know how to identify cluster bombs.]*

“Oh yes I know they are yellow and sort of round and they look like toys you might want to play with. But I don’t know how this one looked. I didn’t see it with my own eyes so I can’t tell you accurately what it was.”

*[She rushes on...]*

“Three months ago I went with mom to Gaza City and we were in the market and two planes came - Apaches - and they hit a school bus actually a university bus- they threw a rocket on it. They were targeting the head of an Islamic movement.”

**Israelis?**

...Yes they were Israelis, but the reason I am telling you now is that I was so scared and so afraid. But we took shelter right away. Mother pulled me..

*[Transcript unclear here about how she and her mother quickly reached safety-it seems by ducking into a covered shopping arcade. The implication was that her mother was quick thinking.]*

“You see the way it works is they put a small smart card on the car and then the plane can control the car, can control it from the sky. They control everything from the sky...the cars and when to bomb the people.”

*[Here Sahar continued to talk Israeli technology, positioning herself as a knower, but seemed to be anxiously confusing surveillance drones, Apache helicopters and other weapons delivery systems.. However what seemed confused may not have been entirely so, as the interviewer learned that drones now fire missiles. More importantly Sahar may have been trying to convey her awareness of the Israeli technological upgrade, the “war by remote control.” that followed “disengagement.” (Benvenisti, M., 2005) .*

“The plane threw rockets and everyone ran to hide...And it was close to my head...but now we are used to it.” *(Sounds like a fall into denial.)*

**How do you get back to a feeling of safety in your mind when such distressing things happen?**

“First, I start praying and reading the Koran and asking not to be hurt. Second, I keep thinking about it – the situation – I think about it over and over. Third, I talk about it – with my parents or my girl cousins.

*[Here ensued a short conversation about how this works to help her.*

*Interviewer tries to determine if this thinking/ remembering becomes obsessive or reaches a resolution. Saha says her thinking does help resolve the upset.]*

Sahar: “The memory always fades away before I fall asleep.”

*[Next Sahar associates on to other events before the Israeli “disengagement.”]*

“Before my dad left to study abroad, we used to watch TV at night in the living room. Dad went outside....because we lived near settlements ...one bullet came through the window and another hit the wall. There is a thing called *manoch* I don’t know how to translate it. It is a big light like a searchlight but bigger...it is green and comes from the settlements. It sheds a green light on our rooms and the house and then we saw the bullets...my younger brothers were all crying. We always feel scared when this happens. When the bullets stop we crawl along the floor very quietly. When our parents came back we told them everything.”

### **What do you do when you feel scared?**

“What I do when I am scared now? I usually talk about it to my cousins, not parents. My favorite girl cousin is also 15, and another is second year at University.

*[Sounds of gunfire]*

Sahar: “Can you hear it now? The older cousin actually is here right now and would like to talk to you. Can I give her the phone?”

## **Commentary**

Sahar, as I will call her, is an intelligent adolescent girl full of feeling, and capable of compassion. She can identify and reflect on her own emotions and mental states. She struggles not to be overwhelmed by realistic fears and anxieties. Sahar keeps the ability to distinguish ordinary life from the abnormal realities of the siege. In Martín-Baró’s terms, she has not succumbed to accepting the abnormal normal as a commonplace fact. Her composure as she makes her way downstairs from the roof after reporting on the nearby gunfight shows adaptation to a background of actual threat.

When Sahar said of the bystander girl who was killed in the explosion of factional violence, “I feel as if she was a friend I lost,” I was surprised and overcome by the truth of her feelings. I think the transcript reveals this by the fact that I didn’t respond or contain it, but changed the subject . At the gunshots, Sahar is thrown into a series of associations to other dangerous incidents. She emphasizes how random and unpredictable these incursions into ordinary life are. She begins to get upset as the momentum takes her on to the IDF Apaches raining rockets while she and Mother went shopping in Gaza City. She is not in a currently traumatized state of mind, or losing the capacity to think symbolically (Bragin, 2003a). But I suggest we see a deterioration in the coherence of her narratives.

The turning point apparently comes when she declares “They control everything from the sky.” She may be trying to tell about the new Israeli

remote control technology, and she may be accommodating to the interviewer (EF) who sometimes deflects from hot moments to factual questions. Her defensive use of concrete technical knowledge doesn't work. Some feelings I felt, became unbearable here.

“They control everything from the sky.” Was it anxiety about helplessness? The sense of being controlled by a total surveillance? Perhaps there is outrage Sahar is trying to keep in check, or, alternatively, upset with her parents or Palestinian politics. In the next memory of the settlers' searchlights, her home was, disturbingly, viewed by the settlers as enemy turf, and her narrative goes in and out of the present tense as if she is back in the present tense of childhood. Parents are quick witted and protective, providing a “background of safety” in her mind but not a perfect shield. The theme of realizing parents can no longer entirely protect her, is an adolescent one, but it hurts more and is graver, because of the siege.

Sahar is reflective. She likes thinking. It could be supposed that her having fun reading English over her head shows a capacity to tolerate ambiguity – a mark of creativity.. But her usual good ability to understand the world including people's motives (Fonagy & Target, 2003) is stretched too far by the irrationality of the siege.

### **Siege and Basic Anxieties**

What are some basic anxieties and body based images stimulated by the threats of siege? The question is suggested by the interdisciplinary collaboration of psychoanalytic thought (about infantile and unconscious fantasy) together with anthropologists' efforts to conceptualize psychosocial experience in communities under threat (Suárez-Orozco & Robben, 2000). It

is not meant to pathologize individuals or to minimize harsh realities. The question of the stimulation of primary anxieties is relevant to a besieged community's struggles to maintain human dignity and a sense of meaning, to resist pariah status, to resist being the repository of the antagonist's or occupier or colonizer's projections, and for the individual's efforts also to keep off the invasion of psychic space by "the uncanny" of horror or overwhelming disgust. (Gampel, 2000; Bragin, 2003a). Infiltrations by the uncanny usually refer to the effect of having witnessed atrocities. Less obvious ways of communicating indifference or arbitrary control also induce helplessness and primitive anxiety.

Confinement, encirclement, enclosure, loss of freedom of movement, evokes archaic anxieties about being suffocated, strangled, and unable to breathe. This is heightened by the deliberate arbitrariness or spasmodic punitiveness of closures, The siege can be experienced as a noose which is occasionally loosened and then tightened further, evoking the representation of being toyed with by a mad or sadistic Other.

The interdiction of life supporting supplies and goods coming in stirs basic anxieties about starvation.

When sewage cannot be processed, because electricity is shut down, and repair parts and fuel is embargoed, the situation embodies "paranoid" anxieties: about not being able to eliminate bad stuff from one's own body, and of being poisoned by bad stuff within. Another archaic fear is that overwhelming internal bad stuff will poison the good body of the nurturant mother, or spoil paternal potency, leading to anxieties about being poisoned by toxic food and a contaminated or despoiled environment.

### **Some Particular Targets of the Siege in Gaza**

Unfortunately all this is no legend in Gaza (Harel & Azoulay, 2008). Failure of sewage processing capacity has led to overflow in the streets and massive tonnage of raw sewage dumped directly into the Mediterranean daily. This produces such pollution of the sea that in many places last summer anyone wanting to swim had to choose to swim in sewage, and Gazan fishermen had to choose between abandoning their livelihood or dealing in a dwindling and contaminated catch. Fishermen trying to go out beyond a 3 km. limit to clearer seas are violently harassed and may be imprisoned by the Israeli coast guard (Johnston, 2006b).

Attacks on remaining self-sufficiency in food production were notable as I reviewed the news from Gaza in spring 2008. This includes disabling of the fishing cooperatives as indicated above. Gaza's agriculture, formerly a large sector of its economy and of Palestinian/Gazan identity, was already notably undone by closures during the occupation years that prohibited timely export of perishable produce.

2008 seems to have targeted as "collateral damage" or direct bulldozing, remaining small-scale food production, poultry farms and orchards. These enterprises might have survived without exporting, by contributing to the local economy, and would have continued to contribute to local dignity. Productive agriculture in these cases is being reduced to subsistence farming (Palestinian Centre for Human Rights, 2008, Narratives Nos. 2, 12, 19, 21; Johnston, 2006a).

A glimpse of how this affects the morale of the sons of the fathers so reduced:

"'We used to have citrus trees,' says Jamal Swailem. 'We had groves of orange and lemon and grapefruit trees, and guava as well, because the land here is very rich. Some of the trees were fifty years old. The first time the Israelis bulldozed our trees, we immediately re-planted all of them. When they bulldozed the trees again, we replanted them all again. They [the Israelis] damage and destroy, and we rebuild. This is our life. But the third time they bulldozed our trees, we decided to grow vegetables instead'

Jamal's 15-year-old son, Imad, sits at his father's side. 'Our life here is tension, fear and total instability' he says. 'At any moment I expect death.' "(Palestinian Centre for Human Rights 2008. Narrative Nos. 2).

A youngster who sees only death ahead, who cannot imagine a future. The children I interviewed were fortunate. But I knew there were many others who were depressed and preoccupied with the expectation of death. I had read similar statements from children who had seen their homes demolished. Imad attributes his bleakness to the danger of the frequent tank incursions- explaining they live near Beit Hanoun. As this town was site of a brutal IDF massacre (November 2006) - one eventually investigated by Archbishop Tutu-, local reports of what happened there would deepen the family's dread. However the fact that his father's resilience has been of no avail must contribute to his feeling there is no future for him.

### **Sites of Recreation Become Sites of Random Death**

In Gaza, the beach along its Mediterranean coastline is the major site of public recreation where families gather on weekends and holidays year round to picnic. The beach belongs to the all Gazans and as can be readily

gathered, has a special place in their Gazan/Palestinian/Mediterranean identity. During severe closures, the trek along the beach was the road that remained open.

When Gazan families picnicking on the beach have been killed by allegedly accidental IDF shelling or other ordinance it has the impact of an act of terrorism that goes to the heart of the possibility of ordinary family life. The tragedy that became iconic for such a random attack was that of 12 year old Huda Ghalia caught on camera crawling in the sand to reach her father's body, not yet knowing he was dead. (June 6, 2006) That image of Huda's disbelief multiplied on posters carried by girls her age in memorial processions and protest marches throughout the territories. It seems fair to suppose that Gazans' sense of the beach as a site of recreation, freedom and social cohesion has been permanently infiltrated by the horror of the uncanny. (Since disengagement, reports continue of boys playing pickup soccer where there is a bit of open urban space, getting seriously injured or killed by bombs, rockets or shelling.)

For children the provision of safe play space means that the adult world wants them to thrive. Safe playgrounds mean to children that they are welcome in the world. In contrast, as Martín-Baró (1994) wrote of El Salvador: "For them," (children "living with fear and horror,") all that is military represents the permanent threat, the symbol and bearer of death, society's rejection of their place in the world" (p. 131).

### **Isolation, Abandonment, and the Kidnapping of the Messenger**

*Wednesday: negotiations for a cease-fire the enemy has imprisoned our messengers*

*"Report from the Besieged City" Zbigniew Herbert*

Along with the body-based anxieties, there are profound anxieties and forms of suffering based in human needs for attachment, relationship and social bonds that are mobilized by states of siege. I am here trying to approach the sense of abandonment, as personal and collective experiences. Regarding children during crises, the abandonment they will first register is the withdrawal of parental attention because of parental stress, preoccupation, or grief. Parents can somewhat protect children from feeling more isolated or forgotten, as children can feel without quite knowing why, by acknowledging to the children that they know they are not available in the same way because of their own struggles.

Just as sieges importantly differ in the aims of the besieger, both military and political, overt and covert, so sieges can be usefully compared in the dimension of permeability: what gets in or out, of goods, people, and communications and information, many variables producing a complex field of effects on the community. A few examples to evoke how far reaching each variable can be:

In the siege of Sarajevo, the post office and phone lines were targeted immediately. Families could not communicate with relatives within or outside. New Israeli regulations now impede the re-union of family members between Gaza and the West Bank: an interdiction of free movement and of communication.

In the Siege of Leningrad, attacks on communication links at first made the Leningraders more isolated but also more Independent of Party and

Red Army command which allowed for more spontaneous popular and civil society emergency efforts. News from Leningrad then spread by military radio. Leningrad's struggle for survival became widely known and its resistance admired throughout Russia. It was strangely after the war that re-writing history set in with purges of the Leningrad leadership, show trials, imprisonment or disgrace of Leningrad's writers and artists, and suppression of all documentation of the story of the travails and heroism of the citizens of the siege (Salisbury, 2003).

Sarajevo's citizens knew the whole world was watching TV coverage of the siege, just as less than a decade earlier the whole world had watched the Winter Olympics in Sarajevo. This only deepened their sense of isolation and abandonment when the international community withheld intervention, particularly after the first Markale (Market Place) massacre (February 5, 1994).

Dizdarevic, the journalist and newspaper editor, wrote candidly of the Sarajevans' daily struggle against cynicism, psychic numbing, and a covertly suicidal fatalism, occasioned by their sense of abandonment (Dizdarevic, 1993). In the struggle to stay in touch with hope, and to keep making the efforts necessary for survival, it was essential, he felt, to sustain a sense of belonging to the Sarajevan culture noted for its humane values, multi-ethnicity and tolerance. For the four years of the siege many middle class Bosnian Muslims, secular, Christian and Jewish Sarajevans were able to feel still rooted mentally in a recently lost ordinary reality of pre-siege culture and traditions of civil society, against which the atrocities of the siege could be considered a madness that would pass (Cataldi, 1994.)

In Palestine, the ethos of *sumud* as resistance has been a sustaining value, supporting resilience. Insofar as carrying on everyday life was understood collectively as the practice of *sumud*, as a way of holding one's ground, it kept each individual's enduring the hardships of the occupation from collapsing into accepting "normal abnormality." Critical re-evaluations and re-formulations of *sumud* are part of contemporary Palestinian non-violent discourse in response to the Separation Wall (Teeffelen, 2005).

As an outsider, I am necessarily far from understanding the many ways in which experiences of isolation and abandonment arise in daily life in Gaza under siege. It might be supposed that Gaza's situation resembles Sarajevo's: that Gazans might primarily feel the whole world is watching but does nothing, or at least does not intervene politically, thus colluding with or endorsing the siege. From another perspective the Palestinian experience has been that information does not get out because of its distortion in news media: the messenger keeps on being kidnapped: the latest version of Palestinian invisibility.

How does this affect parents being able to listen to children? A peculiar sounding question. But this is as far as I have come: to be able to pose that question. It is unavoidably striking how much the current siege of Gaza comes wrapped in lies and contradictions: the Occupation that was not an occupation, a "Civil Administration" administered by the military, the phony unilateral "disengagement," acknowledged to be "formaldehyde" for the peace process, (Shavit, 2004). but touted as a step towards peace, a "disengagement" in which Israel divorces itself from responsibility for the rights and welfare of an occupied people which it never occupied, and regarding whom it carefully retracts any implication that it did have

responsibility, followed by a siege against the same people now designated as citizens of an “enemy territory” in the war on terror, and so on into the setting up of escalating factional competition, and further stalemate.

It would be understandable if adults shy away from encouraging children to be curious about the world around them in this discouraging context. Because of the stalemate of political wills, Palestinians in Gaza are living under a siege with no end in sight. Having no end in sight is unbearable. In ordinary life there are beginnings, middles, and ends in sight, as Winnicott remarked in his radio broadcasts to mothers, explaining how mothers help make the world coherent and understandable for their babies by finishing one action before starting another (Winnicott, 1960).

The remarkable resilience of Palestinian children has been conventionally attributed to the robustness and reach of the Palestinian extended family and the strength and patience of Palestinian mothers. The so-called strength and patience of the mothers it has been observed is based in a tradition of thoughtful and concerned mothering, that allows Palestinian mothers to keep their children in mind, and allows their children to feel cared for, thoughtful, and able to think of others. (Bragin, 2003b) Where civil society has been systematically dismantled the provision of security, socialization, and hope is left as the business of families alone (Roy, 2007). Caution is needed against using the findings of resiliency studies about the buffering function of the family to lay more burdens on the family under siege, especially female heads of families. Ordinary life requires civil society, and civil society depends on ordinary life, as Roy cogently reminds us. (Roy, 2007).

A conventional idealization of the strength and endurance of the

Palestinian mother is currentl critiqued by Palestinian social scientists working in Womens' Studies (Kuttab, 2006, Taraki, 2006), who point out that in the latest phases of the occupation or siege, women carry the major share of the burdens of survival as the economy is pushed closer to subsistence level, more males are unemployed or in prison or dead. They also arrestingly articulate that, given the accumulated losses in so many families, women are expected to carry a disproportionate burden of "grief-work", the work of mourning. From afar, one can only begin to raise the question of how this mental work and preoccupation of the mothers is affecting the next generation.

P.S. This was a compilation of what I could understand, imagine, and bear to know about the siege of Gaza so far – a venture in posing questions and raising issues that I hoped I would learn more about in visiting Gaza, guided by colleagues of the GCMHP, and from the opportunity to spend time with children and caregivers there. I welcome comments from those I did not get to meet, as well as those who were also denied entry this time.

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