

COMMON GROUND ARTICLE

Robert Kennedy once said "*Let no one be discouraged by the belief there is nothing one man or woman can do against the enormous array of the world's ills against misery and ignorance, injustice and violence. Few will have the greatness to bend history itself; but each of us work to change a small portion of events, and in the total of all those acts will be written the history of this generation.*"

It is from numberless diverse acts of courage and belief that human history is shaped. Each time a man or woman stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance."

The Gulf War is a daily reminder that there is no separation between Nations, States and People and that when one child suffers, children everywhere suffer. It is a reminder that the hunger that exists within the world is not just physical but spiritual hunger as well and that the sanctity and security of the world as we once knew it is painfully dissolving into the light of the new being born

Today some Americans are caught in the cross fire of frustration and hopelessness as their country embarks upon a new war. As pro war popularity gives rise to a new National identity and purpose, there are those citizens who feel helpless and paralyzed in the path of a "hot war" situation and in the face of our Hi Tech military mite.

During the height of the (cold war era), a new breed of citizens arose ..A Citizen who did not wait for conditions to change but helped people to change conditions over the years.. The psychological interplay between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. led to growing tension within the World and the emergence of this new kind of Citizen; a Citizen who at a time when the leaders were not speaking, decided that the people must speak; a citizen who had the courage to cross the borders of their personal, political and ideological beliefs to bypass Government policies and meet and see the enemy for themselves, to embrace the oneness of humanity. This Citizen became known as a Citizen Diplomat≥

Citizen Diplomats have become a bridge between grassroots and bureaucracy. They span the gaps of separation between governments and People through their ability to listen, to understand and to accept perspectives so different from their own.

A Citizen Diplomat is one who is able to hold the balance of two or more points of view simultaneously. It is one who can listen and understand the views of another without denying his or her own values.

In the role of Citizen Diplomacy, the Center for Soviet-American International Dialogue has been establishing bilateral relations between Citizens of the US and USSR that have led to policy changes between our governments. We have conducted over 40 conferences and specialized exchanges bringing more than 4,000 Americans to the USSR and hundreds of Soviets to the U.S.

CSAID developed and sponsored The First Soviet-American Citizen's Summit, Washington, D.C. 1988: "A New Way of Thinking" and Soviet-American-International Citizens Summit II, Moscow 1990: "Restoring the Global Environment: Sustainable Development for the New Millennium". During these Summits, over 1200 Soviet and American citizens met in task forces for the development of ongoing joint projects in fields such as: Ecology, Energy and Economics; Business and Trade; Human Rights; Education for a Positive Future; Wholistic Health and Healing; Global Security; Conflict Resolution; International Terrorism (finding solutions together); Media and the Arts; Religion, Atheism and Spirituality.

Through the years, these projects and human interactions have produced a ripple affect leading to an estimated over one million people interacting with the Soviet people as a result. This contact is even more important for the people of the USSR at this critical juncture in their history. The ongoing relationship established between our countries and our people is now helping the Soviets find solutions to the critical challenges now facing them in attempting to build new infrastructures within their society.

Through these contacts, hundreds of Soviets are now being brought to this country for special educational, health, business and management exchanges that will aid the people of their country during this difficult time of transition.

CSAID has joint staffed offices in Moscow and Kiev which serve as a communication link between Soviets and Americans to aid them on the follow through of their joint projects. The offices also serves as "Citizen Embassies" in helping Soviet citizens and visiting foreigners with travel, visa support, home stays, seminars, lectures and specialized meetings in the USSR.

Our Kiev office in the Ukrainian Republic of the USSR is established to work in areas of Medical and Wholistic Health and as a liaison for citizens of the U.S. and other countries wishing to work with victims and refugees of the Chernobyl Nuclear Plant. Many Ukranian people are still living in contaminated areas where severe birth deformities have grown considerably and 40% of children die before the age of one year.

Due to the trust that it has built in the USSR, CSAID is now able to provide a voice for citizens of the USSR republics through radio roundtable dialogues. These provocative dialogues are broadcast by local and National radio stations throughout the Soviet Union. They are humanistic in their content and support the desire for autonomy and the newly emerging rights of self determination within the republics.

We have been told our work over these last several years has made a significant contribution to the Soviet people and the ending of the cold war. But for many of us, it has not been about TRYING to create peace or to change world circumstances. It has simply (or not so simply) been the expression of our own inner evolutionary journey of learning to apply Citizen Diplomacy to our own personal life so that we can model the change that we would like to see within the world.

Now as we enter the decade approaching the new Millennium, the advent of change is accelerating not only in our own country, but throughout the world. As a result, CSAID is now being invited to expand the success and spirit of it's work into areas of crises within the Middle East.

For the last two years, we have been invited by Ambassadors, official representatives and non-official citizens within Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Israel to create the first Soviet-American-Arab-Israeli Dialogue .

In May of 1990, we travelled to the Middle East on a fact finding mission to establish a third Citizens Summit that was to be a Soviet-American International citizen's alliance for peace in the Middle East. We gained enthusiastic support from Egyptian, Israeli and Palestinian citizens and officials.

We participated in Arab-Israeli Dialogue on the West Bank in Jerusalem in occupied territory in Palestinian homes with our Israeli friends. For some of the Israelis, it was the first time that they had direct contact with "the enemy". Armed soldiers were stationed on the roof as we listened to heart rendering stories of both Palestinians and Israeli's who shared with each other the pain and losses suffered by both families due to the ongoing conflicts within the occupied territories.

Palestinians spoke of the loss and lack of self-respect and dignity that the occupation had cost them. They shared with us and the Israelis sitting in their living rooms how they felt that they were just on the verge of regaining their dignity and sense of self-respect. They said "now we are ready to come to the negotiating table. We could not make peace with the Israelis before because we did not feel that we were their equals".

Israeli and Palestinian women who have lost children in the ongoing attacks on both sides asked us "Where does forgiveness start? Who should take the first step?" It was through this dialogue and the personal encounter that both were able to reassess previously held concepts and beliefs. They held each other in their arms as tears of past grief and future hope spilled over shoulders laden with the burden of war.

Before our eyes, stereotypes began to dissolve as both Israeli's and Palestinians found that they had the same hopes, fears, dreams and desires to secure a hopeful future for their countries and for their children. It was almost identical to our experiences we had the past seven years of taking American citizens across the barbed wire borders of the Soviet Union to meet "the enemy". When coming face to face with those we were taught to believe are "the enemy", we found only the face of the friend and our shared commonalities. Naive, but true. It was that naivety that made the changes that leaders eventually followed.

The current situation in the Middle East does not entirely alter the regional conflicts that continue to exist between Israelis and Palestinians that are presently overshadowed by the war. The still exist and are very real and from the indications are escalating dramatically. Now more than ever....Dialogue is critical.

Our sources in Palestine share horror stories of curfews so long and stringent that food and water are all but non existent..These are American sources, non political and non judgmental. Jobs have disappeared and people cannot leave their homes, they are fired upon and many killed. Palestinians are being forced to live in the worst of conditions. Stories are plentiful about the deprivation regarding refugees on all sides of all borders in the Middle East and on all fronts of the war

We were originally scheduled to begin our Soviet-American-Arab-Israeli Dialogue in January/February 1991. in Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Israel. On January 15th, the day war broke out, we felt paralyzed and helpless in trying to effect peaceful solutions through communication and dialogue between citizens of the U.S. and the Middle East.. Diplomacy as an option to war was replaced by military force.

After the initial shock and depression, we began to evaluate what we could do within our own community, within our own Nation to offset the devastating and repercussive affects of. this war. What could we do to initiate positive action for change?

We have begun to hold weekly roundtable dialogues in our Seattle, Washington office.with Arab-American representatives from Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, Soviet Union and the U.S. We feel that this first step of bringing together the Arab-American community with Soviets and Americans working together for a common purpose can serve as an inspiring example of what is possible within the Middle East as well as within other U.S. communities

Our purposes for Arab-American-Soviet Dialogue is: (1) To avoid and diffuse Arab "enemy" stereotypes that are rapidly accelerating due to the Gulf war (2) To educate the American public to improve their knowledge of this situation (3) To offer a meeting place where both Americans and Arabs can discuss their feelings and offer

positive suggestions during this time of crises (4) To create educational panels and seminars for the general public in Mideast cross-cultural awareness.

The Arabs representing nearly all the Mideast countries all felt that if the American public were better educated to the complexities of the Arab political, religious, ethnic, cultural and geographical variances, they would have a much different view of the war.

In responding to the growing need for more experts on the Citizen Diplomatic negotiation process, both in and out of governments, CSAID is also preparing teams of specialists in non-official dialogue. To work in obvious areas of hostilities and regional disputes within the Middle East, the dialogues will include former Ambassadors, diplomatic and military advisors, academicians specializing in Mideast issues and citizen diplomats from the US and USSR.

We are currently establishing a format for the training of International Citizen Diplomatic Teams of conflict resolution specialists in "The Art and Preparation for Non-Official Dialogue", in areas of regional conflicts. It should be mentioned however, that even though we use the term Conflict Resolution, we feel resolution may be premature. Through our experiences, we have found that in bringing hostile parties to the same table, at first, everything unlike resolution may come up. The term resolution implies an ending. We feel that Dialogue in the Middle East is a process and a continuing one at that. We stress "Dialogue"...not resolution.

Our Dialogue teams are being chosen from the Global Bank of Human Resources who are free from political or National representation. We are inviting those who we feel can cross borders of their own ideological, and nationalistic belief systems to express a more global view of the origins, patterns and solutions to conflict and who view dialogue as the only reasonable way to promote solutions to political concerns of the Middle East and the World.

The Japanese word Kiki means both crises and opportunity. Perhaps out of the crises in the Middle East will emerge new opportunities for healing the ancient wounds inherited by each generation.

Citizen Diplomacy has become a new form of community. In the past, we heard, "before we can heal the planet, we have to heal

ourselves". However, we now believe that in the process of healing the world, we DO heal ourselves and the relationships among and between us. Since Citizen Diplomacy has grown out of this consciousness, those who come into this work begin seeing their own judgements, criticisms in a new light bringing new understandings and healing to their personal, national and international relationships.

We have found that Citizen Diplomacy is not work that is being done in the outer world as much as it is about what we are doing within the inner world. Citizen Diplomacy applied Internationally accelerates ones own inner evolutionary journey.

As we apply the elements of Citizen Diplomacy in our own life, we begin to reflect and model the change we would like to see within the world. In turn, what we experience through our International interactions can be equally applied to the people and leaders within our own nation, our own community and equally important....to those within our own home.

You can practice Citizen Diplomacy in your own life by:

- (1) applying principles of non-violence in thoughts and words by reducing critical evaluation of others.
- (2) crossing borders within your own consciousness and your own lives to model the change you would like to see within the world.
- (3) honoring one anothers differences as well as the similarities.
- (4) harmoniously aligning those differences in order to create and build together with others.
- (5) continually refining elements of non-judgement in order to hold "two points of view simultaneously."
- (6) realizing that you are the architect of your own destiny.
- (7) embracing the planet as the parent would embrace his or her own child.

(8) holding the field of unconditional love for ALL PEOPLE everywhere so TOGETHER we can recognize our common humanity

We have recently helped to create an organization called, **GULF HUMANITARIAN RELIEF FUND** for War Victims in Iraq, Jordan. Every dollar collected will go directly to the American Red Cross then sent to the International Red Cross and to the Red Crescent in Jordan and Iraq. We do not sit in judgment of the war but we do believe there are those within these countries that require food and medical supplies, NOW. This organization has been put together by Americans and Arab-Americans wishing to make a difference.

Anyone wishing to contribute to this fund may do so by writing a check to **GULF HUMANITARIAN RELIEF FUND..MARK ON THE BOTTOM OF THE CHECK ...FOR JORDAN /AND /OR IRAQ** , Send it to 615 Second Ave, #110, Seattle, Washington 98104.

if information is needed please call 206-623-4950 or 623-5029

Rama Vernon, Founder/President, Center for Soviet-American International Dialogue has a background in East-West Psychology, Asian Philosophy and Comparative Religion. She has co-developed conflict resolution roundtable dialogues between the Armenians and Azerbaijanis and is now establishing "non-official dialogue groups in Egypt, Israel, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon as well as with the Arab-American Community within the U.S. Ms Vernon, a Lebanese American and mother of five children, originated the First Soviet-American Citizens' Summit I, Washington, D C 1988 and Summit II in Moscow 1990. She has travelled to the Soviet Union 47 times in the development of numerous conferences and exchanges that have led to the development of over 700 joint projects between Soviet and American citizens.

Rev. Max Lafser, M.A. Psychology, Chairman of the Board, Center for Soviet-American International Dialogue, co-coordinator of the Soviet-American Citizens' Summit in Moscow 1990, co-creator of conflict resolution series within the republics of the USSR, Middle

East, Vietnam, Ireland, Costa Rica and Ethiopia. Rev. Lafser acted as Liaison officer for the International Association of Unity Churches in the U.S. and has led seminars and given lectures on human relations and the art of negotiations. He is currently developing conflict resolution training seminars and non-official Citizen Diplomacy seminars through CSAID in the USSR and Internationally.

For more information on the Center for Soviet-American International Dialogue and how you can become involved contact:

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