

There Are No Borders

by Rama J. Vernon

The joyful child is in each one of us. Even in the midst of life's greatest challenges a glimpse of the innocent child may emerge the child that lives not too far in it's future. .not too far into it's past. .but in the moment. .alive with the enthusiasm of daily discoveries. This was my experience with the Dalai Lama on my latest trip to Israel during the Easter holiday. It was the first time in 16 years that Easter and Passover gracefully overlapped and interwove with one another.

The situation in the Holyland was tense in contrast to the mood prevailing just six months ago after Prime Minister Rabin and Chairman Yasser Arafat shook hands on the White House lawn signaling the beginning of long overdue Peace Accords. The people in the territories were mourning, not only for their dead, but for a future that was yet to come.

The sun was setting as our four-engine propeller plane flew from Tel Aviv over the dark, sandy mountains and valleys of the Nagave desert. We were on our way to the International

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Conference on The Role of Non-Governmental Organizations in Protecting the Environment. The Conference was being held in Eilat, an Israeli town that hugged the crescent rim of the Gulf of the Red Sea on the Egyptian border and its guest of honor was to be His Holiness, the 14th Dalai Lama.

The sun left a legacy of velvet corridors of heliotropic blues and violets. A nearly full moon rose over the desert hills on the Arabian side of

the Gulf of Aqaba. There was a haunting timeless sensation in this place where at one time Bedouins and prophets had walked. It was obvious, even from the airplane, that at one time this was not a place. .but a mood. It awakened memories of the stories of the first quarter of this century when Lawrence of Arabia and 50 tribal warriors of King Faisal crossed the formidable Nefu desert by camel to capture the Gulf of Aqaba from the Turks. Now in 1994, huge luxury hotels cast their shadows over the waters of the Red Sea while the bright city lights drowned out the constellations of the night sky "What a magical place, what a magical night," I thought as I stepped from the plane into the warm, fragrant night air and into waiting taxis that took us to our hotel.

The next morning before sunrise conference participants were invited to join the Dalai Lama on top of one of the highest peaks in the Nagave desert. From this strategic point we could see across the deserts and hills to the borders of Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt and Israel. "You have just been given a typed version of my speech," the Dalai Lama joked, "so... there's nothing more for me to say." The group laughed uncomfortably, thinking he might be serious. His laughter was infectious in its spontaneous quality reminding me of a playful child.

His written words conveyed how the world's people have become almost one community, and that we are being drawn together by new technologies as well as the grave problems facing us all. "There is an environmental crisis that threatens our air, water and trees along with the vast number of beautiful life forms that

are the very foundation of existence on this small planet we share."

It was a very cold morning and the audience tried to huddle together in hopes of breaking the cold chill of the wind off the surrounding deserts. I continued to read the written text that lay on my lap that was increasingly illuminated by the light of the rising sun. "I believe that to meet the challenge of our times, human beings will have to develop a greater sense of universal responsibility. We must all learn to work not just for his or her own self, family or nation, but for the benefit of all humankind."

The Dalai Lama discarded this written speech and after a long silence began to speak in English, apologizing self-consciously for his lack of vocabulary and then paused again. Poised on the brink of the cliff with only the blue sky for a backdrop, I was reminded of Tibet.



Rama Vernon and daughter Andrea.

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The Dalai Lama looked back over his shoulder at the valleys far, far below. With a sweeping gesture of the

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hilltops and valleys of the land once called Palestine he said, "I don't see any boundaries or borders here." There was another long pause as his eyes swept over the four corners of the Middle East. "There are no environmental borders of Nations here or anywhere. This makes me think that the only borders exist within the human mind."

His Holiness quickly glanced at the military guard standing by with machine guns poised. "It is helpful to remember that when fear is the motivating force behind our actions, our actions become destructive rather than constructive." He stood that day on the mountain top like the ancient way showers who had walked these rocky lands 2000 years ago. Behind my back I hear whispers from conference colleagues, "He isn't saying anything. he's so simple." "Yes," I thought to myself, "he is simple and how difficult it is to be simple. Perhaps when we say nothing, we express everything."

Again, his childlike laughter was infectious and so necessary to lift the heart when addressing a complex and painful topic. "I have been extremely heartened to follow the recent developments in the search for peace between Israelis and Palestinians. Laying down guns on both sides and talking face-to-face is, in my opinion, the only way to resolve such disputes." He said, "I have always envisioned the future of my own country, Tibet, as founded on this basis. Tibet will be a neutral demilitarized sanctuary where

weapons are forbidden and the people live in harmony with nature. I have called this a Zone of Ahimsa or non-violence. This is not just a dream. It has been a reality in the way Tibetans tried to live for over a thousand years before our country was tragically invaded. Even the environment and animals were protected by decree and by the beliefs that were instilled in us as children."

"There is a wonderful verse in the Bible about turning swords into plowshares." He used the image of a weapon transformed into a tool to serve basic human needs. "That would be symbolic of an attitude of



Children of Gaza.

inner and outer disarmament." In the spirit of this biblical passage, he proposed the urgency of a policy that is long overdue. The demilitarization of the entire planet which he felt would free great human resources for protection of the environment, relief of poverty and sustainable human development.

Regardless of what has happened to his country to his people, the Dalai Lama has become, for people throughout the world, a living example of compassion, wisdom, forgiveness and love. The Tibetan leader spoke softly, "I believe that if these qualities are conveyed to children at an early age they will

increasingly develop empathy and a sense of responsibility toward all beings. It is through the practice of compassion that children will learn to value others while transforming themselves. As children develop peace within, they learn to extend it to others."

The Dalai Lama touched me that day as never before. I felt his suffering and that of his people as well as the childlike joy of one who is liberated in human consciousness to soar above the sea of human suffering, to know our connectedness and oneness with all life forms.

That night I crossed another border on my journey to Egypt to stay at a hotel on the Gulf of the Red Sea. My Israeli taxi went as far as it could go and then stopped at the Egyptian border. Now it was time to go by foot. To cross this once forbidden territory I slowly walked the 25 yards of "no man's land" that separates one country from the next, one border and belief system from another. The Egyptian and Israeli flags, one with an eagle, and the other the six pointed star, stood side by side on both sides of the gate as well as on the hills overlooking their respective borders.

An Israeli border guard walked briskly to the Egyptian side to take care of passport and visa difficulties. Before he reached the Egyptian side he shouted a greeting in Arabic. I was awestruck as I heard the Egyptian guards shouting over the barbed wire fence, "Shalom," which meant Peace in Hebrew. My heart was filled with the wonderment of this

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moment. As I stood between the two flags, the two borders and two peoples, I remembered the Dalai Lama's words, "I see no natural or

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environmental borders here." That evening, I felt the essence of his words. "Borders are created by the human mind."



Photo by Charolett Rhoads

Child of Gaza.

"Borders are created by the human mind."

I inhaled the clear night air, the sounds, sights, and smells of this precious land as if I would never experience it again. Perhaps one day we will all, individually and collectively, transcend the borders of our own ideological, political, and religious beliefs. Perhaps one day, the people of this nation and all nations would stand together in compassion for one another and the forgiveness of their ancient wounds. Perhaps one day, we will all transcend the borders of our own personal and ideological beliefs that separate us from one another to live in peace and love and the remembrance of our global interconnectedness. Perhaps one day, we will stand side by side, men, women

and children, and say, "Never Again," not just for the people of one nation...but for all.

Rama J. Vernon, President of the Center for International Dialogue and Co-founder of the Academy for Conflict Resolution and Peace Studies, has traveled to the Soviet Union 47 times in seven years organizing over 200 Soviet and Russian-American programs and conferences.

Since 1992, Rama has held regional women's gatherings for over 500 women in the United States who shared their visions of peace and positive actions in war-torn countries of the world. Rama is also the Founder of the California Yoga Teachers Association and Yoga Journal, an international magazine.

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