

# FRIENDS JOURNAL

"Here is a query for each of us: What must change in our personal beliefs and biases for us to leave behind adversarial thinking and move into a pervading mindset of collaboration?"

## Beyond Walls and Fences

October 1, 2021

By Robert Dockhorn



A crowd gathers on the West German side of the Berlin Wall at Potsdamer Platz to watch as the structure is dismantled. November, 1989. Photo by STAFF SGT. F. Lee Corkran, Combined Military Service Digital Photographic Files.

### **Moving Nations from Competition to Cooperation**

The fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989, has cast a long shadow personally for me. I visited that Cold War island of a city for the first time in 1959, before the erection of the structure separating its Eastern and Western Zones. I ventured there again several times while the Wall stood, and I visited one more time in 1998, nine years after it was gone. I vividly remember passing through the Friedrichstrasse entry point into the East in 1982, and the

unease I felt as East German guards patrolled with machine guns on the station's walkways overhead—and then in 1998, after they had vanished, the elation I sensed as boisterous crowds passed freely by or stopped for delicious currywurst and doner kebab at kiosks.

A couple of decades before that, having been trained as a European historian with a specialization in twentieth-century Germany, I was deeply moved by trips to the sites of three Nazi concentration camps. The first was to Mauthausen in Austria in 1960, where Viktor Frankl, the author of the deeply inspiring book *Man's Search for Meaning*, was interned until the war's end in 1945. The second was to Terezin in Czechoslovakia in 1968, which the Nazis deceptively displayed to the world as a model camp. And the third was to Buchenwald in East Germany in 1969 and its unspeakably gruesome exhibits. These experiences helped prepare me when, in Philadelphia in the 1980s, I served as a group facilitator for the annual Youth Symposium on the Holocaust, in which high school students were given the opportunity to meet in small groups with survivors.



American Fulbright students look across the Berlin Wall into East Germany from a stadium-style platform, 1969. Photo by the author.

---

During these years, I visited Israel and the West Bank twice. In 1982, on my way back from the Friends World Conference in Kenya, I traveled there to acquaint myself with this pivotal land. And in 1985 I did so with my wife, Roma, as part of a religious and political delegation led by the Jewish Community Relations Council of the Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia. The encounter with the diversity of people, land, and history was beyond real.

Both of these trips took place during the calm years when one could still travel relatively freely, prior to the First Palestinian Intifada of December 1987. Afterward I felt a deep concern for all on both sides of the conflict, and I wondered what could bring about a healing end to the separation. Was a sudden turnaround like the collapse of the Berlin Wall possible, and if so, what could make it happen?

As I ponder the Israeli-Palestinian conflict of today, I see two great requirements for its peaceful resolution. The first one is for recognition that the Jewish people have a unique reason, justified by historical experience, to fear further victimization.

Partly in response, Israel has taken the position that serious peace negotiations require the Palestinian side to recognize Israel “as a Jewish state.” This position may seem straightforward, but the implications are complex. Does it require that Jews in Israel have a privileged status before the law?

A step toward solving the conflict will be to find an understanding of this expectation that does not privilege anyone over anyone else. That is because the second great requirement for a peaceful resolution is an acceptance that all the inhabitants of Israel-Palestine receive equal treatment before the law.

These are the two conditions that could enable all parties fully to accept the end of the conflict. When achieved, other questions will wither away; it won't matter so much, for instance, whether there is one state, or two states, or a close federation. But as an additional necessary step toward a solution, it will matter to establish robust international guarantees for preserving the rights of every group in Israel-Palestine in the face of inevitable population changes over time, as well as possible intervention by neighboring states.

---

**Here is a query for each of us: What must change in our personal beliefs and biases for us to leave behind adversarial thinking and move into a**

## **pervading mindset of collaboration?**

---

Solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not just an isolated task, but instead, a keystone in achieving inclusive community everywhere. Implementing international guarantees of human rights in all countries will constitute a major step toward keeping the whole world free from war and oppression, and its place needs to be at the top of the agenda for the United Nations.

To resolve conflicts, it is also important to redress the past. After World War II, the West German government responded to the damage of the Holocaust for starters by making substantial reparations payments to Israel. Parallel to this came re-educating the German population.

In 1959, when I traveled to be with German high school students in a summer exchange program, I learned that they had received no explanation at home or in their schools about how Jews and other targeted populations were victimized. I found out that this changed abruptly in 1961; a German student wrote me with surprise and shock that schools were now instructing them in graphic detail about this shameful chapter in their history.

In Israel-Palestine, sharing information both ways about the past and ongoing history of the conflict is vital to healing. So, too, is the promotion of cultural understanding. Educational programs exist already in music and drama, with small-group interactions of children.

As the process of truth and reconciliation progresses, the time will come to work out jointly whether (and if so, how) to compensate all those who have suffered losses on all sides in the past. This is a difficult but critical question. Meanwhile, there is plenty of opportunity waiting for individuals in the two communities to work together in repairing all the damage that has occurred.

There is an opportunity to go deeper. In almost every aspect of culture—politics, economics, law, religion, sports, the media—adversarial struggle is present. The alternative of cooperation is also available in all of these arenas, but we sometimes ignore it when the going gets rough. Transforming the dominant ethos from competition to collaboration, not just in Israel-Palestine but also in the entire international community, will complete a broad shift in values.

---





Southern aerial view of the Temple Mount, Jerusalem. Photo by Andrew Shiva/ Wikipedia.

---

Will that happen? A doubter might ask: What kind of a personality transplant will humans, accustomed to competitive and hierarchical systems, need in order to embrace equitable distribution of power and resources? The answer: A first step always is to develop a vision for what in this case amounts to a paradigm shift. A second step, close behind, is to come to the realization that without this, we humans may be doomed.

This is because we face the looming reality that the current world economy is environmentally unsustainable. Not only are we consuming irreplaceable resources, global warming is cooking our home planet. And now, fatefully, we find ourselves in a pandemic, which further exposes the limits of our concept of individualism and raises up the need for a deep encounter in the ethics of collaboration.

Recovering from environmental and other damage will require solid grounding in human equality and the sharing of resources. For a tiny example, the mining of fossil carbon and other limited resources can be controlled at the

point of extraction to a level consonant with preservation of our environment, and whatever proceeds result from this can be distributed evenly—worldwide.

An apt analogy for a new kind of collaboration is the circulation of blood. As every cell gains access to nutrients in a living body, so, in a reconstructed international fiscal entity, can every human gain support regardless of one's distance from the controllers of power, just as the human circulatory system nourishes the limbs of the body regardless of their distance from the heart.

In a post-adversarial world, there will be no need for huge and wasteful military expenditures and conflicts. Some policing of conduct will remain, built into the new economic organism: moderate, proactive, and in harmony with the health of the body politic.

Here is a query for each of us: What must change in our personal beliefs and biases for us to leave behind adversarial thinking and move into a pervading mindset of collaboration?