A PLACE OF EMPATHY IN A FRAGILE, CONTENTIOUS LANDSCAPE: ENVIRONMENTAL PEACEBUILDING IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN

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On a kibbutz in the Negev desert, close to the Jordanian border, every year since 1996 small groups of Israeli, Palestinian, Jordanian and overseas students – cumulatively numbering by 2011 about 600 – have lived and studied together for one or two semesters at the Arava Institute for Environmental Studies. The Arava Institute has the goal of producing a network of regional environmentalists who are able and willing to work together.

The Arava Institute is an unusual place both in its origin and in its persistence as a peacebuilding initiative. In the period after the PLO-Israeli Oslo Accords (1993), Interim Agreement (1995) and the Jordanian-Israeli Peace Treaty (1994), many dialogue groups, 'people-to-people' programmes and cooperative initiatives began or were reinforced, including a small network of organizations promoting regional environmental cooperation. With the return to armed Palestinian-Israeli hostilities during the second Palestinian Intifada in 2000, most of these groups and initiatives were discontinued.[i] However, several civil society groups that promote environmental cooperation, including the Arava Institute, have persevered.[ii]

This chapter pushes the development of a geography of peace by focusing on the Arava Institute as a meeting place in a highly contested landscape. Megoran's exploration of the concept of positive peace as an alternative to 'peace as the absence of war'[iii] is apt as the Arava Institute persists despite continuing, sometimes violent conflict. War is not absent, but peacebuilding takes place nonetheless. As well, Megoran writes based on his inquiry into the meaning of 'peace,' that 'peace is inseparable from questions of social justice',[iv] and this too is apt for understanding the institute, its challenges and strategies. In their piece, Williams and McConnell are especially attentive to 'peace as process' and propose 'a more expansive and critical focus around "peace-ful" concepts such as tolerance, friendship, hope, reconciliation, justice, cosmopolitanism, resistance, solidarity, hospitality and empathy.'[v] The institute has, through design and trial-and-error, developed a group culture that cultivates empathy. As students participate in this culture, they go through processes that are aimed at cultivating peaceful interpersonal relationships. These processes are the focus of this chapter.

Earlier work on the Arava Institute[vi] has identified structural features that have allowed it to persevere where other peacebuilding projects have failed. Its student body – approximately one third Jewish Israeli, one third Arab (Palestinian, Jordanian, Israeli Arab) and one third overseas students (mostly from the USA) – receive university credit for a full year or semester of environmental studies taught in English. While overseas students pay tuition, Middle East students receive scholarships. After students leave, the institute helps its alumni to network with each other and in their search for work and further education. Through this strategy, the institute does not rely on the idealism of its students, but gives them practical educational and professional assistance. The institute has also been flexible, learning from experience and changing. Ongoing research by the authors examines the institute from the perspective of

resource mobilization, noting that it has positioned itself as both a social movement organization and a credit granting academic institute, and draws resources from both networks. For example, the institute has income from research projects (academic) and a fund-raising (social movement) support group.

Other structural features of the institute provide emotional support for building peaceful relations. Students are somewhat insulated from the surrounding conflict by the isolated setting of Kibbutz Ketura. They are a small group, never more than 45 in any one semester. Students share living space, eat together, spend leisure time with each other, and are hosted by an idealistic communal society.

This chapter, based on interviews with alumni, probes further into the experience of being a student by following the process through which empathy for those from adversarial societies develops at the institute. Literature on environmental peacebuilding and empathy situates this process and intersects with issues of 'the geography of peace.' The interviews indicate the growth of empathic relationships through extended personal contact, shared experiential learning and structured experiences that intentionally evoke conversations over difficult topics. The process analysis in this chapter suggests an approach that could be used in research on similar initiatives.

Peacebuilding

Peacebuilding is understood and practiced in various ways. In some contexts its focus is on post-conflict reconciliation; in others peacebuilders intervene into continuing conflicts. Civil society groups that engage in peacebuilding frequently cite Lederach on theory and practice.[vii] In his formulation, peace is not the absence of violent behaviour, but the presence of a just social order and respectful relations between former adversaries. As such, peacebuilding proceeds on two axes. One is vertical: peacebuilders side with the oppressed and work to transform the injustices that sustain conflict into more just social arrangements. The other axis is horizontal: peacebuilders bring together those who are in adversarial relations so that they can build the human relationships that will transform the conflict. This dual axis perspective is consistent with Megoran's point above that social justice and peace are inseparable. In a contrasting approach, peacebuilding, following Galtung's distinction between peacemaking, peacekeeping and peacebuilding,[viii] has been incorporated into strategies of conflict reduction and conflict resolution. International agencies (for example the UN and the World Bank) or world powers promote the transition from conflict to cooperation by advocating cooperative projects between adversarial groups, making financial resources available and directly or indirectly promoting personal contacts between their members.[ix] This perspective is more consistent with what Oliver Richmond calls the 'liberal peace.' All approaches recognize that peacebuilding is emotionally difficult.

Environmental peacebuilding brings adversaries together around common environmental challenges.[x] Much has been written about the Eastern Mediterranean as a region of severe and increasing environmental stress.[xi] The Eastern Mediterranean is poor in water and energy resources, with a rapidly growing population. Drought is severe and becoming more common. The loss of natural areas and widespread pollution have radically degraded rural areas, with a corresponding diminished quality of life in ever more crowded cities. Species habitats are degraded, with decreasing biodiversity. The Mediterranean and the Red Sea are stressed marine environments. The literature on this regional environmental stress often promotes regional cooperation, which is consistent with the growth in trans-boundary environmental governance.[xii]

Literature on regional environmental challenges, some of it presented at conferences at the Arava Institute or authored by its faculty members, typically focuses on shared problems and benefits of cooperation. There is less attention given to the emotional dimension of environmental peacebuilding. For example, *Water in the Middle East: a geography of peace*,[xiii] consists of expert analyses of water resources and negotiations. Environmental peacebuilding is treated as a rational process, brought to a successful conclusion by cost / benefit negotiations in which all parties get enough of what they want to be satisfied. Antagonistic politics inform the negotiations and make them harder, but in the end the high costs of continued antagonism will lead to an agreed, coordinated solution. This is an understandable approach among well-educated experts who share a common culture of rational problem solving. When, however, antagonisms persist and intensify, the prospect of successful negotiations and coordinated action recedes, suggesting the importance of paying attention to the affective aspects of environmental peacebuilding. The interviews discussed in this chapter show that the experience of study at the Arava Institute is only partly about developing shared knowledge and exploring shared solutions. It is also about transforming adversarial relationships into empathic ones.

Empathy

A focus on empathy complements the utilitarian aspect of peacebuilding – bringing adversaries together around a common problem and promoting cooperative work that is mutually beneficial[xiv] – with attention to affective dimensions. The concept of empathy, while subject to debate about its meaning, offers a way to understand the interplay of rationality and affect in these initiatives.

In both its common and scholarly uses, empathy refers to a quality people bring to social interaction. In its common use, empathy refers to some mix of *understanding* – putting oneself in the position of another, *sympathy* – sharing another's feelings or having a similar feeling in response to another's feelings, and *compassion* – feelings of wanting to help in response to another's distress. In academic literature empathy is sometimes understood primarily as rational, as understanding another without necessarily feeling fellowship or compassion, and sometimes primarily as an emotional response of identifying with and having compassion for a fellow human being.

This chapter follows the scholarly work that presents empathy as a combination of understanding and affect.[xv] Recent literature on empathy differs, however, in delineating where empathy is located. One perspective approaches empathy as a personality characteristic[xvi] developed in early childhood,[xvii] while another locates empathy as an element of cultural evolution.[xviii]

These differences over origin and location may be integrated by approaching empathy as a quality of *interaction*. People do vary. Individuals come to group activities with different degrees of empathic potential as a consequence of personality characteristics and prior social learning. Groups that cultivate empathy are conscious of the tension between formal and informal normative expectations that guide group activities versus cognitive understandings and behavioural expectations that people bring into the group. Formal design features and informally understood practices cultivate and elicit empathy. The interviews in this chapter speak to learning empathy as a skill, and growth in the capacity for empathic relationships.

Personal and collective narratives are relevant for this exploration of empathy.[xix] Stories organize information and make it accessible. They typically contain a mix of information and emotion, a quality they share with empathy. People understand their lives by addressing the

question, 'What story am I / are we in?' Stories are teleological, structured around beginnings, middles and ends. Because we are conscious of the teleological structure of narratives, they may assist agency. We can imagine where our story is headed and change our behaviour in order to get to a different ending. With respect to empathy, narratives can promote identification with an in-group in conflict with others, or promote identification with those who are different.

These considerations about narrative influenced our choice of methodology for this study of empathy at the Arava Institute. We supplement what we have learned previously about the structural features that provide emotional support for building peaceful relations by letting alumni tell their stories.

The interviews

We conducted and transcribed 38 interviews with Arava Institute alumni, some lasting over an hour. Our interest was in how alumni incorporated their experience at the institute into the narratives of their lives. Rather than enquire abstractly about 'empathy', we asked alumni to narrate the stories of their times at the institute and what it meant to them. Using an inductive approach[xx] we coded for themes and identified narratives about the development of empathy. Our sample is neither comprehensive nor representatively random. We cannot give percentages of alumni who became more empathic. We can report that in our sample there are many stories of how empathic relationships developed.

Shared environmental concerns, on which the academic culture is based, and social design features of the institute set the foundation for both affective and cognitive empathy. Friendly relations promote greater understanding, and both are intensified in a positive feedback loop. The interviews show the following temporal sequence:

- Motivations and preconceptions. People approach a setting in which they encounter those from hostile groups with a mix of hope and apprehension.

- First Impressions / Getting Along. Initial contacts focus on the practical tasks of getting along in a new setting. Students at the institute have personal agendas of acquiring skills and building resumes. They typically do not seek out confrontations that take energy from these goals. Friendships develop and are basis for more difficult conversations.

- Challenging Behaviour. The conflict context of the situation inevitably evokes behaviours that challenge civil, practical getting along.

- Empathy Building Strategies and Responses. People in the situation respond to these challenges with individual and collective strategies. The organizational culture of the institute is designed to cultivate empathy. Students share in this organizational culture and enact it in their relationships.

- Expressing and sustaining empathy. People are able to articulate that they have become more empathic, both intellectually and emotionally. An alumni organisation maintains relationships

Interview quotations that appear below are illustrative of this process. The transcripts contain many similar quotations. Quotations and comments below are not meant to indicate uniformity of outlook or behaviours, but an analysis of variability is beyond the scope of what is possible in this chapter.

Motivations and preconceptions

Students come to the Arava Institute both to study environmental issues and for the contact with the 'enemy.' Quotations from Palestinian and Israelis students show their apprehension but also their perception that the Institute offers something unique.

I was introduced to… the Arava Institute for Environmental Studies, when I read a brochure at the Islamic University [in Gaza]. It was so weird to see a Jewish organization there. I decided to take that huge step and go eat with enemies, and live with enemies, and share water, food, and education with enemies. I was rejected in my society, because people were calling me a spy, and crazy, traitor, all this weird stuff, and friends just disappeared. … because I deal with Israel. Even though I did not deal with Israel, I dealt with the Arava institute, which is completely different [Palestinian man].

I came with hope and good will about bridging differences, even though I had a rough background from army service. I was in a combat unit, fighting Palestinians, including X [a student] now at the institute. We never met face to face, but knew from stories [Israeli man].

I have been part of/participated on many peace building and cooperation programmes that I thought are not really worthy of my time anymore, because most of them really don't go deep enough to understand the conflict between the Palestinians and Israelis and to come up with cooperation that will benefit both …when I was interviewed by the Arava Institute, I wasn't really sure to do this all over again. I was more interested in the environmental aspect of it [Palestinian woman].

These are only examples of quite diverse motivations and preconceptions. The interviews show that students arrive with some uncertainty about what they are entering into although they all know from the recruitment and interview process about the Institute's objectives. Their expectations are filtered through their previous experiences and agendas that mix pragmatism and idealism.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS / GETTING ALONG

Arriving at the institute, students typically do what other students do at residential universities. They settle in, look for friends and start to study.

To be honest with you… in the beginning I didn't care about the environment at all. My interest is to meet new people, and visit a new place….. In the beginning it was for fun, but then I learned a lot of things about the environment, and I learned about things that I wasn't willing to talk about or to deal with before [Jordanian man].

You are like in an aquarium so you develop friendships. … friendships developed just by force of contact. You saw these people everyday. …. People naturally grouped by affinity. Often that was cultural affinity although other interests brought people together [overseas woman].

I remember sitting up at night with my roommate who was 7-8 years older then me, but her English was difficult so we read those texts together. … I shared a room with an Israeli woman who is still one of my close friends to this day [overseas woman].

Students from different backgrounds share rooms and suites. The quote below is typical of the amiable curiosity among roommates, and illustrates the use of English as a common, neutral language.

I had an American roommate and the third roommate was a Jordanian. I agree with this idea that you have international roommates in the same room because … the main language would be English. So we just speak English. The second thing would be the culture …. We learn about North American pastimes, Jordanian pastimes, Palestinian pastimes; by that we learn about each other's cultures and learn how each other thinks [Palestinian man].

Shared environmental concerns provide both emotional and cognitive connections between students. Environmentalism and emergent friendships set the stage for the of development empathic relationships when students deal with the continuing conflict.

CHALLENGING BEHAVIOUR

The institute began after the Oslo Accords in the spirit of creating post-conflict cooperation. The quick movement to an agreement anticipated in the mid-1990s did not happen. Hostilities persist, waxing and waning in intensity. Inevitably, Arava students have had to deal with the continuing conflict. The curriculum covers regional environmental issues, environmental policy and environmental ethics. However, because political and environmental issues intersect, difficult political topics surface in classes and student life.

While the institute is committed to peacebuilding, it is in Israel with mostly Israeli faculty. In some interviews, Arab students report frustration and arguments in classes that come from this context. These clashes in the classroom rarely lead to withdrawal from the programme and are taken seriously by instructors, but the comments show that political issues and the emotions around them could not be kept out of academic discussion.

We had many arguments in … [the water] course because some people from the Israeli side came who were arguing against the Palestinians, at the same time we were visiting all the Israeli water stations. We didn't visit the Palestinian ones at all. So the knowledge that was given on the Israeli side was more, and richer than what was given on the Palestinian side and the Arab side[xxi] *[Palestinian man].*

In subsequent years, the Institute reorganized the water trip to go to Israel, the West Bank and Jordan. There are, however, serious issues that are beyond the ability of the Institute to change. The following quotation shows a protest when a guest lecturer refuses to engage Palestinian priorities.

Once there was a guest talking about sustainable development in the West Bank between the Israelis and the Palestinians. Then I raised one of the main issues: that Palestinian people are suffering from the segregation wall. They said that they don't want to talk about the segregation wall. So why did we come! Why did we go to this course? We want to discuss many issues, and we are not going to discuss one of the main environmental issues … between Palestine and Israel! [Palestinian / Jordanian woman].

Emotional challenges in the classroom were not experienced only by Arab students, as the following quote indicates:

[One] class was a mess. We had a lot of arguments, people walking out crying all the time…. There was just one moment where every Jew in the room felt extremely uncomfortable, no matter what their political background was, it was like a line that no one wanted to cross. … A comment compared the Israeli government to the Nazis. I think everyone in the room just kind of froze; there was a sense in the room of 'just don't go there.' … The facilitators put a stop to the discussion at that point, but there was no taking it back and there was no saying that it didn't make everyone uncomfortable. I know that whenever you get a group full of Jews together there is a huge proportion of second and third generation holocaust survivors. It wasn't going to go away [overseas woman].

I don't remember any heated political discussions until Israeli Independence Day … suddenly all the Palestinians were wearing black and playing harsh music. We said - what is going on? … I was really naïve. I was 19 years old. For me that was a shock, it was like these are my friends and they are so upset and everyone else is so happy, what is going on? [overseas woman].

In the years the unresolved conflict turned into widespread regional hostilities – the outbreak of the Second Intifada in 2000 or the Gaza incursion in 2008-9 – the challenge was particularly strong, but it was always there.

EMPATHY BUILDING STRATEGIES AND RESPONSES

The institute was founded in a period where environmental peacebuilding could be seen as an aspect of an emerging post-conflict situation. It has adapted to the new situation of unresolved protracted conflict. As in many groups, staff intervene in public disputes between the students. One student said, 'tempers did flare and people yelled at each other, but the institute got us in groups and we talked about it' [overseas male].

Indirect but powerful support for developing empathy comes from the institute's practical work. Students gradually develop interpersonal ties to each other and develop

deepening empathic relationships, and in addition, the institute established a formal peacebuilding seminar programme. Our research identifies six key empathy-building strategies that the institute uses, which will be considered in this section.

The first strategy is to use Arab and Jewish 'Program Associates.' Older, more mature students, similar to university dons or housemasters, live in student residences. They are problem solvers, advisors and role models in a setting where academic study and the cultivation of empathy go together.

Secondly, the intimacy of a small group living together for months in an isolated setting – talking over meals, engaging in recreation activities and in small classes – is a major aspect of learning to understand each other and developing sympathy and trust. Empathy increases over time with a positive feedback loop in which closer emotional relationships foster more understanding, which in turn produces more emotional empathy.

We were not always involved in politics. We were involved in environmental classes, homework and group discussions. If two people had an argument about a political point they would be in the same group in an environmental class and develop a friendship [Palestinian man].

Plenty of times we used to talk in the evenings, like saying: now explain to me exactly how you see things. It was one on one; it was really about listening to what the other one thinks not what about what you think he thinks [Israeli woman].

Interpersonal trust is a foundation on which difficult conversations can take place and deepen both the cognitive and affective dimensions of empathy. The extended time together seems to matter for developing trust, friendship and a willingness to be empathic.

At the beginning you feel that everyone is surrounded by his own world. You don't know who you are talking to, you don't know what you're getting, what reactions. After a while, the walls start to break down and then everyone is sleeping in the same bed [Palestinian woman].

When people stop being politically correct, they know they are at ease, they know they can dare. It doesn't happen in the first semester. When you come back after a three week break [in December], you're happy to see everyone. You did not expect that three weeks before [overseas woman].

Relationships that developed at the institute occasionally led to invitations to visit each other's homes and families and, in at least one case, to be guests at the wedding of an Arava student. One interviewee described a home visit to Jordan,

In the middle of the first semester, I took like twelve Israelis to my house. To my family it was a shock, but I did it on purpose. I just wanted to show … that you are not talking about an enemy, you are talking about people.

… The Israelis came and understood my culture, they kissed my sisters, and helped my sisters. My family said the Israeli girls acted more normal then the American girl. They felt more close, you know [Jordanian man].

Another described a weekend visit to Israel.

I invited several of the non-Israeli students to stay with us in Jerusalem. … We went sightseeing, visited the famous Ben Yehuda Midrahov, and even sat in a cafe. Several days or weeks later … a suicide attack in Jerusalem hit the same cafe where we were sitting just a few days earlier. That was a shocking moment to my Jordanian friend .... He could much more easily identify with the Israelis after he could relate to the location, the time and the place. He realized that had the attack been just a few days before, he could have been there too [Israeli man].

The third strategy cultivates empathy through of fieldtrips and projects. Since the institute brings students together in the Middle East, they could see for themselves the settings in which other students and institute alumni lived.

My roommate from Oregon - he can't avoid political discussions if he lives with a Palestinian. We had a lot of discussions…. He had his own ideas on the rights of Israel, the rights of the Jewish state. We talked a lot and I argued with him. He did not change until we went to Nablus, to Ramallah, around the wall. I think he changed when he saw how Israel acts towards Palestinians. [Palestinian man]

Traveling around, looking at the land was great. The water trip was great. … The Jordan trip was one of the moments - I was like, wow, we do a holy work here. We were at the restaurant and a bunch of alumni came to us and it was like everybody started dancing and kissing and hugging; it was like wow [overseas woman].

Many students, sometimes with partners, used individual projects as opportunities to expand their knowledge of the region, sometimes learning about groups that are more like their own and sometimes about groups that are quite different. A number of student projects have explored the situation of Bedouin in Israel's southern arid Negev region.

Fourthly, and closely connected to this, the projects, field trips and courses are often connected to Institute research projects and environmental innovation. A faculty member does important research on dry lands agriculture. The research division had a project on local consequences of the proposed megaproject to link the Red Sea to the Dead Sea, and has organized conferences with broad regional representation. The Arava Power Company, which has opened a major solar field on kibbutz land, is closely connected to the institute.

Practical work sometimes becomes activism. Thus for example students and staff of the Institute participated in the 2008 public protests against relocating the Eilat airport in an ecologically sensitive area and in 2005 against building an ecologically intrusive superhighway.

Practical work develops students' skills and provides them with a sense of personal empowerment that enables them to go beyond being students and to be environmentalists, sometimes in quiet ways, sometimes as activists.

The memories that I have are going out at dawn to the wastewater treatment facility as part of the wastewater management course, and checking which animal tracks were there. Just being out in nature. I'd have to clean up the tracks, and make it fresh, but nevertheless it was beautiful [overseas man].

I was going to be an activist with tools once I left, and I did! It wasn't so much the coursework that helped me though a lot of the practical stuff helped me, but it was largely the internships. We did a lot of internships or independent projects, and that gave me confidence. And when I went to [university] I was like "yeah, I can start a food security group!" I joined every environmental activist group at X University. I knew I could do it because I had already done it at the Arava Institute [overseas woman].

A fifth and crucial strategy involves both staff and students taking responsibility for restoring relations after difficult interactions. Sometimes extended conversations took place after someone was upset, often in a public way. Troubling things happened in class. Emotions varied, including anger and tears. Upsetting events also happened in informal settings. While teachers and staff were involved when students were upset, the students' response to each other mattered most of all for their developing relationships. The following story was independently told in interviews with two overseas students (A, B) from the same year:

There was a party out on the grass. Someone put on Arab music really loud and there was a request to turn it off, so it was turned off. Twenty minutes later someone else came back and put on a different kind of music. Then an Arab students [threw the tape recorder and broke it with a crash.] (A). X (Arab student) said, "You don't like us, you don't like our music." I didn't see X like that before. The depression is too deep for the Palestinians to ignore. At some point it comes up. [It was] obvious to everyone that we have to talk, there was too much tension in the air. … It was the right thing to do. Some people felt better. Each of us had some new things to think about. (B) There was a dinner and Arab music night organized by the Arab students where they cooked … an Arab meal, which was wonderful, and there was music and dancing. It was a gift to share their culture that way (A).

This incident, remembered slightly differently by the two overseas students, shows both the vulnerability of interpersonal peacebuilding to ruptures and the importance of the students' responses to each other. Students responded with personal reflection, talking to each other and taking steps to repair the threat to their relationships.

A final plank to the Institute's cultivation of empathy is the Peacebuilding and Environmental Leadership Seminar (PELS). As it became clear that a period of continuing unresolved conflict was replacing the transition period envisaged by the Oslo Accords, the institute introduced PELS as a structured engagement with the challenge of pecebuilding during

a continuing conflict. Attendance at weekly PELS meetings is required despite the fact that it is not a credit course. PELS includes guided discussions, workshops, guest lectures and field trips, all with the aim, as described by the Institute's website, of cultivating 'intercultural and interpersonal awareness and understanding' thereby building 'a supportive learning community that emphasizes reflection, self-knowledge, and cultural awareness.' The following quotes are typical of the most common comments on PELS:

… three hours … in the week … you sit down and talk about the 'elephant in the room' that you try to ignore all the time … When you take part in PELS you realize how students that you live next to and study with don't usually share the ideas that you have, they don't share your beliefs, and you have to, not defend, but at least show your point of view in a way that would get to their minds. ... when the PELS sessions are over, they will go back to their rooms, maybe go back to their communities in the future and think about what you said, and think about how what you said might be right or might be wrong, and how you can change the ideologies of the other people who have this narrow minded thinking [Palestinian woman].

We used to get to the point where we are forced to talk about issues that are hard for Jordanians, Palestinians, and Israelis to talk about, because in the setting of the programme … we all become friends. So you might not want to talk about those issues with your friends, unless you are forced to. I think the main idea of the PELS was to force us to talk about the issues. Because, when we used to sit outside, we never talked about these issues. We were only enjoying the bubble that we were in, coexistence, harmony, and peace. But during the PELS sessions we had to talk about the conflict [Jordanian woman].

I found myself expressing myself with political views, being very clear about what I thought. ... At the same time, I was listening too. It's painful. Sometimes it feels like a waste of time because people won't change their minds, but afterward, I think the goal was not to change peoples' minds but to hear the other. Maybe not to accept it, because it goes against everything you ever been told it is very hard. But at least you get to listen. People coming from different background, religions, countries, who have been told things, almost brainwashed for years, get to hear where I come from. … I realized how Arab identity is complicated [overseas woman].

Reports on PELS differ due to individual experience and cohort dynamics. Some interviews comment on problematic experiences in PELS sessions.

Israelis would say things that I consider outrageous and I typically would argue with them but when we were with Palestinians I didn't feel like it. Who am I to argue? They should argue...they are here to represent themselves. I can't defend them. They need to defend themselves. It would be wrong for me to step in, …. But on the other hand the Palestinians didn't feel empowered enough to present their opinions and fight for what they believe in.... … Jews kind of stepped back and let the Palestinians take the floor, and they didn't take the floor because there didn't feel empowered enough and so only the more right-wing Israelis would dominate the discussion and it would look like all Israelis agree with them, while in fact when we were in the small group it was a completely different dynamic [Israeli woman].

I felt really lonely. I didn't get any support from anyone, even my Jordanian friends in the programme at that time. They were staring at me, like they are telling me, 'X be silent.' I didn't like that, because I didn't go to get loved or to be liked from other people, I went there to tell the truth. In the first semester … they used to look at me like I am a terrorist, because of my thoughts. Actually I wasn't defending Hamas as organization, as a terrorist movement, I was trying to say that there is no difference between the Israeli Army and what they are doing to the Palestinians; like destroying their houses and killing their children, and what Hamas are doing to the Israelis. For me it is the same. … they told 'X there are is difference, the Israelis are not really killing, the Israelis are trying to defend their rights, they are trying to defend themselves', and so I was, 'OK Hamas is doing the same.' … One American student … told me 'X, you were very brave to raise these issues, you are the only one that is interested in this programme in the way you want to talk about peace.' This is peace, I didn't come to tell you 'take the land,' and 'it is for you.' We are all Palestinians, and I was angry all the time because they were telling us that we are Jordanians students. At the same time we are not, because all of us were originally Palestinians. My parents were raised in Palestine, and one day we are supposed to be there [in Palestine] [Jordanian-Palestinian woman].

PELS is one element of a multidimensional environmental peacebuilding programme. For many students it is an important, useful experience while others look back on it less favourably. Sometimes, what started in PELS in a way that was uncomfortable could be continued elsewhere.

I really appreciated the compassionate listening.[xxii] What I like the most is that it brings people together. It is … a chance for people to… see and hear each other in different ways. … There is often continued conversation, and sometimes it's about really harsh things. Last semester … X was coming very much from a perspective of social justice and Palestinian rights, and another student was Israeli and served in the army. They… [had] these discussions back and forth after PELS sessions that were really…really emotional, and really good for both of them [overseas woman].

Sometimes we continued the discussions, but when we continued the discussions that were opened in the PELS sessions, we continued in a way that we accept each other's opinions [Jordanian woman].

EXPRESSING AND SUSTAINING EMPATHY

There is virtually universal agreement amongst alumni we interviewed that the experience of studying at the Arava Institute helped students to understand each other's point of view. For example:

Now I know what Israelis think about the conflict. Before I only knew what the government or the media think [Jordanian woman.]

If you don't agree with somebody, to know how to put your what you think is a fact aside and just try to listen. … Everybody carries pain, and everybody's pain is legitimate, maybe you can work through that but first you have to understand where people come from [Israeli woman].

… to be a student at the Arava Institute … made me have a different perspective. … I came to the point where I understand that everybody is right and there is nobody that is wrong. But you have different perspectives, different point of views. … I can understand how Israelis think and understand how the Jews think. I can understand how the radical Muslims think. Without judging, but still I have my own points of view [Jordanian man].

Some of the students, Israelis and American Jews and some of the Arabs, were having a fight… the talk led to talking about the prophet Mohammad and the cartoons of the prophet Mohammad. They asked why I was so pissed off about it and then I started to explain why, as a Muslim, I was pissed off…. It made me realize that from my background, I just know that those cartoons are bad, but from their background its something normal. It is free speech. So I try to explain to them why, as a Muslim, I was mad. One student told me, 'Wow, you are mad like this, now I can understand why all the Muslims were mad….because I saw you, you who is so open, and you are pissed off, so I can understand' [Jordanian man].

The interviews contain many strong positive statements about the emotional impact of the institute. One Israeli said that the institute 'is like a lighthouse in a dark and roaring sea' and another said that after being at the institute, 'Nobody can take away my belief in peace.'

I was friends with Arabs and Jews. I did not felt segregated. I did not take part in [extended political] discussions because I don't like to. I think we hear enough about that in the media. We just became friends. We went to their houses. After the year I had Palestinian friends, I had Jordanian friends. They are people like the rest of us. That was a very awakening experience. Before - my parents are Israelis and my family is from here - they were enemy, they were the others, and now, after that year, they are my friends. [Israeli man]

The people I met changed my life. I have the privilege of … affecting their lives too. I think that the most important thing about the institute is the small things you do, just explaining your daily life and how you, like how do you survive; whether you're a Palestinian or Israeli or Jordanian, that really humanize the conflict that is happening between us and makes you want to do some change, some actual changes in your community [Palestinian woman].

… We go in with so much hatred for each other, and we leave, feeling sorry and feeling sad that we're not going to see each other every day [Palestinian man].

It is important to note that the Institute does not see its task as completed by working with cohorts of students over four or eight months to develop more empathy towards each other. A key argument of this book is that peace is not an endpoint, but a fragile process that is contextual. In recognition of this, the Institute fostered the creation of the Arava Alumni Peace and Environment Network (AAPEN). Although the interviews did not cover participation, AAPEN needs to be mentioned as part of the institute's evolving strategy. Founded in 2005 and run by alumni with staff support, AAPEN assists alumni networking. Its annual meetings – 100

Middle Eastern alumni attended the meeting in Aqaba, Jordan in 2010 - make visible projects that alumni are involved with and allow them to share personal time. The institute's alumni director uses a variety of strategies – a Facebook page, small grants for alumni projects, networking - to maintain relationships after the intense residential experience. Peace is a process that can be quickly reversed, and thus needs continued attention. Future research to study the long-term impact of the Institute's work and the alumni network will help understand its effects outside the context of the residential experience.

Conclusion

Environmental education at the Arava Institute cultivates relationships. In a part of the world where other issues take priority over the severity of environmental challenges, the institute teaches about environmental problems and responses from a regional perspective and nurtures a network of alumni who share its outlook. The institute recruits in Israel, the Palestinian territories, Jordan and outside the region. Over four or eight months, and afterwards through the alumni network, the institute works on relationships. Students live in mixed residences, share leisure time, work together in classes and on projects, take field trips and participate in a seminar that raise difficult political issues.

The interviews conducted for this chapter show the development of empathy through this process. Students come wanting to get something personal from the experience, not wanting to argue and be placed in difficult situations. While shared environmental challenges present an initial point of departure for personal and collective journeys, it is impossible to avoid the larger context of the continuing conflict. Emotionally charged differences come out, sometimes in classes and during leisure time, but they are also intentionally evoked in the Peacebuilding and Environmental Leadership Seminar series (PELS). Challenging behaviours and the direct challenges of PELS interact with the gradual development of trust, understanding and friendship. Young people living together, each knowing in a personal way about the toll that conflict in the region exacts, develop the skills of listening to each other, explaining to each other, understanding each other and having sympathy for each other.

This case study speaks to our understanding of empathy as a quality of interaction that can develop through social processes. At the institute, the rational and affective dimensions of empathy interact. The rational and affective act as a feedback loop, with emotional connections the first stage in the process. The greater the affective connection, the more openness to understanding there is. The more there is understanding, the greater the affective connection. Even though those who come to the institute are self-selected, and arguably more open to engaging others than most people, they do not necessarily come empathic to people who represent opposing sides or viewpoints in the Arab-Israeli conflicts, or empathic in general. The interviews express appreciation for the way in which the institute has fostered personal growth in empathy.

This case study of the institute highlights the importance of mutuality – opening up to each other. Empathy would not grow if it were one-sided. Mutuality begins with the gradual growth of trust that comes from such experiences as having roommates or project partners who are from adversarial groups. These personal relationships are carried into larger group processes, inhibiting rigid alliance formation along lines of group identity and expanding group willingness to be open to each other.

The institute's culture cultivates a way of being with each other in which it is possible to disagree, and disagree emotionally, yet still understand each other, work together, care about

each other and be part of each other's lives. Students participate in this culture and actively shape it. It is a culture with its own internal tensions. On the one hand, this culture of empathy is not peace, and it is certainly hard to sustain this culture in a conflict zone. The institute and its alumni have been tested and challenged, and will be again. Periods of heightened violence, pain inflicted by governments or members of one group on the other, and enforced separation by legal means or social pressure all challenge a culture of empathy and promote polarization. On the other hand, this culture of empathy is grounded in awareness of severe, intensifying environmental stress in the Eastern Mediterranean and the potential importance of a shared response. Shared environmentalism helps explain how the institute is different from groups that existed only for dialogue, that were consequently largely unsuccessful at cultivating empathy and thus were more vulnerable to collapse with the onset of the violence of the second Intifada.

The literature on empathy cited above, and other similar sources, argue as well that empathy is grounded in human nature. Human nature has within it a selfish side, based on our personal needs, the pleasure we get from meeting them, the pain we feel when our needs go unmet, and competition for meeting needs. Human nature equally has an empathic, altruistic side, based on our need for reciprocal help, our need to receive and give affection, awareness of our embeddedness in the deep biological networks of children, parents, relatives and species, and our collective search for understanding and creating meaning in life. We find understanding of this potential for empathic relationships in Kant and other moral philosophers, in the existence of the 'Golden Rule' in many cultures, in the sociology of relationships, in the psychologies of human development, happiness and meaning, in the studies of everyday peaceful relations that Williams and McConnell describe, and in many cultures in the articulation of 'peace' along the lines described by Megoran.[xxiii]

Shared or potentially shared environmental management and the cultivation of a shared environmentalist culture may be foci from which a 'geography of peace' can develop. Literature on environmental peacebuilding often comments on the goal of empathy. The view that properly managed shared space creates shared empathic relationships is common in proposals for peace parks on contested borders[xxiv] and for shared management of water systems and other natural resources. Rifkin takes this view to the highest level of generality, arguing that the combination of contemporary communications media and growing awareness of a global environmental crisis is leading to an empathic biospheric consciousness.[xxv] These observations suggest the usefulness of research on the development of empathy when examining specific environmental peacebuilding initiatives.

Attending to the development of empathy complements another potential linkage of place to peace – work that links environmental security to human security.[xxvi] This literature addresses the material dimension of peace by moving the concept of 'security' out of the domain of warfare into the domains of ecological balance and human welfare. Providing for ecological sustainability and human needs is foundational for the practical work of peacebuilding, as Simon Dalby argues in his contribution to this book. Empathy is similarly foundational to the emotional and process dimensions that link peacebuilding to human security.

Specific findings from this case study suggest ways to develop the research agenda on environmental peacebuilding and empathy. The mix of strategies used by the Arava Institute to foster empathy may be found in other settings or replicable in other initiatives. The interviews indicate that the joint experience of border crossing – both spatially and socially (being face to face while going from place to place) – is an especially powerful contributor to empathy between members of adversarial groups. It may be significant for other environmental peacebuilding efforts that the Arava Institute brings people together in their own region and takes cross-border field trips. Likewise, the future orientation of the Institute, with its focus on shared solutions to

serious common problems, is foundational to its emotional work. This study shows the importance of cultivating a culture of empathy when doing peacebuilding, and how the linkages between peacebuilding and empathy are experienced. It thus suggests an approach that could be fruitful in exploring the work of other, similar initiatives.

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