



GRACE Pilgrimage 2007 in the Negev desert of Israel

What is GRACE?

Sabine Lichtenfels, 2006, excerpt from the book: "GRACE. Pilgrimage for a Future without War"

The pilgrimage is to lead us to Israel-Palestine, to the so called Holy Land, a region which has been dominated by war, conflict, struggle and division for a long time.

If this pilgrimage is to be a success in terms of inner and outer peace work, then a spiritual source will be needed. This will make us as pilgrims act in both a correct and healing way despite any difficult situations. In search of a name for the pilgrimage we came across the term GRACE. Grace has many connotations and in English comprises more than the word "Gnade" does in German.

GRACE is mercy, favour, charm, sweetness, readiness, charity, consideration, congeniality and also stands for the act of Grace itself.

GRACE reminds me of walking in the service of the higher mission, in the service of life and its inherent justice.

Those who are walking in the name of GRACE do not come to accuse. They do not come to impart a new ideology on a country or on a land and its people – they come in the service of openness, of perception and of support.

GRACE pledges not to wage a war but rather to end it wherever it happens to be. In the name of GRACE I am always on the lookout for a non-violent solution, a solution which creates justice and healing amongst all concerned. Often clear judgement is necessary to do this, but never condemnation.

GRACE says: I am willing to end the war and to understand the means by which it can be ended and I place myself in service of a solution.

You can easily examine just how far you have committed yourself to act in this way by the way you react, especially when you feel that someone has tried to hurt you or treated you unjustly. In such situations we are quick to forget our determination to live in peace and readily enter into disputes and wars, large or small.

Here is a small example, perhaps a little humorous, but it makes the point. If you hear that the car of a distant acquaintance has been stolen, you will probably take the news very calmly. If you hear that your best friend's car has been stolen, you will probably get a bit agitated but still stay cool enough just to pass on a few words of commiseration. When, however, your own beloved car has been stolen, inner peace is shattered and perhaps for some time. The deeper directions we take are being decided on totally different levels of consciousness. We can, however, understand more about the correlations on a large scale when we have learned to become witnesses to ourselves on the smaller scale.

GRACE is not manmade.

GRACE always refers us to the higher level of order in life itself.

It is not me that will judge, but life itself may.

No matter where I happen to be and where I am going, I put aside all prejudice and judgment.



Sabine Lichtenfels during the first GRACE Pilgrimage in Israel-Palestine, 2005



Sabine Lichtenfels in negotiation with army general Hector Peña, in Colombia, 2008

I do not arrive with preconceived ideas of who the other one might or might not be and I do not make those opinions the yardstick for my actions.

I practiced and learned to see the Christ in every human being wherever I was and throughout the pilgrimage.

At first I turn to the human being who happens to be my counterpart and let myself be touched by his or her history. To do this, I anchor myself as far as possible in the present moment. Again and again I imagine that the person sitting in front of me could just as well be me. I could be a female settler, a Palestinian woman or a young Israeli woman about to enter the military. I could be the soldier just shot tear gas at Palestinian kids. I look for the core of the human being in all its roles and behind all the roles and masks of alienation. It is often difficult to be in this kind of presence. How often have I been outraged about the ideologies which I had to endure listening to, for instance from an extremist rabbi or a fanatical Muslim? And how often did I feel an inner defensiveness or a reaction of disgust when listening to the never ending accusations and stories of suffering from the Palestinians in the West Bank or to the fanatical speeches of the settlers?

GRACE demands self-knowledge. And self-knowledge is not always easy. To discover flaws in others is much more pleasant and easy, than to unmask oneself. Everything within me wants to cry out in anger and outrage when I sit opposite a young officer listening to his excited explanations about the ideological values of his country.

All of a sudden it occurs to me that he could just as well be my son and immediately I begin to see in him not only the soldier but the human being behind his role. This is a first step which creates an opening. Now everything depends on whether I will be able to tell him the truth of what I see without any fear.

This is where GRACE occurs.

I let myself be touched and I try to touch others. Whenever possible, I enter places with my heart open. This was the case when I met with soldiers and officers, Palestinian peasants and farmers, and Israeli settlers.

GRACE comes from the strength and the connectedness with the source of life.

This must not be confused with a timid attitude where I dare not speak up against injustice when I see it.

I do not condemn anyone or anything when I am in the state of GRACE, rather, I gather the courage to speak the truth. I want to speak the truth in a way that it reaches out to others and changes the other, and not in order to be right, and therefore further waging war. In our everyday reality we shut out both sides. We shut out the truth of the victim as well as the truth of the perpetrator. We then are quick to impose our view of the world on either one of them. And most important of all is that our view of the world is the right one! We do this to protect ourselves from being touched. We can only bear to watch the constant and terrible news because we are so closed up. And we are relieved when we are able to distinguish the good guys from the bad guys. We carry on living our comfortable everyday lives and believe that we are good people



In Anata, Palestine during the pilgrimage in 2005

when we manage to show a little charity in our lives. This is how the subtle fascism of our time emerges – indifference.

People shut their good middle-class front doors in the face of reality. They do it until suddenly they themselves are caught by a wave of real life which till then they have been successfully suppressing. Suppression now hits back and shows its most cruel and violent side. It is not life itself that is cruel. It is through suppression that life appears to be cruel and violent. We see this in marriage crisis, in illness, in growing suicide rates, in psychological sickness, alcoholism and other similar problems. That is until we wake up!

GRACE reminds us of another truth and reality at work behind the terrible dimensions of a culture which will soon have exhausted its last resources. The truth is simple and the same everywhere.

When forming an opinion, we tend to forget that we do this mainly from a level of interpretation. The truth lies beyond all opinions. The truth is distinct from ideology in as much as truth is both simple and true.

I was shocked to realize that conflicts, more often than not, are kindled and rekindled by the ideologies and the convictions which people continually fire at each other. Because of our fear of the truth of life we consider our opinions and views to be true and defend them until the bitter end. This is psychological warfare that finally results in real war. We hold to be true what has nothing to do with truth. This is the story of our socialization with which we identify.

All of a sudden you look into the distorted mirror of mankind, which has separated itself from its roots. You look at the same patterns of fear, anger, powerlessness and trauma, which are everywhere, and at the resulting war with its destructive acts of revenge. It is the suppressed life itself that chooses revenge in order to survive.

At this point appeals to morality are useless. Just imagine – your child is killed in front of your own eyes. Is it not revenge that is your foremost and strongest impulse?

You see it everywhere, in greater or lesser forms, but the basic pattern remains identical everywhere. It can be found behind every ideology, behind all religions, behind all world views. We have, in equal measure, all become victims of an imperialistic culture. Behind this avalanche that rolls across the regions of war on this planet, writing its painful history of victims and perpetrators, behind all this, you suddenly come across the same hunger everywhere – a hunger for life, a hunger for love, a hunger for trust and belonging, a hunger for acknowledgement and a hunger for wanting to be seen and understood. This hunger is independent of any culture. It simply exists in every human being for as truly as s/he still remains human.

When I am out there in the name of GRACE, I try to meet the human being and let myself be touched by them rather than by the world views they represent.

All was lost whenever our meetings started with a debate about world views. Nobody listened anymore and instead an emotional upheaval ensued. The meetings unfolded in a completely different way whenever people were touched by each other on a human level.

GRACE always reminds you of this.

GRACE is like a consciously chosen naivety that helps you not get lost in the ocean of world views so that you recognize and protect the elementary and simple truth behind all things. You create an opening for the cry for life.

You see the collective body of pain in front of you, this body that has presented the Jews with their terrible fate. You equally recognize the collective delusion of the German people who have still not been able to truly look at and heal their past. You see the effects of a patriarchal religion and culture which has taken a wrong turn for thousands of years, and you see how war is an inseparable part of it, just as much as thunder and lightning are part of a stormy night.

The history of victims and perpetrators and our identification with either one of them has to come to an end. At this point world history awaits a big transformation, the final awakening!

GRACE always reminds you that this change does not occur by one's own power.

GRACE reminds you of the sacredness of life itself at every moment.

GRACE reminds you that the only way out of the dead end street is for humankind to successfully return to the very basis of life and love, of trust and truth.

GRACE is the power of a long breath that is going to last because it can see a new dawn at the horizon of history, a paradise of love and compassion, a culture honouring variety while at the same time acknowledging the universal values of life.

GRACE is the umbilical cord that connects us to this vision and guides us, as of this moment, to act and behave out of its spirit, its freshness, abundance and beauty.



Encounter with Israeli Soldiers and a Palestinian

The next morning we set off for a long way through the olive groves that are typical of this region. (...) We have not been on our way long when a jeep with three soldiers comes towards us.

The following experience has imprinted itself very deeply in my memory. It sits deep in my soul and will come up again and again and remind me of this elementary experience. I became a witness of how human beings are able to instantaneously let go of old behavioral patterns and open themselves up to something new. Through this, a new vision and a possible new reality radiate into our lives.

The soldiers want to control us. With cool, official faces they ask us why we were walking along here and tell us that it is forbidden to enter the security zone.

As we talk about what we do their formal working faces start to crack. They look at us somewhat disbelieving. They are used to politically engaged international groups which on and off show up in the West Bank. But we are earnestly going our way on foot through the whole country in the name of GRACE, and they have never met something like this before. They become more and more curious and the talk takes on human traits. Finally they let us carry on.

After a while we come to a fountain. Fayez, our Palestinian guide, happily shows us how the farmers scoop up the water in these oases. We take a rest in the shade of an olive tree. It is the peace emblem of the Palestinian world. I feel like starting a talking circle. Here under the silvery-grey light playing on the olive trees and the place's immense sacred frequency, a talking circle could prove itself worthwhile in bringing a humane tomorrow to life for all participants.

For some time already it has been my concern to initiate a talking circle. (...) What moves the young people? What takes place in the German pilgrims who know how the fate of this country is connected to the aftermath of the Holocaust? When will the Israelis speak of how they feel?

Joel gives me a pomegranate. It is to go from hand to hand and will serve as a symbol of our mutual esteem and respect and of our willingness to listen to the person who is holding the pomegranate. (...)

I open up with a prayer and am reminded of the Goddess with the pomegranate, which festively illuminates the whole situation. How the soul asks for such moments where it is lifted up beyond suffering, pain and hopelessness in order to strengthen anew the forces of self-healing. Unpretentious simple rituals which are not soaked in any defined religion or ideology can always support a group to find itself and to build up mutual vibration. Such deep listening can produce miracles. (...)

Admittedly life often plays a somewhat different tune than the one expected. Just as we start a jeep draws up with the same soldiers that had stopped us earlier, and the faces of all our participants mirror tension, curiosity and mutual concern. I am determined to protect this talking circle and go up to the driver's window. I explain our situation to them and that it is very important that we are not disturbed. They ask if they may watch. "Watch? That I'm afraid is difficult, but you can ask the group whether you might participate." I surprise myself with my answer. They readily get out of the car in order to join our circle.

One of the participants begs us to consider, "How are we supposed to speak the truth with people in uniform sitting with us. They stand for everything we want to overcome."

"Let us decide to see the human being behind the uniform," I suggest. The group agrees. The soldiers sit themselves down.

Now the pomegranate wanders from hand to hand and the individuals talk, moved by what has touched their hearts since entering the West Bank. Israelis express not only the fears they have lived through since they arrived on this side of the wall, but also how deeply touched they have been by the Palestinian hospitality. Some have seen and experienced so much that they now need a day of rest.

Many admit to the circle that never before had they let themselves be touched by the misery of this world. Apart from pain they also feel added strength and a new responsibility. Some simply pass on the apple without talking. After a period of silence one of the soldiers finally breaks through his inner limits after obviously having struggled with them for some time. He did not know what to make of us. "Shall I really let myself into this? What do they think of me? They will despise me for being a soldier. They connive with the Palestinians so that the anti-Jewish front is strengthened." Such and similar thoughts are to be read all over his face. But now the moment has come, he breaks through an inner taboo, takes the pomegranate and begins to talk about his situation. "I do not like doing what I have to do. I too do not think that the Palestinians are our enemies. But as long as acts of terror take place, we have to protect our people. I try to behave here in a friendly way. Sometimes I even give the children something to eat. But my experience has been that shortly afterwards they throw stones at me. Why do the children throw stones at me after I have given them something to eat?" Somewhat insecurely he ends his searching words.

Afterwards the pomegranate wanders on through the circle. Nobody speaks for quite a while.

Now Fayez takes the pomegranate. He rolls it to and fro in his hands visibly struggling for words. His eyes shine powerfully as if one is able to read the entire history of this country in them. Fayez, a Palestinian man with his own history, taught not to show feelings, a Marxist, resistance fighter of the Palestinian movement "Stop the Occupation" is obviously moved. The muscles of his face are trembling.

It is almost certainly the first time in his life he has sat in such a spiritual circle, taking the time to listen without interruption to the points of view of others, and to top it all, to do this in the presence of Israeli soldiers in uniform. If they saw him, his comrades might accuse him of being a collaborator and despise him for sitting in our circle. But Fayez is too much a seeker of truth to let such thoughts prevent him from pursuing his intuitive search for a solution. He keeps looking at the young soldiers. The circle is absolutely quiet. Everyone is waiting expectantly for him to speak. Slowly and hauntingly he begins to talk to the soldiers.

Very profoundly he explains why the children throw stones. With great restraint he is at pains to talk, but then one sees how a wave of feeling wells up in him. He breaks into tears and struggles for each word. "Listen, you are young, you do not yet have a wife and children. But I am sure that your mothers and fathers feel as I do when my sons or my daughter leaves home. The children begin to sympathize with Hamas because they want to do something for their country. Can you imagine how I feel when I have to witness this? Can you imagine how we all feel? For generations we have been living peacefully side by side. Why now do we have all this, and for so very, very long? Can we not slowly begin to accept that we are not able to carry on like this? In this way the endless murdering will never come to an end. Why do we not at last simply stop? We could stop it, right now."

His words have a strong and insistent effect. Nearly all the group openly let their tears flow.

We become quiet. It could just be as simple as all that. Nevertheless the way out of the mess seems impossible. Between them stand the walls – walls of judgment and prejudice, walls built with countless injuries, walls of world views, religion and ideology, walls of political slogans and regimentation.

Because of these walls all that is humane, beautiful and true is being pushed into private niches. Only sometimes a crack creates a small opening, shedding light on all who are near. And this releases great illumination. It is a crack that brings with it the readiness for reconciliation and the readiness for a new beginning.

Further on our way through the villages, in between loudly honking cars and many waving Palestinians, Michal, an Israeli peace worker, talks to me about her feelings. “I see you have already adapted to this place. You take the honking as a friendly gesture. But I jerk nervously each time.” She, who is very courageous in her peace work, now expresses her main questions and doubts. “Where is the path? If the Arabs perceive us as weak they will drive us away and we will be back to the old situation where there was no place for us on Earth.”

She tries to describe how the settlers feel but in everything she says I hear her own search for a new identity. “We need deep healing,” she says with quiet seriousness.

We reach Tulkarem and come to a meeting place of the Palestinian administration. In the town we again see the placards and flags of Hamas everywhere. Michal faints from the accumulation of everything, the fear, the sun, and the many new impressions!

But as I get to her she is already laughing again.

In the evening we are put up at the hostel owned by Fayez a little outside Tulkarem. He has prepared a large party.

By now, after this day of shared experiences, Fayez seems like a close friend to us. In his village he is the “father” of a huge family clan. Between our young people and his children moving contacts take place. (...) We feel the huge responsibility and the possibilities which lie in our work. May we obtain the necessary strength (...) needed so that the work that has begun can be realized on a larger scale, so that the youth of this world has a chance again.



November 9th 2005:
Meditation at the Israeli separation wall close to Tulkarem, Palestine

Historic Significance of November 9th

Background of the Wall in Israel-Palestine

November 9th is one of the planned highlights of our pilgrimage. It is a historic date on many levels. It was our intention to arrive to some point of the Israeli wall on the border of the West Bank on this exact day and to hold a solemn vigil.

The West Bank is a large part of the Palestinian autonomous territory. It is the area west of the lower Jordan River and the Dead Sea. Since the Six-Day War in June 1967, Israel has occupied the West Bank. In the nineties agreements were passed to turn it step by step into an autonomous region under Palestinian administration. Because of the violent escalations between Israelis and Palestinians, since the year 2000 this plan for autonomy has been gravely jeopardized. The building of the wall since 2002, mostly unnoticed by the Western world, is the last result of this conflict. It is a violent intervention for the fate of countless people. The most popular argument for the building of the wall goes like this, "It is being built as protection against terror."

The reality says something different. The wall separates Palestinians from Palestinians, towns from the land, and it separates farms from the water sources, workers from their places of work. It is made of reinforced concrete and with its height of eight meters, it is double the height of the Berlin Wall. Outside of developed areas it turns into a high-security fence. After its completion it will be more than 700 kms long – double the length of the "Green Line." Only few people are aware that a large part of the wall does not follow the Israeli borders as recognized by the UN in 1967, but expands far into the Palestinian area. Many towns and villages are thus cut off from hospitals, schools and from telephone, electricity and water supplies. A large part of fertile land has thus been annexed to Israel without the public noticing.

The wall separates the West Bank into 81 parcels. Over 200,000 Palestinians have been expelled from their land through the construction of the wall. 160,000 people live in areas which are fenced in all around – "behind barbed wire with watch towers, ditches, double fences, pressed into a system of passes by a military bureaucracy, which watches over each person's coming and going," writes the Israeli journalist, Amira Hass. In July 2005, the International Court of Law in The Hague summoned Israel to "immediately stop the construction of the installation of the barricade and to tear down those parts which have been erected on Palestinian Territory against international law." Nothing happened.

Another detail that we were also informed of during our pilgrimage: About 12,000 Palestinians were literally shut out of Palestine by this type of politics; they are now forced to live squeezed in between the wall, i.e. the insurmountable high-security fence and the Green Line. Although the line cannot be seen, those who are caught crossing it are sentenced to prison. Are these measures for the protection against terrorism? Those who walk through Palestine and witness how many of the farmers have lost their land, how many relatives and families have been separated from each other, how children who used to go on foot to the nearby school now have to drive up to 35 kms by bus, are made very aware that a time-bomb has been set. For those who have no hope in life anymore it is a last satisfaction to leave this planet with a cry of revenge.

Does not the thought seem close that in a more just world there would be no terror? Is not terror always a result of suppressed life? I ask all Israelis, for whom it is difficult at times to read such lines without feeling incriminated or judged, to not immediately react. I am not writing this out of any hostility towards the inhabitants of Israel. I write all this in order to unmask a structure and to show that this approach draws everyone ever deeper into war and misery. There can be no peace until such time when we leave behind the entire system and its thinking forever.

November 9th, 1989 – In Front of the Berlin Wall

On November 9th 1989 I too became a witness of the opening of the Berlin Wall. It had been a well thought out barricade of concrete walls, three to four meters high, or of metal-grid wire fences reinforced with ditches up to five meters deep, trip wires, running tracks for watch dogs, surrounded by signal and watch towers. This was the way the East Berlin and the GDR were separated from West Berlin and the German Republic. Under the pressure of the non-violent mass protests of the GDR inhabitants, the government of GDR opened the Wall on November 9th, 1989.



I experienced the opening of the Wall at the so called “Check-Point Charlie,” one of the most well-known crossing points. Quite by accident I happened to be in Berlin at that time together with co-workers of the project; Dieter Duhm and I were there to give a speech. The joyous news made us formulate a statement about the opening of the Wall with lightning speed and pass out the hundreds of thousands of copies.

It said, “The revolution in the East has to be followed by the revolution in the West,” in the hope and in the belief that the enormous power of change in the East would be matched by the most courageous spirits of the West in order to overcome the walls and atrocities of the capitalistic system as new comrades.

The reality was different. Quickly capitalism managed to take over the GDR movement’s power of change. It was terrible to see how this change was swallowed by a system that cared little about the humane background. It all petered out and we had not more humanity, but “more value, more market and more consumption,” the motto for the survival of capitalism.

Nevertheless, at the same time and in the background, committed spirits quiet and determined, kept working for the realization of “Concrete Utopia.”

The opening of the Berlin Wall was a historic event, which on November 9th we wanted to commemorate by holding a meditative vigil in front of today’s Israeli wall. It was important for us to set a sign for feeling connected with the larger lines of history and their potential for healing. The fall of the German Wall is one of the few current examples in history where a non-violent revolution was able to lead to victory. This is only one of the lines of significance which connect us to the historic date of November 9th.

November 9th, 1938 – The Third Reich “Night of the Pogrom”

The second essential connection leads us further back into history. On the night of the 9th to the 10th of November 1938, the Night of the Pogrom of the Third Reich, also known as the “Night of Broken Glass,” was carried out. It was the first big hit of the Nazis against the German Jews. Hundreds of synagogues were set on fire, many Jewish citizens murdered – the numbers range between 90 and 400 – and more than 30,000 human beings were carted off to concentration camps.



With such an account I can hardly carry on writing. I have to retreat and remain in silence for a while to let myself be touched by the fact that this atrocious insanity is true, which I can here only refer to in sober words, and which we prefer to read over in history books. And this part of history is not yet in the all too distant past. We are compassionate about the fate of others as long as it is bearable for us and as long as we can believe in some sort of consolation. But we have almost no possibility of reaction when we hear what had been done to human beings in the concentration camps.

Never before have I been touched in such a way by the atrocious works of fascism as I have when visiting the concentration camp at Mauthausen during my pilgrimage through Austria. This then is the human being. The cruelty human beings are capable of goes far beyond what I am able to imagine, even to this day. The wooden barracks of Mauthausen still today resonate with the living history of a past whose reality could hardly be looked at by any of the survivors. To view this massacre is just too horrible. Look at the people who are reduced to almost only bare bones, look into the eyes ripped open wide with fear and fright, see the carts filled with the dead bodies of starved people being daily removed from the chambers. And see the commanders who gave their orders for torture, subjugation, murder, mutilation and sexual assault. Quickly the observer is so overcome by nausea he wants to turn away. Only too quickly the mind is looking for some kind of soothing distractions. Consciousness is apt to draw a veil of oblivion across all the atrocities of history.

They were your fathers and grandfathers who had lived and acted in this war, there is no use turning away. Those whom you loved and respected were participating. They were human beings. Quite normal human beings! Victims as well as perpetrators were equally prisoners of an infinitely larger mass hypnosis. Today we are called to recognize this. Only then can we begin to end war.

Claude AnShin Thomas, a Buddhist monk and veteran of the Vietnam War pointedly writes,

“By taking up arms I was directly responsible, and the killing only stopped when I was honorably discharged and sent home with numerous decorations, including a Purple Heart, a decoration for injuries received. However, when I began to put together the grenade splinters of my life again and discovered the heart that had been broken by the war, I understood that justified killing does not exist, that there is no separation between good and bad violence and that real morals and honorableness do not exist in war. War never has any morals. It is simply the expression of suffering. Acting that is generated by suffering.”

Through our presence at the wall we want to bear witness to this underlying part of history, which will cause more harm until it is consciously recognized and abandoned by the vast majority of human beings.

Material for Further Study:



Book recommendation:

“GRACE. Pilgrimage for a Future without War” by Sabine Lichtenfels

ISBN 978-3-927266-25-4, Pb, 264 pages

<http://www.verlag-meiga.org/node/205>

Film recommendation:

“We Refuse to Be Enemies”, 85-minute documentary by Angelika Reicherter about the GRACE Pilgrimage 2005 through Israel-Palestine (language: German with English subtitles).

You can order the DVD for 4,99 EUR at the following page: <http://bit.ly/Hpnxpg>