

Intact Eggs and Right Relationships: Peacemaking on the Ground **by Ed Nyce**

It's Friday evening, maybe 7:15 or so. Zoughbi Zoughbi and I are on our way home from a workshop at the Wi'am Palestinian Center for Conflict Resolution, where he is director. Walking along Bethlehem's Manger Street, I see a store and, needing milk, we stop. Once there, I also obtain three eggs. Three eggs? Well -- that's all I need for the foreseeable future.

As he chats with folks in the store, Zoughbi's cell phone rings several times. When Zoughbi's cell phone rings, and it's got a lot of practice, it's rarely someone just wanting to know how he's doing.

“Would you like to come with me for a few minutes?” Zoughbi asks me.

I've been here for two and a half years, and I have a lot to learn. But I have caught on to a few things by now.

For one, when Zoughbi says “a few minutes,” it does little good to try to estimate how much time that really entails.

Second, I rarely bother inquiring, “Where are we going?” If I do so, Zoughbi readily begins to tell me, but invariably the phone rings again, or, if we're walking (or even driving), someone else comes up to speak to Zoughbi on our way, and the answer is not completed when we arrive at our destination.

Third, Zoughbi is equally accepting of a “yes” or a “no” when invited to join him. Either way, he will provide another opportunity in the future.

Three eggs in one bag, and two bottles of milk in another. Oh, and an umbrella in the bag with the milk, brought along from home in case of rain. I don't know exactly where the eggs, milk, umbrella, and I are headed, but Zoughbi does have a chance to tell me that we are on our way to a dispute between several people.

The most well known conflict in these parts, and admittedly the one upon which I expend the most mental energy, is the Palestinian/Israeli situation. Thank God for the people, including Zoughbi, who pray about and attend to it. Wi'am has, through the years, been involved here and abroad in dialogue and other forms of working for regional peace.

But the other conflicts are here, too. People do not only huddle in their homes waiting for the next tank shelling.

Rather, they go about their lives as best as they can. If the economy has not devastated them, there is business to conduct. There are marriages to work at and to enjoy. There is rent to pay. There is school in which to try to learn and do well. There are doctor bills, and times of prayer and worship, and sibling rivalries and revelries.

Those relationships and therefore conflicts would exist here as anywhere, even if there were no justice issues with the Israelis. Yet many conflicts are directly tied to the reality of the political situation. For example, Zoughbi and others recognize the displaced anger which comes from the humiliation experienced at a checkpoint, taken out on a loved one later at home. Medical practitioners see health

problems related to the occupation, sometimes due to the bottling up of incidents and feelings of victimization at the hands of soldiers, settlers, and the political system. Indeed, some conflicts literally would not exist if this reality did not force people into smaller geographical areas, into encounters they otherwise would not have.

We arrive at the place where the people involved in the conflict will gather. Three eggs, two bottles of milk, an umbrella, and I – oh, and a small notebook I used at the workshop; we follow Zoughbi into the room.

It is one of two rooms where we will meet. The several members of each party, some directly involved in the conflict, some not, are not yet together in one place. For awhile, Zoughbi will meet with one group, and then the other, back and forth a few times.

Each time we move, we go to a different room in the same building, but we have to go outside to do so. After our first meeting with the first party, we head out. Three eggs, two bottles of milk, an umbrella, a small notebook, and I follow – oh, and a 14-page fax sent to me at Wi'am; we follow Zoughbi into the room.

As in the previous room, Zoughbi and the party talk about the conflict, but also about other things. Peacemaking On the ground in this setting depends heavily on relationships, including that of the third party with the disputants. Zoughbi has a track record on the ground, and is trusted by many.

Speaking of the ground, that's where my eggs are resting. The one bag, with the milk, umbrella, notebook, and 14-page fax, doesn't concern me too much; it's cool enough that the milk won't spoil. The eggs, though, in a plastic bag, resting between the milk bag and my right foot on the ground; I've been known to break an egg while trying to get it from the shop across the street to my apartment! How long are these eggs going to last?

Then again, what are three eggs in the midst of the holy moments of working for right relationships?

Zoughbi, the three eggs, two bottles of milk, umbrella, notebook, 14-page fax, and I go back and forth a couple more times. The stage has been reached where it would be ideal if the parties can be together in one room. It's at this point that Adnan Thalgieh, Zoughbi's colleague at Wi'am, shows up. For awhile, he stays with one group, we with the other.

A practitioner in conflict transformation back home in North America has a difficult balancing act. His or her jobs not a 9-5-weekday vocation. Long evenings or weekend soften suit participants' schedules the best for gathering to work on a church or community conflict. Something similar is the case here, too. The folks at Wi'am are basically on call; people dial them up whenever a conflict arises. If it's possible to put off until another time, sometimes that is done. Often, though, the heat of the moment makes it ideal to address the situation immediately.

But it is not ideal in every way. Adnan is a husband and father of infant twins. Zoughbi is a husband and father of four. Adnan and Zoughbi want to help, to go the extra mile in their communities. They also want to be involved at home, to see the infants grow, to help with homework. This dilemma looks awfully familiar: where, in the West, or in Bethlehem, is the “proper” balance between a) addressing urgent-sounding needs from within one's vocation, and b) the desire and responsibility to have a private and in many cases a family life?

After some hesitancy, the two groups gather in one place. The encounter takes a fair amount of time.

The disputants didn't invent the conflict for the sake of having a meeting: there are genuine issues, genuinely hurt feelings. The process which Zoughbi, Adnan, and colleagues use has some similarities to and in some ways differs from what feels familiar in my own cultural context. In his work, Zoughbi combines elements from his experience on the ground here, and from his training here and in the west, as he works for peace. In typical teamwork fashion, he and Adnan pool their gifts and insights to address tonight's challenging conflict.

An individual speaks, and sometimes another person, including even Zoughbi or Adnan, speaks simultaneously. Occasionally, this or that person enters or exits the room. One person, sitting near me, rises as if to leave, dissatisfied with the direction of the proceedings.

Meanwhile, my spot is kind of close to the door. Hmm. The people moving about maneuver carefully. Still, the various feet get a little close to the three eggs from my point of view. I think the eggs are probably still safest here between the milk bag and my right foot. How much do I really need these eggs, anyway?

Adnan, by now also standing, actually takes the hand of the guy who rose to leave: gently, firmly, without begging, he is physically urging him to stay. Zoughbi moves toward the door. Zoughbi force the man to stay when he does not want to? No, Zoughbi is expressing his deep desire that the progress which has been made so far in dialogue continue to have a chance to come to fruition, yet that evening. The others who came with the standing man encourage the man to remain. He sits down, neither entirely happy nor convinced.

By the end of the evening, the relationships are not yet fully "right." But an agreement for the time being is reached, signified by drinking coffee together, and by the two primary disputants exchanging a customary kiss on both cheeks.

Zoughbi, the three eggs, two bottles of milk, umbrella, notebook, 14-page fax, and I head home. He and I chat and eat a late supper at his place; his family is asleep. How does one explain the process of such work, and the importance of other things Zoughbi did today, to funders, Zoughbi wonders aloud? It's often easiest to get funding for the Israeli/Palestinian dialogue component of Wi'am's work. What about these other vital, society-maintaining and -building tasks?

As I near Zoughbi's door to leave, I bump the eggs against the wall. I walk down the steps to the next building where I live, turn on the light, and check on the eggs. They are no worse for the wear for having met the wall or, for most of the night, the floor while witnessing peacemaking on the ground. Their delicate shells remain unbroken. May God bless the delicate work as well as the relationships of Zoughbi, Adnan, and others of all people groups who strive, wait on God, and pray for peace in all its forms?