

The War is Not So Far Away: Learning from the Streets of Toronto

Deborah Barndt, November, 2023



Toronto, my home for the past 50 years, is a microcosm of the world. When I joined thousands in three protests in November, I found myself walking amongst diasporic Arabs and Jews, trying to capture a global conversation with my camera.

What did I learn from this historic moment and movement?

Connections to colonial histories and Indigenous solidarity were made.



It was a powerful moment when a Palestinian mother and daughter joined the Indigenous contingent and they marched and drummed together. (photo on left by homayed)

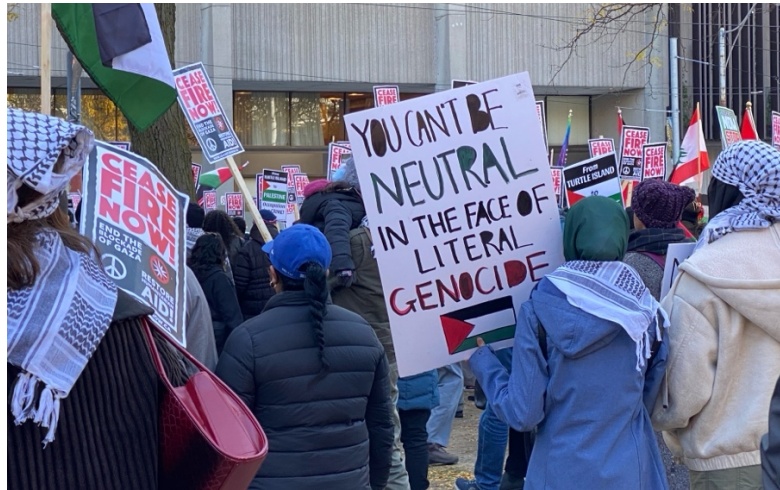


Thousands of Torontonians carry in their bodies similar brutal histories from their homelands, and see common patterns in their struggles.



We are reminded once again of Canada's colonial history.





Nor can we ignore the atrocities that we observe daily on our screens.



1526 - 1867: ATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE
 1870 - 1990: INDIAN RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS
 1933 - 1945: HOLOCAUST
 1948 - TODAY: PALESTINIAN GENOCIDE



Our message
to our politicians is clear:
stop Canadian complicity!





I am moved by the Jews who courageously stand up to the Israeli state and support a free Palestine, while decrying the Hamas massacre of Israelis.





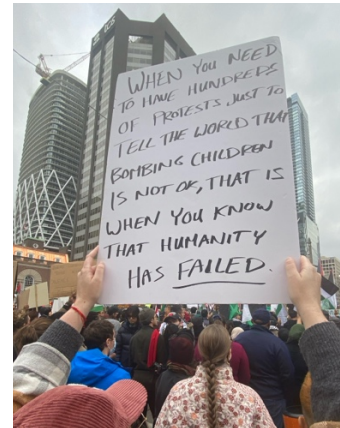
I feel strongly the presence of my friend the late Amy Gottlieb, who co-founded Jewish Women's Committee to End the Occupation of the West Bank and Gaza 34 years ago. Amy's partner Mo and their son Sammy with their chosen family carry on that commitment, and since her death in July, her virtual memorial has become a major site of educating about the war and organizing for solidarity.

Amy Gottlieb, Presente!

Kate Lushington, her daughter Natasha and granddaughter represent the intergenerational legacy.

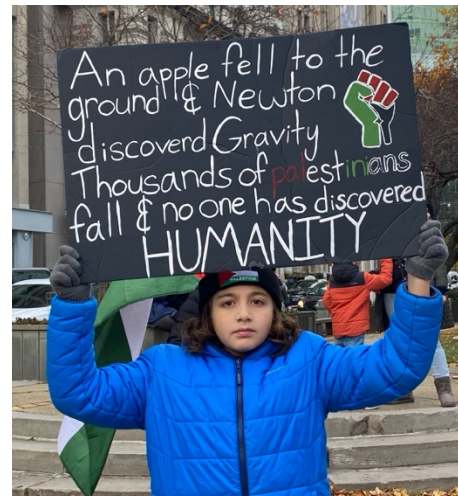


Perhaps the children – there and here – are our strongest messengers.





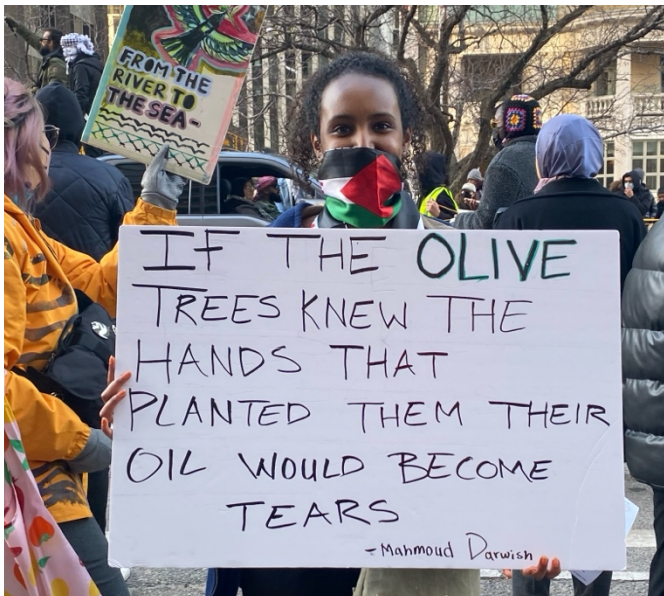
Children tap a deeper chord within us,
compelling us to recognize our common humanity.



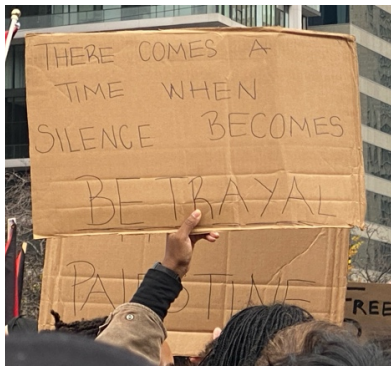
Our humanity is also affirmed by the diversity of our identities, and our common struggle for equity.



The creative spirit of peoples fighting for freedom is evident in the multiple forms of expression enlivening the streets.



From the hand drawn to the machine printed....





From the artist poster
to the electronic billboard....





From the paper sculpture made by former community arts student Simon to the balloon versions of the watermelon, symbol for the Palestinian flag.



Clothes and face paint become artistic and political statements.

In December I focused my protest actions in my neighbourhood at the office of my Minister of Parliament, Arif Virani, also the Minister of Justice, pressuring him and the Liberal government to push for a Ceasefire.



These family-friendly events included music, poetry, food, and art for kids, building local movements to push for more economic actions against Canadian arm dealers and to work long term for an end to occupation and a free Palestine.



They featured speeches by both Jewish and Palestinian neighbours.



I have been very influenced over the past 50 years by close friends whose life experience gives them an embodied understanding of this history. Several close Jewish friends are offspring of Holocaust survivors who know intimately intergenerational trauma; they have been life-long peace activists protesting the occupation of Gaza and the West Bank. I do not equate their critique of the Israeli state with antisemitism.



I also have many Muslim friends, some political refugees, born in the Middle East with their own colonial histories. In 2016, a group of us sponsored an Iraqi refugee family, witnessing the impacts of another conflict that was motivated by revenge led by the U.S. and that left a country in ruins.

I carry on the legacy of my late parents, Bill and Laura Barndt, who protested U.S. roles in dictatorships in the Philippines and El Salvador in the 1980s, and took buses from Ohio to Washington, DC to protest the U.S. bombardment of Iraq in the early 2000s.

Post-script (in late December): Almost 1200 Israeli citizens were massacred by Hamas on Oct. 7. The numbers of Palestinians killed by Israeli forces has risen from 12,000 when I first wrote this to almost 22,000 today (two-thirds of them women and children). The protests calling for a permanent ceasefire continue and so does my learning about the deeper and complex history of this conflict. But I am finding it difficult to express my horror at the ongoing genocide. So I turn to Palestinian poets for the final words, and to musicians to touch our souls

If I Must Die

If I must die,
you must live
to tell my story
to sell my things
to buy a piece of cloth
and some strings,
(make it white with a long tail)
so that a child, somewhere in Gaza
while looking heaven in the eye
awaiting his dad who left in a blaze –
and bid no one farewell
not even to his flesh
not even to himself –
sees the kite, my kite you made, flying up
above
and thinks for a moment an angel is there
bringing back love
If I must die
let it bring hope
let it be a tale.

The poet, Refaat Alareer, a Palestinian writer, activist, and professor of English literature, was cruelly assassinated (along with six members of his family) on December 6, 2023 when his apartment was hit by an Israeli forces airstrike.

Finally, a song against war sung in Spanish, Arabic, and Hebrew.
<https://youtu.be/TXOUpXKn1NM?si=5vEj2qq9snTVOB5p>