

Teaching Amid Despair: Global Warming and Israeli Wars on Lebanon (the title can change)

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“This documentary is clearly American,” a colleague commented after the screening of *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) at my university earlier this year. “Americans caused this problem of global warming. What can we do about it here in Lebanon? We are the victims and not the perpetrators. And, more importantly, we here have much more pressing concerns to deal with than this issue of global warming.”

Not believing the film’s message of urgency, one of my students dismissed the science in the documentary as “exaggerated,” claiming that this documentary is basically telling us to commit suicide since there isn’t anything we can do about it.

Denial. Then despair.

Yes, we here in Lebanon do have worries other than global warming and the numerous environmental crises. Added to our intense political and economic troubles, we still have to deal with the July 2006 war-wounds —material, human, and environmental.\* Ten months after the Israeli bombings of the Jiyeh electrical power plant’s fuel storage tanks, oil is still spewing onto Lebanon’s shores, new slicks of solid oil are still being discovered, and the coastline is still uncleaned. Although most covered by the media, the oil spill was just one of several major environmental consequences of the war. As reported by the United Nations Development Program, the war created substantial amounts of solid wastes: “Up to 3.5 million cubic meters of demolition wastes mixed with household damaged waste was generated.”<sup>1</sup> At the war’s end, more than 400 truckloads a day ferried millions of tons of rubble to improvised or existing dumps for six to eight weeks.<sup>2</sup> The main dump lays where Beirut’s badly bombed southern suburbs meet the sea, and thus, concrete, rubble, dust, and anything else you’d find in a house were not only dumped along the fragile coastline but also directly into the sea.

Arguably the greatest environmental war wound that directly affects the lives of hundreds of thousands is the one million cluster bombs throughout the South, 90% of which Israel dropped in the last 72 hours of the

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations Development Programme. **Lebanon Rapid Environmental Assessment for Greening, Recovery, Reconstruction and Reform**. 2006. UNDP report prepared by ELARD. 2007. p.7-49.

<sup>2</sup> Reuters. “Lebanon’s environment bears the consequences of conflict.” February 8, 2007. Website: [http://yalibnan.com/site/archives/2007/02/lebanons\\_enviro.php](http://yalibnan.com/site/archives/2007/02/lebanons_enviro.php). Accessed February 9, 2007.

war. Despite an intensive de-mining effort, it took seven months to remove less than 2% of the cluster bombs. At this rate, assuming that the remaining 98% would be cleared at the same rate as the first 2% (and thus assuming everything else stays constant, which is always a faulty assumption), it will take approximately 30 years for the South to be cleared of cluster bombs. (setting aside the landmine removal)<sup>3</sup>. In addition to killing and wounding civilians, the cluster bombs have also forced farmers in the South into a deadly binary: increased impoverishment or risk of severe injury or death by harvesting their fields. If one assumes that farmers in cluster bomb-infested fields cannot harvest their fields, then the indirect economic costs of the war would increase by four-folds.<sup>4</sup>

Added to these physical wounds of the war, we have little sense of security that our country will not be bombed again, little reassurance that we can rebuild our homes and not worry that they will be turned to rubble once again.

I am reminded of Orleanna Price, the mother of four girls taken to the Congo by her orthodox missionary husband in Barbara Kingsolver's (1998) epic *The Poisonwood Bible*, saying, "the pain in my household seemed plenty large enough to fill the whole world."<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps that is the case here in Lebanon.

Perhaps that is the case for many families around the world.

And, if that is so, where, amidst such pain, can there be space left to absorb and respond to the environmental crises?

But, do we have to choose between our own local burden--our household pain--and the global environmental burden of climate change that is imposed on us from the outside (if we are to accept the argument that global warming is an outside burden imposed on us)? Do we have to choose between the environment and our local, chaotic, insecure political and economic situations? Or, asked in another light, do we wait until our

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<sup>3</sup> Daily World EU News. "Israel's Peres: Cluster bombs a mistake." January 31, 2007. Website: <http://www.turks.us/article~story~20070131212833666.htm>. Accessed February 13, 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Ragy Darwish, Nadim Farajallah, and Rania Masri. "Inter-temporal Economic Impact of the July 2006 War on Lebanon's Agricultural Sector." January 2007. Unpublished research.

<sup>5</sup> Barbara Kingsolver. **The Poisonwood Bible**. (New York: HarperPerennial. 1998) P.382

house is in order before we examine our impacts on the Earth? Setting aside the cynical response that our house may never be in order, do we even have the luxury of time?

More fundamentally, are the environmental issues of our country – be they local, regional, or global – separate from the political and economic issues? Since economics is the management (or attempted management) of natural resources, and since the relationships between politics and economics have been recognized by all to be close, to say the least, then can economics and politics be even conceptually and logically separated from natural resources and thus from the environment?

This discourse reminds me of another false binary that our community has been grappling with for decades: the status of women during the time of national strife. All too often, we feminists are told that now is not the time to speak of domestic violence and the absence of women’s institutionalized or social rights; now, we have to focus our efforts on liberating our land from occupation, and then later we have to liberate our land from economic oppression. Once those critical issues are resolved, then, we are told, we will deal with this issue of women’s equality. Just as such an argument ignores that a society cannot be liberated when half its citizens are oppressed, the argument of relegating environmental issues to a future time, when our political and economic concerns have been alleviated, is also naïve and foolish.

There is an added dimension to the environmental discourse in Lebanon: the presumption of innocence. We are not guilty of contributing to global warming, therefore we are not responsible. The environment, though, does not care if we are the major contributors to the crisis. Although the United States is (currently) the biggest culprit, the people of Africa will be the largest victims.

Thus, even if we in Lebanon are innocent of significantly contributing to global warming, are we not responsible for attempting to manage the impact of global warming on our country? Global warming will severely impact water resources in this region. Already, this region is faced with water scarcity. Already, in Lebanon, “current levels of water consumption are nonsustainable in light of population growth, industrial development, expansion of irrigated agricultural land and escalating uncontrolled tapping into groundwater.”<sup>6</sup> Only a few years ago, Israel repeatedly threatened a full-scale war should Lebanon attempt to draw more water

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<sup>6</sup> M. El Fadel, M. Zeinati, and D. Jamali. “Water Resources in Lebanon: Characterization, Water Balance, and Constraints,” *Water Resources Development*. 2000. 16. 4, 615-638. p 615.

from the Lebanese Wazzani springs, which feed directly into the Hasbani river, which crosses the border into Israel and feeds into the Sea of Galilee.<sup>7</sup>

I remember the words of Orleana Price again: “whatever your burden, to hold yourself apart from the lot of more powerful men is an illusion.”<sup>8</sup>

Expecting environmental problems--ones we are already facing and ones to come--to wait until our household pain is lessened is an illusion. But, there was more to my colleague’s comment than a possible belief in this illusion. There was something much deeper: a sense of powerlessness, a sense of despair.

Perhaps, as our experiences with despair expand, we absorb it as the truth. No need for our body to feel such pain when we realize, subconsciously, that the situation cannot change, that there is no action that is effective, no action that is possible. That, then, becomes the full measure of despair.

My colleague wasn’t saying that he didn’t care. He wasn’t saying that the impacts of global warming wouldn’t be felt in our small house here. He was saying what my own student had said: there is nothing we can do about it; so, let’s continue to worry about other things.

Given the pervasiveness of these responses—denial, powerlessness, despair--what do we, as environmental educators, activists, and concerned citizens, then do?

What I have learned, in my twelve years of organizing and public speaking on issues of peace and social justice in the U.S., and what I am re-learning here as a professor of environmental sciences in Lebanon, is that *it is not enough to inform*. It is not enough to communicate information in the form of facts, statistics, and knowledge.

Years into my organizing, I remembered an allegedly-persuasive presentation I had given back in high school. I had argued against the testing of animals for cosmetics. I had used statistics and pictures to emphasize my point. Afterwards, I asked a student for her thoughts.

“Do you agree with me that it is unethical to conduct animal testing for make-up?”

“Yes.”

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<sup>7</sup> Nicholas Blanford. “A Lebanese-Israeli water conflict threatens to boil over,” Christian Science Monitor. October 21, 2000. Available at: <http://www.csmonitor.com/2002/1021/p08s01-wome.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Barbara Kingsolver. **The Poisonwood Bible**. (New York: HarperPerennial. 1998) P.387

“So, will you change your brand of cosmetics, send back any cosmetics you have purchased from companies that test on animals, and only purchase your make-up from animal-friendly companies?”

“No.”

I was stunned. “But, why not??”

She shrugged and walked away. She had received the information, and nodded her head to its validity, but she simply didn’t care.

I don’t want my environmental science students to simply shrug and walk away at the end of their ecology course, after having learned about the relationships and interactions that comprise our ecosystems, our living earth, and after having had a glimpse at the various ways through which we influence everything around us. If they are indifferent to the presence of lions among us hundreds of years ago, would they be indifferent to the future loss of certain birds that are among us now? Would they sense that we could lose now what we have lost before? And, if so, will that recognition be personalized to them. In other words, will they care?<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps they are afraid to care.

Why invest the emotional energy in caring about something, and then investing the greater energy in actually changing your behavior, when there wouldn’t be any good done from that change, when you don’t believe that any change is even possible?

In rousing people from inaction to movement, I have realized that it is necessary to communicate with emotion, to personalize it, and to infuse it all with a belief, an honest belief, that we do have the ability to create positive change. In the U.S., I depended on Howard Zinn’s reading of history and on the historical movers for my well of hope. I built my foundation on the understanding that positive change in society has arisen from the people, due to demands from the people, and it needn’t have been the majority, only an organized, committed minority.

In Lebanon, I realized that it was simply not enough to give my students information in environmental science courses. Information remained information, to be added to the piles of data being handed down to them

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<sup>9</sup> This question applies not just to environmental science students. It is the same struggle we face when attempting to persuade anyone to change his behavior – be it to boycott Nestle products, to sign a petition, to raise their voices against one of the many feudalistic, sectarian politicians in this country, or to even attempt to understand what is happening to our world – and by ‘our world’ – I do not mean the borders of this small countries, but the relationships and lives that go beyond our nation-state and include Iraq and Palestine and reach into Africa and the Americas.

by their other professors. Do I want environmental news, environmental understanding, to be merely acquired like another book on the shelf of knowledge, to be compartmentalized in such a fashion? Do we want any information on our society and our community to be compartmentalized into false divisions?

It is not enough to know that the polar bears are drowning. We need to absorb that information, to feel the sorrow, and to take that sorrow and apply it to other threatened animals less majestic than polar bears. It is not enough to learn about the mechanisms of tree growth and forest succession, but also necessary to impart a sense of the magic, the wonder, of how a seed half the size of a fingernail can transform itself into a tree that scratches the belly of the sky. We need to be both enthralled by nature and humbled by it, and to allow those emotions to move us to action, and not to angst or despair.

But how to avoid despair? How to expect people, particularly students, to change, to involve themselves in some personal or collective way to lessening our impacts on this Earth? How to motivate people to action in Lebanon in particular? How is hope taught to a generation of students born amidst a civil war (1975 – 1991), in a country that has endured regular Israeli invasions and bombings since 1948 and a 22-year Israeli military occupation (1978-2000, and ongoing), and, in many cases, raised by parents who themselves have lost hope after being beaten down a series of debilitating national and regional defeats?

One way to answer these questions is by recognizing our history as a history of struggle, and by learning of our previous successes. The public school system in Lebanon, as in the U.S., from primary schools to the university, was not granted by the goodness of the government or by the love of the politicians, but demanded and fought and won by the people themselves. That is only one simple example. Our history here, as it is throughout the world, is one filled with stories of people organizing, fighting, and sometimes dying for social change. Some of the struggles were defeated, some succeeded, and many more are still ongoing. Nevertheless, one victory reveals the possibility for victory, one positive change fought for and won reveals the possibility for future change. Do our students really know this history? I think not.<sup>10</sup>

All too often my students exclaim that it does not matter what they learn, they feel there is no hope in creating this better world in Lebanon. I spend a significant portion of class discussion talking about social

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<sup>10</sup> Due to a space limitation, I have given only one example of positive struggle. What examples do you know of positive struggles in the Fertile Crescent and throughout the Arab world? Share them with me. Email me at [rania.masri@balamamand.edu.lb](mailto:rania.masri@balamamand.edu.lb)

power. Such discussions are not digressions, but are fundamental to the students' outlook, to the students' desire to learn, and, critically, to the students' position as citizens.

Understanding the extent of the power we have today requires understanding the history of that power and the history of social movements. Then, the hope needs to be strengthened by equipping it with a sense of both local and larger possibilities. We need to have hope in both setting our local house in order and in attempting to rectify the larger, global problem(s). In other words, here, in Lebanon, we must have grounded hope in resolving our political and economic state, and in the ability to better manage our water resources, reforest our land, and play a role in the global management of environmental crises. We cannot and should not be forced to choose. These national and international hopes are tied together. As Paulo Freire (1998) wrote in his book, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, “hopelessness is a form of silence, of denying the world and fleeing from it.”<sup>11</sup> As believers in the necessity of social change, we cannot afford to flee.

So, what then? What action is necessary? Do we offer small solutions to large problems, or attempt, at the very least, to confront the larger issues themselves?

The documentary, *An Inconvenient Truth*, did a powerful job in explaining the impacts of global warming, and thus making it hard to dismiss the full awe of such a climate change; however, the documentary fell short when it presented the options for change. “Recycle.” “Change your light bulb.” “Drive a fuel efficient car.”<sup>12</sup> Just as “true compassion,” as Martin Luther King, Jr. (1967) said, “is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring,”<sup>13</sup> just as peace requires more than simply calling for ‘compromise’ and ‘dialogue’ among unequal partners, so it is that environmental change requires more than recycling and driving fuel efficient vehicles.

We need a new model – socially, economically and politically – and not band-aids to an environmentally destructive model. We need a new framework of thought. Socially, the same thinking that has propelled us to

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<sup>11</sup> Freire, Paulo. **Pedagogy of the Oppressed**. Trans. Robert R. Barr. (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group. 1994) p.73

<sup>12</sup> *An Inconvenient Truth* [Motion Picture]. Davis Guggenheim (Director). Lawrence Bender Productions and Participant Productions (Producers). (New York: Paramount Classics. 2006)

<sup>13</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr.. “Beyond Vietnam: A time to break silence.” April 4, 1967. Riverside Church speech. New York City. Website: <http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/45a/058.html>. Accessed February 13, 2007.

this unsustainable state, a state in which the extinction rate has increased one hundred to one thousand times its natural rate, cannot be used to rescue us from this situation. Economically, so long as we believe in a model structured around the concept of infinite physical growth – which itself is an impossibility -- and so long as we see this capitalistic model as our only alternative, we will continue to accept further erosion of our economic and livelihoods rights. And politically, so long as we view ourselves as innocent individuals living within a system of government that we oppose and not as individuals with the responsibilities – and the means – to change (overthrow?) this system, we will never realize the society we wish for our children.

Merely asking for small solutions to larger problems is an acceptance of failure. Deeper questions need to be asked. In essence, how do we overcome the structures of oppression and build a new world? How can we build a short-term and long-strategy to doing so?

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