

# Book Review

Oasis of Dreams, Grace Feuerverger



# Oasis of Dreams: Teaching and Learning Peace in a Jewish-Palestinian Village in Israel, Grace Feuerverger

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Routledge Falmer NY, 2001 188 pages with an index and a 250-entry bibliography. ISBN 0—4159—2939—3

Reviewed by Esther Lucas

When I picked up this book, the first thing I wanted to know was who the author was and why she had written this monograph. The back cover divulges that she is Associate Professor at the Centre for Teacher Development in the Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. This was not enough. But the answers came as soon as I started reading, and they permeate the whole book.

Grace Feuerverger is the daughter of holocaust survivors who came to Canada after having languished for nearly three years in a displaced persons' camp. Born in Montreal, she grew up as an immigrant/minority language child always living on the "border" of the world around her.

She was attracted to the educational experiments in the village of Neve Shalom-Wahat Al Salaam, as an example of border crossing that had haunted her childhood. She says: "I didn't choose the research topic, it chose me".

This is a very personal book, and the story it unfolds of Grace Feuerverger's life and philosophy was as important to me as the story of this remarkable Arab-Jewish village. Many monographs have been written about Neve Shalom, yet no one but the author of *Oasis of Dreams* could have written a book as emotionally charged and as penetrating as this. It is also an academic piece of work in which her statements are continually referenced.

The author first visited the village in 1991 and wrote from journal notes and interviews. Her last visit was in 1998, making a research period of seven years. The book is divided into seven chapters. (Is seven a significant number?) The introduction summarizes their

content. The final chapter includes a report of Hilary Rodham Clinton's visit to the village in 1998, which she describes from a video clip, as she was not present.

The first chapter offers the writer's initial glimpses of the Oasis of Peace (English for the Hebrew and Arabic names of the village). It describes the elementary school which was very small on her first visit, but included children of surrounding villages, both Arab and Jewish by the time of her last visit. The research questions that she answers in her interpretation of this "bicultural, binational environment, refer to the perceptions of the teachers, as educators and as Jews and Arabs, how these views are communicated in the classroom, and how far the curriculum is egalitarian. She notices the predominance of Hebrew, although attempts are made to use both languages equally. [On one of my visits to Neve Shalom, I noticed when a class sang some songs to the visitors, that all the words were in Hebrew]. Hebrew teachers find

it more difficult to learn Arabic, while Arabs learn Hebrew with ease. Grace Feuerverger admits she was overwhelmed by the interactive aspects of Arab and Jewish children studying together. The children usually have less language problems than the adults.

A Community of Moral Education is the title of Chapter Two, in which the writer considers herself a participant observer. Her interviews are conducted with scientific and analytic vigor. She sees in the lives of the villagers a microcosm of the Jewish Palestinian dilemma. And yet she observes a discourse of caring, equality and justice. She uses tableaux, anecdotes, parables, tales, and mini-narratives with the narrator in them. She is full of enthusiasm. Particularly interesting are her conversations with school children, and she is moved to tears when she attends a Christmas party and witnesses interfaith understanding.

Chapter Three, The Pedagogy of Peace, describes the elementary

school where children's voices are heard and acknowledged. The school was recognized by the Ministry of Education as an Experimental School (one of two in Israel) in 1993, and now enrolls students from surrounding villages. The problem of Arab Hebrew asymmetry reappears, and is illustrated by interviews with teachers from both communities. She refers at some length to the New Language Center and its influence on multi-lingual education, and claims that the use of both languages has become emblematic of egalitarianism and mutual understanding. She regards the pedagogy of the school as a political act of resistance as well as an act of self-empowerment that liberates. This chapter includes an autobiographical analysis that explains the writer's own early language problems.

Witnessing Trauma: "The School for Peace" is the title of Chapter Four. Here Grace Feuerverger presents us with the curriculum guidelines and rationale of The School of

Peace that brings groups of Arab and Jewish secondary students together for carefully planned three-day workshops. The aim of the SFP is to develop the ability of the participants to take a multidimensional view of themselves and others. It is a long and difficult process. Using field notes, interviews, and translations by colleagues, and seeing herself as a "boundary sitter", the writer meticulously observes the methods used for conflict resolution, and sees how the facilitators encourage the participants to attempt to conquer the obstacles of their own pain, and express empathy for that of the other group. The students, like the writer, are confronted with their common inheritance of exile, displacement, and diaspora.

In Chapter Five, Portraits of Peace, we find an interview with Father Bruno, "a genuinely transnational, transcultural and multilingual individual", the visionary behind the establishment of Neve Shalom in 1970. Born in Egypt of Jewish

parents, he was educated in Italy and France, where he became a Roman Catholic. He came to Israel in 1953 and worked for understanding between Christians and Jews until his recent death. The writer was able to pour her heart out to him.

In this chapter she also interviews Rayek Rizik, born in Nazareth, resident of Neve Shalom since 1984, and dedicated secretary/mayor of the village from 1997 to 2000. Grace Feuerverger takes an immediate liking to this man, as their personal suffering creates a bond between them. Over several meetings they discuss their own experiences and the role of the village.

Finally there is an interview with Pere Abbe Paul Sauma, of the Latrun Monastery that leased their land to the village. The land has more recently been given to the

village in honor of the millennium. The writer admires the mosaic in front of the entrance, with the word PAX on it. It is the symbol of the monastery, and of the village. She concludes that the work of the village is a dialogic attempt at exploration and reconciliation within a desert of conflict.

Chapter Six, entitled Teaching Peace: The Power of Love, Art and Imagination, begins with a quotation from Steinbeck that says a great teacher is a great artist, and teaching might be the greatest of arts, since the medium is the human mind and spirit. Grace Feuerverger also refers to Freire's belief in the need for a profound respect for the cultural identity of the students. This is what emerges from her interviews with teachers. Each class has an Arab and a Jewish teacher who work together. Teaching for them is a life experience.

In addition to a description of Hilary Clinton's visit, the last chapter, The Dream of Peace, is a brief reiteration of the writer's own need to settle a personal account with her own cultural inheritance. She regards this book as an individual experience and a personal inquiry into the collective consciousness of the villagers. She claims they have taught her that education has the power to create a collective "home".

This book is a must for anyone interested in bilingual/binational living and education. The village is indeed an Oasis of Peace in a troubled world. How it has managed to overcome hurdles of prejudice and hatred, is little less than a miracle.

Note: The Elementary School at Neve Shalom-Wahat Al Salaam is a member of UNESCO ASPnet in Israel.

