



Introduction

When everything started, I felt very confused. It felt like my mind was divided into two parts. One part felt protected and secure when I saw the soldiers and tanks getting ready to go into the territories. That part of me felt that we should teach the Palestinians a lesson and show them how powerful we are. But there was another part, a part that was created only after our involvement with Seeds of Peace, that felt that what was happening was wrong—that war is wrong. That part knew that there must be another way, a better way. But most of the people don't have a second part. I pray that our leaders have that second part. I know Rabin did.

—AN ISRAELI SEED OF PEACE, 1998

Every summer four hundred Arab and Israeli teenagers from the Middle East descend on a pine-covered crescent thousands of miles away, a camp carved out of the woods in a two-hundred-year-old town in central Maine. The setting, along the shores of Pleasant Lake, is peaceful and harmonious. Its natural beauty is a striking contrast to the climate of conflict they have left behind—fear, the daily threat of violence, the sterile poverty of refugee camps. They arrive at the Seeds of Peace International Camp in Otisfield, Maine, tired and confused, armed with old stereotypes of one another. Some are ready to dismiss the prejudice. “We want to make peace,” they say, and smile at the strangers in their midst. Some hold on all too tightly to the stereotypes, too afraid to get into their pajamas the first night, bracing themselves to defend their land and their country against a people they see only as the enemy.

But as they are led to their bunks on the first night, the youngsters begin a three-week process that will turn all of this upside down. They are instantly thrown together—forced to live in the same bunks as their enemies, to eat at the same tables, to shower in the same bathrooms, and to tell one another what often are the same hurtful thoughts. Every day they are forced to be friends and enemies—teammates on the fields and open, honest, forthright peers in daily “coexistence discussions.” And just three weeks later, many have undergone profound changes. They stay up talking until the last hours. They tell each other their closest secrets. They e-mail back and forth constantly once home. They are now friends with those who once were their enemies, and spokespeople for a peace they once dismissed. What is it about this experience that changes them so dramatically? Why is it that so many are able to throw away years of built-up aggression, malice, and prejudice? What let Daniel, the Israeli quoted at the start of this chapter, develop this “second part”?

When I created this program in 1993, I worked out of the Hearst Newspapers office in Washington. I was a correspondent, their foreign affairs editor, an author on the Middle East and an occasional television panelist, and happy doing what I did. But years spent reporting on war left me exasperated by violence and eager for peace. The catalyst for Seeds of Peace was the World Trade Center bombing in February 1993. It marked the first time that Americans were targets of fundamentalist terrorists. What was their motive? The answer was clear—to instill fear in the hearts of ordinary Americans, to send the message that there would be a price for continuing American support for Israel and the price would be American lives. For the first time in more than three decades of being a journalist, of having covered four wars in the Middle East and the intifada, the Palestinian uprising against Israeli rule, I asked myself a question: How could we respond to the fear that terrorists try to inculcate? Could we, I wondered, send a message of hope by bringing together the next generation of Arabs and Israelis at an age when they could bond and learn to overcome the fears, prejudices, and inhibitions of their parents and grandparents?

Fortunately I knew a number of the leaders of the Middle East from my days as a journalist. I was one of fourteen reporters who had traveled on former secretary of state Henry Kissinger’s plane during most of his Middle East shuttles following the October 1973 war between Israel and its Arab neighbors. These diplomatic missions laid the basis for the initial Egyptian-Israeli troop withdrawals in the Sinai and for the 1978 Camp

David accords that led to the signing of an Israeli-Egyptian treaty of peace. In the course of covering Kissinger's negotiations with Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Syria, and Saudi Arabia, I became acquainted with their leaders, particularly Israel's Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres, Egypt's Anwar Sadat, and Jordan's King Hussein. My newspaper stories and daily reports on the BBC World Service were read and heard in the United States and in the region. In 1980, Janet, my wife, and I also produced and co-wrote a PBS documentary, "Israel and the Palestinians: Will Reason Prevail?" that was praised for presenting Palestinians as people, not merely as terrorists.

A few years later, during the intifada, we wrote a book together, *Still Small Voices*, that sought to portray the lives—and fears—of ordinary Israelis and Palestinians living so close to and yet so far from one another on the Israeli-occupied West Bank of the Jordan River. For several months, we lived with Israelis in their West Bank settlements and with Palestinians in their refugee camps. The book was an effort to help Israelis hear the voices of ordinary Palestinians and an effort to help Palestinians hear the voices of ordinary Israelis. Publication of *Still Small Voices* in 1988 led to yet another project, a biography of Yasser Arafat, at the time probably the most hated "terrorist" in the world. Our motive was not to take sides. We wanted to write a book that would help people understand Arafat and thus help end the ridicule and dehumanization of a man with whom, we believed, Israel would have to deal to make peace. In the course of spending several months in Tunis, the headquarters of the exiled Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), we were granted unprecedented access to Arafat and his family, friends, and foes in Damascus, Amman, Cairo, and Jerusalem. So by the time *Arafat: In the Eyes of the Beholder* was published in 1990, we were reasonably well known to both the Israeli and the Palestinian leaderships. Indeed, while we were writing the biography, Yitzhak Rabin, who was then the Israeli defense minister, arranged to meet with us secretly in Tel Aviv to quiz us about his nemesis, the PLO chairman, to whom the Israeli would reluctantly offer his hand in friendship only three years later.

Seeds of Peace was born in March 1993 at a dinner party in Washington, D.C., hosted by the indefatigable Esther Coopersmith, a Democratic Party stalwart and goodwill ambassador who has been on a first-name basis with almost every president since Lyndon Johnson. At the dinner honoring Israeli foreign minister Shimon Peres, I asked Esther if I could make a toast. "John privately asked Peres first, would Israel be willing to send youngsters to a peace camp in the United States?" recalled Coopersmith. "Yes, why

not?’ Peres replied. Then John made his toast, announcing Seeds of Peace. He challenged Sayed Ahmed al Maher, the Egyptian ambassador, to agree too. He was so embarrassed he said yes,” added Coopersmith. When I called Hasan Abdul Rahman, the head of the PLO office in Washington, D.C., he also agreed to send Palestinian teenagers from the West Bank and Gaza. “The next day John publicly proposed it and issued a press release so nobody could back out of it,” said Coopersmith. Meanwhile, I prevailed on Joel Bloom, the owner of Camp Powhatan, where my son Michael had spent some of the best summers of his life, to let me use the campsite for the last week of August and the first week of September.

The initial negotiations with the three governments were not easy. I remember an exchange with an official in Jerusalem who told me that thirteen-year-old Israelis were far too young to leave home and attend a camp so far away. “They are not politically mature,” the official said. That, of course, was why I wanted them in their early teens—before the combined pressures of parents and grandparents, governments, school systems, and the media had programmed them too politically. Eventually I succeeded in persuading each government to send a small delegation of teenagers to the woods of Maine. The organizational and fund-raising tasks were equally formidable. Fortunately, at a book club evening in Bethesda, Maryland, where Janet and I were invited to discuss the Arafat biography, I met a wonderful woman, a social worker with extensive experience and a deep commitment to Arab-Israeli peace. When I mentioned that I was getting Seeds of Peace off the ground and needed help, Barbara (Bobbie) Gottschalk immediately volunteered. The rest, as they say, is history. Barbara has been at my side ever since. Today, she directs the coexistence (conflict resolution) program that is an important element of Seeds of Peace. The other indispensable member of our initial team was Tim Wilson, a schoolteacher and former football coach who was codirector of Camp Powhatan’s regular summer season for American campers. Tim, a veteran leader of the civil rights movement, was the first African American to head the human rights division of the state of Maine. He is one of the most inspirational figures I have ever met. His physique, not to mention his outwardly tough demeanor born of decades of counseling high school victims of drive-by shootings in his native Pittsburgh, gives Tim the stature of someone, as the campers say, “you don’t mess with.” With Barbara and Tim, I set out to raise the initial \$25,000 to get the first Seeds of Peace season off the ground.

There was, and is, a method to my madness. Above all, it is vital that camp life reflect a neutral, loving, and supportive environment. As you will see, for many of these youngsters, simply living together under the same roof can be traumatic. In the first few days of camp, the things that we take for granted with our friends—eating our meals together and playing baseball, soccer, or tennis—can be frightening and formidable with people you have been schooled to hate. Removing the image of the “other” as an enemy is indispensable in beginning to create the structure for trust and understanding. Terry Anderson, the Associated Press reporter who was the longest-held American hostage in Lebanon, told me shortly after he was released: “John, if you achieve nothing else, at least the enemy will have a face.” Accepting the “other” as nonthreatening is the initial goal when the youngsters arrive at Seeds of Peace. When that happens, a sense of community begins to be created that gives everyone a stake in its welfare—and survival. With it comes a new sense of safety that permits the “Seeds” to relax and open up to one another in the vital daily meetings we dub “coexistence sessions.”

Our first summer, in 1993, was for boys only. The Egyptian government and the Palestinian authorities had cautioned us that it was too soon to bring women, particularly young women, to a camp in the United States where they would live together with young men. Not merely Muslim fundamentalists but most parents would frown on any suggestion of communal living—even if the girls were strictly separated and lived in different bunks that were isolated from the boys’ part of camp. So in our first year we were 45 boys: 20 Israelis, 15 Palestinians, and 10 Egyptians. Although we wanted to include women, it might not have happened until much later had it not been for pressure from Barbra Streisand. She saw the first group of “Seeds” on television at the historic 1993 White House signing of the Israeli-Palestinian Declaration of Principles and offered us badly needed funding—but only if we would include young women in the program. Surprisingly, the same governments that warned us not to do so ultimately agreed to include women in their 1994 delegations. For our part, in addition to carefully monitored separate housing, we agreed to provide separate swimming facilities, and to facilitate prayer services for the Muslims every Friday afternoon and for the Jews every Friday evening. Today, the delegations chosen by each government reflect a 50:50 balance between boys and girls. Among the Israeli and Arab delegations there are even several religiously orthodox youngsters whose special dietary and other needs are provided for every summer.

The composition of the total camp population is designed so that approximately 40 percent of the campers are Israeli and 50 percent of the Arabs are Palestinian. In that way, the Israelis and Palestinians make up two-thirds of the total number of campers that average between 160 and 180 per each three-week session. Seeds of Peace now schedules three sessions every summer, which permits us to reach more than three hundred new campers every summer and to enlist the help of one hundred youngsters from previous summers to assume peer support and program leader responsibilities. In recent years, Seeds of Peace has begun separate program for teenagers from other war zones, including Cyprus, the Balkans, and southern Europe. The focus of this book, however, reflects the main focus of our work: our Middle East program.

Today, nine governments actively participate in Seeds of Peace: Cyprus (north and south), Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Morocco, the Palestinian National Authority, Qatar, Tunisia, and Yemen. In order to allow each government an opportunity to build a group that is acceptable to its constituency and accountable to its people, we ask every government to select its own delegation of teenagers and accompanying adult leaders. No funding is sought from any participating government. However, Seeds of Peace recommends general criteria for the selection process: teenagers should be chosen through the educational system (public and private schools) and have a working knowledge of the English language. Each teenage applicant is expected to write an essay on some aspect of the Arab-Israeli conflict that is evaluated by the respective ministries. Seeds of Peace suggests that the final group of candidates be interviewed in English to test their language skills.

Having the governments select their participants gives each delegation an official imprimatur that is important to the goals of Seeds of Peace. But even more important, the governments' hands-on involvement has helped ensure that those selected are not chiefly from families that are already ideologically disposed to liberal or dovish causes. Thus, when a right-wing government was elected in Israel in 1996, the composition of the Israeli delegation reflected the more hawkish views of the governing Likud coalition that had assumed power. The Palestinian delegation includes a sizable number of refugee camp youngsters because the government feels a need to be accountable to the poor as well as to the more middle-class segments of Palestinian society. These teenagers also tend to be more hawkish in their attitudes. This is as it should be. The mission of Seeds of Peace is to help humanize a conflict that has thrived partly because both sides have

so successfully dehumanized each other. It is important for us to receive as many youngsters from right-wing or conservative backgrounds as from more tolerant or liberal perspectives.

It costs Seeds of Peace approximately \$2,500 for each youngster's three-and-a-half-week stay in the United States, not including airfare. Each family is asked to contribute \$1,200 to help defray the cost of the round-trip air travel, but, once chosen, no one is excluded if his or her family cannot afford it. Each government also knows that it can offer scholarships for the entire or partial cost of the airfare to anyone who genuinely needs one.

The final composition of each delegation reflects the nature of each government. The Israelis and the Palestinians have done an exemplary job of democratically choosing their delegations from a broad political, social, and economic spectrum and generally without regard to privilege. There are exceptions. In 1994, when the Labor Government led by Yitzhak Rabin was in power, a right-wing member of the Knesset (the Israeli Parliament) attacked the government for selecting teenagers from families that were known Labor Party supporters. It was discovered only later that his own son had been denied a place in the delegation.

The Jordanian and Egyptian selection process reflects those countries' keen desire to ensure that their best and brightest represent their nation abroad. Since English is taught primarily at English-language schools in Egypt, generally attended by the elite of the society, the selection of the Egyptian youngsters has reflected less of a cross-section than in other delegations. In Jordan, the delegation was initially chosen from students attending the Jubilee School established by Her Majesty Queen Noor al-Hussein to ensure that gifted Jordanian youngsters, regardless of their economic or social status, receive a head start in their education. In 1999, Their Majesties King Abdullah II and Queen Rania further democratized the selection process, broadening the delegation to include teenagers from every political and social strata of Jordanian society. Although Seeds of Peace constantly urges all governments to broaden the selection process, nations joining the program for the first time tend to restrict the selection. Thus, it came as no surprise that in its first year of sending teenagers, Yemen sent the son of its foreign minister and a nephew of the prime minister.

In general, Seeds of Peace is not involved in the selection process. However, certain situations have required us to weigh in. For example, the Israeli government was initially reluctant to include in its delegation as many Israeli Arabs as one would expect given the percentage of Arabs (approximately 18 percent) who are citizens of Israel.

Seeds of Peace, in coordination with the respective governments, selects the delegates who return for a second or third summer. They are chosen on the basis of their participation in Seeds of Peace activities in the region, their overall leadership skills, and an essay that each is asked to write on why they believe they should come back. It is, however, becoming more and more difficult to select these peer support and program leaders. With the growing numbers of graduates, we cannot bring back all of the deserving candidates. To help meet the need to continually challenge our graduates, we have developed new programs such as the Novartis Youth Summit (similar to model high school programs run by the United Nations) that allow us to bring as many as one hundred teenage alumni to Switzerland every year. At these summits, the older graduates are asked to use the listening and other skills they learned at Seeds of Peace in actual political negotiations—for example, in drafting a final Israeli-Palestinian peace treaty.

Relations with the governments often are as complex as the Arab-Israeli negotiations themselves. At times governments have even sought to use the youngsters as pawns to punish an action taken by the “other side.” In the summer of 1994, only a week before the opening of the Seeds of Peace Camp, Israeli troops launched massive retaliatory raids in Lebanon, bombing Hezbollah guerrilla camps and killing a number of civilians. In response, an Arab government declared that it would not be sending a delegation to Seeds of Peace. But the youngsters’ families refused to be intimidated. They declared that they were sending their children anyway. Less than twenty-four hours before the start of camp, the government backed down and the delegation arrived a day late but without incident.

From 1996 to 1999, when Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu pointedly refused to recognize Palestinian statehood, Seeds of Peace came under Israeli pressure to stop using the term “Palestine” in any public ceremonies, publications, or activities. In 1997, in a move to signal its displeasure with the fact that Palestinian teenagers were permitted to say they came from “Palestine,” the Ministry of Education, headed by Yitzhak Levy, a member of the orthodox National Religious Party, deliberately delayed sending the names of the Israeli delegation. After the exchange of several drafts, a compromise was reached preserving the right of the Palestinians to say they come from Palestine—but committing Seeds of Peace to follow the practice of the host country, the United States of America, in using the name of the government, the Palestinian National Authority, instead of the yet-to-be-declared nation, Palestine. In this book, too, we will use the name of the government,

except of course when we quote the youngsters themselves or recount their discussions about Palestine.

Less than four months after I met Barbara Gottschalk, our first camp began to take shape. Seeds of Peace was an idea that seemed to make sense: Bring the next generation together before they too fall victim to the hate that ensnares their parents and grandparents—bring them together and see what happens. What happened was that after one summer, I became so convinced that this was the only way to break the unending cycles of violence that I seriously considered quitting my job as a nationally syndicated correspondent. I had covered the Arab-Israeli conflict at close range for almost three decades. Seeds of Peace seemed to be the way to be on the front lines of resolving the conflict. The opportunity arose at the end of our second summer, in 1994. I had invited Nobel Laureate Elie Wiesel to speak during our tour of the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. Elie was moved by the sight of 150 Arab and Israeli youngsters sharing the pain and suffering that he had experienced as a child in the Nazi concentration camps. In his remarks in the auditorium, he mentioned that my name in Hebrew meant “a gift from God.” Then he announced that if I ever wanted to leave my journalism career, he would offer me a position as executive director of his foundation in New York. After he concluded, I asked him if he was serious. He suggested that I contact Arnold Thaler, the deeply motivated vice president of the Elie Wiesel Foundation for Humanity. Arnold spent the next several months recruiting me for the position. In February 1995, I finally decided to retire from having to meet daily deadlines. Janet and I sold our home and our American folk art collection and moved to New York, ready to take on the challenge of administering a foundation and, in my spare time, shepherding Seeds of Peace into a new era of growth. As Seeds of Peace grew, so did my preoccupation with its welfare. In the spring of 1997, I asked Elie to be relieved from my duties at the foundation so that I could devote my entire life to raising the funds for the expansion of Seeds of Peace. I am eternally grateful to Elie, his wife, Marion, and Arnold Thaler for the opportunity they gave me to make the transition to a new career. Seven years and almost one thousand five hundred teenagers later, Seeds of Peace has changed almost every life it has touched—most profoundly my own.

Over the years we have learned something about the processes that these youngsters go through during the three weeks of camp. We have come to understand when and where they need to be supported and when and where they need to be pushed. We are beginning to understand and

expect the phases of change and the patterns of confidence and confusion that are steps in their journey toward mutual understanding. We see the same recurring arguments, how they haunt us again and again, and why it is as important for the youngsters to engage in these arguments as it is for them to find solutions to both their personal and ideological conflicts.

The Seeds of Peace experience raises a lot of questions: How do these youngsters change, and why? What do we do to support them? What are the chief difficulties and challenges we face? What are the chief difficulties they face? Can bringing people together for three weeks really have a lasting effect in the region at large? This book addresses these questions by tracing the various stages and identifying the key elements within a Seeds of Peace program.

We begin in chapter 1 with the youngsters' arrival at camp and the efforts made to create a supportive, open environment in which they can think and speak for themselves. Chapter 2 examines the kinds of stereotypes of one another they bring with them and then describes how these are gradually broken down to allow personal friendships to grow. In chapter 3 we focus on the daily "coexistence discussions," two-hour facilitation sessions that give the campers the opportunity to work through the history, symbols, and suffering of both sides in the conflict. In chapter 4 we see how a crisis at camp serves to disrupt but then to deepen the relationships that have been established among the youngsters. The camp experience culminates in the Color Games, which, as chapter 5 describes, divide the entire camp into two multinational teams for a host of competitions. The youngsters' return home is chronicled in chapter 6, which explores the difficulties that arise as families and friends react with surprise and often scorn to the new ideas and new relationships that the campers have brought home with them. Chapter 7 outlines some of the steps that Seeds of Peace has taken to help our graduates stay in contact with one another and to continue the work they began at camp. Finally, chapter 8 offers some concluding thoughts on how and why the youngsters change and what this suggests to a world still searching for ways to build peace.

Although we work hard to make each program a success, it is clearly the youngsters who change themselves. And although we try to help the returning campers develop the ideas they have initiated in Maine, in the end the youngsters themselves do the hard and courageous work of making peace with one another. Seeds of Peace is not about planting trees or singing songs. Although Seeds of Peace takes place at a summer camp, we are not a traditional summer camp program. The natural setting of the

camp allows the basic human instincts to surface in a safe and secure environment where young people can get to know one another as human beings. But *Seeds of Peace*, above all, is about making real peace in the real world. It is about changing attitudes, ending the fears and prejudices that have prevented entire generations from getting to know one another; in short, it is about “rehumanizing,” not dehumanizing, the enemy. No one tells this story better than the youngsters themselves. As much as possible, I have let them tell their story as they experienced it so that the reader will feel some of their frustrations and anger and, ultimately, hope. Many of the quotations are transcriptions from the coexistence sessions as well as from subsequent interviews that allowed the youngsters to reflect on the changes they were experiencing. (Most transcriptions are verbatim, but on occasion grammatical mistakes have been corrected for the sake of clarity.)

“My goal became to understand Israelis,” said Hazem, a Jordanian youngster. “I had always seen them as bad and even thought they knew themselves to be bad. This is not the case. I discovered that the history they believe to be true justifies much of what has been done by them, as the history I believe to be true justifies much of what Arabs have done.” For Hazem, like so many others, the personal experience of getting to know the other side is the most memorable. “I’ve been stranded with an Israeli on a sailboat in the middle of the lake because the wind stopped blowing. I have been in canoes with Israelis on more than one occasion; I was saved from burning myself when an Israeli saw that the tray of hot gravy I was carrying was about to tip over.” What is Hazem most proud of? He says, “I have slept next to Israelis for a total of more than two months and never found reason to be worried. *Seeds of Peace* may be the only place where an Israeli will truly want an Arab to score in an Israeli goalkeeper’s net and vice versa.”

As their comments reveal, their journey from fear and suspicion to understanding and trust is twisting and difficult. They often find themselves heading down dead-end streets, doubling back on themselves, wishing they had never chosen such a journey at all. Yet, eventually, most reach their destination: a new level of compassion for one another as human beings. When they return home, they are well on their way to becoming the true leaders of a new generation that is as committed to fighting for peace as their predecessors were in waging war.

